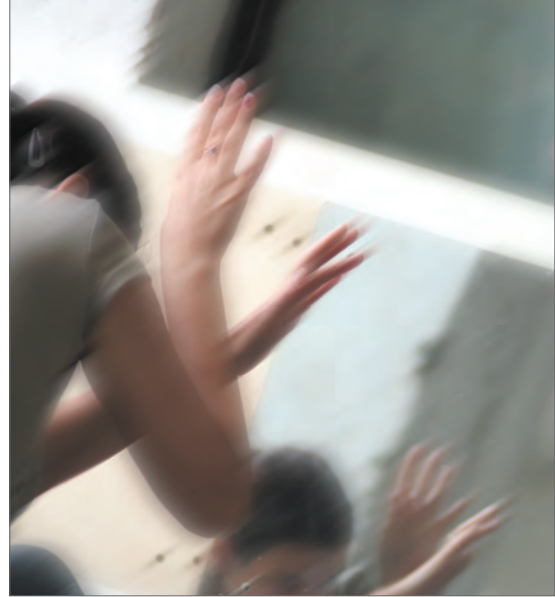


Considering the Differences: Intimate Partner Sexual Violence in Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Discourse

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Twenty years ago, I became free of a dangerous man. He beat me regularly, threatened me with weapons and pursued me with threats to my life when I sought to leave. Although I could never have given it a name at the time, he had other ways of subjugating and demeaning me too. He raped me, repeatedly, when his sense of ownership of me was threatened, to punish me, or just because I presumed the right to say “no.” At the time, avoiding or surviving the battery was a priority; I figured that what happened in the bedroom was best forgotten as soon as possible.

I got away, I tried to bury myself in a new life and forget. Then my ex-partner was charged with murder, and the barricade began to crumble. Most disconcertingly, memories of the rapes bothered me. It occurred to me that it was different, worse, somehow than the battery. I decided to seek information that could help me begin to process it.

This was immensely frustrating. In rape and domestic violence literature, as well as within agencies, Intimate Partner Sexual Violence (IPSV) and the range of issues it carries as distinct from general sexual assault or domestic violence, was not well-defined. It was as if there was a hole in the knowledge; my experiences had only limited commonality. It left me feeling as if what happened to me was given lip-service as rape, but somehow “less” rape than any other kind. I believed that my level of trauma must be an overreaction, and was embarrassed about putting it on a par with the rapes of other women.

Upon entering the university setting, I had the opportunity to study IPSV. I discovered that researchers were indeed drawing attention to the issue, pointing out the need to be aware of the specific dynamics of intimate partner sexual violence (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Russell, 1990). Since that time, further positive contributions to understanding have been made. It is thus a privilege to have co-authored the book *Real Rape, Real Pain* with Dr. Patricia Easta.

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Problems with Equating IPSV and General Sexual Assault Issues

It is true that all types of rape are traumatic, and that in any context, rape should be seen as rape. But known wisdoms about sexual assault are often ill-suited to IPSV survivors. Finkelhor and Yllo (1985) write about the "special traumas" of IPSV and tell us, "It is these special traumas that we need to understand in their full and terrible reality." Survivor Linda articulates:

And they say marital rape is not as bad as stranger rape. I don't know. I have never been raped by a stranger. But I think being raped by your husband in your own home must be worse in some ways. At least if you're attacked by a perfect stranger it is not so personal. Your husband is the person whom you should be able to turn to for comfort, who should protect you. When it is the person you have entrusted your life to who abuses you, it isn't just physical or sexual assault, it is a betrayal of the very core of your marriage or your person, your trust. If you're not safe in your own home, next to your husband, where are you safe? (Easteal & McOrmond-Plummer, 2006, p. 138)

Raquel Bergen (1996) writes about the insufficiency of treating IPSV survivors as generic rape survivors with particular regard to counseling and support groups. This is borne out in my own experience of membership in a generic rape survivor group. There simply wasn't the space to explore my specific issues such as ambivalent feelings for the perpetrator and the deep shame of having continued the relationship after being raped by him. This led to a deeper sense of isolation and sense that my experiences didn't matter quite as much as those of the other women. It didn't occur to me at the time that "different" didn't mean "less than."

Below are just some of the issues common to IPSV victims/survivors as opposed to other rape survivors:

- **Longer-lasting trauma:** There's a common notion that IPSV doesn't have as bad an impact as sexual assault by a stranger. In fact, research reveals that the trauma can be longer lasting. Significant reasons for this are lack of recognition and ability to share the pain (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985).
- **Higher levels of physical injury:** If we accept that generally most rapes are not physically violent, those that do involve injury are likely to be partner

rapes (Myhill & Allen, 2002).

