The Complex Relationship Between Dependency and Domestic Violence

Converging Psychological Factors and Social Forces

Robert F. Bornstein
Adelphi University

Research indicates that economic dependency in women and emotional dependency in men independently contribute to domestic-partner abuse risk and that high levels of emotional dependency in an abused partner may reduce the likelihood that the victimized person will terminate the relationship. An analysis of psychological factors and social forces that contribute to domestic violence suggests that multimodal intervention strategies are needed to combat this complex problem.

Keywords: emotional dependency, economic dependency, partner abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence

Researchers have long speculated that when one person relies on another for financial assistance, physical help, or emotional support, the possibility that the dependent member of the dyad will be mistreated or exploited increases. Initial interest in this topic arose when psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists suggested that the economic dependency of one member of a married or cohabiting couple could lead the dependent person to tolerate mistreatment because of a lack of viable living alternatives (see Dearwater, Coben & Campbell, 1998; Schewe, 2002). As theoretical and empirical work in this area accumulated, however, it became clear that the relationship between dependency and domestic violence is more complex—and more far-reaching—than researchers once thought, with several forms of dependency (i.e., economic, functional, and emotional) implicated in one or more categories of abuse (Dutton, 1994, 1995; Tueth, 2000).

Because many instances of abuse go unreported and victims are often unable or unwilling to provide accurate descriptions, it is difficult to obtain sound estimates of the frequency of domestic violence in America. More than a million incidents of domestic partner abuse are reported to law enforcement officials each year in the United States, and large-scale epidemiological surveys suggest that between 20% and 25% of adult women have been physically abused by a partner (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Studies indicate that more than 95% of abuse perpetrators are men, although some researchers believe that the incidence of domestic violence perpetrated by women may be underestimated, in part because of the social stigma associated with male victimization (see Kaukinen, 2004; McCloskey, 1996).

Similar assessment challenges confront researchers who study the epidemiology of domestic violence. It is clear that the frequency of partner abuse declines in middle and later adulthood (Eisenstat & Bancroft, 1999; Marshall, Panuzio, & Taft, 2005), but studies contrasting domestic violence rates in different ethnic and racial groups have not produced conclusive results. Some data suggest that domestic partner abuse may be perpetrated more frequently by Hispanic and African American men than by Caucasian men (Newby et al., 2000; Pan, Neidig, & O’Leary, 1994), but the magnitude of these intergroup differences remains unclear, and for the most part, extant surveys failed to control for potential moderating variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, substance use) that might account, in whole or in part, for differences in domestic violence rates across groups (see Marshall et al., 2005).

Although there has been considerable research on dependency and partner abuse in recent years, findings from these investigations have never been reviewed in a way that might lead to a better understanding of the interactions among the psychological factors and social forces that shape this dynamic. In this article, I synthesize empirical findings regarding the roles of economic and emotional dependency in domestic partner abuse, discuss theoretical and empirical implications of these results, and suggest directions for future research that can help resolve unanswered questions in this area. I discuss the social policy implications of dependency–abuse links, focusing on the importance of (a) funding research examining the combined effects of economic and emotional dependency on abuse risk, (b) integrating interventions targeting emotional...
dependency into treatment programs for abusers, and (c) modifying federal welfare legislation to avoid creating unintended hidden dependencies in women at risk for abuse.  

Defining and Assessing Domestic Partner Abuse

Physical abuse (sometimes called battering) involves deliberate infliction of pain or injury in the context of an ongoing dyadic relationship, and while a pattern of mistreatment is generally required, some argue that even a single serious incident can constitute abuse (Campbell, Campbell, King, Parker, & Ryan, 1994; Comjis, Smit, Pot, Bouter, & Jonker, 1998; Dearwater et al., 1998). Definitions of physical abuse usually emphasize intentionality (i.e., desire to intimidate, control, coerce, or harm), but researchers also classify as abuse those instances in which mistreatment was impulsive rather than planned (e.g., resulting from momentary loss of control), especially when the incident is part of an ongoing pattern (see Dutton, 1994, 1995; Dutton & Starzomski, 1993). Although physical abuse often co-occurs with emotional abuse (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991) and sexual abuse (Beckerman, 2002), infliction of physical pain or injury is a key inclusion criterion in virtually all contemporary domestic violence studies.

Operationally defining abuse is challenging; assessing abuse is even more difficult. Many researchers use a threshold approach, deriving measure-specific cutoff scores to classify abuse perpetrators and victims into discrete categories (e.g., Porcerelli, Cogan, & Hibbard, 2004). Other researchers (e.g., Fals-Stewart, Lucente, & Birchler, 2002) assess abuse perpetration and victimization using a dimensional approach, recognizing that—like many problematic behaviors—abuse perpetration and victimization both range in severity along continua.

With these challenges in mind, three general abuse assessment strategies have been used in recent years: self-report scales, structured interviews, and classification via category membership (e.g., use of emergency services for abuse victims, involvement in a treatment program for abusers). Self-report scales, which may be completed by victim, perpetrator, or both, have several advantages: They require minimal training, are inexpensive, and can be administered in person, by mail, or over the Internet. The main disadvantages of self-report scales are their susceptibility to self-report and self-presentation bias (see Babcock, Costa, Green, & Eckhardt, 2004; Campbell et al., 1994).

