Burnout and Work and Family Violence among Police:

Gender Comparisons

Leanor Boulin-Johnson

Abstract: *This survey of 457 male and 139 female police officers examined the relationship of gender and burnout as it relates to violence within the home (mate and child) and at work (officer and citizen). While both males and females showed moderately high degrees of burnout, females had higher emotional (internal) ratings and males had higher ratings on depersonalizing citizens (external). Officers with a high level of burnout demonstrated a high rate of violence. Significant gender differences exist in rates of violence toward citizens, fellow officers, mate, and children. Authoritarian style and inequity related to rates of violence, but alcohol did not.*

KEY WORDS: police domestic violence, gender, burnout, survey

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BURNOUT AND WORK AND FAMILY VIOLENCE AMONG POLICE:

GENDER COMPARISONS

After years of relative obscurity, the negative spillover of occupational stress into family life caught the attention of several scholars in the 1970s and 1980s (Johnson, 1989; Crosby, 1984; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Orthner & Bowen, 1982; Niederhoffer and Niederhoffer, 1978; Kanter, 1977). Prior to the Journal of Marriage and the Family 1971 special issue on family violence, no article in this leading family journal contained the word "violence" in its title. Since then, the number of texts and journals giving attention to domestic violence has markedly increased. Sociological Abstracts' citations showed only nine articles on domestic violence in 1974, but by 1988, the number had increased to 228 (Stith and Straus, 1995). Furthermore, the proliferation of journals such as Violence and Victims and Family Violence demonstrate the demand for a regular forum within which practitioners and researchers can share the latest developments in theory, research, policy, clinical practice, and social services.

While the women's movement of the 1970s went a long way toward sensitizing society to domestic violence, it did little to uncover violence within police families. This does not surprise anyone, given the value police officers place on camaraderie, the code of secrecy, and protection from external intrusion. Unfortunately, the code of secrecy remained intact until the 1990s. Johnson's (1991) research and expert testimony before the U.S. Congress, as well as the subsequent efforts to highlight the problem through national conferences (e.g., National Center for Women and Policing conferences, 1997/1998; 1991 Convention of the Fraternal Order of Police), revealed the frequencies and unique aspect of violence within police families. The controversy surrounding the Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act of 1997 has proven most effective in exposing the crime of domestic violence within law enforcers' families to the public.

The current lack of a firm definition of violence presents a problem for researchers. Research on acquaintance rape serves as an example of the subjectivity of violence. Women who provided affirmative answers to questions ranging from have you ever had your bra taken off against your will, your panties taken off against your will, had a date penetrate your vagina against your will, responded to an additional question: had they ever been raped. Surprisingly, a small proportion of these dating women refused to label this experience as rape. For them, strangers rape, not acquaintances. Likewise, the possibility exists that when officers respond directly to questions about having engaged in domestic violence, they may honestly say no. Officers may not see physically restraining a spouse as violent (regardless of how hurtful), as long as they maintain control of their emotions. They may not see verbal abuse as violent, given their work experiences. Because of this "eye of the beholder" phenomenon, the present study examined whether officers felt they had lost control and behaved violently. "Control" in a domestic violence incident may not only result in violence (i.e., an officer trying to regain control), but may factor into the prevention of a clear understanding of whether a person has perpetrated violence.

In seeking explanations for family violence, researchers employ various conceptual frame-

works: witnessing violence (social learning/culture of violence theory), experiencing violence (traumatic stress disorder), emotional suppression and alcohol abuse (masculine mystique/bio-psychological theory), and authoritarian negotiating styles and patriarchal values (cognitive and feminist theory). While witnessing and personally experiencing violence constitute potential stressors, authoritarian style and alcohol use represent ways of coping with these stressors. While these factors generally emerge as negative in nonpolice family literature, ironically many consider at least one of these emotional coping mechanisms (e.g., authoritarianism and alcohol use) desirable for effective policing or for developing camaraderie.

