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# Blaming the Messenger for the Bad News about Partner Violence by Women: The Methodological, Theoretical, and Value Basis of the Purported Invalidity of the Conflict Tactics Scales<sup>1</sup>

Murray A. Straus, Ph.D.\*

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More than 200 studies have found “gender symmetry” in perpetration of violence against a marital or dating partner in the sense that about the same percent of women as men physically assault a marital or dating partner. Most of these studies obtained the data using the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS). However, these results have been challenged by numerous articles in the past 25 years that have asserted that the CTS is invalid. This article identifies and responds to 11 purported methodological problems of the CTS, and two other bases for the belief that the CTS is not valid. The discussion argues that the repeated assertion over the past 25 years that the CTS is invalid is not primarily about methodology. Rather it is primarily about theories and values concerning the results of research showing gender symmetry in perpetration. According to the prevailing “patriarchal dominance” theory, these results cannot be true and therefore the CTS must be invalid. The conclusion suggests that an essential part of the effort to prevent and treat violence against women and by women requires taking into account the dyadic nature of partner violence through use of instruments such as the CTS that measure violence by both partners. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

The Conflict Tactics Scales or CTS2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) is both the most widely used measure of partner violence (PV) and the most widely criticized. Hundreds of articles reporting results on PV from the CTS have been published, including a large number reporting cross-national results (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999). There is extensive evidence that the factor structure is consistent with the theory used to develop the CTS, and evidence showing internal consistency and test–retest reliability, and convergent and construct validity. Some of this evidence is summarized by Archer (1999), Straus (2004), Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin (2011, p. 69), and Straus (2012). Nevertheless, many articles in books and journals assert or strongly imply that the CTS Physical Assault scale is invalid and misleading. Three examples are Britton (2011), Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, and Daly (1992), Kimmel (2010), and Sillito (2012).

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Extensive critical examination is appropriate for any widely used instrument because, if the instrument is not valid, a great deal of research will also be invalid. It also has forensic implications. The purported invalidity of the CTS can be a basis for litigants or judges to exclude the results as admissible evidence. In view of these concerns, the first of the two main purposes of this article is to evaluate the purported inadequacies of the CTS for measuring physical violence between married, cohabiting, and dating couples. The second purpose is to suggest explanations for the paradox that an instrument for which there is strong evidence of reliability and validity is so often labeled as invalid and to suggest that incorporating results based on the CTS into partner violence (PV) prevention and treatment programs can contribute to reducing PV, including violence against women.

The CTS has scales to measure Negotiation, Injury, Psychological Aggression, and Sexual Coercion. These scales and the Parent-Child version of the CTS, which measures parent-to-child violence (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998), follow an identical measurement strategy to the Physical Assault Scale of the CTS, but they have not been the subject of numerous critical reviews and therefore are not discussed in this article.

The first parts of the article identify and respond to criticisms of the CTS physical assault scale, three of which are judged to be real and eight erroneous. The eight criticisms are believed to be the most frequent and important, not a complete inventory of alleged shortcomings of the CTS. The concluding sections suggests that the claims about the invalidity of the CTS reflect theoretical and value differences much more than methodological shortcomings, and briefly discuss the implications for prevention and treatment of violence against women. The theoretical and value differences arise because the results of more than 200 studies have found “gender symmetry” in perpetration of physical assaults on partners, as documented for general population samples (for example in Archer, 2000; Fiebert, 2010; Straus & Gelles, 1990) and for agency and clinical-level violence cases (Straus, 2011a). Gender symmetry in perpetration refers to results showing that about the same percent of women as men physically assault a marital, cohabiting or dating partner. According to the “patriarchy theory,” PV is perpetrated almost exclusively by men in order to maintain male dominance in the society and the family. It follows that, if this theory is correct, the CTS must be invalid or misleading.

The first version of the CTS was developed in the early 1970s (Straus, 1974, 1979) and underwent revisions in wording and some additional items in 1985 (Gelles & Straus, 1988). A major revision (the CTS2) was published in 1996 (Straus et al., 1996). It included additional scales to measure injury and sexual coercion. As some of the discussion in the Erroneous Shortcomings section shows, many critiques of the CTS are about shortcomings that have not existed for at least 15 years or, in my opinion, have never existed. For example, Nazroo (1995), in his eagerness to declare the CTS invalid, faults the CTS for using qualitative response categories, whereas as the next section shows, the CTS uses numeric categories.