Like self-report scales, structured interviews assessing abuse incidents or abuse-related dynamics have certain advantages. Most important, the interviewer can follow up on incomplete or ambiguous responses and use other information (e.g., physical appearance, nonverbal behavior) to supplement verbal reports (Feindler & Rathus, 2004). In contrast to self-report scales, however, interviews are comparatively expensive and labor-intensive, and they require training to be administered properly. These challenges can be circumvented when abusers and victims are identified via category membership, but as several researchers have noted (e.g., Haddock, 2002; Heshorn & Rosenbaum, 1991), this selection strategy may yield a nonrepresentative sample of abusers and victims who differ from those not involved in the legal and mental health systems.

The most widely used measure in research on domestic partner abuse (both in general and with respect to the dependency–abuse link) is Straus’s (1979) Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS), which consists of two questionnaires, one for each member of the dyad. Respondents rate the frequency with which their partners use various strategies to resolve domestic conflicts; strategies range from adaptive/nonabusive (e.g., “Discussed the issue calmly”) through those associated with physical aggression (e.g., “Threw something at you”) and culminate with behaviors that constitute severe abuse or life-threatening violence (e.g., “Threatened you with a knife or gun”). A detailed discussion of CTS administration and scoring is provided by Straus (1979); construct validity information for the CTS is provided by Feindler and Rathus (2004) and Straus, Hamby, and Warren (2003).

Economic and Emotional Dependency

Although studies indicate that physical (or functional) dependency plays a significant role in child abuse (Bornstein,
Dependent personality disorder. Trait dependency refers to a marked need for nurturance, protection, and support, even in situations in which a person is capable of functioning autonomously and meeting challenges on his or her own (Bornstein, 1992, 1993). Level of emotional dependency is commonly operationalized in terms of dependent personality disorder (DPD) symptoms and diagnoses (e.g., Gondolf, 1999; Watson et al., 1997), but as I have noted elsewhere (Bornstein, 1997), DPD symptoms emphasize the passive, helpless features of emotional dependency and do not capture this personality style’s more active, assertive qualities (e.g., attempts to curry favor with figures of authority through ingratiation and self-promotion, efforts to preclude rejection and abandonment through breakdown threats and other self-destructive behaviors).

Table 2 summarizes common partner-specific social influence strategies exhibited by dependent persons. As this table shows, these include indirect strategies designed to emphasize the dependent person’s subservience and vulnerability (e.g., supplication, ingratiation) as well as more direct strategies aimed at strengthening ties and minimizing the possibility of abandonment through assertive—even aggressive—means (e.g., self-promotion, intimidation).

Many researchers today use trait dependency measures (rather than DPD symptoms) to capture the full range of indirect and direct social influence strategies associated with dependency-related social influence strategies. As this table shows, these include indirect strategies designed to emphasize the dependent person’s subservience and vulnerability (e.g., supplication, ingratiation) as well as more direct strategies aimed at strengthening ties and minimizing the possibility of abandonment through assertive—even aggressive—means (e.g., self-promotion, intimidation).

Research on the intra- and interpersonal dynamics of these dependency-related social influence strategies has been summarized by Bornstein (1995), Overholser (1996), and Pincus and Wilson (2001).

Historically, researchers conceptualized economic dependency in terms of income disparity: The greater the difference in income between two domestic partners, the greater the economic dependency of the less well-off person. In recent years, researchers have broadened this definition to include other related factors that influence one person’s reliance on another for financial support (e.g., the presence of young children, the availability of alternative housing, access to financial resources other than income). With this in mind, researchers (e.g., Kalmuss & Straus, 1982; Strube & Barbour, 1983) have distinguished objective economic dependency (i.e., economic dependency based on resource availability) from subjective economic dependency (i.e., the less well-off person’s perception of financial reliance and vulnerability).

**Emotional Dependency**

Emotional dependency refers to a marked need for nurturance, protection, and support, even in situations in which a person is capable of functioning autonomously and meeting challenges on his or her own (Bornstein, 1992, 1993). Level of emotional dependency is commonly operationalized in terms of dependent personality disorder (DPD) symptoms and diagnoses (e.g., Gondolf, 1999; Watson et al., 1997), but as I have noted elsewhere (Bornstein, 1997), DPD symptoms emphasize the passive, helpless features of emotional dependency and do not capture this personality style’s more active, assertive qualities (e.g., attempts to curry favor with figures of authority through ingratiation and self-promotion, efforts to preclude rejection and abandonment through breakdown threats and other self-destructive behaviors).

Table 2 summarizes common partner-specific social influence strategies exhibited by dependent persons. As this table shows, these include indirect strategies designed to emphasize the dependent person’s subservience and vulnerability (e.g., supplication, ingratiation) as well as more direct strategies aimed at strengthening ties and minimizing the possibility of abandonment through assertive—even aggressive—means (e.g., self-promotion, intimidation). Research on the intra- and interpersonal dynamics of these dependency-related social influence strategies has been summarized by Bornstein (1995), Overholser (1996), and Pincus and Wilson (2001).