We must identify the numerous stressors within police work in order to create successful prevention programs. Identifying the negative outcomes potentially resulting from ineffective responses to these stressors holds equal importance. Burnout stands as perhaps the most common outcome of ineffective coping with police stress. Maslach (1982b) defines burnout as emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, leading to reduced personal accomplishment among individuals who do "people work." Burnout occurs most often among individuals who deal closely with troubled or problem-ridden people. Given this definition, law enforcers prove highly susceptible to burnout, because on a daily basis they closely associate with "the worst of people, and ordinary people at their worst" (Golembiewski and Kim, 1990). This close contact with other people's problems often leads to emotional exhaustion (feeling drained) or depersonalizing one's clients (treating clients like impersonal objects).

In explaining work and family dynamics in people service occupations, researchers have attempted to link psychological burnout with both individual characteristics and job conditions (Burke, 1994; Maslach and Jackson 1982a, 1978; Hageman, 1978). However, empirical studies linking burnout to work and home violence as well as to cultural differences (male/female) within this linkage virtually does not exist in the literature. Thus, the present report focuses on differential burnout by gender and the relationship between violence within the workplace and the home. Conceptually, role theory provides a framework to understand burnout within the context of gender. Before turning to the empirical findings, a brief discussion of role theory and domestic violence may prove helpful.

The explanations for negative job and home outcomes often involve gender roles. Such explanations may include an individual becoming caught up in a system of interlocking roles, which may result in role ambiguity (lack of clarity about one's role), role overload (excessive tasks), or role conflict (conflicts with job demands and roles beyond the workplace). Many assume that women are particularly susceptible. As women have moved into the male dominated police departments, gender-based role conflicts have come to the forefront. For example, gender-work role conflicts arise because traditional female behaviors do not coincide with the tough, assertive behaviors often demanded of a police officer. Often women receive mixed and incompatible messages as to whether they should act like women (feminine, nonaggressive, submissive, courteous, gentle) and demasculinize their roles, or act like typical police officers (tough, aggressive, authoritarian) and defeminize their roles. If they select the latter, their male counterparts may perceive them as "pushy" and "castrating" and their mate and children may perceive them as unloving and callous. Yet, if they choose to act like women, male officers may feel they don't have a partner upon whom they can rely.

Male officers often comment that women officers cannot be taken seriously given the high degree of commitment to their family over their job. Works by Pleck (1977) and Hall (1975) support this perception. They suggest working men with families have two sequential roles, while working women with families have two simultaneous roles. Consequently, women juggle their work and family roles and, therefore, experience more strain.

Finally, with regard to home violence, research has repeatedly concluded that males more frequently perpetrate physical domestic violence than females do. Explanations for higher incidences among males range from biological (the greater physical strength of males), to societal endorsement of patriarchal values, particularly the importance of authoritarian styles for males (feminist theory). However, since 1975, a decrease in approval of assaultive behavior by men has occurred; although it remains higher than that of assault by women. Approval of violence by women and the rate of assault by women on their male partners has remained virtually unchanged (Gelles and Loseke, 1993).

In addition, the crossover effects of violence have not received sufficient attention from researchers. Beehr, Johnson, and Nieva (1995) note that a spouse's own coping style can reduce his or her mate's stress and negative outcomes (e.g., suicidal thought, drinking, divorce potential). However, studies identifying the relationship between job and home violence in police populations remain virtually nonexistent.

If burnout varies by gender, and males and females engage in domestic violence at a different rate, we should expect burnout outcomes (such as work/family violence) to also vary by gender. Figure 1 illustrates this assumption. This model implies but does not establish causality. Based on our discussion, we expect gender association with different burnout types. These types in turn will associate with different types of violence occurring either at work or at home. We also expect a correlation to exist between work violence and home violence. In addition, we expect a number of correlates to relate to both work violence and home violence, including authoritarian spillover, alcohol use, and inequity (see Method section).

METHOD

The present sample of police officers consists of 457 males (47 Blacks and 410 Whites) and 139 females (39 Blacks and 100 Whites) from one medium and one large police department. These officers represent those joining the force since 1970, when a substantial number of females and Blacks entered the police force. The questionnaire reflected input from many sources: an advisory panel, police ride-along experiences, workshops for police officers and their spouses, formal and informal interactions with ethnic minority and gender-based police organizations, more than 60 intensive interviews with police officers and spouses, and pretesting in one rural and two urban departments. While the 333-item questionnaire covered a variety of topics, the present study focuses on the relationship between police work and family violence as well as variations in police violence by gender.

