Violent Behavior: A Measure of Emotional Upset?*

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Over the past ten years, sociologists have broadened their view of what counts as an appropriate measure of mental health. This reflects a growing recognition that individuals express emotional upset in various ways. For example, some individuals are more likely to become depressed in response to stress while others are more likely to drink heavily. Contemporary studies often include measures of “internalizing” (i.e., more feeling-based measures) and “externalizing” (i.e., more behavioral measures) styles of psychopathology, especially when studying group differences in mental health. Alcohol abuse is the classic measure of externalized distress in sociological research. In this paper, we present a theoretical argument and supporting empirical evidence to argue that violent behavior should be included as a measure of externalized distress in response to stress. Our study suggests that violent behavior is a more likely response to stress among individuals with particular coping and appraisal tendencies. Specifically, violent behavior may be a more likely response to stress among individuals who tend to appraise situations as threatening while also repressing any emotional response to stress. We contend that, since some groups may be more likely than others to respond to stress with violence, it is particularly important to include measures of violent behavior when studying group difference in distress.

Neither psychologists nor sociologists view violent behavior as a class of mental disorder or as indicative of emotional distress. Rather, psychologists tend to view violent behavior as a symptom of several specific disorders including borderline personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder while sociologists tend to view violent behavior as criminal behavior designed to achieve some goal. We argue that violent behavior is more than a symptom of certain personality disorders or criminal behavior. In fact, many individuals with no clinical diagnosis or criminal record engage in violent behavior. We present a theoretical foundation and supporting empirical evidence to show that violent behavior should be viewed as a behavioral expression of psychological distress that is characteristic of certain individuals. We argue that social structural and personal factors influence the probability of violent behavior in response to stress.

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON VIOLENCE AND EMOTIONAL UPSET

For decades, sociologists measured psychological distress primarily on the basis of psy-
chological distress symptoms. In recent years, this approach has been challenged and expanded on the premise that different groups are likely to express emotional upset in different ways (Horwitz and Davies 1994; Rosenfield 1999; Schwartz 1991). Thoits (1990) reviews evidence showing that "emotional experiences, expressive displays, and attempts at emotional regulation are influenced by socialization and by prevailing situational factors" (p. 180).

Social groups differ in personal resources, roles, and statuses that influence both the activation and experience of upset. For example, socioeconomic status is inversely associated with stress. Furthermore, the rich and the poor may express their upset in different ways; socioeconomic status is inversely associated with depression and anxiety, but it is positively associated with anger in some domains (see a review in Schieman 2000). If sociologists measure psychological distress symptoms only (i.e., depression, anxiety), they underestimate psychological upset in social groups that are likely to express upset in ways other than depressive symptomatology.

Measures of psychopathology are often characterized as internalizing or externalizing. For example, women experience more internalizing disorders that involve turning "problematic feelings inward against themselves;" men experience more externalizing disorders that involve "expressing problematic feelings in outward behavior" (Rosenfield 1999:210). Externalizing styles involve behavioral expression—for example, suicidal behavior, alcohol consumption, and antisocial behavior. Internalizing styles are characterized by feelings—for example, feelings of anxiety or despair. Violent behavior has not been examined as an expression of emotional upset even though it is, arguably, the most extreme example of externalizing distress.

Many scholars argue that socialization—into gender as well as other cultural roles—makes some groups more likely than others to resort to violence in the face of frustration and stress (Lee 1995; Nisbett 1993; Schwartz 1991; Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). Different groups differentially socialize individuals into appraisal processes (e.g., appraising situations as stressful or not, threatening or not) and ways of expressing upset (e.g., with alcohol abuse, anxiety, violent behavior). Structuralists argue that individuals in certain social groups (e.g., males, the poor, those of African American and Hispanic status) are exposed to greater strains that elicit violence. They also argue that certain groups are characterized by norms and values that emphasize violence as an acceptable way to express feeling and solve problems (see Heimer 1997, for a review).

Structural position is extremely influential in shaping patterns of upset; however, even within groups, some individuals are more likely than others to appraise their situations in a way that is conducive to violent behavior. Of course, appraisal and coping processes reflect both social position and personal factors. In the present study, we take the first step in assessing violent behavior as an expression of emotional upset. This study focuses primarily on individual-level factors that may contribute to violence. We present evidence from a case-control study of men in similar structural circumstances (e.g., similar income, education, age, marital status) to consider whether particular appraisal and coping strategies increase the probability of violent behavior.

**Terminology**

The terms anger, hostility, aggression, and violence are sometimes used interchangeably, but they should be distinguished from one another. Anger is an emotional state defined as a "strong feeling of distress or displeasure in response to a specific provocation of some kind" (Thomas 1993:13). Of course, "provocation" is relative and depends on the individual's appraisal of the situation. Hostility, compared to anger, "implies a more pervasive and enduring antagonistic mental attitude" (Thomas 1993:13). Hostility has been described "as a [sic.] habitual propensity for disliking others, wishing them harm, or acting aggressively toward them" (Reiser 1999:25). Aggression refers to "an actual physical or verbal attack" (Reiser 1999:28) toward another person. Violent behavior refers to a physical attack directed against another person. In the present study, we focus only on the clear behavioral expression of violence, defined as a physical attack on another person.

The sociological literature has only recently begun to focus on anger as an expression of emotional upset (Ross and Van Willigen 1996; Schieman 2000). Anger is viewed as an emotional state that may be accompanied by aggressive behavior. While anger and hostility
may precede an act of aggression or violent behavior, Reiser (1999) argues that "one can be aggressive without feeling angry or hostile" (p. 28). Yet, logically, anger is an emotion that is more likely than other emotions to be associated with violent behavior. Violence may be preceded by expressions of anger such as verbal threats of violence and other aggressive acts (e.g., throwing or destroying inanimate objects). Whether anger is associated with violent behavior (or other mental health outcomes) remains an empirical question. Remarkably, the existing bodies of research on anger and violent behavior are largely separate entities. In our later analyses, we consider the association of violent behavior with depression, anger and hostility, and alcohol problems.