Many researchers today use trait dependency measures (rather than DPD symptoms) to capture the full range of indirect and direct social influence strategies associated with dependency-related social influence strategies.
with a dependent personality. Contemporary trait dependency scales conceptualize emotional dependency as a multifaceted construct involving four elements (Bornstein, 2005a; Pincus & Gurtman, 1995): (a) cognitive (i.e., a perception of oneself as vulnerable and weak), (b) motivational (i.e., a desire for guidance, protection, and help), (c) behavioral (i.e., a pattern of behaviors aimed at minimizing the possibility of rejection and strengthening ties to potential caregivers), and (d) affective (i.e., fear of abandonment, fear of negative evaluation by a valued other). The majority of trait dependency measures are self-report questionnaires, and more than 30 such measures are available today (see Bornstein, 1999, for evidence regarding the construct validity of these scales). Among the more widely used self-report dependency measures in partner abuse research are the Interpersonal Dependency Inventory (IDI; Hirschfeld et al., 1977) and the Spouse-Specific Dependency Scale (SSDS; Rathus & O'Leary, 1997).

### Table 2

**Partner-Specific Social Influence Strategies in Dependent Persons**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Prototypical behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supplication</td>
<td>To appear helpless and vulnerable</td>
<td>Submissiveness; self-deprecation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>To create indebtedness in the partner</td>
<td>Ego-bolstering; performing favors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemplification</td>
<td>To exploit partner guilt</td>
<td>Providing help; emphasizing sacrifices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-promotion</td>
<td>To emphasize personal value or accomplishments</td>
<td>Performance claims; exaggeration of effort or worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidation</td>
<td>To frighten and control the partner</td>
<td>Threats or anger displays; breakdown displays</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Dependency and Domestic Partner Abuse

#### Theoretical Frameworks

Building upon Thibaut and Kelley’s (1959) interdependence theory, Rusbult and her colleagues (e.g., Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994; Rusbult & Martz, 1995) developed a *dependency model of commitment* in intimate relationships. This model contends that people become invested in certain relationships because they believe these relationships provide rewards that cannot be obtained elsewhere. As Drigotas and Rusbult (1992, p. 62) noted, “An individual may sometimes remain in a relationship that is not terribly satisfying because of high dependence on that relationship—dissatisfying as it is, the relationship may nonetheless fulfill important needs that cannot be gratified in alternative relationships.” Rusbult’s model predicts that a person’s subjective perceptions of reward alternatives (which need not reflect actual reward alternatives) are a primary determinant of his or her level of relationship commitment.

The dependence model has important implications for relationship dynamics and long-term stability (see Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), but in the present context, one aspect of the model is particularly relevant: This framework predicts that when one partner has a high degree of economic or emotional dependency, that partner will be particularly unlikely to terminate the relationship. Thus, high levels of either form of dependency in one partner should be associated with increased risk for (and tolerance of) abuse.

Bornstein (1993, 2005a), Dutton (1995, 1998), and Murphy, Meyer, and O’Leary (1994) offered a contrasting perspective on the dependency–abuse relationship. This framework—which may be termed the *dependency–possessiveness model*—posits that high levels of emotional dependency in one partner increase the likelihood that this person will physically abuse the other member of the relationship. The dependency–possessiveness model specifies a different set of mediating variables and relationship dynamics in domestic partner abuse.

Numerous studies have shown that emotionally dependent people are particularly fearful of abandonment and rejection (Mongrain, Vettese, Shuster, & Kendal, 1998; Ojha & Singh, 1985), show high levels of jealousy and possessiveness in romantic relationships (Bringle & Buunk, 1985; Bush, Bush, & Jennings, 1988), and have difficulty managing anger and other negative emotions (Casillas & Clark, 2002; Overholser, 1996). With these findings as context, Murphy et al. (1994) noted that emotional dependency may contribute to an escalating cycle of coercive control regulated by changes in emotional distance. Although coercive tactics may engender short-term behavioral compliance or intense emotional reunion, a frequently coerced partner is likely to withdraw emotionally . . . in the long run. As the batterer’s emotional vulnerabilities are further activated, he may engage in more intense, frequent, and diverse coercive behavior. (p. 734)

Thus, the dependency–possessiveness model argues that dependent persons’ insecurity and abandonment fears may lead them to become abusive when they believe their partner will reject them (Dutton, 1995, 1998). In part this abusiveness reflects the dependent person’s inability to manage insecurity-related emotional upset (Bornstein, 2005a), and in part it represents a strategy for controlling...
and intimidating the partner to prevent that person from terminating the relationship (Murphy et al., 1994).  

**Empirical Findings**

Numerous studies have explored the link between dependency and partner abuse; some focused on the role of victim dependency in risk for abuse, and others examined the role of perpetrator dependency in abuse risk.

**Victim dependency.** Researchers have examined links between both emotional and economic dependency and risk for abuse by a domestic partner. Results of these investigations indicate that women’s economic dependency plays a significant role in abuse risk; emotional dependency plays a more modest role.

Gelles (1976) was among the first to report empirical evidence in support of a link between economic dependency and risk for abuse by a partner, using unstructured interviews to assess women’s reasons for leaving (or remaining in) abusive marriages. Gelles found that women’s occupational status predicted decisions to leave or remain, with women in low-paying occupations being less likely to terminate abusive relationships. Similar results were subsequently obtained by Wofford et al. (1994) in a large national sample of married or cohabiting couples; Wofford et al. found that women in low-paying occupations and women receiving welfare were significantly less likely than other women to terminate an abusive relationship. These findings, taken together, support the role of economic dependency in partner abuse, but because occupational status is only one of several variables associated with economic dependency (others include the availability of alternative housing, the presence of children in the home, and access to personal financial resources; see Gortner, Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1997), these results must be interpreted with caution.