We categorized work and home violence types by the frequency with which the officers indicated on a seven-point scale that, during the previous six months, they had lost control and behaved

violently toward a citizen, fellow officer, spouse or mate, or their children. Factor analysis served as the method for developing five scales. Two of these scales measured job burnout: Internal (e.g., feelings of fatigue and emotional depletion) and External (e.g., treating civilians like objects or becoming callous toward people). These yielded Cronbach alphas of .85 and .87, respectively.

The first of the three correlates, the Authoritarian Spillover scale (Cronbach alpha = .74) included items such as "I like to do things by the book at home," "My job conditioned me to expect to have the final say on how things are done in my household," and "I catch myself treating my family the way I treat the civilians." The Alcohol Use scale (Cronbach alpha = .85) included three items: "Did you have periods when you could not remember what happened when you were drinking?" "Did you ever worry or feel guilty about your alcohol consumption?" and "Did you ever drink more than you planned?" Finally, the Inequity scale *(Cronbach alpha = .72)* consisted of five items: "Compared to others, I find that I am more apt to be penalized for my mistakes," "No matter what I do, it is always too tough or not tough enough," "I am more closely watched by the department than most officers," "I have been overlooked for commendations," and "When I am assertive or question the way things are done in the department, I am considered militant."

FINDINGS

Relationship between Burnout and Gender. Table 1 illustrates differential burnout of males and females. The scaled means reflect the average scores for males and females on a seven-point scale. While males experience both types of burnout in nearly equal proportions (scaled means: 3.74 and 3.78), females more likely experience internal burnout (scaled means: 3.79 and 3.23). We have included the individual criteria for each burnout scale along with the scaled means. The general trend consists of females scoring higher than males on internal burnout, but not to a statistically significant extent. On the other hand, external burnout items yielded striking gender differences. Excepting those claiming to have emotionally hardened, all external burnout items produced statistical significance, with males scoring highest. Clearly, females experience more internal burnout and less external burnout than males. Controlling for tenure (table not shown) does not affect the pattern.

Relationship between Burnout and Violence Types. Approximately 80 percent of the males and 65 percent of the females who scored high on internal burnout reported losing control and behaving violently toward citizens, fellow officers, spouse or mate, or children (See Table 2). Additionally, approximately 75 percent of those experiencing external burnout reported having committed violence against individuals within one of the four categories. Interestingly, males experiencing internal burnout indicate higher rates than females for all violence types. Females experiencing external burnout indicate higher rates than males for all but one violence type (fellow officers), where there is parity.

Relationship between Gender and Violence Types. Table 3 illustrates the association between gender and four types of violence (citizen, fellow officer, spouse or mate, and children). Although female officers produced a higher mean for losing control and behaving violently against a fellow officer, the gender differences did not reach statistical significance. However, the male offi-

cers produced significantly higher means for all other forms of uncontrolled violent behavior.

Work and Family Crossover Violence. To what degree do work and family violence relate? Because police brutality receives so much media attention, one might conclude that this type of violence has the highest correlation with domestic violence. However, citizen-to-spouse violence does not represent the strongest crossover (See Table 4). For example (item a), of the officers who reported having behaved violently toward their spouse, 73.38 percent of the males and 68.75 percent of the females had also behaved violently toward citizens. Within the population of officers who reported having behaved violently toward citizens (item b), 64.53 percent of male and 73.33 percent of female officers reported losing control and behaving violently toward their spouse or mate. The strongest link between work violence and family violence exists among the population of officers who reported having experienced a loss of control and behaving violently toward a fellow officer (item d). Within this group, 80.68 percent of the males and 90.90 percent of the females had also behaved violently toward their spouse.

