

Male batterers consistently overestimate rates of violence toward partners

March 9 2010

Men who engaged in domestic violence consistently overestimated how common such behavior is, and the more they overestimated it the more they engaged in abusing their partner in the previous 90 days, according to new research conducted at the University of Washington.

Those men overestimated by two to three times the actual rates of seven behaviors ranging from throwing something at a partner to rape,, according Clayton Neighbors, lead author of a paper to be published in a spring issue of the journal *Violence Against Women*.

"We don't know why men make these overestimations, but there are a couple of likely reasons. Men who engage in [violent behavior](#) justify it in their mind by thinking it is more common and saying, 'Most guys slap their women around so it is OK to engage in it.' Or it could be that misperceptions about violence cause the behavior," said Neighbors, now a UW affiliate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences and a professor of psychology at the University of Houston.

"Another way of looking at this would be wearing a red shirt. If you think everyone is wearing a red shirt then it is okay for you to wear one too. Or if you wear a red shirt you might overestimate the number of other people who are wearing red shirts," he said.

The work is the first to document overestimation of intimate partner violence by batterers and is consistent with findings about a variety of other harmful behaviors such as substance use, gambling and eating

disorders. This line of research looks at social norms, or what is considered to be appropriate and inappropriate behavior in society.

"Social norms theory suggests that people act in a way that they believe is consistent with what the average person does," added co-author Denise Walker, a UW research professor of social work and co-director of the Innovative Programs Research Group.

The research looked at 124 men who were enrolled in a larger treatment intervention study for [domestic violence](#). The men, all of whom had participated in violence against a partner in the previous 90 days, were asked to estimate the percentage of men who had ever engaged in seven forms of abuse. These included throwing something at a partner that could hurt; pushing, grabbing or shoving a partner; slapping or hitting; choking; beating up a partner; threatening a partner with a gun; and forcing a partner have sex when they did not want to.

Data on the percentage of men who actually engaged in these abusive behaviors were drawn from the National *Violence Against Women* Survey, funded by the National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In every case the men vastly overestimated the actual instances of abuse. For example, the participants on average thought 27.6 percent of men had thrown something with the intent of hurting a partner while the actual number is 11.9 percent. Similarly, they believed 23.6 percent of men had forced their partner to have sex involuntary compared to 7.9 percent in reality.

"With sexual assault the more a man thought it was prevalent the more likely he was to engage in such behavior. If we can correct misperceptions about the prevalence of intimate [partner violence](#), we have a chance to change men's behavior. If you give them factual information it is harder for them to justify their behavior," Neighbors said

Walker added: "It is unclear if we can change perpetrators' behavior by correcting their misperceptions about intimate [partner](#) violence. However, work in alcohol use suggests that changing misperceptions about drinking changes drinking behavior among college students. Consistent with social norms theory, people are motivated to be 'average' in many ways, particularly if the behavior in question could be considered risky or taboo."

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: Male batterers consistently overestimate rates of violence toward partners (2010, March 9) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-03-male-batterers-overestimate-violence-partners.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.