Stronger evidence regarding the role of economic dependency in domestic partner abuse came from Rusbull and Martz (1995), who assessed the link between economic dependency and abuse in 100 women who sought refuge at a shelter for battered women between 1978 and 1982. Various indices of economic dependency were used to predict the likelihood that a given woman would return to her abusive partner, and stay/leave decisions were operationalized using a three-category classification scheme: (a) returned to the partner within 3 months (n = 35), (b) returned to the partner after 3 months but before 12 months (n = 30), and (c) never returned to the partner during the 12-month duration of the study (n = 32). Rusbull and Martz found that every index of women’s economic dependency predicted stay/leave decisions, and in each case, increased economic dependency was associated with a decreased likelihood of remaining apart from the abuser. Correlations between economic dependency and stay/leave decisions were as follows (all ps < .05): currently employed, r = −.31; income level, r = −.26; independent income, r = −.28; total money available, r = −.27; and amount of money on hand, r = −.21.

Examining the economic dependency–abuse link from a somewhat different perspective, Kalmuss and Straus (1982) assessed the relationships between economic dependency and risk for physical abuse in a national sample of 1,183 married or cohabiting women, using two separate dependency measures: (a) a multidimensional index of objective economic dependency (based on the woman’s occupational status, the presence of children, and the proportion of household income generated by the husband) and (b) a questionnaire-derived index of subjective dependency that encompassed a range of dependency domains (i.e., financial, sexual, emotional, and interpersonal/social). Abuse presence and severity were assessed via Straus’s (1979) CTS, which was completed by the women with no input from their partners.

Objective and subjective dependency scores in this sample were only modestly intercorrelated (r = .15), suggesting that—as expected—they were tapping distinct features of partner dependency. Kalmuss and Straus (1982) found that both dependency indices predicted risk for victimization but that the two scores predicted different forms of physical abuse on Straus’s (1979) CTS. High subjective dependency scores were associated with an increased likelihood of physical aggression (e.g., “threw something at [partner]”, “slapped [partner]”), whereas high objective dependency scores were associated with an increased likelihood of severe abuse or life-threatening violence (e.g., “threatened [partner] with a knife or gun”).

Along somewhat similar lines, Strube and Barbour (1983, 1984) examined the links between two indices of dependency—objective economic dependency and subjective dependency—and physically abused women’s decisions to terminate an abusive relationship. Strube and Barbour’s 1983 sample consisted of 98 women who had contacted the domestic violence counseling unit of a county attorney’s office; Strube and Barbour’s nonoverlapping 1984 sample consisted of 251 women who had sought domestic violence counseling from various sources. As in Kalmuss and Straus’s (1982) study, objective dependency scores were derived from an array of demographic and family variables (i.e., the woman’s employment status, presence of children in the home, availability of alternative housing); subjective dependency scores were based on questionnaire responses tapping a range of dependency domains. In both of Strube and Barbour’s samples, high levels of objective economic dependency were associated with a lower likelihood of terminating the abusive relationship. In both samples, subjective dependency scores were

---

2 Although high levels of emotional dependency are theoretically linked to risk for abuse perpetration in women as well as men, practically speaking the dependency–possessiveness model predicts that emotional dependency will be a particularly salient predictor of abuse perpetration in men. Because men tend to show externalizing coping strategies in response to challenge or threat whereas women tend to show internalizing strategies, men are more likely to respond to actual or anticipated abandonment by directing anger outward, whereas women are more likely to respond by channeling emotional upset inward (e.g., becoming depressed, engaging in parasuicidal behavior).
weakly (and nonsignificantly) related to relationship termination decisions.3

In the only study to assess directly the relationship of women’s emotional dependency to risk for physical abuse, Watson et al. (1997) compared DPD prevalence rates in 127 abused women and 56 age-matched nonabused controls. Abused women were recruited through therapists and domestic abuse survivors’ groups; control participants were community volunteers. Although Watson et al. found only a modest (and statistically nonsignificant) increase in DPD prevalence rates in abused women relative to controls, \( \chi^2(1, N = 183) = 2.41, p = .10 \), they obtained a strong relationship between DPD symptom levels and severity of physical abuse within the abused sample (\( r = .69, p < .01 \)). Significant correlations were also obtained between severity of abuse and symptom levels of borderline personality disorder (\( r = .63, p < .01 \)) and avoidant personality disorder (\( r = .47, p < .01 \)).

**Perpetrator dependency.** Studies of dependency and abuse perpetration have focused exclusively on men’s emotional dependency as a possible precipitating factor. Results of these studies are clear: Trait dependency scores predict likelihood of abuse perpetration in men, but DPD symptoms do not.

Five studies assessed the relationship between perpetrators’ emotional dependency and partner abuse using DPD symptom criteria as an index of dependency. In the first of these investigations, Hastings and Hamberger (1988) compared the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory (MCMI; Millon, 1983) dependency scores of 125 male spouse abusers participating in a domestic violence treatment program and 43 nonabusing men recruited from marriage and family therapy clinics. Abusers in Hastings and Hamberger’s sample obtained slightly (but not significantly) lower MCMI dependency scores than control participants. Similar results were subsequently obtained by Beasley and Stoltenberg (1992), who reported no differences in MCMI–II (Millon, 1987) or interview (i.e., the Personality Disorder Examination [PDE]; Loranger, 1988). DPD prevalence rates in Hart et al.’s sample were 2.5% and 0.0%, respectively, when assessed with the MCMI–II and the PDE.