As expected, given a woman's special relationship with children and the traditional role of the father as disciplinarian, the results yielded marked differences between males and females (items e and f) in the displacement of violence from child to citizen (74.78 percent of males, 53.33 percent of females) and from citizen to child (62.77 percent of males, 44.44 percent of females). Again, those who acted violently toward fellow officers (item h) produced the highest rate of violence against their children (71.76 percent of males, 60 percent of females).

Correlates of Police Violence. Table 5 presents three correlates of police violence: authoritarian spillover, alcohol, and inequity. Using the Authoritarian Spillover measure created for this study, earlier analysis (table not shown) concluded that women engaged in significantly less authoritarian spillover than did men ($\underline{M}$'s = 3.28, 3.78, $\underline{p}$ < .01). Table 5 also illustrates a significant relationship between high authoritarian spillover and violence type by gender. The percentage of male officers who engage in violent behavior, in the home or on the job, markedly exceeds that of female officers.

Our second correlate, alcohol use, remains one of the most frequently offered and widely accepted reasons for various types of violence. Within the past few decades, social scientists have begun to investigate the link between alcoholism and family violence. Although evidence of alcohol's exact role in violence varies, psychologists tend to see greater association between alcohol abuse and violence than do sociologists (Flanzer, 1993; Gelles, 1993). Gelles argues that cultural and social contexts dictate responsive behavior to alcohol use. Thus, alcohol has an association, but not a causal relationship, with violence. Gelles bases his conclusion on how people react to drinking in different cultures. Flanzer (1993), on the other hand, challenges this premise, arguing that alcohol both causes disinhibition leading to violence and alters brain functioning, causing neurotransmitter changes and possibly leading to violent behavior.

The data here suggest little relationship between a high rate of alcohol use and the rate of loss of control and violent behavior by the officers. Fewer than one in five officers showed a relationship

between the influence of alcohol on their loss of control. Although gender did not influence this result, females reported a slightly lower rate of alcohol use within all four violence types, particularly in child abuse (6.66 percent vs.18.33 percent).

Finally, inequity perceptions may contribute to negative outcomes. For example, affirmative action may create male resentment against women. Women must constantly struggle to reconcile their own perception of their competence level with the male majority's view of them. Both in and outside the department, women may find a cool reception when invoking their authority as law enforcers. More insidious than overt discrimination, there exists the nonhostile withdrawals or "psychological distancing" between those officers who have not previously shared authority with women as well as those women who have never had authority over men. In sum, added to the stressors felt by all officers, women may experience inequity, creating a psychological conditioning for acting out frustrations perhaps at a higher level than expected by women in general or a higher level than their fellow male officers.

The data indicate, compared to males, a higher percentage of women who perceive inequity on the job report losing control and behaving violently toward citizens, fellow officers or their spouse or mate. The only exception to women's higher percentage regards violence toward children (46.09 percent of males, 25 percent of females).   In some, of the four violence types, only inequity showed women exhibiting higher scores than males (exception; child violence).

DISCUSSION

Relatively high levels of burnout exist for both male and female police officers. Clearly, the nature of burnout differs by gender. While females experience even higher levels of internal burnout than males, who generally demonstrated elevated levels, males experience higher levels of external burnout than females. Johnson (1991) suggests males avoid internal burnout because they receive better preparation for policing (e.g., experiences in contact sports, military combat) and women avoid external burnout by incorporating the skills and attributes derived from traditional gender role socialization into their policing style.

Gender role socialization may also protect women from the negative outcome of authoritarian spillover. Clearly, authoritarian spillover does not exist as a universal trait. Female officers experience less authoritarian spillover and remain less likely to commit violence as a result of it. Although females exhibit more control over authoritarian spillover, this ability does not protect them from the adverse effects of burnout. When women experience the external burnout typical of males, the strength of the relationship between external burnout and the various violence types equals or exceeds that of their male counterparts.

Future research should examine factors related to women's ability to use authoritarianism on the street while minimizing its influence in their home. Furthermore, studies need to focus on increasing our understanding of the possible outcomes of officers developing the burnout typical of the opposite gender (e.g., women with external burnout or men with internal burnout). Our data suggest

that developing the opposite gender's burnout style increases negative outcomes.