In a most general sense, violent behavior falls into two categories: (1) impulsive acts of violence and (2) instrumental acts of violence (Reiser 1999). These categories are not mutually exclusive, but a distinction is important in making the argument that violent behavior is an expression of emotional upset. We focus only on impulsive acts of violence directed toward another person. Such acts result from an explosion of feeling or emotion. This does not mean that such acts are never instrumental. In fact, many, if not most, impulsive acts of violence are consciously or unconsciously motivated by a desire to obtain some goal—for example, to control someone's behavior or to restore one's honor—but some acts of violence are entirely instrumental. These acts are typically tied to the commission of crimes (e.g., personal assault committed in the commission of a robbery) and are not necessarily relevant to the discussion of violence as an expression of emotional upset. Impulsive acts of violence account for the vast majority of violent acts directed by one person against another (Reiser 1999).

The Stress and Coping Model

We adopt a stress and coping framework to provide a new way of looking at violent behavior. In the classic stress and coping model, stress is defined as a:

state of arousal resulting either from the presence of socioenvironmental demands that tax the ordinary adaptive capacity of the individual or from the absence of the

means to attain sought after ends. (Aneshensel 1992:16)

Stress is induced both by stressful life events (e.g., divorce) and chronic life strains (e.g., chronic financial strain or marital problems). The research literature clearly documents that perceived stress increases the risk of psychological distress symptoms and alcohol consumption (Aneshensel, Rutter, and Lachenbruch 1991; Horwitz and Davies 1994; Horwitz, White, and Howell-White 1996). Of course, all individuals do not respond in the same way to a stressor. For example, relationship strain leads to more emotional upset for some individuals than others (Bolger et al. 1989). One of the most important elements of the stress process is the individual's appraisal of a situation as stressful. Objective stressors that are appraised as benign or manageable have little effect on psychological distress. The appraisal of a stressor as personally threatening is most conducive to psychological distress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The stress and coping model holds that individuals engage in coping strategies in an effort to solve problems and regulate their emotions. Finally, these elements converge to affect emotional and psychological outcomes (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). At least indirectly, the domestic violence literature suggests that threat appraisals and emotion regulation (a coping strategy) may be linked to violence.

Indirect Evidence Suggesting Linkages between Stress, Threat Appraisals, Emotion Regulation, and Violence

Previous qualitative work suggests that violence may be a component of emotional distress and that repressed emotion plays a role in triggering violent episodes (Gondolf 1985; Umberson and Williams 1993). Umberson and Williams (1993) conducted an in-depth interview study of divorce, parental role strain, and mental health among men. Although the focus of their study was on psychological distress symptoms, a recurrent theme throughout the interviews was that men often respond to perceptions of threat and stress with violent acts against others—typically directed against female partners, ex-wives, children, and the new partners of ex-wives.

Many of the violent men in the Umberson and Williams (1993) study report that they
National studies document higher rates of gen-
have experienced stressful life events (Felson
financial strain and chronic marital strain are
eqd toward partners among individuals who
response to stress (Holahan and Moos 1987;
Repetti 1992) and to engage in violent behav-
ors that result in the injury of another person
(Rosenberg and Fenley 1991).

For some men under stress, the underlying
upset eventually surfaced in a sudden and
explosive violent act. Domestic violence
expert, Edward Gondolf (1985), contends that
all men are socialized to hide their emotions
but that this may be especially extreme in men
who are domestically violent. Violent men may
use violence to release and express emotion.
This process of stress arousal and repressed
emotion may, of course, be operative in women
as well as men, but the available empirical
evidence on violent behavior shows that men are
more likely than women to repress emotion in
response to stress (Holahan and Moos 1987;
Repetti 1992) and to engage in violent behav-
ior that results in the injury of another person
(Rosenberg and Fenley 1991).

Some empirical evidence indicates that
stress is associated with domestic violence. Na-
tional studies document higher rates of gen-
eral interpersonal violence and violence direc-
ted toward partners among individuals who
have experienced stressful life events (Felson
1992; Straus 1990). Furthermore, chronic
financial strain and chronic marital strain are
associated with an increased risk for domestic
violence (O'Leary 1993).

The literature also provides indirect support
for the position that threat appraisals play a
role in a link of stress to domestic violence.
Previous studies suggest that domestic vio-

lence is most likely to occur when the perpe-
trator perceives some threat or challenge to his
position. For example, violence is more likely
when a woman threatens to end or leave the
relationship and when women are pregnant—
both situations may threaten a man's sense of
control over self, others, and the environment
(Dobash and Dobash 1998; Gondolf 1985;
Jasinksi 2001).

Stress research further shows that high lev-
els of personal control alter the stress appraisal
process in adaptive ways that minimize the
degree of distress experienced in response to
the stressor. One previous study reports no
relationship between personal control and
domestic violence, however, the measure of
personal control was extremely limited
(Umberson et al. 1998). To our knowledge,
personal control and violent behavior have not
been jointly investigated in other empirical
studies. However, clinical and theoretical work
suggests that domestic violence may occur in
an attempt to regain control when an individual
feels that he is losing control (Gondolf 1985;
Umberson et al. 1998).

Figure 1 summarizes a simple conceptual
model of the hypothesized stress/violence
process. This model is adapted from the classic
stress and coping paradigm that is used to
study the link of stress with psychological and
physical health (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

FIGURE 1. Conceptual Model of Stress and Violent Behavior
This model represents a first effort to examine only a few of the key concepts of the stress and coping framework in a study of stress and violent behavior. We focus on those concepts that hold the greatest theoretical interest based on prior research on violent behavior. Figure 1 suggests that a potentially stressful event or situation occurs. We hypothesize that perceived stress increases the risk for violent behavior. Individuals appraise a stressor in terms of its potential harm or threat. We hypothesize that the combination of perceiving threat (appraisal) along with a tendency to repress emotion (a coping strategy) increases the probability of violent behavior (a stress outcome). We are particularly interested in how personal control (a personal resource) operates in the stress/violence model. The domestic violence literature emphasizes the importance of control to men who are domestically violent. We hypothesize that personal control is inversely associated with the propensity for threat appraisals, repressed emotion, and domestic violence. We compare violent and nonviolent men who occupy similar social locations in order to clarify the psychosocial processes through which stress may result in violent behavior.

