



Batterers, Personality Characteristics of

Men who batter exhibit a variety of personality characteristics, and there is no single personality profile of the batterer. However, their personality characteristics tend to cluster into some distinct groups. This entry discusses these personality clusters and groups, the prevalence of personality disorders in men who batter, risk assessment of and interventions for men who batter, and the controversy surrounding these personality characteristic findings.

Personality Clusters and Groups

Early studies found three personality clusters: (1) schizoid/borderline, (2) narcissistic/antisocial, and (3) dependent/compulsive. More sophisticated studies that included measures of behaviors, beliefs, and physiological responses, along with personality, found that abusers could be placed into three major groups: (1) *family only*: those with no significant personality problems who tend to be violent only at home; these men seem to be conformists who have difficulty communicating assertively and dealing with stressful situations, and they seem to suppress their emotions more than do other abusers; (2) *antisocial*: those with strong antisocial traits who have a history of severe behavioral problems in childhood and adolescence and abuse of alcohol and other drugs; they tend to be violent inside and outside of the home, and they justify their violence and are adept at tactics of intimidation; and (3) *borderline/dysphoric*: those with borderline traits, who are emotionally “volatile,” and exhibit depression and suicidal tendencies; they are the most psychologically abusive, and they have the most difficulty separating from their partners and may stalk and harass them after separation. The above differences in personality traits appear to be linked to distinct types of childhood traumas. The studies found that while the antisocial type was likely to have suffered severe physical abuse at the hands of one or both parents, the borderline type was likely to have experienced loss, rejection, and humiliation.

Research on general personality dimensions supports distinctions between “impulsive” and “instrumental” violence. Impulsive violence appears to fulfill an emotional need, such as in the borderline abuser, whereas instrumental violence is more calculated and aimed at obtaining one's way, as in the antisocial abuser. Both the borderline and antisocial abuser appear “underinhibited,” in contrast to the family-only type, who appears to be “overinhibited.” Some

research has investigated physiological responses in the midst of couples' conflicts and linked them to personality types. One study found a *decrease* in physiological arousal among antisocial men during conflict, even when they seemed very angry. This implied that they knew how to appear intimidating and became more relaxed when their control was working. However, this study has not been replicated. Among the recent trends in research is the exploration of psychopathy, generally considered a more severe subtype of antisocial personality disorder. Psychopathic men seem to have little or no empathy for others and there is evidence that they are the most likely to re-assault, even after completing treatment. This research may help in identifying an abuser type who would not benefit at all from treatment and instead may require prolonged incarceration.

Prevalence

Some studies find that the majority of men who batter have personality disorders, but prevalence rates can vary as a function of the measures and definitions being used. Some researchers suspect that the self-report nature of many personality measures leads to inflated rates. Studies rarely use more reliable, comprehensive clinical assessments that include structured clinical interviews and reports from significant others. It should be noted that *personality* disorders are distinct from *mental* disorders. There is general agreement that men who batter do not have severe mental disorders, in particular mental disorders with an organic origin such as bipolar disorder. Courts do not recognize personality disorders as factors in criminal proceedings, whereas certain mental disorder symptoms may play a role in an offender's ability to distinguish right from wrong and to understand court proceedings.

Risk Assessment and Intervention

Knowing about the personality characteristics of batterers may prove useful in risk assessment and intervention planning. For example, antisocial types are the most severely violent during the relationship and exhibit domineering and threatening behaviors. However, they do not show the strong emotional attachment of the borderline type and have a "dismissive" style of attachment, which makes it easier for them to end relationships. Borderline types, on the other hand, are more likely to emotionally abuse their partners. They seem to be at the highest risk of killing their partners and themselves after separation. Still, it is possible to become complacent about the lethality of borderline types because they often show a strong motivation to get help, express their feelings, and perpetrate relatively low rates of physical abuse.

Some types of treatments or intervention might be more successful for some personality types than others, suggesting that one size does not fit all. One experiment found that men with antisocial personality traits, compared with other men, had lower reassault rates if they completed feminist-cognitive-behavioral groups, whereas those with dependent personality traits had lower reassault rates if they completed process-psychodynamic groups. The feminist-cognitive-behavioral approach uses sex-role resocialization and the cognitive restructuring and stress management methods used in most group programs. The process-psychodynamic

approach helps men to reveal and resolve childhood traumas in a safe environment. Group cohesion and leader self-disclosure are emphasized. Some researchers conclude that because the majority of abusers show narcissistic or avoidant traits, they will respond well to the commonly used cognitive-behavioral group treatment approach. Criminal justice interventions may not be very effective with the borderline type who is acting out of intense emotional needs. His “emotional survival” at the time of separation is more important to him than the consequences of arrest and jail.

Controversy

Findings on the personality characteristics of men who batter have been controversial. The findings lead some to conclude that certain personality traits, rather than cultural and social factors, are the sole cause of the violence. However, other views are possible. For example, it is possible to view the characteristics: (a) as correlated with causal factors and not causes in themselves; (b) as necessary but not sufficient causes of violence-individual level factors, such as personality, can be integrated theoretically with family factors, community factors, and sociocultural levels; and (c) as ways to understand the origins and manifestations of different forms of violence. This last view is in line with findings about different trajectories of childhood trauma leading to different forms of violence and personalities. On the other hand, some researchers who refer to an “abusive personality” mean that personality is the most important causal pathway leading from various childhood traumas to domestic violence. As research continues, a clearer picture is likely to develop on the precise role of personality traits in understanding domestic violence.

—Daniel G. Saunders

Further Readings

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