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Best practice principles for measurement of technology-facilitated coercive control

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Abstract

Domestic violence research is marked by longstanding definitional, theoretical, and methodological debates that have serious implications for policy and practice (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007, 2009; DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz, & Schwartz, 2017; Dragiewicz, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2013; Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012; Dragiewicz & Lindgren, 2009; Yllö, 1990). Domestic violence is difficult to measure, and non-physical forms of abuse are the most challenging. The emerging research on technology-facilitated abuse has highlighted the extent to which measuring domestic violence in a meaningful way remains challenging. Gathering data about abuse in intimate relationships requires careful consideration of study design. Decades of research have documented problematic approaches to measurement and their implications (Dragiewicz & Lindgren, 2009; Yllö, 1990). However, many of the researchers developing measures for technology-facilitated abuse are unaware of the domestic violence research and longstanding discussion of measurement issues. This chapter highlights domestic violence/coercive control research best practice principles and the measurement challenges they ameliorate. It also highlights implications for research on technology-facilitated abuse. The goal is to assist researchers to produce research that is meaningful, interpretable, and responsible, which means it does not harm domestic violence survivors.

Key terms

Coercive control is currently a popular term for the social problem widely known as domestic violence. When I use the term domestic violence in this chapter, I understand it as synonymous with coercive control. Coercive control is a re-articulation of earlier feminist theories about men's violence and abuse against female intimate partners as historically

contingent, multicausal, and reproduced via patriarchal forms of power and control (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016; Radford & Hester, 2006). In Stark's (2007, 2013) formulation, coercive control is defined as an ongoing pattern of physical, sexual, or non-physical abuse against current or former intimate partners in which male abusers leverage structural gender inequality to limit women's liberty. According to coercive control theory, it is the combination of persistent micromanagement of gendered daily activities, non-physical abuse, credible threats of physical violence, and structural gender inequality performed in heterosexual couples which disproportionately entraps women in abusive relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016; Stark, 2007, 2013). This combination of factors describes the dynamics of the social problem of domestic violence and helps to explain its uneven distribution and impact.

Unfortunately, while many scholars and commentators have picked up the language of coercive control, most fail to acknowledge the gendered dynamics at the core of this type of abuse. Gender-uninformed formulations of coercive control have been rapidly adopted, outnumbering applications that accurately reflect the evidence-based theory. Gender-uninformed formulations of coercive control focus on claims that non-physical abuse is just as bad as, if not worse than, physical abuse; that coercive control is a repetitive pattern of behaviour; and that those who use it seek to control their partners (see Hamberger et al., 2017 for a review of gender-uninformed approaches).

Stark argued that men's coercive control of women in heterosexual relationships is distinguished from control in other contexts "by the degree to which its scope, substance, duration, dynamics, societal significance, and individual consequences are inextricably bound to persistent forms of sexual inequality and discrimination" (Stark & Hester, 2019, p. 92). Degendered understandings of coercive control inappropriately apply a theory based on empirical data about heterosexual men's violence against women who are their intimate partners to other dyads and contexts as yet unsupported by the research.

Degendered understandings of coercive control distort the ecological character of the theory, reducing the concept to dyadic 'control of intimate partners', devoid of the structural power analysis central to coercive control theory. This decontextualisation and individualisation obscures that fact that empirical data from research and administrative data document significant sex differences between women and men's violence in same-sex couples

(Donovan & Hester, 2014; Gannoni & Cussen, 2014), women’s use of violence against men in heterosexual relationships, and men’s use of violence against women in heterosexual relationships (Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network, 2018; Dragiewicz & Lindgren, 2009; Hester, 2013; Houry et al., 2008; Stewart, 2000).

Technology-facilitated coercive control refers to abuse via digital media and devices in the context of domestic violence. This includes things like stalking via global positioning systems (GPS); audio and visual recording; verbal abuse and threats via messaging apps; unauthorised access of accounts and devices; doxing (publication of personal information); impersonation; and image based sexual abuse (Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2020; Southworth et al., 2005; Woodlock, 2017). Technology-facilitated coercive control is a subset of online abuse and a subset of domestic violence. For this reason, it is important to keep domestic violence in view when seeking to understand technology-facilitated coercive control.

<Figure 1.1 here>

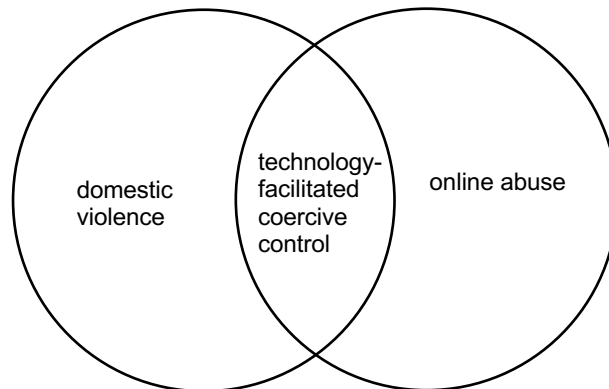


Image caption: Relationship between domestic violence and online abuse

Alt text: Venn diagram. Left circle says “domestic violence.” Right circle says “online abuse.” Overlapping area says technology-facilitated coercive control.”