- **The incidence of multiple rape:** Although IPSV can be one offense, survivors of IPSV suffer the highest frequency of multiple rape (Myhill & Allen, 2002).
- **Higher levels of anal and oral rape:** Partner perpetrators commonly use these forms of assault to humiliate, punish and take 'full' ownership of their partners (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985).
- **Advice to "put up with" rape:** Marital rape victims are a group singularly prone to being advised by church, family or friends that they should be grateful that the rapist is a good father, and that it's their duty to submit (Adams, 1995). It's hard to imagine any other class of rape victim being given this advice, and is what leads to further endangerment.
- **Financial dependency on the rapist:** Women with children who are permitted no money or employment of their own may feel that there is no escape.
- **Safety issues:** The IPSV survivor may need a place of refuge, court-orders and assistance with legal/custody matters.
- **Difficulty defining the act(s) as sexual assault:** Women are socialized to see rape as involving non-consensual sex between two strangers. Additionally, there may be reluctance to define a partner she loves as a "rapist."
- **A general climate of sexual assault/abuse:** Women living with IPSV may face a host of other behaviors than rape that would not be acceptable if committed by strangers, such as their breasts being hurt, being forced to touch the perpetrator sexually, and degrading name calling (Easteal & McOrmond-Plummer, 2006).

Problems with Equating IPSV and General Domestic Violence Issues

There has been a past trend in domestic violence discourse to view IPSV as simply another abuse. Yet, Bergen's study reveals that women who were battered as well as raped by their partners considered rape to be the most significant issue. She adds that, "When treated as battered women, the wounds left by the sexual abuse often go unaddressed" (Bergen, 1996, p. 89). To be sure, all domestic violence, be it physical, emotional, sexual or otherwise is usually aimed at control and subjugation. But sexual assault attacks a woman's psyche in different ways. In my experience,

the battery was aimed at getting me to do what I was told or hurting me for not doing so, but the rape had a far nastier and more contemptuous message about my lack of worth and power. My rapist intended it as an ultimate insult, and that is how I experienced it. While I was ashamed of being battered – certainly in terms of the blame it accrued from others – the shame of being raped was more deeply excoriating; I did not think I would ever tell anybody.

Another serious problem in subsuming IPSV under domestic violence is that it may foster the assumption that rape only happens in battering relationships. While this is statistically more likely (Russell, 1990), it does also occur in relationships that are not characterized by other violence. Natalie says, “There was absolutely no indication in the seven years of our relationship that he could be violent, and I know he adored me. I simply couldn’t reconcile the Sean who attacked me with the Sean that I had known all those years” (Easteal & McOrmond-Plummer, 2006, p. 111). Numerous women have written to me through my website (www.aphroditewounded.org) with apologetic tones because their partners didn’t beat them “like so many other women.” Yet women shouldn’t need to be beaten to feel that their pain around being raped is valid. Women who don’t identify as domestic violence victims because they aren’t being hit, or whose sexual assaults are more coercive than physically violent (i.e. the perpetrator withdraws affection or verbally badgers to get what he wants), may continue to fall through the cracks when IPSV is not clearly defined and given a prominence of its own. Let’s look at some differences:

- **Potential Fatality:** Research establishes that women who are being raped as well as battered are in greater danger of being killed than women who are battered but not raped (Browne, 1987; Campbell, 1989). Given the dynamics of ultimate power-over and ownership in IPSV, this would seem to be a logical step for some batterers. Screening women for life-threatening issues is an important part of shelter intake; viewing IPSV in this light may save lives.
- **Deliberately Inflicted Pregnancy or STDs:** Men may rape to impregnate their partners in order to force them to remain in or return to the relationship (Easteal & McOrmond-Plummer, 2006). They may also force their partners into unprotected sex to infect them with sexually transmitted diseases (Wilson, 1997).
- **Psychological Effects:** Women who have been raped as well as battered may suffer greater damage to



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self-esteem and body issues – and this effect has been measured as separable from battery (Shields & Hanneke (1983). This should shock us little since the degradation has come from somebody who was supposed to love and honor the survivor’s body. Rape can result in a more “intimate” wound than battery.

Different Issues among Subgroups of IPSV Survivors

In thinking about the distinct issues that IPSV survivors face, we should not neglect determinant factors that may have bearing on different IPSV survivors’ reactions. Some factors to consider are:

- the age of the survivor (teenage survivors of IPSV experience some different effects to their adult counterparts)
- the levels of violence involved (bearing in mind that “non-violent” rape is still traumatic and may be more confusing to the victim than rape that involves the more “stereotypical” element of violence)
- the duration and frequency of the assaults (acknowledging that one rape is one too many and can comprise a profound shock) (Easteal & McOrmond-Plummer, 2006)

To Conclude

IPSV is sexual assault and domestic violence – “both/and” rather than “either/or” - with some distinct features, the recognition of which are crucial if survivors are to be aided effectively. Extremely positive endeavors to this end include Raquel Bergen’s extensive writing and training, together with initiatives such as the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (WCSAP) Sexual Assault and Stalking in the Context of Domestic Violence project, a collaborative project which brings together domestic and sexual violence advocates, law enforcement and prosecutors to address the intersections of sexual assault and domestic violence, and trains helping professionals in advocacy for survivors of IPSV (www.wcsap.org/ipsv.htm). For me, being “part of the solution” in coauthoring *Real Rape, Real Pain*, a healing manual that focuses on the issues relevant to IPSV survivors (www.partnerrapebook.org), has been immensely gratifying but also humbling when women write to Patricia and me expressing relief that they finally feel heard and understood, that they know they can end the violence, and that they can take back their lives. It is an honor to be part of this change. We can all hope for its continuance. Women’s lives depend on it. ◉

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