## **ACTUAL SHORTCOMINGS**

### **Response Categories are Unrealistic**

The CTS asks respondents how many times they and their partners carried out each of the acts in the past year, or some other referent period such as since enrolling in a

certain program. For events that can occur frequently, such as yelling at or insulting a partner, or for some couples slapping or shoving, it is unrealistic to expect study participants to know how many times these events occurred in the past year. One way of dealing with this problem is to use qualitative response categories such as Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often or always. However, the number of times denoted by “rarely” or “sometimes” varies from person to person and there are also likely to be cultural differences. Because of that ambiguity, qualitative categories pose an equally or greater problem than the numeric response categories. It is also important to know that the use of the CTS quantitative categories provides satisfactory *ordinal* estimates. Many thousands of respondents around the world have provided these estimates, and that data has been successfully used to distinguish high frequency from low frequency cases, and high frequency from low frequency nations. For example, they enabled Giles-Sims to estimate that women in the shelter she studied had been assaulted approximately ten times more often in the previous 12 months than women in the general population as measured by the National Family Violence Survey ([Giles-Sims, 1983](#); Straus & Gelles, 1990).

Despite the utility of the CTS response categories, there is a need for response categories that are not restricted to one reporting period such as the past-year categories now used for the CTS. More frequently occurring behaviors are best measured by asking about what happened in the previous week or month. However, past-week categories will usually miss the more rarely occurring serious attacks that might have occurred in the past year, but not the past week. To deal with this problem, “variable-period” response categories, which cover both frequent and rare events, have been developed for a related instrument (Straus & Fauchier, 2011). Because they are also recommended for future use of the CTS, they are listed here:

N= never

0= not in the past year, but in a previous year

1= once or twice times in the past year

2= three to five times in the past year

3= six to nine times in the past year

4= monthly (10–14 times in the past year)

5= a few times a month (two to three times a month)

6= weekly (once or twice a week)

7= several times a week (three to four times)

8= daily (five or more times a week)

9= twice a day or more.

### **Obtains Partner Maltreatment Data Only for the Past Year and Current Partner**

The CTS asks for information about relationships with the current or most recent partner. Contrary to [Kimmel \(2002\)](#) and others, all versions of the CTS also ask if each act had ever occurred. The CTS does not provide information about victimization or perpetration with previous partners. However, the CTS can be easily modified to do this if the theory or therapeutic objective requires this information.

## **Injuries not Directly Linked to Assaults**

The injury scale does not provide information on which assault caused each of the injuries identified by the Injury scale. Research intended to provide understanding of the processes resulting in injury would need to include questions to obtain this information in addition to the CTS Injury Scale.

## **ERRONEOUS SHORTCOMINGS**

### **Context and Consequences are Ignored**

The most frequently asserted and according to Krahé, Bieneck, and Möller (2005, p. 822) “The most fundamental criticism is that the CTS neglects the contextual framework in which partner violence occurs and does nothing else but simply and crudely counting blows. . . .” Contrary to this view, measuring only the acts, and not the causes or effects of those acts, is a crucial basis for the *validity* of the CTS and is part of the reason it is so widely used even by its most severe critics. Five reasons why an instrument that “only counts blows” is both necessary and valid are discussed below.

#### *Avoids Confounding of Independent and Dependent Variables*

“Simply and crudely measuring blows” is not only the most fundamental criticism, it is also *the most erroneous* criticism because it embodies a fundamental methodological error: combining independent and dependent variables. If the CTS measured assaults that fit a certain aspect of context or meaning it would prevent testing hypotheses about the causes or consequences of that context and meaning variable. For example, injury is the most frequently mentioned aspect of “context” that the Physical Assault scale intentionally omits. If the CTS had been designed to measure assaults that resulted in injury, studies such as those by [Sillito \(2012\)](#), Straus and Gozjolko (in press), and Stets and Straus (1990), which found that women suffer more injury than men from PV, would not be possible because only assaults with injury would be recorded for both men and women. Similarly, if the CTS had been designed to measure assaults that were the result of male dominance and control, it would not be possible to determine the extent to which male coercive control is the basis for male PV because those would be the only assaults recorded.

The belief that the CTS is not valid because it provides only a simple count of assaultive acts is analogous to believing that a spelling test is invalid because it provides only a simple count of how many words the child can spell and does not include context and consequence data on why a child spells poorly (such as limited exposure to books at home or test anxiety), and does not provide information on the harmful effects of spelling difficulty (such as low self-esteem or dropping out of school). Similarly, in social science research, I know of no instance in which the widely used *Child Behavior Check List* ([Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983](#)) has been declared invalid and misleading because it does not measure the circumstances that explain why a child has a high antisocial behavior count.

#### *The CTS Itself Measures Four of the Most Important Context and Consequence Variables*

As indicated previously, the most frequently mentioned “context and consequence” variable is injury. Psychological aggression is also an aspect of “context and meaning” that

is asserted to be missing. However, scales to measure psychological aggression and negotiation have been part of the CTS since 1972. Scales to measure injury and sexual coercion have been part of the CTS since 1996. Despite this, Sillito (2012) and many others condemn the CTS for not taking into account injury and psychological oppression.