Contrasting results were obtained by researchers who assessed the emotional dependency–abuse link using measures of trait dependency rather than DPD. For example, Murphy et al. (1994) used the IDI (Hirschfeld et al., 1977) and the SSDS (Rathus & O’Leary, 1997) to compare dependency levels in three groups of men: (a) 24 partner-assaultive men requesting treatment, (b) 24 nonviolent men in discordant marriages, and (c) 24 nonviolent men in happy or satisfying marriages. Participants in the latter two groups were recruited through newspaper advertisements; questionnaire measures of marital adjustment and relationship dynamics were completed by potential volunteers to confirm group classification.

Murphy et al. (1994) found that partner-assaultive men obtained significantly higher IDI and SSDS scores than did the men in either control group, \( F(2, 69) = 12.86 \) and \( F(2, 69) = 12.02 \), respectively, both ps = .001. These results are particularly compelling because men in the three groups were matched on an array of demographic variables (i.e., age, education, yearly income, number of children). Moreover, these dependency–abuse effect sizes (which correspond to \( ds \) of .87 and .85, respectively) were larger than those obtained between abuse status and perpetrator self-esteem (\( d = .74 \)) or between abuse status and partner-specific jealousy (\( d = .22 \)).

In a modified replication and extension of Murphy et al.’s (1994) investigation, Holtzworth-Monroe, Stuart, and Hutchinson (1997) compared SSDS-derived dependency scores in three groups of men that paralleled those of the earlier study: (a) 58 violent–distressed, (b) 36 nonviolent–distressed, and (c) 22 nonviolent–nondistressed. Like Murphy et al., Holtzworth-Monroe et al. found that violent–distressed partner-assaultive men had higher SSDS scores than did members of the other two groups, \( F(2, 118) = 12.23, p < .001 \), \( d = .69 \). Moreover, consistent with Murphy et al.’s results, Holtzworth-Monroe et al. obtained a stronger link between dependency and abuse status than between jealousy and abuse status (\( d = .42 \)). Three indices of adult attachment (i.e., anxiety over abandonment, discomfort with closeness, and avoidance of dependency) also showed weaker relationships with abuse status than did DPD in partner abusers (14%) was significantly lower than that in substance abusers (38%) and other psychiatric outpatients (48%). Hart, Dutton, and Newlove (1993) also found low DPD prevalence rates in court-referred and self-referred male abusers (\( n = 85 \)) regardless of whether DPD was assessed via questionnaire (i.e., the MCMI–II; Millon, 1987) or interview (i.e., the Personality Disorder Examination [PDE]; Loranger, 1988). DPD prevalence rates in Hart et al.’s sample were 2.5% and 0.0%, respectively, when assessed with the MCMI–II and the PDE.

Findings regarding subjective dependency levels and abuse risk are difficult to interpret because in every study that has used this index, subjective dependency was defined very broadly, including dependent attitudes and feelings that cut across virtually every domain (e.g., social, sexual, economic). Thus, it is impossible to distinguish the impact of different subjective dependency dimensions in these investigations.

---

3 Findings regarding subjective dependency levels and abuse risk are difficult to interpret because in every study that has used this index, subjective dependency was defined very broadly, including dependent attitudes and feelings that cut across virtually every domain (e.g., social, sexual, economic). Thus, it is impossible to distinguish the impact of different subjective dependency dimensions in these investigations.
SSDS dependency scores (ds were .48, .53, and .28, respectively).

Similar results were also obtained by Kane, Staiger, and Ricciardelli (2000), who compared IDI scores (Hirschfeld et al., 1977) in three groups of Australian men: (a) 23 men participating in a community support and treatment program for abusers, (b) 30 football (rugby) players, and (c) 30 community volunteers. Men in the three groups were matched on age, employment status, and number of children. Kane et al. found, consistent with previous results in this area, that abusive men had significantly higher IDI scores than men in the other two groups, \( F(2, 76) = 10.36, p < .001, d = .74 \).

Two studies that compared dependency levels in subcategories of male batterers provided additional support for the role of trait dependency—but not DPD—in partner abuse. Both studies used Holtzworth-Monroe and Stuart’s (1994) typology, which postulates three distinct groups of physically abusive men: (a) family-only (FO) batterers, who have dependent personality styles, low incidences of substance use and extramarital violence, and moderate levels of physical abuse within the family; (b) borderline/dysphoric (BD) batterers, who have borderline or schizoid personality features, show high levels of substance abuse and depression, and engage in more severe and impulsive abuse within the family; and (c) generally violent/antisocial (GVA) batterers, who show high levels of antisocial and/or psychopathic features, high levels of substance abuse and low levels of depression, and high levels of violence within and outside the family.4

When Waltz, Babcock, Jacobson, and Gottman (2000) compared MCMII–II dependency scores (Millon, 1987) in 40 FO, 17 BD, and 18 GVA men (defined using a battery of interview, questionnaire, and archival measures), they found no differences in dependency levels across the three groups. Moreover, MCMII–II dependency scores in the three batterer groups did not differ from those in a control sample of 32 maritally distressed nonviolent men (\( F = 1.13, n.s. \)). However, when Holtzworth-Monroe, Meehan, Herron, Reham, and Stuart (2003) compared SSDS scores (Rathus & O’Leary, 1997) in 37 FO, 15 BD, and 16 GVA men (using the same battery of interview, questionnaire, and archival measures), they found that men in the BD group obtained SSDS scores significantly higher than those of men in the FO and GAV groups and significantly higher than those obtained by 23 maritally distressed nonviolent men, \( F(5, 151) = 3.80, p < .05, d = .32 \).