**METHODS**

We use a case-control study design to analyze the relationships of stress, threat appraisals, repressed emotion, and personal control with domestic violence. The case-control method involves a comparison of cases with an outcome of interest (e.g., domestic violence) with a control group that consists of persons who are free of the outcome under study (Schlesseelman 1982). The case-control design, commonly used in public health research, is advantageous for research on rare outcomes (e.g., AIDS, interpersonal violence, homicide) because it avoids screening a large population in order to find a small sample of subjects (Loftin and McDowall 1988).

We compare men with a recent history of violence to men with no history of domestic violence. The primary method of analysis is logistic regression where the primary dependent variable equals 1 for every case with a history of domestic violence and 0 for every case in the control group. In our analysis, we ask how the odds of violence depend on stress, combined threat appraisals and repressed emotion, and personal control. We label the case and control groups as the violent and nonviolent groups, respectively, for clarity in presentation.

In addition, we conducted a qualitative analysis to elucidate the social-psychological processes through which violent behavior occurs. Subjects from the case and control groups were asked to discuss the sources of strain and satisfaction in their relationships, the worst and most recent arguments with their female partners, and their general attitudes about family relationships. Interviews, including open-ended and closed-ended questions, lasted one-and-one-half hours on average. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data coding followed the procedures described by Lofland and Lofland (1984). Each transcript was read several times and analyzed into conceptual categories. Some categories were drawn from the literature, and others emerged during the process of interviewing, analysis, and writing.

**Sample**

*Case group.* Subjects with a history of domestic violence were recruited through the Family Violence Diversion Network (FVDN) of Travis County, Texas. This agency provides an educational program for men who batter. The Network sees approximately 500–700 men per year in this capacity. Eighty-five to 90 percent of the program participants are court-mandated to participate in a battering program. The remaining violent participants are self-referred or referred by other sources (e.g., their attorneys or therapists). We recruited subjects through orientation sessions in order to reduce the possibility that interviews would be influenced or biased by information received during educational sessions. Approximately 140 Network participants were invited to take part in the study. Potential subjects were offered $45 to be paid following completion of their interview. Forty-five of these men indicated an interest in participating in the study, and we were able to schedule and complete interviews with 28 of those who were interested.

*Control Group.* We recruited an initial control group of 38 men from notices posted in neighborhoods (e.g., in health clinics, laundromats, restaurants) that are similar in demo-
graphic composition to the group of men recruited from the Family Violence Diversion Network. These neighborhoods were selected on the basis of zip codes of Network participants. Potential control group subjects were selected in order to maximize matching with case subjects on the basis of age, current marital status, zip code, and socioeconomic status. We successfully completed 38 control group interviews. However, eight individuals in the control group indicated that they had previously engaged in domestic violence. Six of these subjects reported perpetrating violence that was similar in frequency and severity to the violence perpetrated by the case group subjects. These six subjects were reassigned to the case group. Two individuals in the control group who reported minor incidents of domestic violence were excluded from the analysis.

The final sample consists of 34 violent subjects and 30 nonviolent subjects. Although this sample is well-suited for an examination of connections between the stress process and violent behavior, the sample size is small. Some selectivity bias may also exist in the sample. For example, it is possible that, among violent men, the tendency to repress emotion and to perceive threat in response to stress is positively associated with participation in the study. However, intuitively, it would seem that perceptions of threat and a tendency to repress emotion would reduce the probability of study participation. Moreover, this type of selection process might bias our results if it operated in the opposite direction for nonviolent men (i.e., if the tendency to repress emotion and perceive threat in response to stress is positively associated with participation by violent men and inversely associated with participation by nonviolent men). Since there is no reason to suspect that selection processes would operate differently for the case and control groups, it is unlikely that sample selectivity seriously biases our results.

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the two groups on sociodemographic variables. The only statistically significant difference between the groups is the larger number of Hispanic respondents among the violent subjects ($t = 2.21, p \leq .05$). Subsequent analyses include a control variable for Hispanic status ($1 = \text{Hispanic}, 0 = \text{Non-Hispanic}$). Our finding that Hispanic status is significantly associated with violence status should not be construed as evidence that one group is more violent than another. This is not a representative sample of violent offenders; rather, Hispanics from the community may be less likely to volunteer for a study of this type, perhaps because we did not recruit in Spanish or because of fears about immigration rules.

**Measures**

The scales and measures included this study are based on extensive reviews of the research literature, use of relevant items and scales in previous research, and factor analyses of relevant questionnaire items in the present study. Alpha reliability coefficients are based on an analysis of the case-control sample used for the present study. All scales and items are coded so that higher scores equal higher levels of the concept being measured. Items included in each scale were scaled to a standard z-score. We then calculated the mean of the standardized items to form each scale.

**Stress.** Stress is considered with three scales that measure chronic strain in relationships and in financial situations. The measure of nonrelationship stress consists of the 15 items that measure stress in respondents’ relationships with children, parents, and friends, and in the domains of work and finances. Three items measure parental strain: “Thinking of all your children, how often do you feel [frustrated/tense/worried] as a parent?” (item response categories, $1 = \text{never}, 5 = \text{almost always}$). Six items measure strain in relationships with parents and friends: “On average, how much do you feel your [friends or other relatives/mother/father] make too many demands on you?” and “How much are your [friends or other relatives/mother/father] critical of you or what you do?” (item response categories, $1 = \text{not at all}, 5 = \text{a great deal}$). Three items examine occupational stress: “When you think of your day-to-day job, how often do you feel [bothered or upset/happy (reverse-coded)]?” (item response categories, $1 = \text{never}, 5 = \text{almost always}$).