*Other Context and Meaning Variables of Interest Can Be, and Have Been, Measured by Researchers or Clinicians Along with the CTS*

In addition to the context variables directly measured by the CTS, hundreds of studies using the CTS in the last 30 years have obtained data on context and meaning variables and used them in conjunction with the CTS to test feminist theories of PV. My research, for example, included measures of male dominance in the relationship and found that the more male dominant the relationship the more frequent was PV (Allen & Straus, 1980; Coleman & Straus, 1986; Straus, 2008) and the more male dominant the society the more prevalent were assaults on female partners (Straus, 1994, 2011b). Other researchers have used many different context and meaning variables to investigate whether assaults by women are different from assaults by men: for example, determining who initiated the violence, whether the assault was an act of self-defense, the meaning of the act for the offender and the victim, and psychological and economic injury experienced by victims.

More important, Sillito's study contradicts her own criticism of the CTS. Sillito tested and found support for the hypothesis that women experience more physical and psychological injury than men. The measure of partner violence was two items from the CTS. Thus the very article that describes the CTS as invalid because it does not take into account the context and meaning of the acts illustrates the way in which the CTS enables hypotheses about context and meaning to be investigated.

*Using the Context and Meaning of the Events as a Criterion for Measuring Violence will Under-Count the Prevalence of Violence*

It will also result in a biased sample of violent behavior. This can be illustrated by injury, which, as previously noted, is the most frequently mentioned "context" characteristic. If one objective of research on PV is to determine the percent of women who are physically assaulted, measuring it as acts *that resulted in injury* would fail to identify at least 90% of women who have been assaulted by a partner. This is because less than 10% of assaults by male partners result in injury (Stets & Straus, 1990). The main exception, for the reasons given later in this article, is the National Crime Victimization Survey. Injury is extremely important, but, as with all other context and meaning variables, it must be measured separately from the measurement of assault. This is why the CTS2 has a separate injury scale.

*Too Many Context and Meaning Variables to be Practical to Include*

The context, meaning, and consequence variables must differ from study to study to test different theories about context and consequences. They must also vary from clinical setting to clinical setting to be consistent with the theory to be the basis of the treatment modality. Consequently, even if it were scientifically valid to include context and meaning as criteria for measuring the prevalence and chronicity of PV, there are so many important context and meaning variables that it would be impractical.

## Does not Measure Self-Defense and Who Initiates Violence

Britton (2011) argues that a major reason that CTS data is invalid is that it does not differentiate acts of self-defense from other assaults. This purported defect could have been discussed in the previous section because it is another aspect of the general criticism that the CTS does not measure the context and meaning of the assaults counted by the CTS. However, it is such an important aspect of context and meaning that a separate section is appropriate.

As with other aspects of context and meaning, a question or questions on self-defense can be used along with the CTS. The importance of doing this is illustrated by Britton (2011, p. 98), who says “. . .we know that women are much more likely to use violence in self-defense.” Britton provides no empirical data on self-defense and cites no empirical studies. Yet there are studies that do provide empirical data on whether women are more likely to act in self-defense. Nine studies were located, and the percent of women and men who acted in self-defense are listed below in rank order of the percent of women who acted in self-defense.

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Cascardi and Vivian (1995) minor assaults	women = 5%	men = 10%
Felson and Messner (1998) homicides	women = 9.6%	men = 0.5%
Foshee (1996)	women = 15.9%	men = 5.4%
Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd and Sebastian (1991)	women = 18.6%	men = 17.7%
Cascardi and Vivian (1995) severe assaults	women = 20%	men = 0%
Carrado, George, Loxam, Jones, and Templar (1996)	women = 21%	men = 27%
Makepeace (1986)	women = 35.6%	men = 18.1%
Harned (2001)	women = 42%	men = 56%.
Ross (2011)	women = 47%	men = 16%

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The percent of women who acted in self-defense ranged from 5% to 47% with a median of 19%. None of the ten studies found that a majority of women acted in self-defense. Almost half of the studies found a higher percent of men than women acting in self-defense.

A number of other studies report results on self-defense such as those by [DeKeseredy and Schwartz \(1998\)](#) and [Hamberger \(1997\)](#), but only for women. Consequently, they do not provide information on whether, as is so often asserted, women are much more likely to use violence in self-defense.

There are also studies of who initiated PV, of which I have so far located the following eight:

- [Capaldi, Kim, and Shortt \(2007\)](#) observed 118 young men at high risk of delinquency interacting with their partners and found that, in 46% the cases, the female partner was the first to hit.
- [DeMaris \(1992\)](#) studied 218 undergraduates who reported violence in a current or previous relationship and found that 49% of the women said that they were the first to hit.
- [Fiebert and Gonzalez \(1997\)](#) studied 978 undergraduate women and found that 32% of those who reported one or more violent incidents said they had initiated the violence.
- [Hamberger \(1997\)](#) studied 52 women arrested for domestic violence, and found that 77 said they were the first to hit.