Little information exists regarding the proximal antecedents of abuse episodes in dependent men, but one recent investigation provided preliminary data regarding this issue. Babcock, Costa, et al. (2004) developed a 30-item self-report measure—the Proximal Antecedents to Violent Episodes (PAVE) scale—to assess men’s likelihood of exhibiting physically aggressive behavior in response to various partner-specific events and interactions. Factor analysis of PAVE items revealed three distinct abuse-eliciting situations: (a) Violence to Control the Partner, (b) Violence Out of Jealousy, and (c) Violence Following Verbal Abuse. Babcock, Costa, et al. then administered the PAVE to 70 maritally distressed violent men classified according to Holtzworth-Monroe and Stuart’s (1994) typology, finding that FO batterers (\( n = 41 \)) obtained significantly higher scores than BD (\( n = 17 \)) or GVA (\( n = 12 \)) batterers on the Violence Out of Jealousy scale, \( F(3, 97) = 3.66, p < .05, d = .39 \). Moreover, FO batterers obtained lower scores than BD or GVA batterers on the Violence to Control the Partner and Violence Following Verbal Abuse scales, suggesting that proximal increases in jealousy may be uniquely predictive of partner abuse episodes in highly dependent men.

**Dependency and Domestic Violence: Converging Psychological Factors and Social Forces**

Research confirms that dependency plays a significant role in domestic violence: High levels of economic dependency in a woman and high levels of emotional dependency in a man independently predict the likelihood that the woman will be physically abused by her partner. Moreover, women’s economic dependency is also associated with a decreased likelihood of terminating an abusive relationship (Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Strube & Barbour, 1983, 1984). Effect sizes linking women’s economic dependency and abuse risk ranged from medium (Rusbult & Martz, 1995) to large (Kalmuss & Straus, 1982), suggesting that the association between economic dependency and risk for victimization is not only statistically significant but ecologically significant as well. Although the link between women’s emotional dependency and abuse risk appears modest (Watson et al., 1997), the relatively strong association between emotional dependency levels and abuse severity within Watson et al.’s abused sample raises the possibility that—like economic dependency—high levels of emotional dependency may make it difficult to terminate an abusive relationship. Taken together, these results are consistent with Rusbult’s commitment model (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Rusbult et al., 1994) in that both economic and emotional dependency in women are associated with increased tolerance of abuse.

Although these findings support the commitment model, it is important to recognize that causal relationships between economic dependency and abuse are most likely bidirectional. High levels of economic dependency may cause some women to tolerate abuse, as the commitment model contends, but repeated incidents of abuse may also lead to increased economic dependency. As McCloskey (1996) and Wettersten et al. (2004) pointed out, physical abuse can undermine women’s ability to obtain and retain adequate employment in several different ways. For example, victimization is associated with diminished perfor-

---

4 Detailed descriptions of these three subtypes and reviews of research supporting the validity of this tripartite typology are provided by Holtzworth-Monroe (2000), Holtzworth-Monroe and Stuart (1994), and Holtzworth-Monroe et al. (2003).
mance at work and with increased absenteeism. Visible physical evidence of abuse can stigmatize an employee and undermine her reputation. In addition, abusers sometimes threaten the partner’s colleagues and/or supervisor and may behave inappropriately at the partner’s workplace (e.g., initiating verbal or physical confrontations). Thus, high levels of economic dependency in women may be both a risk factor for and a consequence of abuse.⁵

Findings regarding men’s emotional dependency and perpetration of physical abuse are consistent with the dependency–possessiveness model (Bornstein, 2005a; Dutton, 1998; Murphy et al., 1994). Highly consistent results have been obtained in different populations of abusers (e.g., community adults, men in voluntary treatment, men in court-mandated intervention programs), but it is also clear that the dependency–abuse link varies as a function of the way dependency is operationalized. Every study that assessed men’s emotional dependency in terms of DPD symptoms and diagnoses found that abusers’ dependency levels were comparable to those of nonabusing controls, whereas every investigation that used the SSDS and/or the IDI found significantly elevated levels of trait dependency in abusers. Moreover, the effect sizes associated with SSDS- and IDI-derived dependency–abuse links were uniformly large (Cohen, 1988), suggesting that the increased abuse risk associated with high levels of emotional dependency in men is not merely statistically significant, but ecologically significant as well.

