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Patterns and mental health predictors of domestic violence in the United States: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey

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1. Introduction

Over 10 million Americans are estimated to experience domestic violence each year (Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 1998; Sorenson, Upchurch, & Shen, 1996), making it a major public health problem. More than one-third of all women seen in emergency rooms in the U.S. are victims of domestic violence (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). Over half of women and one-third of men murdered in the U.S. are killed by their domestic partners (Browne & Williams, 1993). Not surprisingly, in light of these statistics, domestic violence is also associated with high rates of mental disorders, including depression, substance abuse, and suicidality in both clinical samples (Gleason, 1992; Miller, 1990; West, Fernandez, Hillard, Schoof, & Parks, 1990) and general population samples (Bland & Orne, 1986; Danielson, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998; Stets & Straus, 1990).

The literature has largely assumed that the high rates of mental disorder found among victims of domestic violence are consequences of the violence to which they are exposed. This is consistent with evidence documenting adverse mental health effects of many different types of traumatic life experiences (Breslau et al., 1998; Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, & Nelson, 1995). However, it is also important to consider a possibility suggested elsewhere (Barnett & Fagan, 1993; Dinwiddie, 1992) that some preexisting mental disorders might be risk

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factors for the subsequent onset of domestic violence. Documentation of such risk in a large representative sample would have important treatment implications (Danielson et al., 1998).

Several strands of evidence support the hypothesis that preexisting mental disorders affect the subsequent onset of domestic violence. First, domestic violence exhibits substantial intergenerational continuity (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Toadter, 1983; O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994; Widom, 1989). This implies that at least some people reared in abusive families either differentially select themselves into abusive relationships as adults or differentially fail to leave ongoing abusive relationships. Second, exposure to childhood family violence is a powerful risk factor for early-onset mental disorders (Bryer, Nelson, Miller, & Krol, 1987; Kessler, Davis, & Kendler, 1997; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996). And, third, early-onset mental disorders have a variety of adverse marital consequences that include increased probability of early marriage (Forthofer, Kessler, Story, & Gotlib, 1996), increased probability of assortative mating with a partner who also suffers from a mental disorder (McLeod, 1995), and increased probability of divorce (Kessler, Walters, & Forthofer, 1998). It is plausible to hypothesize, based on these results, that preexisting mental disorders are also risk factors for domestic violence. Consistent with this hypothesis, there is evidence that depression partially mediates the relationship between childhood family violence and physical assaults by husbands (Straus & Yodanis, 1996).

General population survey data from the National Comorbidity Survey (NCS; Kessler et al., 1994) are presented in the current report to evaluate this hypothesis more completely by examining a wide range of premarital mental disorders of both men and women. The NCS is a large household survey that was designed to study the prevalences, predictors, and social consequences of DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) mental disorders in the United States. Questions about domestic violence in current marriages were included as part of the assessment of potential social consequences. By using retrospective reports on age of onset of the mental disorders assessed in the survey in conjunction with information on marital timing, it is possible to examine the associations of premarital mental disorders with subsequent domestic violence. We begin by presenting data on the estimated prevalence and sociodemographic correlates of domestic violence in the NCS data. We then present data on the associations of premarital mental disorders with the subsequent onset of domestic violence. All results are presented separately for both victims and perpetrators and by gender.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

The NCS is a nationally representative household survey of 8098 people in the age range 15–54 that was fielded between September 1990 and March 1992. Respondents were sampled using a multistage area probability design. Interviews were carried out face-to-face in the homes of respondents. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and also from the parents of minors. The response rate was 82.4%. The interview was carried out in two parts. Part I of the interview, which took approximately 1 h to complete, included a

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