- Olson and Lloyd (2005) interviewed 25 women who had used aggression during conflicts with their romantic partners. Fifty-four percent said they had initiated the aggression.
- Saunders (1986) asked 52 two battered women in five shelters and a counseling agency “what percentage of these times did you assault your partner before he actually attacked you, or threatened you with a weapon.” Twenty-five percent of the women said they had hit first at least some of the time.
- [Straus \(2005\)](#) asked participants in the 1985 National Family Violence Survey “Let’s talk about the last time you and your partner got into a physical fight. In that particular instance, who started the physical conflict, you or your partner?” Of the 446 women involved in a violent relationship, 42% said they were the first to hit,
- Straus (2012) studied 14,252 university students in 32 nations and asked “If you ever slapped, grabbed, shoved, or hit your partner, or if your partner has ever slapped, grabbed, shoved, or hit you, who was the first one to do this the last time it happened?” Of the women in this study, 61% said they were the first to hit.

Leaving aside the study of women arrested for domestic violence, the percent of women in the other seven studies who initiated violence ranged from 25% to 61%, with a median of 46%. This suggests that women initiate PV about as often as men.

### **Measures Only Conflict-Related Violence**

Although the theoretical basis of the CTS is family systems theory and conflict theory, the introduction specifically asks study participants to report instances of expressive and malicious violence. It asks respondents to answer about the times when they and their partner “. . .disagree, get annoyed with the other person, want different things from each other, or just have spats or fights because they are in a bad mood, are tired or for some other reason.” In the past 25 years the claim that the CTS measures only conflict related violence been repeated in perhaps 100 publications, such as those by Kimmel (2010) and [Sillito \(2012\)](#). This gives the appearance of a well established limitation because each can cite a large number of previous articles asserting this. However, I know of no empirical evidence showing that only conflict-related violence is reported. In fact, where there are both CTS data and qualitative data, as in Giles-Sims (1983), it shows that the CTS elicits malicious violence as well as conflict-related violence.

### **Covers Only a Limited and Invalid Set of Abusive Acts**

The kernel of truth in this allegation is that the CTS items are only a sample of the hundreds of aggressive behaviors that could be included. It follows the same measurement strategy as a spelling test for children in third grade, which includes only a small fraction of the words the children should know how to spell. A critical aspect of any sample is how representative it is of the “universe” it purports to represent, in this case the universe of physically assaultive behaviors. The methods used to select items for the CTS were intended to achieve this, although they do not prove it. They included qualitative interviews and a review of the few published studies available in 1971 when the first version of the CTS was created ([Straus, 1974, 1979](#)). The revised CTS added



more items on the basis of publications up to the mid-1990s, and suggestions from co-authors, other colleagues, and published critiques.

Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, and Lewis (1998) created a *Violence Assessment Index* or VAI. The VAI has 14 physical assault items, compared with 12 in the CTS2. Most of the CTS items are in the VAI, thus casting doubt on the belief that the CTS items are biased. Nevertheless, each instrument includes some that the other does not. For example, the CTS includes “My partner kicked me” but the Dobash Violence Assessment Instrument (VAI) is more specific. The VAI has three items for kicked, one each for kicked in the body, arms, or legs; in the face; and in the stomach when pregnant. Although the CTS has only one item on being kicked, it includes modes of assault that are not in the VAI such as “slammed me against the wall, beat me up, burned or scalded me on purpose, and used a knife or gun.” This comparison suggests that the VAI, which was developed by two of the most severe critics of the CTS, like the CTS includes only a sample of the many ways that a partner can be physically assaulted. I suggest that the CTS and the VAI are both appropriate samples of items.

Why not combine the items in the CTS and VAI? As desirable as that would be, it would result in an instrument that, although excellent for clinical use, would be too long to be practical for most epidemiological survey research. Additional items would be a greater problem for the CTS than the VAI, because the CTS asks each item twice (once for what the respondent did and once for what the partner did). Asking each item for both partners is a unique and important characteristic of the CTS. It permits measurement of one of the most important context variables: the behavior of both partners (Straus, 2009b; Straus & Douglas, 2004). It permits determining the mutuality of PV and creating Dyadic Partner Types (Male-Only, Female-Only, and Both Violent). Numerous studies have found that the Both-Violent is the most frequently occurring type (Straus, 2012). In general population samples such as the National Comorbidity Study (Kessler, Molnar, Feurer, & Appelbaum, 2001), the Both-Violent type is about half of the relationships in which violence occurred. The remaining half is about equally split between the Male-Only and the Female-Only types. Moreover, empirical studies (summarized above) suggest that self-defense is rarely the explanation for the predominance of the Both-Violent type.

