

New University of Houston research focuses on treatment for perpetrator, not victim

July 31 2012

A new UH experiment takes an unconventional look at the treatment for domestic violence, otherwise known as intimate partner violence (IPV), by focusing on changing the perpetrators' psychological abuse during arguments rather than addressing his sexist beliefs.

"There is a lot of research that studies the victim of intimate partner violence, but not the perpetrator," said Julia Babcock, department of psychology and co-director of the Center for Couples Therapy, a clinical research center at UH that offers therapy for couples. "The predominant model for IPV intervention is based on what was gleaned from women in battered women shelters and focuses on men's patriarchal attitudes about power and control. Since most [domestic violence](#) occurs in the context of an argument, the experiment I conducted evaluated whether I could change how the communication goes during an argument with the batterer and his partner. The findings indicated the batterers could learn communications skills and when they applied them in an argument with their [female partners](#), the argument improved and the participants felt better about the argument and more understood."

Babcock notes this research is significant in that it breaks new ground in applying experiments to domestic violence and may improve batterers' intervention programs. In a review of the research studies on the efficacy of batterers' intervention programs, Babcock found the results disappointing. There was a small change when a [perpetrator](#) completed a batterers intervention program and only a 5 percent reduction rate in repeat offenses. "There is definitely a need to improve batterers'

intervention programs, since research suggests that they're largely ineffective, but frequently prescribed by courts as a remedy for convicted IPV perpetrators," said Babcock. Babcock's research focuses on male batterers because men are the perpetrators in about 85 percent of the abuse cases, and women are 10 times more likely to be murdered by an intimate than are men.

By listing an advertisement in local papers that said, "couples experiencing conflict," the research team recruited 120 couples in the Houston area qualified for the experiment. Candidates for the study were screened over the telephone to make sure they met criteria. To meet the criteria to participate in the study, two acts of violence had to occur in the last year that might include: pushing, shoving, choking, using a weapon or a beating. If there was no physical abuse, but the couple scored low for marital satisfaction, Babcock included them as a comparison group.

The couples were then invited to participate in an experiment in the "Emotions in Marriage Lab," where the research team observed a couple in a 15-minute argument. Both male and female partner were connected to monitors to measure heart rate, respiration, skin conductance, movement, pulse, transit time of blood flow from the periphery to the heart, skin temperature while affect (such as anger, contempt, fear, disgust, etc.) was noted. Midway during the 15-minute argument, the researchers interrupted the argument at 7½ minutes and randomly assigned the male batterer to one of three conditions: 1) a time out; 2) a request to edit out the negative, where he makes the same points in a more neutral fashion; or, 3) a request to accept influence, where he listens to the female's ideas, trusts that the partner may be right and validates her idea even if his idea is different. The male batterer was taught these communication skills then asked to use them in the second half of the argument.

"What we found is that the interventions worked to make the second half of the argument better," said Babcock. "Batterers could learn these communication skills and when they applied them in arguments with their female partner, it decreased aggressive attacks on the female partner, contemptuous behavior, criticism and put downs in both the woman and the man. The idea is that reducing such [psychological abuse](#) may reduce [intimate partner violence](#). Whereas most therapies are built top down from theory, the new technology allows us to build a therapy package--technique by technique--from the lab up."

Provided by University of Houston

Citation: New University of Houston research focuses on treatment for perpetrator, not victim (2012, July 31) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-07-university-houston-focuses-treatment-perpetrator.html>

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