Babcock, Costa, et al.’s (2004) results not only indicate that proximal increases in jealousy precipitate partner abuse in emotionally dependent men but also help explain why the majority of dependent men do not engage in domestic violence. It may be that only those dependent men who are most prone to become jealous when they believe their partners have become emotionally or physically close with another person are predisposed to domestic violence (see Bush et al., 1988, and Overholser, 1996, for discussions of the dependency–jealousy link). In this context it is important to note that closeness-induced jealousy need not be based on the partner’s actual behavior but might instead represent the dependent man’s misperception of the partner’s emotional or physical closeness with another person (Bornstein, 2005a; Mongrain et al., 1998). In either case, perceived closeness of the partner to others is likely to elicit concerns regarding abandonment in the dependent person; in some dependent men—particularly those who have difficulty modulating negative emotions—abuse may ensue (see Bornstein, 1993, 2005c, for detailed discussions of research on dependency and deficits in impulse control).

Findings regarding the emotional dependency–abuse relationship are also consistent with the emerging view that high levels of trait dependency may sometimes lead to assertive—even aggressive—behavior when important relationships are threatened (Overholser, 1996; Pincus & Wilson, 2001). In this context, the present results suggest that to understand the dynamics of dependency-related abuse, dependency–abuse links must be analyzed in relationship-specific terms. A particular form of dependency may have different consequences in different contexts, and even when a given form of dependency is associated with increased risk for abuse, the pathways linking dependency with elevated abuse risk often differ across relationship categories (see, e.g., Bornstein, 2005c, for findings regarding the links between dependency and child abuse).

Dependency and Domestic Violence: Social Policy Implications

Beyond their theoretical and empirical implications, the present results have noteworthy implications for domestic violence research, prevention, and treatment. Three recommendations follow.

Fund research exploring the interaction of economic and emotional dependency in domestic partner abuse. We know a great deal about the separate effects of emotional and economic dependency on domestic partner abuse but little about how these two factors interact in vivo. It may be that the relative contributions of economic and emotional dependency to partner abuse differ from dyad to dyad; some researchers speculate that the interplay of these two processes might also vary as a function of ethnicity and cultural milieu (see Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Kim & Sung, 2000; Neff, 1995). Complicating the situation, studies confirm that abuse patterns tend to co-occur, with victimization in one domain associated with an increased likelihood of victimization in other areas (e.g., the presence of physical abuse is associated with an increased likelihood of sexual and emotional abuse; see Claussen & Crittenden, 1991; Cooney & Mortimer, 1995). Thus, in addition to delineating the separate and combined contributions of economic and emotional dependency to domestic partner abuse, researchers must also explore the proximal and distal causes of multiple abuse scenarios.

Longitudinal research is needed to examine the evolving dynamics that characterize abusive relationships and the processes that propagate domestic violence over the time course of the relationship. Such research is needed in both starting and sustaining abusive relationships, and in the processes by which abuse escalates (see, e.g., Bornstein, 2003b, for findings regarding the links between dependency and child abuse).

⁵ At first glance, findings regarding the link between women’s economic dependency and risk for victimization would seem to conflict with data suggesting that economic ‘role inversion’ (i.e., elevated occupational status and/or earning capacity in a woman relative to her male partner) is also associated with an increased likelihood of domestic violence. However, scrutiny of these role inversion findings indicates that results in this area have been somewhat inconsistent. For example, although Hornung, McCullough, and Sugimoto (1981) found that elevated occupational status in women was associated with an increased prevalence of physical abuse by the partner, McCloskey (1996) found no link between occupational status disparity and abuse risk and only a modest link between income disparity and abuse risk. Anderson (1997) found that when women earned 69% or more of combined family income, the rates of domestic violence increased in both partners, but Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, and Gottman (1993) found no significant relationships between educational disparity or income disparity and abuse risk in either partner. Two studies (Kaukinen, 2004; Macmillan & Gartner, 1999) found increased rates of domestic violence in married or cohabiting couples in which the woman was employed and the man unemployed, but an equally plausible explanation for these results is that the same factors responsible for men’s unemployment in these samples (e.g., drug and/or alcohol addiction, severe mental illness, criminal history) also underlie the abuse.
long term; such studies would allow researchers to assess changes in dyadic interactions as a function of each person’s current dependency level. In this context, several researchers have argued that abusive relationships are often characterized by a destructive interdependence between abuser and abused, with each member of the dyad using various strategic self-presentation strategies to manipulate the partner and extract emotional and monetary resources (de Young & Lowry, 1992; Woffordt et al., 1994). These frameworks suggest that as abuser and abused become increasingly enmeshed, longstanding dyadic roles and dysfunctional relationship patterns become more firmly entrenched.

Finally, it is important to move beyond traditional dyads and study dependency–abuse dynamics in nontraditional families. Because all investigations in this area thus far have focused on male abusers and female victims, the possibility that high levels of emotional dependency in a woman increase the likelihood that she will abuse her partner remains unexplored. Although studies of dependency and partner abuse have been limited to heterosexual couples, data suggest that physical abuse occurs between homosexual partners at frequencies equal to those in the heterosexual population (McClennen, Summers, & Vaughan, 2002; Ristock, 2003). Research assessing possible dependency–abuse links in lesbian and gay couples is needed.

Integrate issues related to emotional dependency in treatment programs for abusers. Most contemporary intervention models focus on prediction and prevention of abuse rather than treatment after the fact (see Feindler & Rathus, 2004; Hilton et al., 2004; Schewe, 2002). However, when psychological intervention is warranted, a combination of individual and group therapies (sometimes in conjunction with marital therapy) remains the treatment of choice for perpetrators of domestic violence (Brownlee & Chlebovec, 2004; Williams & Becker, 1994). Outcome studies indicate that the impact of extant treatment programs is modest, with a minimal reduction in recidivism beyond that which results from simple being arrested (overall d = .18) and with similar outcomes produced by different intervention models (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004).