A potential problem with asking about the behavior of the partner is that it could lead to reporting the partner as engaging in more assaults than oneself. However, there is also the possible bias when each partner reports on their own behavior. I do not know of any study that has investigated whether self-reported or partner-reported biases are greater. Nevertheless, it is widely believed that the best approach, but one rarely used, is to have data from both partners in the relationship and to use the higher of the two reports.

### **Equates Acts that Differ Greatly in Seriousness**

Starting with the first version of the CTS (Straus, 1979), exactly the opposite is a key characteristic of the CTS. The Physical Assault scale, like all the CTS maltreatment scales, differentiates between less severe acts of violence, such as slapping and throwing things at a partner, and more severe acts such as punching, kicking, and choking. The CTS physical assault scale can also reflect the seriousness of each of the acts by weighting the scores by the frequency and/or severity of the behaviors (Straus, 2001; Straus et al., 1996).

## Severity of Items is not Specified

Dobash and Dobash (2004) point out that the item “threw an object at your partner” may cover such diverse acts as throwing a lamp and throwing a pillow, which differ not only with respect to their potential to cause injuries but also possibly in terms of the intensity of the underlying intention to harm. Although that was true of the first version of the CTS, it was changed in 1985 to specify throwing “something that could hurt.” More than 20 years later, Dobash and other critics continue to make this false claim. Ironically, in their own instrument (the VAI discussed previously), Dobash and Dobash repeat the mistake made in the original CTS by including a similar item, which could refer to a relatively harmless or dangerous item (“Threw things at her or about the room”).

## Focus is on Minor Violence

Payne and Gainey (2009, p. 135) argue that the CTS “. . .emphasizes relatively minor forms of violence (e.g., Pushing, grabbing, shoving), although it does include more serious types of violence (e.g., beating, choking, threatening, or using a knife or gun.” Payne and Gainey do not mention that 7 of the 12 modes of assault are in the severe violence category. This criticism also seems to contradict itself because Payne and Gainey list four extremely serious forms of assault that are in the CTS. Perhaps this misperception occurred because results from studies using the CTS usually find that at least two-thirds of the assaults identified by the CTS involve acts of minor violence. The predominance of minor assaults creates a cognitive inconsistency with the widespread image of PV by men as typically being acts of great severity. This image probably reflects the greater social concern with severe assaults and may therefore result in press coverage and public service announcement about domestic violence, which depict or imply severe assaults.

## Under-Reporting, Especially of Male Violence

Another assertion that is the opposite of the evidence is that the CTS under-reports PV. The kernel of truth in this is that, as pointed out in the original report of the results of the 1975 National Family Violence Survey (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 2006, pp. 48–50), the percentages and the mean frequency of assault are lower-bound estimates because not everyone is willing to provide this information or because many incidents are not remembered. Despite this, the CTS uncovers several times more cases of PV than other instruments (Straus, 1999). For example, the percent violent typically found using the CTS in general population surveys is in the 10–15% range, and studies of university students using the CTS find rates in the 15–30% range, probably because students are in the peak age group for violence (Straus & Ramirez, 2007, Figure 1). These rates are 10–30 times greater than the rate of about one percent found by the National Crime Victimization Survey.

As for under-reporting male perpetration, numerous studies have found similar rates when the data are based on reports of men and women study participants. Seven of these studies are summarized in Table IV in Straus (2012). The upper panel of that table gives perpetration rates in seven male-dominant nations as reported by women. The lower panel gives the rates for men as reported by men in those nations. For any

violence, the percentage of male perpetrators is higher based on the data provided by women in five of the nations, and higher for reports based on the data by men in one nation, and there is no gender difference for one nation. For severe assaults, the rate of male perpetration as reported by women is higher in three of the nations and the rate as reported by men is higher in four of the nations. Thus, as in the results for a US national sample (Stets & Straus, 1990), men self-report assaults to about the same extent as women report assaults by male partners.

## **OTHER BASES FOR ASSERTING THAT THE CTS IS INVALID**

### **Gender Symmetry is Refuted by the National Crime Victimization Survey**

The most widely cited and respected survey of crime in the US is the National Crime Victimization Survey or NCVS (Truman, 2011). The NCVS has consistently found that in about 85% of cases of PV the perpetrator was the male partner. Because it is widely regarded as the “gold standard” of crime surveys, the male predominance in PV found by the NCVS is used to argue that the gender symmetry found by over 200 studies, most of which used the CTS, is invalid; see, for example, Barnett and colleagues (2011, p. 67).

