



Gender and Family Violence  
Monash Arts Focus Program

## Research Brief

### Understanding Intimate Terrorism

**Background** 'Intimate Terrorism' is a specific type of intimate partner violence (IPV). The term was coined by the American sociologist Michael P. Johnson, who developed a typology of domestic or family violence (FV). Johnson's work aimed to understand two significant discrepancies and contradictions in IPV research. Firstly, that feminist researchers and research with victim/survivors in refuges and shelters, hospital admissions and law enforcement responses, demonstrates that IPV and FV is gendered, or has 'gender symmetry', meaning that men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators and women the victims. Secondly, that large population surveys in Western jurisdictions have identified that men are also victims of IPV, with women acting as perpetrators (Johnson 1995). Johnson posits that these two theories can best be understood as 'explanations of two essentially different forms of intimate partner violence: one rooted in an attempt to exert general control over the relationship (intimate terrorism) and the other arising out of particular conflicts (situational couple violence)' (Johnson and Leone 2005: 323).

#### The Four Types of Intimate Relationship Violence

Johnson argues that if the behaviour of both parties is considered, then there are four different types of individual relationship violence that can be identified: situational couple violence (SCV), violent resistance (VR), intimate terrorism, and mutual violence control (MVC). These can be defined as:

- Situational Couple Violence – 'an individual can be violent and noncontrolling and in a relationship with a partner who is either nonviolent or who is also violent and noncontrolling';
- Violent Resistance – an individual 'can be violent and noncontrolling but in a relationship with a violent and controlling partner. The behaviour of the partner suggests an attempt to exert general control';
- Intimate Terrorism - an individual 'can be violent and controlling and in a relationship with a partner who is either nonviolent or violent and noncontrolling'; and
- Mutual Violent Control – 'a violent and controlling individual may be paired up with another violent and controlling partner' (Johnson 2006: 1006).

There are important distinctions to note between the different types of IPV. Three of the four types (all except SCV) involve the concepts of power and control. For Intimate Terrorism in particular, this is a defining feature of the IPV.

**Understanding Intimate Terrorism** Johnson's typology has found significant empirical support, especially of the propositions of SCV and intimate terrorism (Jasinski et al. 2014). Research indicates that intimate terrorism is a distinct phenomenon when compared to other forms of IPV (Johnson and Leone 2005). It is more harmful, more likely to result in significant harm to or death of the victim, and nearly always perpetrated by a male against a female victim (Johnson 2010). Power and control is an essential element of intimate terrorism, and this is best understood through the 'Power and Control Wheel' (see Figure 1 below) developed by the *Domestic Abuse Intervention Project* (DAIP). DAIP developed the wheel based on research and the testimony of victim/survivors seeking assistance from battered women's shelters in Duluth (Minnesota, United States). The behaviours listed on the wheel are common tactics used by intimate terrorists, including:

- coercion and threats,
- intimidation,
- emotional abuse,
- economic abuse,
- isolation,
- using male privilege,
- using any children, and
- minimising or denying harm and/or blaming the victim.

As depicted in Figure 1, the violence in the relationship is not one of the 'spokes' of the wheel, but the framework of it, holding all the spokes together. Non-violent actions can become violent within the context of an intimate terrorism relationship, and the physical and sexual violence that occurs is more than the sum of its parts (Johnson 2010).

**Research in Australia** Johnson's work on intimate terrorism is increasingly used to understand the patterns of coercive control in Australian IPV and FV relationships. As Brown and James (2014: 179) note, the debate about 'gender symmetry' in IPV and FV has been less contested in Australia, for two reasons: firstly, that Australian Governments and criminal justice practitioners have largely based their understanding on official and Australian Bureau of Statistics data and national surveys, which consistently demonstrate that women are the predominant victim/survivors of men's IPV and FV. Secondly, Australian researchers and practitioners do not deny that women can be perpetrators of violence.

Australian research has highlighted that both intimate terrorism, and victim/survivors of intimate terrorism, are not well understood or responded to by the criminal justice system. Victim/survivors of intimate terrorism encountered 'gendered power imbalances and stereotypical beliefs about battered women when



seeking help from the criminal justice system' (Meyer 2011: 15). Australian research with female victim/survivors of intimate terrorism has found it was common for them to stay with their abuser as a harm minimisation strategy. Threats to harm children were used by the perpetrator as a tactic of coercive control, and a history of financial control by the perpetrator could also make it more difficult to leave the relationship initially (Meyer 2012). These are important insights, given that prior research has demonstrated long-term exposure to IPV is more likely to elicit judgemental and negative reactions from criminal justice officials, as opposed to shortened periods of IPV (Johnson 2010). Intimate terrorism relationships can not only be more violent and harmful than situational couple violence, they can also be more difficult to leave.

Recent studies have applied Johnson's typology in the Australian context, finding that it is applicable to same-sex relationship violence (Frankland 2014). Australian research has also highlighted the need to understand and classify IPV and FV perpetrators, to more appropriately tailor offender treatment programs (Bernardi and Day 2015).

**Policy Implications** Understanding intimate terrorism has important policy implications for the criminal justice system. Johnson and Leone (2005: 323) argue that educational programs and intervention strategies for IPV and FV perpetrators and victim/survivors often do not distinguish between the different patterns of violence and control, and this can have implications for the effectiveness of these programs. Research also indicates that victim/survivors of intimate terrorism often feel extreme fear and terror, and feel entrapped in a relationship that they cannot escape; they are more reluctant to seek formal assistance due to this fear, the perception of danger, and the belief that the criminal justice system cannot help or protect them from the perpetrator (Leone, Lap & Xu 2014).

This research, coupled with other findings by Johnson (2010) demonstrating that intimate terrorism victim/survivors are more likely to experience more and diverse forms of harm, including significant injury or death, higher incidences of posttraumatic stress disorder, and absences from work, indicate that intimate terrorism poses a challenge not yet met by the criminal justice system.



Figure 1: The Duluth Wheel 'Power & Control'  
Source: Domestic Abuse Intervention Project

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## For further inquiries

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