Best practice principles for measuring technology-facilitated coercive control

Scholars have been documenting the challenges associated with measuring domestic violence since the 1970s. Hundreds of articles have critiqued aspects of domestic violence measurement and proposed solutions to the problems. There continue to be lively discussion

about the best way to address measurement issues (see for example Donovan & Barnes, 2018 and Walby & Towers, 2018). Measurement and representation of domestic violence matter because they are the foundation of popular and scholarly understandings of the problem, policy, and practice decisions with significant implications for people's lives (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007, 2009; DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz, & Schwartz, 2017; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Walby & Towers, 2017). Emerging efforts to study technology facilitated abuse risk exacerbating existing measurement and reporting problems since measuring non-physical abuse is even more difficult than measuring physical abuse. This section highlights best practice principles that address key measurement problems for technology-facilitated coercive control.

- Principle: Keep the domestic violence in focus
- The problem it fixes: Changing the subject.

Many studies slip back and forth between measures of conflict, control, aggression, altercations, monitoring, or surveillance and claims-making about domestic violence, intimate partner violence, or coercive control. Conflating these very different phenomena is confusing and often misleading for readers. This becomes extremely problematic when researchers make recommendations for practice around the social problem of domestic violence based on research about something else. Keeping domestic violence in focus can help researchers to triangulate findings from individual studies with the extant research on the social problem of domestic violence (such as crime surveys, personal safety surveys, domestic violence surveys), and qualitative research with administrative data (on domestic violence calls, arrests and breaches, and rich case data from domestic and family violence death review panels). Triangulating research findings on technology-facilitated coercive control in this way can make the relationship between findings from one study and the large body of domestic violence research visible. Triangulating diverse domestic violence data sources will permit more meaningful analysis than comparison with studies that simply use a common methodology, measurement tool, or theoretical framework.

- Principle: Ask about context, meaning, and motive
- The problem it fixes: counting decontextualised behaviours.

Study findings are uninterpretable when researchers count decontextualised behaviours and fail to ask about the context, meaning, or motives behind them. Failing to collect this important contextual information makes it impossible to make distinctions that are essential to understanding what happened. Without asking about context, meaning, and motives, there is no way to distinguish between defensive and offensive acts. This has serious implications for understanding domestic violence practice because, contrary to patriarchal stereotypes of women as passive and helpless, most women attempt to defend themselves from domestic violence, including via physical force (Hester, 2012). Failure to consider the meaning of abuse means leaving out important outcomes, such as injury and fear, that can help to make sense of behavioural measures (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). Asking about context, meaning, and motive can also mitigate known issues with overcounting behaviours not experienced as harmful by the parties involved. This principle is important when measuring technology-facilitated coercive control because many technology-related behaviours are ambiguous, with their meanings entirely dependent on their context and impact.

- Principle: Include all incidents
- The problem it fixes: Counting practices that cap the number of incidents analysed.

Surveys that cap the number of incidents analysed seriously distort the appearance of the nature and distribution of the social problem of domestic violence. Capping is used in recording of multiple incidents of the same type of behaviour. It significantly reduces total estimates of behaviours. Capping of series crimes is routine practice in crime victimization surveys as well as other surveys that ostensibly measure domestic violence. For example, the CTS- records all behaviours that occurred ‘more than 20 times in the last year’ in one category, minimizing the most frequent (and possibly impactful) types of abuse. Similarly, the Crime Survey for England and Wales caps the number of incidents at five. Capping artificially lowers estimates of crimes in a way that is especially pertinent to domestic violence and other types of violence against women (Walby, Towers, & Francis, 2016, p. 1204). Violence against women tends to be perpetrated by men known to the victim. This type of violence is more likely to be repeated than the kinds of violence most commonly experienced by men. As a result, violence against women is disproportionately minimised when capping is used relative to violence against men. This measurement issue is especially

pertinent to technology-facilitated coercive control where sending hundreds of intrusive text messages is a common tactic.

- Principle: Include current and past partners in dating, de facto, and spousal relationships
- The problem it fixes: Leaving out key relationship types and past relationships.

When researchers only ask about abuse in current relationships, they leave out all of the survivors who identified the relationship as abusive and left the abuser. Women who are domestic violence survivors often recognise the relationship as abusive near separation or after leaving (Kearney, 2001). Men who abuse women frequently continue the abuse post-separation, and the intensity of the abuse often increases at that time (DeKeseredy et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to include past and current relationships in surveys investigating the use of technology in the context of domestic violence. It is important to include and report sex-disaggregated data on past boyfriends and girlfriends as well as current and former spouses since these relationships are also common locations of technology-facilitated abuse. This is especially true outside of the United States as couples from other wealth nations are much less likely to marry.