Although the NCVS may be excellent for measuring other types of crime, for purposes of measuring PV, it is the NCVS not the CTS which lacks validity, because it has inadequate “sensitivity” in detection of PV. The NCVS prevalence rate is less than 1%, compared to a typical rate of about 15% in general population surveys using the CTS. Thus the NCVS fails to detect 94% of the cases of PV detected by the CTS. An important part of the explanation for the low sensitivity of the NCVS is that the context of the survey is “crime.” Consequently, study participants tend to tell NCVS interviewers only about instances of attacks serious enough for the participant to perceive the incident as a “crime,” not just a “family fight.” This has serious implications for results from analyses of NCVS data, sometimes leading to erroneous results.

An example of an erroneous result on PV from NCVS data is the finding that about half the PV victims identified by the NCVS are injured, whereas other representative sample studies of PV find one to ten percent injured (Stets & Straus, 1990). The misleadingly high percentage of cases involving injury is also part of the explanation for the misleading 85% male perpetrator rate (Straus, 1999). If being injured is one of the criteria used by respondents to perceive they have been the victim of a crime rather than just a “family fight,” and if, as is the case, men inflict about two-thirds of the injuries, that alone could result in many more male than female perpetrators in NCVS statistics. Other NCVS errors in measuring PV are given in Straus (1999).

As a result of these problems, the NCVS identifies cases that the study participants regard as serious enough to be a “crime,” which is a tiny fraction of the cases identified by the CTS, and this applies to both severe and less severe assaults. On the other hand, the Canadian and British national crime surveys found results that are more like those

from the CTS: prevalence rates in the 4–7% range and similar rates for men and women (Mirrlees-Black, 1999; Statistics Canada, 2005). The more complete disclosure, and by implication more representative sample of cases, indicated by prevalence rates that are five to eight times higher than the US NCVS may be part of the explanation for the gender symmetry found by the Canadian and British crime victimization surveys.

### **Asymmetry in Harm is Erroneously Used to Assert Asymmetry in Perpetration**

Numerous studies show that women experience more harmful effects from being a victim of PV than men. A typical result is that women incur about two-thirds of the physical and psychological injuries, and two-thirds of the deaths from PV ([Archer, 2000](#)). This is extremely important, but it does not contradict the huge number of studies which have found that about the same percent of women as men physically assault a partner. Moreover, the approximately equal rates of pepertration apply to clinical-level cases of PV whether measured by the CTS or other methods (Straus, 2011a). However, scholars who deny gender symmetry in perpetration present data on the greater *harm suffered* by women as though they contradicted symmetry in *perpetration*, for example [Hamberger \(2005\)](#), [Nazroo \(1995\)](#) and [Sillito \(2012\)](#).

The difference in injury may not reflect a difference in motivation. As [Felson \(2002\)](#) pointed out, when two classes of people, one typically bigger and stronger than the other, physically aggress at about equal rates, because of size and strength differences one should end with a greater probability of injury. In addition to the logical error of using asymmetry in harm as evidence of asymmetry in perpetration, focussing on the greater harm inflicted by men ignores the research showing that partner assault by women is a serious problem even when, as is usually the case, the male partner is not physically injured ([Hines & Douglas, 2009, 2010, 2011](#); [Straus, 2005](#)). Similarly, partner assault by men is a serious problem even when, as is also usually the case, the female partner is not physically injured. Recognizing the greater harmful effects experienced by women and providing services to aid female victims is extremely important, as I have repeatedly argued for more than 30 years ([Straus, 2005](#); [Straus et al., 2006](#)). However, it does not contradict the approximately gender-equal rates of perpetration.

### **ARE OTHER MEASURES MORE VALID?**

A number of other measures of physical abuse of a partner have been developed. Some are brief instruments (e.g., two items) intended for use in preliminary screening, not as alternatives to the CTS, and therefore are not discussed here ([Brown, Lent, Schmidt, & Sas, 2000](#); [Feldhaus et al., 1997](#); [Norton, Peipert, Zierler, Lima, & Hume, 1995](#); [Sherin, Sinacore, Li, Zitter, & Shakil, 1998](#)).

The history and utility of instruments intended to be more valid than the CTS is illustrated by the instrument developed for the Gender, Alcohol, and Culture International Study surveys ([Boden, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2012](#)). The authors state that the CTS “. . . appears to minimize gender differences in violence, focusing on frequency of

incidents of aggression and failing to capture gender differences in the severity and dynamics of those incidents” (p. 70). They therefore developed an instrument they believed overcome these shortcomings. It focuses on the respondents’ *beliefs* about the severity of the violence, and *feelings* of anger, and fear. These are important aspects of PV to measure but as pointed out in the previous section, they are not replacements for data on actual perpetration of assaults. What the resulting instrument shows is that the *subjective* experience of PV by women involves more fear, is seen as more severe, and involves more anger, i.e., this instrument shows gender differences in phenomenology, but not gender differences in perpetration.