We then calculated the mean of the standardized items to form each scale.
TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Case (violent) and Control (nonviolent) Subjects on Sociodemographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Case Group (Violent)</th>
<th>Control Group (Nonviolent)</th>
<th>t-values for Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>31.88 (7.80)</td>
<td>31.70 (7.08)</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Income</td>
<td>28.75 (16.24)</td>
<td>32.33 (18.30)</td>
<td>-.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>13.18 (1.68)</td>
<td>13.63 (1.45)</td>
<td>-1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>.41 (.50)</td>
<td>.37 (.49)</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>.47 (.51)</td>
<td>.63 (.49)</td>
<td>-1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>.35 (.49)</td>
<td>.27 (.45)</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced/Separated</td>
<td>.18 (.39)</td>
<td>.10 (.31)</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>.24 (.43)</td>
<td>.20 (.41)</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>.26 (.45)</td>
<td>.07 (.25)</td>
<td>2.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-American</td>
<td>.44 (.50)</td>
<td>.63 (.49)</td>
<td>-1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race/ Ethnicity</td>
<td>.06 (.24)</td>
<td>.10 (.31)</td>
<td>-.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05

VIOLENT BEHAVIOR

Avoidance-withdrawal. To measure an individual’s propensity to avoid or withdraw from conflict situations, we used two items from the verbal aggression subscale of the Conflict Tactic Scales (Straus 1996). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they “sulked or refused to talk about an issue” and “stomped out of the room or house or yard” during fights with their partner in the past year (item response categories, 0 = never, 6 = more than 20 times).

Repressed emotion. Repressed emotion refers to the tendency to control or repress emotional feeling states, including those related to depression and emotional upset. We created a 2-item scale to measure this tendency. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they felt or acted in the following ways: “When I am in a low mood, I try to act cheerful so my mood will change” and “When I am depressed, I try to keep busy to take my mind off things” (item response categories, 1 = never, 5 = almost always; scale alpha = .54).
Our theoretical model suggests that a tendency to appraise situations as threatening combined with the repression or avoidance of emotion produces a greater risk for violence. We created a dummy variable for combined global threat appraisals/ repressed emotion in which individuals who score higher than 0 on global threat appraisals and on repressed emotion are coded 1 and those who score 0 or less on global threat appraisals or repressed emotion are coded 0. We used the same coding strategy to create combined dummy measures of non-relationship threat appraisals/repressed emotion and relationship threat appraisals/repressed emotion. To examine the combined impact of threat appraisals and conflict avoidance, we used the same strategy to create dummy measures of combined global threat appraisals/avoidance-withdrawal, non-relationship threat/avoidance-withdrawal, and relationship threat appraisals/avoidance-withdrawal.

Personal control. To measure personal control, we combined a 2-item version (Sweet and Bumpass, 1987) of Pearlin, et alia's (1981) Mastery scale with Mirowsky and Ross's (1990) eight-item Sense of Control scale. A factor analysis of these items suggests that all items load on one factor, and we thus combined these items into one personal control scale that includes the following items: (1) "There's no sense in planning a lot—if something good is going to happen, it will" (reverse-coded); (2) "The really good things that happen to me are mostly luck" (reverse-coded); (3) "I am responsible for my own successes;" (4) "I can do just about anything I really set my mind to;" (5) "Most of my problems are due to bad breaks" (reverse-coded); (6) "I have little control over the bad things that happen to me" (reverse-coded); (7) "My misfortunes are the result of mistakes I have made;" (8) "I am responsible for my failures;" (9) "There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have" (reverse-coded) and (10) "Sometimes I feel that I'm being pushed around in life" (reverse-coded) (scale alpha = .75). Response categories range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Psychological distress. In exploratory analyses, we compared the violent and nonviolent groups on psychological distress. Psychological distress is measured with an 11-item version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they felt each of the following during the week prior to the interview: "I felt depressed;" "I felt that everything I did was an effort;" "My sleep was restless," I was happy" (reverse-coded); "I enjoyed life" (reverse-coded); "I did not feel like eating. My appetite was poor;" "I felt sad;" "I could not get going;" "I felt lonely;" "People were unfriendly," and "I felt that people disliked me" (item response categories, 1 = hardly ever, 3 = most of the time). The reliability and validity of the CES-D scale are well-established in large-scale epidemiologic studies (Radloff 1977; alpha = .81 in the present sample).

Hostility/Anger. Hostility/anger is measured with three items that asked respondents to indicate how often during the past week they "felt irritable, or likely to fight or argue," "felt like telling someone off," and "felt angry or hostile for several hours at a time" (item response categories, 1 = hardly ever, 3 = most of the time; scale alpha = .66).

Alcohol use. We measured alcohol consumption by multiplying the number of days the respondent reported drinking in the past month by the typical number of drinks consumed on those days. Alcohol problems were assessed with a 9-item scale (Room, Greenfield, and Weisner 1991). Sample items include "I have skipped a number of regular meals while drinking" and "My hands shook a lot the morning after drinking" (scale alpha = .80). Response categories include "yes" (coded 1) and "no" (coded 0).

RESULTS

Is Stress Associated with Domestic Violence?

We begin by considering whether the violent and nonviolent groups differ on perceived stress. We estimated logistic regression equations in which violent/nonviolent status was regressed on stress and Hispanic status. We report findings that are significant at the .10 level due to our small sample size. Panel A of Table 2 shows that, compared to nonviolent subjects, the violent subjects report significantly higher levels of global stress. The odds of violence increase more than fourfold for each unit increase in global stress. These results provide indirect evidence for the view that some individuals respond to stress with
VIOLENT BEHAVIOR

TABLE 2. Logistic Regression Results for the Effects of Stress on the Odds of Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Betaa</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
<th>Odds-Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Panel A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Stress</td>
<td>1.434*</td>
<td>.867</td>
<td>4.195*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.455*</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td>4.286*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.093</td>
<td>.283</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-relationship Stress</td>
<td>1.188</td>
<td>.833</td>
<td>3.280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.580*</td>
<td>.837</td>
<td>4.853*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.115</td>
<td>.280</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Stress</td>
<td>.384</td>
<td>.322</td>
<td>1.468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.332</td>
<td>.863</td>
<td>3.789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.061</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10

acts of domestic violence. We ran this analysis separately for relationship stress and non-relationship sources of stress. The results (shown in panels B and C of Table 2) show that the odds of violence are not significantly increased when these sources of stress are considered separately, only when they are combined. These findings may reflect our small sample size or may indicate that the effects of stress on violence are most relevant when stress is cumulative across domains.