- Principle: Talk to domestic violence survivors if you want to understand domestic violence
- The problem it fixes: Failure to recruit domestic violence survivors when using “community” or “representative” samples.

Despite claims that community or representative samples are the gold standard for survey research, many studies targeting the general population include few respondents who are domestic violence survivors. This makes them a poor source of information about domestic violence. Straus wrote,

Ironically, the types of cases that are not covered by community surveys are the most horrible cases and the ones that everyone wants to do something about. However, community surveys can tell us little about what to do about these extreme cases because the samples contain too few to analyse separately (1993, p. 77)

Domestic violence survivors who are currently in an abusive relationship are highly unlikely to answer the phone or an email asking them about their experiences of abuse given the high rates of monitoring and surveillance used by abusers and abusers' use of isolation tactics including blocking communication. Domestic violence survivors who know or suspect that their partner is monitoring their electronic communication or has unauthorised access to their online activities are perhaps the least likely to participate in surveys targeting community samples, meaning that the target population, abuse survivors, are likely excluded from surveys using community samples.

- Principle: Ask about sexual violence
- The problem it fixes: Minimisation of sexual violence.

Despite the common claim that domestic violence includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, many studies of domestic violence do not ask about sexual abuse. Sexual violence is one of the most harmful types of domestic violence. Sex differences in sexual abuse are greater than sex differences in other types of interpersonal violence. Leaving sexual abuse out distorts the nature of domestic violence in a way that obscures one of the most harmful types of violence and disguises one of the key sex differences in the dynamics of abuse. The cultural context of gender inequality means that sexuality-related harms weigh most heavily on women. Implications of incidents like having a naked photo of yourself shared online differ greatly for women and men (Henry & Powell, 2018). The contexts in which women and have images of themselves shared without permission also differ in meaningful ways. Women's disproportionate risk of sexual violence and abuse and the greater impact of unauthorised image sharing make sexual violence a key context for understanding the impact of technology-facilitated coercive control (see Harris & Woodlock's chapter).

- Principle: Take physical violence seriously
- The problem it fixes: Minimising physical violence.

The claim that psychological abuse is just as bad or worse than physical violence has been around since Walker wrote, "one woman described life-threatening physical assaults during acute battering incidents, one of which resulted in a broken neck. Yet to her, the psychological degradation that she suffered was far more humiliating and painful" (1977, p.

53). While examples like this are intended to illustrate the harms of non-physical forms of abuse, they have been eagerly taken up by those who claim domestic violence is not gendered. Such claims are sometimes used in ways that minimise the impact and damage of violence and the credible threat of violence that underpins women's experiences of domestic violence. Homicide is a real risk for women experiencing domestic violence, as we are reminded by weekly news of domestic violence-related killings of women and children (Cullen et al., 2019). Accordingly, physical violence, including the ever-present threat of homicide, is an essential context for studying technology-facilitated coercive control.

- Principle: Look at the whole picture
- The problem it fixes: using one type of study as a proxy for the large body of domestic violence research.

Despite the known difficulties of measuring domestic violence, many researchers present findings from studies using one measurement strategy with one population as if it represents the big picture of domestic violence. This problem is exacerbated when authors make sweeping claims based on one narrow type of study that are sharply contradicted by the diverse research on domestic violence as a whole (see Archer, 2000 for an example of this). This is especially irresponsible when reporting on a phenomenon as difficult to measure as domestic violence. The wide variation in estimates of domestic violence by methodology, question set, sampling frame, time period bounding, study framing, types of abuse, and relationships included is well documented (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Phillips & Park, 2006; Reed et al., 2017; Walby et al., 2016). This principle is especially pertinent to research on technology-facilitated abuse as several of the early studies replicate common shortcomings of dating abuse research: using decontextualised behavioural prevalence measures, surveying students about current relationships, and failing to ask about the context, meaning, or motives of behaviours for those involved.

- Principle: Remember that abusers and survivors are in the research participant pool
- The problem it fixes: failing to account for abuser beliefs and attitudes that affect self-reports.

While many researchers are cognisant of issues affecting domestic violence survivors' participation in research, this is only half of the picture. Abusers' ways of thinking affect their perspectives on violence and abuse. Research on men's accounts of domestic violence provide essential insights to inform research on technology-facilitated coercive control. Considering the social forces that contribute to violence, and the frames that batterers use when describing their violence, can help researchers improve research design. Research on men who abuse women finds that they deny minimise, excuse and justify their actions (Bancroft, 2002).