Some of the other instruments intended to overcome alleged deficiencies of the CTS include (Hegarty, Bush, & Sheehan, 2005; Houry et al., 2008; Hudson & McIntosh, 1981; Jory, 2004; Marshall, 1992a, 1992b). These instruments have one or more of the following characteristics which limit their utility: (1) measuring only unilateral violence, thus precluding determining if the violence was bilateral; (2) using qualitative response categories such as “sometimes” and “frequently” whose meaning varies from individual to individual and from cultural group to cultural group, and which precludes determining how many assaults occurred; (3) measuring beliefs or opinions rather than violent behavior; (4) absence of separate scales to measure severe and less severe assaults; (5) confounding items measuring motives for assault along with items measuring acts of assault; (6) including items on psychological or sexual aggression, injury, or fear, and combining them with the physical assault items to get an overall maltreatment scale, but no separate sub-scales for each component.

Whether each of the six characteristics does limit the utility of other measures of partner violence is subject to debate. For example, because an overall maltreatment score can be very useful, limitation 6 might not be considered a problematic characteristic. However, it is not the overall maltreatment score that is a problem; it is the absence of scales to measure each of the components that is a severe limitation. Moreover, a replacement for the CTS is not necessary to obtain an overall maltreatment score because the CTS can provide this. One method is to sum the scores for the separate CTS scales. This will provide what is likely to be a better overall maltreatment measure than provided by other measures because each CTS scale has demonstrated reliability and validity. Another method is to dichotomize each CTS scale and use that to determine the extent of poly-victimization (Sabina & Straus, 2008).

Perhaps the most important point in relation to 30 years of declaring the CTS to be invalid is that in all those years, despite many attempts to develop other measures, no other measure of PV has been shown by empirical evidence to be a more valid measure of perpetration of PV and all the alternative measures also find gender symmetry in perpetration. This is illustrated in an article by Nazroo (1995) whose main purpose was to demonstrate the invalidity of the CTS. The result using Nazroo’s measure was a much higher rate of perpetration by the women in his sample.

It seems that the only certain way to not find symmetry in perpetration is to ask women only about their victimization. Many users of the CTS do this by omitting the parallel CTS questions asking about perpetration. That is the procedure followed by the *Demographic And Health Surveys* conducted worldwide (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999).

The use of the CTS in major international and nations surveys such as the *Demographic And Health Surveys* and in the US *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* (Black et al., 2011) suggests that the designers of these studies could

not identify a more valid instrument. This also applies to the Canadian Violence Against Women Survey (Johnson & Sacco, 1995). The designers investigated alternatives to the CTS for more than a year, including extensive consultation with experts and battered women's advocates, focus groups, public hearings, and field testing. In the end, they measured physical assaults with the nine items in the original CTS but with one major modification: to ask the women in the survey only the victimization questions. As in the case of the *Demographic And Health Surveys*, this modification made certain the study found no female perpetrators.

## WHAT EXPLAINS THIRTY YEARS OF ERRONEOUS CRITICISMS?

I suggest that the attempt to show that the Physical Assault scale of the CTS is invalid and misleading has less to do with methodology than with profound disagreements in respect to theory and values. Those who do not like findings from research, for whatever reason, scrutinize the methodology behind the findings, often to an unreasonable extent. Since studies using the CTS find symmetry in PV for men and women, it is bound to be rejected by those who, despite the evidence from many sources (only one of which is the CTS), believe that there must be considerably more male than female perpetration.

### The Theoretical Disagreement

The theoretical disagreement arises because so many studies using the CTS in many nations have found that about the same percent of women and men physically assault a partner. This contradicts the patriarchy theory that partner violence is almost exclusively committed by men as a means to dominate women. The commitment to that theory is so strong that the approximately equal percent of women and men who physically assault a partner is taken as *prima facie* evidence that the CTS is not valid.

Ironically, belief in the invalidity of the CTS persists even though use of the CTS in the multi-nation Demographic and Health Survey (Heise et al., 1999) has provided the best evidence of the world-wide prevalence of violence against women. Those studies are heralded, despite using the CTS, because, as a result of modifying the CTS by removing the questions that asked women about their perpetration, the results cannot contradict the patriarchy theory of PV. In addition, because these surveys found higher rates of violence against women in male-dominant nations, the use of the CTS in the Demographic and Health Surveys also provided some of the strongest evidence confirming the link between male dominance and partner violence. Much other research using the CTS, including my research, adds to the evidence on the link between male dominance and violence against women ([Archer, 2006](#); Coleman, 1990; [Straus, 1994, 2008](#); [Straus et al., 2006](#)).