Comorbidity

Although the violent subjects report more stress in their lives, we find no difference between the violent and nonviolent subjects on psychological distress as measured by the CES-D (nonviolent subject mean = 15.97, violent subject mean = 17.48, t = 1.49). Of course, by definition, the two groups diverge dramatically in their propensity for violent behavior. This suggests that violent behavior is an outcome that is distinct from psychological distress.

We also considered the association of violent behavior with measures of hostility/anger, alcohol consumption, and alcohol problems. We find that the violent group scores significantly higher than the nonviolent group on both hostility/anger (nonviolent subject mean = -.196, violent subject mean = .173, t = 1.99, p ≤ .05) and alcohol problems (nonviolent subject mean = -.230, violent subject mean = .207, t = 3.02, p ≤ .01) but not alcohol consumption (nonviolent subject mean = 23.20, violent subject mean = 43.44, t = 1.32). This suggests that a propensity for violence may covary with hostility/anger and alcohol problems.

Are Violent Men More Likely to Appraise Situations as Threatening and to Repress Emotion?

To follow up on the idea that appraisal and coping follow a unique pattern for violent men, we considered whether violent and nonviolent men differ in their tendency to appraise situations as threatening and to repress their own emotions. We hypothesized that men who appraise their situations as personally threatening along with a tendency to repress emotions are at greater risk for violent behavior. The logistic regression results in Panel A of Table 3 support this hypothesis. We find that the odds of engaging in domestic violence are 3.52 times higher among individuals who perceive threat and repress emotion compared to those who do not exhibit this pattern of threat appraisals/repressed emotion (p ≤ .05).

We further examined the consequences of threat appraisals/repressed emotion separately for threat appraisals associated with relationship stress and threat appraisals associated with non-relationship stress. The results, shown in panels B and C of Table 3, indicate that relationship-based threat appraisals are most strongly associated with an increased risk for domestic violence.

Our second approach to examining emotion regulation is to examine the tendency to avoid/withdraw from stressful encounters with intimate partners. The results in Table 4 provide further support for the position that a propensity to perceive threat along with withdrawal/avoidance is associated with violence.
The odds of engaging in domestic violence are eight times higher among men who perceive threat and tend to avoid/withdraw from partner conflict, compared to men who do not exhibit this pattern of threat appraisal and withdrawal. The significantly greater risk for violence is present whether threat appraisals occur in the relationship or non-relationship domain.

Qualitative analysis of our in-depth interviews also supports the threat appraisal/repressed emotion and threat appraisal/avoidance-withdrawal pattern found among domestically violent men in the quantitative analysis. Appraisals of threat, especially in partner encounters, were a pervasive theme in in-depth interviews. Violent subjects are more likely to perceive their partner’s behavior as threatening, regardless of the objective qualities of the behavior. For example, the following quotations illustrate the different ways in which a violent and a non-violent subject responded to his partner’s threats to leave the relationship after she learned that he was unfaithful. Jeff, age 25, a violent subject, reported that:

Our last physical altercation, I think it would be the worst. It started because of my, me committing adultery. And she wanted to leave. I had no problems with it . . . We were breaking up . . . At least, that’s how easy I thought it would be. However, it wasn’t that easy at all . . . It was final in her mind that she didn’t want to be with me. And that was hard for me to accept, so I, I lashed out. I mean, I kicked her back into the room and she fell on the ground because I was kick-

### TABLE 3. Logistic Regression Results for the Combined Effect of Threat Appraisals and Repressed Emotion on the Odds of Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>(S.E.)</th>
<th>Odds-Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Odds of Domestic Violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Threat Appraisals Combined with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repressed Emotion</td>
<td>1.258*</td>
<td>(.660)</td>
<td>3.517*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.445*</td>
<td>(.851)</td>
<td>4.242*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.390</td>
<td>(.314)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-relationship Threat Appraisals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repressed Emotion</td>
<td>.949</td>
<td>(.625)</td>
<td>2.584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.568*</td>
<td>(.840)</td>
<td>4.795*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.344</td>
<td>(.317)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Threat Appraisals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repressed Emotion</td>
<td>1.156*</td>
<td>(.618)</td>
<td>3.176*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.497*</td>
<td>(.847)</td>
<td>4.466*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.414</td>
<td>(.322)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ * p < .10 \]

**TABLE 4. Logistic Regression Results for the Combined Effect of Threat Appraisals and Avoidance/Withdrawal on the Odds of Violence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>(S.E.)</th>
<th>Odds-Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Odds of Domestic Violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Threat Appraisals Combined with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance/Withdrawal</td>
<td>2.111**</td>
<td>(.826)</td>
<td>8.253**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.537*</td>
<td>(.866)</td>
<td>4.651*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.502</td>
<td>(.316)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-relationship Threat Appraisals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance/Withdrawal</td>
<td>2.229**</td>
<td>(.828)</td>
<td>9.294**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.725**</td>
<td>(.862)</td>
<td>5.612**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.560*</td>
<td>(.323)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Threat Appraisals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance/Withdrawal</td>
<td>1.592**</td>
<td>(.614)</td>
<td>4.915**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.588*</td>
<td>(.863)</td>
<td>4.894*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.614*</td>
<td>(.344)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ * p < .10 \] ** p < .05 \]
ing her on her legs. She fell on the ground, and I kicked her in the chest.

Frankie, age 28, a non-violent subject, described a different response to a similar situation:

The worst [argument] I guess would be after I told her about my outside affair, and, things got pretty bad ... she got to the point where she said, “That’s it. I’m not going to have anything to do with you. I’m out of here”. ... She got some clothes. That’s when she hit me a couple of times because I stood in front of the wardrobe. You know, and I was like, come on, don’t pack your stuff. Sit down and let’s talk about this. And she was like, get out of my way. And I’d say, “No, I’m not going to move because I don’t want you to just run out of here. I want to at least get a chance to talk this out. So I’m not going to move.” So she attempted to move me and hit me a couple of times, you know. And when she did that, you know, I was just like, “This is ridiculous.”