It may be that these modest recidivism reduction effects are due in part to a limited treatment focus: Individual and group interventions for abusers focus primarily on confronting the consequences of abuse, enhancing self-esteem, increasing impulse control, and building coping skills so abusers will be better able to manage anger and other negative emotions (Beckerman, 2002; Marshall et al., 2005; Pence & McMahon, 1997). Thus far little attention has been paid to issues related to emotional dependency in treatment programs for perpetrators of domestic violence.

Several psychotherapeutic strategies aimed at reducing problematic dependency and helping individuals cope more effectively with strong underlying dependency needs are available, including those based on psychodynamic (Coen, 1992), behavioral (Turkat, 1994), cognitive (Overholser, 1997), and eclectic (Bornstein, 2005b) treatment models. To the degree that elements of these strategies are integrated into existing intervention programs, recidivism may be further reduced. In this context, the present findings suggest that clinicians who intend to target dependency-reduction strategies at emotionally dependent batterers should use the IDI (Hirschfeld et al., 1977) or the SSDS (Rathus & O’Leary, 1997)—not DPD symptoms or diagnoses—to identify men most likely to benefit from these interventions.

As was the case for research exploring dependency–abuse dynamics, individual and group interventions aimed at ameliorating problematic dependency must accommodate cultural and subcultural differences. Conducting additional research delineating ethnic differences in domestic violence prevalence rates will be an important first step in this process (see Marshall et al., 2005; Newby et al., 2000). Although preliminary (largely anecdotal) results from model treatment programs suggest that acknowledgment of dependency-related thoughts and feelings in group treatment settings is particularly difficult for Korean American and Latino men (see Ho, 1990; Kim & Sung, 2000; Neff, 1995; Pence & McMahon, 1997; Williams & Becker, 1994), systematic research on cultural variables that moderate responses to dependency issues in therapy is lacking (Bornstein, 2005a). Increased attention to this topic is needed as well.

Modify federal welfare legislation to avoid creating unintended hidden dependencies. Just as reducing emotional dependency in men may help lower their risk of continued abuse perpetration, the present results suggest that reducing economic dependency in abused women (and in women at risk for abuse) may reduce the prevalence of domestic violence (see, e.g., Rust & Martz, 1995; Woffordt et al., 1994). Because objective economic dependency not only predicts the likelihood of abuse but also makes it difficult for the victimized partner to terminate the relationship, interventions that reduce the abused partner’s dependency on the abuser (e.g., provision of child support, availability of alternative housing) are likely to have significant positive effects.

As Scott et al. (2002) pointed out, however, recent changes in federal welfare legislation may actually have had harmful consequences in this area, exacerbating abuse risk in low-income cohabiting couples. Noting that fixed limits on the duration of welfare funding have caused many economically disadvantaged women to maintain (or even renew) dysfunctional domestic partnerships in order to obtain housing and economic support, Scott et al. (2002, p. 878) argued that “the pursuit of self-sufficiency in welfare reform may unintentionally encourage some women to develop alternative dangerous dependencies on abusive or potentially abusive men . . . as they struggle to move from welfare to work.” Archival data from law enforcement agencies and emergency housing programs indicate that the negative effects of federal “welfare to work” legislation on abuse risk disproportionately affect African American women in the United States (Josephson, 2002). This conclusion was echoed by Canadian survey data suggesting
that recent provincial policy shifts aimed at promoting economic self-sufficiency through U.S.-style limits on welfare may have had a similar disproportional impact on disadvantaged minority groups in Canada (Morrow, Hankivsky, & Varcoe, 2004).

As Raphael (1996, 1999) noted, legislation that provides temporary financial assistance for abused and high-risk women and regulations that waive work requirements and time limits on welfare receipt for victimized women may reduce the likelihood that these women will develop alternative dangerous dependencies as they struggle to reenter the workforce. Preliminary findings regarding the impact of Family Violence Option legislation, which eases fixed limits on financial support for unemployed women seeking refuge from abusive domestic partners, suggest that this legislation may be effective in reducing both domestic violence and child abuse (Hetling, 2000). Given these promising initial results, exploration of the long-term impact of these and other legislative initiatives is warranted.

Conclusion

Domestic violence is a complex problem, with multiple precipitating factors and myriad negative consequences for both its victims and society. Although dependency is only one of many variables that play a role in the etiology and dynamics of partner abuse, it is an important one. Moreover, the economic and emotional dependencies associated with increased abuse risk can potentially be reduced with a combination of psychological interventions and changes in social policy. Because these two forms of dependency also play a role in child abuse (Bornstein, 2005c; Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994) and elder abuse (Pillemer, 1986; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1989), increased understanding of the complex links between dependency and partner abuse may potentially have far-reaching implications—implications that go beyond the prediction and prevention of domestic violence and suggest new intervention strategies for other types of abuse as well.

REFERENCES


Fals-Stewart, W., Lucente, S. W., & Bircher, G. R. (2002). The relationship between the amount of face-to-face contact and partners’ reports of domestic violence frequency. Assessment, 9, 123–130.


Raphael, J. (1996). Domestic violence and welfare receipt: Toward a new...