Furthermore, the results from using the CTS to measure *victimization* of women are accepted almost without question, whereas results from using the CTS to measure female *perpetration* are ignored, denied, or concealed ([Straus, 2007](#)). A prominent example of this ironic contradiction is the *World Report on Violence and Health* ([Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002](#)). Like many other publications on PV, it

accepts as valid CTS data on female *victimization*, but simply omits reporting the data on female *perpetration*. Many instances of denying, concealing, or ignoring the results on female perpetration are documented by Straus (2007). A psychology and sociology of science analysis suggesting why this has occurred is in Straus (1999, 2009c).

### **The Values Disagreement**

The disagreement in respect to values partly concerns whether priority is given to research and prevention efforts that might help reduce physical violence, *no matter who the perpetrator is*, or to research and prevention efforts that might help reduce *violence against women*. Those who approach research on PV from a feminist perspective, almost by definition, give priority to violence against women, although they are also deeply concerned with reducing violence in general. Nevertheless, they fear that research showing perpetration of violence *by* women will be used to make their primary concern (ending violence against women) more difficult (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2005, p. 18). Those, like myself, who approach research on PV from a concern with reducing all physical violence give priority to research that might do that, regardless of whether the perpetrator is a man, woman, child, or nation. See, for example, Archer (2006), Capaldi and colleagues (2007), Dixon, Archer, and Graham-Kevan (2011), Douglas and Hines (2011), Dutton (2006), Felson (2002, 2006), Hamel and Nicholls (2007), Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, and Silva (2001), O'Leary and Woodin (2009), Thornton, Graham-Kevan, and Archer (2012), Whitaker and Lutzker (2009), and Winstok and Straus (2011). This group is also deeply concerned with ending violence against women, as I have been since my first articles on family violence (Straus, 1976, 1977). Nevertheless, they fear, as I do, that ignoring or denying violence by women will make it more difficult to achieve their primary goal of reducing *all* violence, including violence against women (Straus, 2005, 2009a).

In a more detailed discussion of this moral divide (Straus, 1999, p. 40), I argue that society would lose if either side gave up its perspective because society benefits from the moral agenda and professional contribution of both sides. I for one do not intend to give up attempting to advance the "no violence by anyone, including women" moral agenda that has informed my research on domestic assaults and spanking children for 40 years. I believe humanity needs research inspired by the moral agenda and perspective of those who focus on the oppression of women, regardless of whether the oppression is physical, sexual, psychological or economic; and also research inspired by the moral agenda of those who focus on physical violence, regardless of whether the assault is by a man, woman, child, or nation (Straus, 1999, p. 40).

## **THEORETICAL, POLICY, AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS**

I suggest that the theoretical and value differences just described are a major part of the explanation for the denial of the results of more than 200 studies that have found gender symmetry in perpetration, initiation, and severity of PV by women and men. Similarly, these theoretical and value differences are the major reason for the assertion that the CTS is "fundamentally flawed" (e.g., Britton, 2011, p. 98). Ignoring, denying, and concealing the evidence of gender symmetry in perpetration is documented in Straus (2007). A more in-depth explanation for the denial than can

be presented here is found in Straus (2009c), and a more detailed analysis of the implications for policy and practice is found in Straus (2009a).

The denial of gender symmetry has immense practical costs, one of the most important of which is that it undermines efforts to reduce violence against women. I suggest that ignoring and denying the dyadic nature of PV is an important part of the explanation for the conclusion of a National Institute of Justice review of the effectiveness of PV treatment programs. This review found that batterer intervention programs (BIPs) “do not change batterers’ attitudes toward women or domestic violence, and that they have little to no impact on reoffending” (retrieved 28 November, 2010, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/>). With no exception I know of, BIPs *assume* that the male client is the only perpetrator. Instead, basic clinical practice requires an intake assessment to ascertain whether the violence is male only, female only or both violent through the use of an instrument such as the CTS. For effective treatment, and also for prevention programs, one of the crucial steps is replace denial of female perpetration by recognizing and acting on the overwhelming body of evidence showing approximately equal rates of initiating and perpetrating PV by women. Ending PV by women is also morally and legally necessary.

The empirical evidence suggesting the importance of addressing violence by women for preventing and treating violence against women includes studies that have found that a woman’s perpetration of violence is a strong predictor of her being a victim of partner violence. This includes three longitudinal studies, by [Feld and Straus \(1989\)](#), [Kuijpers, van der Knaap, and Winkel \(2011\)](#), and [Lorber and O’Leary \(2011\)](#), and cross-sectional studies by [O’Keefe \(1997\)](#) and [Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, and Saltzman \(2007\)](#). Still other studies are reviewed in the meta-analysis by [Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, and Tritt \(2004\)](#), which found that violence by the female partner is the largest single risk factor for victimization of women. Thus, reducing violence *by* women is a crucial part of reducing violence *against* women. Research and clinical assessment informed by use of the CTS to measure the prevalence, severity, and chronicity of assaults by *both* partners can help achieve that end.

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