A comparison of these two accounts reveals differences in both the degree to which Jeff and Frankie felt threatened when an intimate partner tried to leave the relationship and how their response to that threat differed. Frankie expressed some understanding of his partner’s feelings and later called her to talk about the situation. In contrast, Jeff suggests that he had no prior awareness of the degree of threat that his partner’s leaving represented—“At least, that’s how easy I thought it would be”—until the moment that she tried to leave. Additionally, although the threat to leave evoked a strong reaction in both Jeff and Frankie, it is expressed quite differently. Jeff denied any emotional response to the break-up—“I had no problem with it.” Frankie described a number of emotions in response to his break-up:

I was really sad and really remorseful about it. At the point when she wanted to call her sister ... I really felt, you know, this was a spiteful thing ... “you not only want to leave here but you want to, you know, maybe get me back, for the way I’ve made you feel.” I was, I was very upset. I was very, you know, mad, mad upset, not crying upset, but mad upset at this point.

Frankie recognized that his partner was experiencing an emotional reaction to their conflict that was distinct from his own reaction. This understanding of a partner’s unique emotions and feelings was largely absent in violent subjects’ accounts of conflict in their relationships (see also Goodrum, Umberson, and Anderson 2001). Finally, Jeff and Frankie differed in their coping responses once the fight was over. After he assaulted his partner, Jeff withdrew from the situation by leaving to meet some friends. Frankie tried to contact his partner via telephone later in the evening to discuss the argument.

Violent subjects rarely reported feeling emotion; rather, they described the acting out or release of emotion through physical acts. Like Jeff in the above account, George, age 21, describes a conflict in which he used violence to convey his emotional response to a threatening situation. Shortly after he separated from his partner, George ran into her at a club and later went home with her where:

... she demanded for me to tell her how I felt, and I told her how I felt, and she said, “well that’s not good enough.” And I kept telling her, you know, that I just wanted to be left alone. So she kept going on and on, because she, she had found a button to push with me basically. And so I kicked her off the couch and said, “This is how I feel.” And I hit her in her side. And that was that. (emphasis added)

George’s lack of emotional expression was a direct source of conflict in his relationship. George used physical aggression toward his partner as a way of expressing his feelings of anger and frustration. Many violent subjects in this study seemed uncomfortable discussing their feelings and reported active efforts to withdraw from potentially threatening situations. Conversely, nonviolent subjects were more likely to report that they experienced emotion and to acknowledge those feelings to themselves, their partners, and others.

Is Personal Control Associated with Domestic Violence?

Parallel to the findings on personal control and psychological distress found in the stress and coping literature, we find that higher levels of personal control are associated with lower risk for domestic violence. Logistic regression results in Table 5 indicate that, for each unit increase in personal control, there is a 65 percent decrease in the probability of domestic violence.

We further considered whether men who are lower on personal control are more likely to engage in a pattern of threat appraisal/
TABLE 5. Logistic Regression Results for the Effects of Personal Control on the Odds of Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>(S.E.)</th>
<th>Odds-Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Control</td>
<td>-1.039**</td>
<td>(.517)</td>
<td>.354**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>1.408*</td>
<td>(.860)</td>
<td>4.089*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>(.286)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10 ** p < .05 *** p < .01

repressed emotion. Panel A of Table 6 presents the results for global threat appraisals/repressed emotion. Panel A shows that personal control is inversely associated with the threat/repression pattern. For each unit increase in personal control, there is a 72 percent decrease in the odds of a threat appraisal/repressed emotion response. It appears, then, that men who feel less control over their lives are more likely to appraise situations as threatening and to repress their emotions.

We reran this analysis separately for non-relationship sources of threat and relationship-based sources of threat. Panel B shows that, for each unit increase in personal control, the odds of making a non-relationship based threat appraisal combined with repressed emotion decreases by 67 percent. Contrary to our previous analysis suggesting that relationship-based sources of threat had stronger effects on increasing the odds of violence, a comparison of panels B and C shows that low personal control increases the probability of threat appraisals/repressed emotion most significantly in the realm of non-relationship sources of threat.

While repressed emotion is associated with personal control, additional analyses (not shown) indicate that avoidance/withdrawal from partner conflict is not significantly associated with personal control.

Issues of control resurface throughout the in-depth interviews. Individuals in the violent group were more likely to spontaneously raise concerns about their lack of control over situations and others, how others attempt to control them, and how they often feel “out of control.” Many of the violent subjects emphasize that they feel they are losing control or feel “out of control” just prior to a violent episode, Tony, age 22, explains:

I got mad enough, you know, when you’re mad enough to hit somebody—that’s pretty much uncontrollable right there. It was like my anger was controlling me at the time. I didn’t want to control my anger. I just wanted to be mad at anybody who would have stepped in my way or anything... when I get angry like that, it’s more like an instinct. It’s not really a decision, like, “OK, I’m gonna be mad.” It’s just something that takes me over; the emotion just takes me over.

Nonviolent subjects, on the other hand, often emphasize how they make a conscious effort to manage their feelings, sometimes using very specific techniques to defuse the situation, Jason, age 40, explains:

Maybe this is what lightened things up. Instead of going into a big, long, drawn-out argument, cussing each other out and all that... I wasn’t pressing it, you know.

Our findings about threat appraisals, repressed emotion, and personal control dovetail arguments made by Rosenfield (1999), Horwitz (Horwitz and Davies 1994; Horwitz and White 1987; Horwitz et al. 1996), and Schwartz (1991) on internalizing versus externalizing styles of distress. These authors

TABLE 6. Logistic Regression Results for the Effects of Personal Control on Combined Threat Appraisals/Repressed Emotion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel A</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>(S.E.)</th>
<th>Odds-Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Control</td>
<td>-1.260**</td>
<td>(.620)</td>
<td>.284**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>.712</td>
<td>(.737)</td>
<td>2.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.266***</td>
<td>(.347)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel B</th>
<th>Non-relationship Threat Appraisals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Control</td>
<td>-1.103*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel C</th>
<th>Relationship Threat Appraisals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Control</td>
<td>-617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Status</td>
<td>.655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.010***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10 ** p < .05 *** p < .01
emphasize that some individuals are more likely to repress feelings and express upset behaviorally while others are more likely to express upset through their feelings and emotions.