The transference between work violence and home violence supports the need to address all violence wherever it occurs. In addition, if further study supports the violence-against-officer and violence-against-spouse relationship, departments adopting a zero-tolerance policy on domestic violence may have another preventive index for detecting an officer who loses control at home.

The data suggest women officers perceiving inequity would act out their frustrations. In our interviews women officers often commented on the "sexist" remarks made by male coworkers. Perhaps the high level of officer-to-officer violence reflects women's low tolerance for such verbal offensives. Given the high probability of officer violence coexisting with domestic violence, departments should adopt a zero-tolerance policy, not only for workplace violence, but for any attitudes or actions promoting perceptions of inequity within the workplace.

Finally, we need to refine our definition of violence. In an earlier report, more than 40 percent of officers reported having lost control and behaving violently toward a family member. Other reports claim prevalence rates of domestic violence ranging from less than 10 percent to nearly 50 percent. We must contend with a subjective understanding of what officers consider violent; what officers may consider nonviolent, the average citizen may consider violent.

Before we can make significant progress with our discussion on violence, we need to thoroughly understand what officers perceive as violent acts within their work and their home. Little doubt exists about the likelihood of these definitions differing by gender in very meaningful ways.

BURNOUT AND GENDER MEANS

	Male	Female
Internal Burnout (Scaled Mean) NS	3.74	3.79
Emotionally drained NS	4.11	4.13
Used up NS	4.28	4.37
Fatigued NS	3.68	3.95
Burned out NS	3.43	3.35
Working too hard NS	3.25	3.12
External Burnout (Scaled Mean)***	3.78	3..23
Treat civilians like objects***	3.78	2.94
Working with people a strain**	2.95	2.65
Callous towards people***	4.52	3.93
Job hardening emotionally NS	4.25	4.06
Don't care what happens***	4.07	2.73
Working with people a stress**	2.80	2.49

***significant at the .01 level
** significant at the .05 level

Table 1

BURNOUT AND VIOLENCE TYPE BY GENDER (percent)

Burnout Type	Violence On Spouse		Violence On Child		Violence On Fellow Officer		Violence On Citizen	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Internal High	81	63	80	64	81	59	83	67
External High	76	79	75	80	73	73	69	73

Table 2

GENDER AND VIOLENCE TYPE

Comparison of means and percentages

Gender	Violence to Citizen***	Violence to Fellow Officer	Violence to Spouse/Mate**	Violence to Children***
Male				
Mean	2.23	1.61	1.88	1.23
percent	85	79	82	90
Female				
Mean	1.70	1.72	1.47	.63
percent	15	21	18	10

*** significant at the .01 level

** significant at the .05 level

Table 3

COMPARISON OF VIOLENCE TYPES (percent)

Work and Home Domain	Male	Female
a. Violent on **spouse** and also violent on **citizen**	73.38	68.75
b. Violent on **citizen** and also violent on **spouse**	64.53	73.33

Work and Home Domain	Male	Female
c. Violent on **spouse** and also violent on fellow **officers**	57.72	62.50
d. Violent on fellow **officers** and also violent on **spouse**	80.68	90.90

Work and Home Domain	Male	Female
e. Violent on **child** and also violent on **citizen**	74.78	53.33
f. Violent on **citizen** and also violent on **child**	62.77	44.44

Work and Home Domain	Male	Female
g. Violent on **child** and also violent on fellow **officer**	53.04	60.00
h. Violent on fellow **officers** and also violent on **child**	1.76	60.00

Table 4

VIOLENCE BY AUTHORITARIAN SPILLOVER, ALCOHOL USE

AND INEQUITY BY GENDER (percent)

Violence Type	Authoritarian Spillover High		Alcohol High		Inequity High	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Citizen	60.58	46.42	19.08	13.46	44.59	58.49
Officer	71.53	35.00	18.30	13.04	44.38	68.08
Spouse	78.26	51.51	17.29	14.28	42.58	55.55
Child	80.34	62.50	18.33	6.66	46.09	25.00

The figures represent the percentage within each gender type who exhibited a particular form of violence; thus adding male and female gender percentages does not equal 100 percent.

Table 5

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