**DISCUSSION**

**Stress, Emotional Upset, Repressed Emotion, and Violent Behavior**

Emmons (1992) defines repressors as “individuals who chronically defend themselves against negative affects, particularly anger and anxiety, and who deny experiencing distress even in the face of objective signs indicating that they are distressed” (p. 142). Our case-control results and the in-depth interviews with domestically-violent and nonviolent men indicate that the individuals who are most likely to express emotional upset through violent behavior are those who have a propensity to repress emotion or avoid/withdraw from stressful partner encounters.

The idea that repressed emotion and emotion regulation are conducive to certain types of psychological distress is not new, particularly in theoretical work and qualitative research. Del Martin (1985), speaking of male batterers, argued that “repression of emotion . . . has devastating psychological effects” (p. 23). Similarly, Reissman’s (1990) qualitative work on divorce emphasizes that men’s inability to express emotion following divorce results in drinking, anger, and psychosomatic illness. In the short run, avoidance, withdrawal, and repression may reduce feelings of distress but, in the long run, these coping strategies only increase distress and health problems (Pennebaker 1992; Repetti 1992).

Individuals may attempt to repress or avoid emotion in order to eliminate feelings of upset; however, repression and avoidance do not make stress or upset disappear. We contend that, over time, attempts to repress/avoid emotion lead to a build-up of tension and upset that may eventually be expressed in a violent act. In the immediate aftermath of violence, there may even be a sense of relief and a felt reduction in distress, Robert, age 40, explains:

> I reached out and popped her on the jaw. It was just a reflex deal. But after it happened . . . I was like, “Man, that felt really good, you know . . . ”

Of course, as violence typically produces more stress in relationships and life situations, the underlying reasons for distress are only amplified by a violent act.

**Measuring Violent Behavior: Dichotomy or Continuum of Emotional Upset**

We accept the sociological view that psychological distress exists along a continuum (and that psychological distress reflects social circumstances as well as individual propensities), even while we acknowledge some clinical and research utility in establishing cut-points along that continuum (Mirowsky and Ross 1989). We adopt a similar position in our view of violent behavior as an expression of emotional upset. Certainly, violent behavior exists along a continuum. At one extreme, individuals are pacifists in the face of any adversity or situation. At the other extreme, individuals are regularly violent toward other people, even murderously so. According to our theoretical model, some individuals are much more likely than others to express emotional upset through violent behavior. There are group differences in this propensity, due to socialization, structural position, and cultural values. Furthermore, there are individual differences within those groups—due to a tendency to appraise situations as threatening and to repress other (nonviolent) expressions of emotion.

In the present study, we examined violent behavior as a dichotomous outcome: Either one has recently engaged in domestic violence severe enough to warrant a police call or one has not. This approach is driven by both research and theoretical concerns: We wanted to investigate the possibility that violent behavior is an expression of emotional upset that is characteristic of certain individuals in similar structural circumstances. This approach allows us to consider the social psychological process through which perceived stress, threat appraisals, and repressed emotion might lead to violent behavior.

Yet our sample of violent individuals is comprised of people whose violence is, by definition, somewhat severe. This is useful for research purposes, in that we wanted to identify individuals with a clear propensity for violence. However, the process through which individuals engage in more severe violence may or may not differ from that of individuals with more moderate violent tendencies (Johnson and Ferraro 2000). Our research pro-
vides a theoretical framework and preliminary empirical support for the view that violent behavior may be an expression of emotional upset. Future research should consider a range of severity when measuring violent behavior in order to help clarify the circumstances under which stress, emotional upset, threat appraisals, and repressed emotion/emotion avoidance might contribute to violent behavior.

It is noteworthy that hostility/anger is associated with violent behavior in the present study. It may be that violence should be measured in a way that parallels sociologists’ usual measurement of psychological distress. Distress is assessed along a continuum from minimal symptoms of distress to full-blown clinical depression; at some point along the continuum, we establish a cut-point to establish significant clinical impairment. A continuum of violent behavior may exist from minimal symptoms (perhaps verbal aggression and hostility/anger) to full-blown physical attacks against others, with some cut-point that denotes physical assault against another person.

Comorbidity

Some scholars have suggested that different mental health outcomes may stand as functional equivalents for one another—with any particular outcome more common in one social group or another. However, the most recent epidemiological research indicates that, although different groups tend to express upset in different ways, certain mental health measures tend to co-vary (Kessler and Zhao 1999). For example, individuals who experience depression often exhibit symptoms of anxiety (Kessler and Zhao 1999). The psychological literature establishes that violence is more likely to be associated with some conditions than others (e.g., antisocial behavior). However, most individuals who engage in violent behavior are not characterized by a specific psychological disorder. Of course, patterns of comorbidity may also differ across social groups (e.g., for men and women). In the present study, we find that depression (as measured by the CES-D) is not associated with violence; however, hostility/anger and alcohol problems are positively associated with the propensity for violence. Furthermore, the social psychological factors underlying violent behavior (e.g., low personal control, repressed emotion, threat appraisals) may differ for different mental health outcomes. For example, personal control may be associated with violent behavior and depression but not alcohol abuse; threat appraisals may be associated with alcohol abuse and violent behavior but not depression. The processes underlying different expressions of upset remain for future research to identify. Clarification of these underlying processes would provide useful information for the development of diagnostic and treatment approaches.

Gender

Theoretical and empirical work suggests that the threat/repression pattern is more common among men than women (Holohan and Moos 1987; Repetti 1992). The present study provides some preliminary evidence that this pattern exists among men but our sample does not include women. Theoretically, although this pattern might be more prevalent among men, women who engage in the same underlying pattern of threat appraisal/repression and avoidance should be at greater risk for violent behavior. Although men are more likely than women to physically injure their partners, national surveys show that women are as likely as men to engage in physical aggression toward a partner (Straus and Gelles 1986). Of course, since aggression by women is much more likely to be in self-defense and noninjurious, the underlying social psychological patterns leading to domestic partner violence are probably quite different for men and women (Johnson and Ferraro 2000). On the other hand, the underlying factors contributing toward violence against children (and others) may follow a similar pattern for men and women. Future research should address the complicated issue of these and other questions of gender, emotional distress, and violent behavior.

Social Structures

Both social and personal factors contribute to one's experience and expression of emotional upset. Our primary focus in this paper has been on personal factors that contribute to violent behavior with a heavy emphasis on appraisal and coping patterns. This is an important first step in identifying the factors
that might contribute to violent behavior. However, we adhere to the sociological paradigm that emphasizes the importance of social structures in shaping emotion and the expression of upset (e.g., Thoits 1990). Future research should consider social group differences in expressions of upset that include violent behavior. Furthermore, appraisal and coping strategies that are associated with violence may differ greatly across social groups, helping to explain why some groups are more likely than others to express upset with violent behavior.

Future research should compare different groups on threat appraisal/repressed emotion tendencies as well as the link between this tendency and violent behavior. If different groups express emotional upset in different ways, some groups may be more likely than others to engage in threat appraisals/repressed emotion, and this may explain some group differences in violent behavior.

Data and Measurement

Our analysis is limited by small sample size and the restricted measurement of key concepts. The ideal sample for a study of repressed emotion and violence would be a random sample that includes men, women, and those of different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic statuses. National surveys show that approximately 16 percent of respondents report a violent episode with an intimate partner in any given year (Straus and Gelles 1986). This type of sample would allow us to examine group differences in the social psychological processes underlying violent behavior, possibly explaining group differences in violent behavior and addressing group differences in the expression of upset. The measures of repressed emotion, avoidance/withdrawal, threat appraisals, and a range of violent feelings and behaviors should be much more extensive and multi-dimensional than those examined in the present study.

It is likely that the associations between many of the psychosocial concepts that comprise our model are bi-directional. Future research should more explicitly explore possible reciprocal relationships and feedback mechanisms in describing the process through which anger, repressed emotion, personal control, and threat appraisal lead to violent behavior. Although our measures and sample are limited, the findings are compelling enough to warrant future investigation with a larger sample, more extensive measures, and more complex models.

Additionally, our findings raise questions about the measurement of stress and psychological distress. Established measures of stress, depression, and strain are often emotion-focused; for example, the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale asks respondents to indicate how often they feel a particular way (e.g., worried, anxious). If the ability to identify or express emotion varies across persons and is correlated with sex or social class or ethnicity, measures of stress or depression that include emotion-focused terms may tap into more than what the construct is trying to measure.

Ideally, a study of violent behavior would also include measures of domain-specific control (e.g., control in the domain of intimate relationships, work, etc.) in addition to global personal control. The violence literature implies that domain-specific control may be even more important than a global sense of control in triggering acts of violence, while the mental health literature focuses more on a global sense of control as conducive to mental health.

CONCLUSION

We argue that violent behavior is an expression of emotional upset, particularly among some groups of individuals. This perspective does not provide a justification for violence. Rather it is intended to provide a new way of looking at emotional upset and violent behavior, especially among social groups for whom traditional measures may lead to underestimation of actual psychological distress. Individuals who repress emotions and feelings are not necessarily free of distress—they are simply free of traditional symptoms of psychological distress. Greater understanding of the social psychological processes through which domestic violence emerges may provide new insights into the etiology of violent behavior as well as more effective interventions for domestic violence perpetrators. However, we emphasize that any intervention with this population requires careful and extensive examination before it can be established as safe and effective.
Recently, Schieman (2000) suggested that anger may be "an equally important distress construct alongside depression and anxiety" (p. 21). However, anger is similar to depression and anxiety in that it is a feeling state, an internalized expression of distress. We emphasize that violent behavior is a pervasive externalizing expression of emotional upset in our society, particularly among certain social groups—an expression of emotional upset that should be viewed as an equally important distress concept alongside feeling states such as depression and anxiety. Our society strongly conveys the message, especially to certain groups (e.g., men), that emotions and feelings are to be repressed and that violence is an appropriate way to respond to frustration and stress.

Viewing violent behavior as an expression of emotional upset is a strongly sociological position. We do not contend that violent behavior should be a new "diagnostic category" of mental illness or disorder. Rather, violent behavior is an expression of emotional upset that is pervasive in contemporary U.S. culture. In fact, violence in our culture is a serious social problem. Social norms advance and reinforce this expression in some social groups more than others. Furthermore, violent behavior has harsh consequences for the mental and physical health of the targets of violent behavior.

The Centers for Disease Control argue that violent behavior is a significant public health problem in the United States (Rosenberg and Fenley 1991). Recognizing violent behavior as an expression of emotional upset provides a new way of looking at mental health and violent behavior. It also provides a new approach to policy formation and clinical intervention with violent populations. We have provided a theoretical perspective and some preliminary yet suggestive empirical support for the position that violent behavior is an expression of emotional upset for some individuals. The rates of violence in our society suggest that this is not an unusual way of expressing emotional upset. We believe that the evidence offered here warrants measurement of a range of violent behaviors (e.g., from grabbing and pushing to hitting and using lethal weapons) in future epidemiological studies of mental health and, particularly, in research on group differences in psychopathology.

REFERENCES


Debra Umberson is Professor and Chair of Sociology at the University of Texas. Her research focuses on structural determinants of physical and mental health, with a specific focus on gender and life course variation. Her latest work on domestic violence shows how the effects of relationship dynamics on mental health differ for violent and nonviolent men. Her new research, funded by the National Institute on Aging (NIA#AG17455), examines change in marital quality and the effect of marital quality on health over the life course.

Kristi Williams is Assistant Professor of Sociology at The Ohio State University. Her research examines the impact of marital and family relationships on mental and physical health, the mechanisms through which these effects are produced, and gender and life course variations in these processes. Current projects focus on the effects of family labor on the health of individuals and their spouses, the impact of widowhood on health behaviors, and the relative effects of marital status and marital quality on psychological well-being.

Kristin L. Anderson is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Western Washington University. She studies the relationships between partner violence and hierarchies of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Her recent article in *Gender & Society* (vol. 15, June 2001) examines the construction of gender within men's accounts of domestic violence.