Many abusers justify their use of violence by characterising it as self-defence (Cavanagh et al., 2001; Dragiewicz, 2011; Ptacek, 1990). Batterers often label violent retaliation for disobedience as self-defence. Male abusers categorize even extreme physical violence as self-defence and therefore not abusive (Adams, 1989). Many abusers perceive their partners' speech as attacks, justifying physical beatings as self-defence against speech with which they disagreed (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). More than half the abusers in one study blamed their partner's aggressive speech for their violence (Coleman, 1980). Many abusers reverse the blame for the abuse, perceiving themselves as the real victim even when they are the primary aggressor.

Multiple studies have found that men who abuse female partners underreport the frequency and seriousness of their own violence (Arias and Beach 1987; Bancroft 2002; Dobash et al., 1992; Dobash et al., 1998; Szinovacz 1983). These ways of accounting for violence should be expected to affect participation in research on technology-facilitated coercive control. Abuser attitudes and beliefs can cause them to respond to victimisation surveys as if they are victims. Gendered socialisation that rewards men's capacity to use violence, normalises their violence against women in certain circumstances, and pathologises women's violence even when in self-defence contributes to these dynamics.

Some emerging research on technology use in intimate relationships reproduces and exacerbates known domestic violence measurement problems

Despite 40 years of critique of poor domestic violence measurement, much of the emerging research on technology-facilitated abuse fails to acknowledge documented domestic violence measurement issues or implement recommended solutions. As a result, some researchers

continue to ignore the context, meaning, and impact of behaviours which are nonetheless characterised as abusive or violent. In addition, new problems are emerging. Due to the non-physical nature of technology-facilitated abuse, ambiguity around common online behaviours, and poorly operationalised terms, surveys of technology-facilitated abuse are prone to over and undercounting, misinterpretation, and distortion (Reed et al., 2017). Brown & Hegarty's (2018) review of digital dating abuse measures found that many of the measurement problems discussed above also apply to studies on technology-facilitated abuse. They noted the range of terms used to describe the problem, conflation of constructs such as aggression and abuse, and failure to define key terms. Brown and Hegarty found 13 different terms used to describe the problem across 16 studies. Only four studies provided explicit definitions of the construct they were measuring (2018, p. 47). While Brown and Hegarty (2018) called for the development and validation of standard measurement tools to fix these problems, researchers have been unable to agree on standard measurement tools for domestic violence despite four decades of discussion and debate. Researchers will continue to use a variety of approaches. By applying best practice principles to research design, they can reengage in responsible research practices that minimise the risk of harm to domestic violence survivors across multiple approaches.

A key issue for researching technology-facilitated coercive control is distorting control, resulting in characterisation ambiguous behaviours as controlling, abusive, and violent. This is discussed in more detail below using selected examples.

Distorting control

Johnson and Ferraro (2000) sought to end the theoretical debate about whether or not domestic violence was gendered by proposing a typology of intimate partner violence. Johnson and Ferraro explained the divergence in findings across studies using different samples and measurement approaches and large sex differences in things like service-seeking and deaths due to domestic violence. For a time, the categories in their typology were adopted by some scholars and practitioners to distinguish between 'common couple violence', 'intimate terrorism', 'violent resistance', and 'mutual violent control'. Johnson and Ferraro (2000) suggested that the development of control scales could improve measurement of domestic violence. However, decontextualised control measures remain problematic (Myhill, 2017). Trying to measure 'control' without considering power, context,

meaning, motives, and outcomes is just as ambiguous as the measures it was intended to improve upon.

More recently, there has been rapid adoption of the term coercive control. In some contexts, relabeling domestic violence as coercive control has been useful in expanding understanding that domestic violence includes more than just physical violence or a pattern of behaviour rather than a one-off incident. However, many people using the term coercive control do not know what it means (Robinson, Myhill, & Wire, 2018). Measuring domestic violence or coercive control is difficult because any behaviour, from buying flowers to homicide, can be used by an abuser to exert control or by a victim to survive or escape domestic violence (Northwest Network, 2017). Accordingly, scholars have a responsibility to collect and present data in ways that maximise the interpretability of research findings and minimise the potential for confusion or data misuse.

Unfortunately, as the popularity of the coercive control language spreads, poor measures of control are proliferating. Many scholars (and practitioners) are adopting the control or coercive control labels without incorporating key elements of coercive control theory, namely power and structural inequality. In Australia, we can observe unintended consequences of this trend in research on technology-facilitated abuse. For example, one study indicated that,

frequent Facebook partner-monitoring was defined in the main study as ‘using Facebook to check on your partner’s activities at least 3 times a week’. To measure ‘check on your partner’s activities’, descriptions obtained from the pilot study (e.g., checking your partner’s profile, checking who your partner is in contact with, scanning your partner’s wall posts and photos) were used (Darvell, Walsh, & White, 2011, p. 718)

It is easy to imagine how this ambiguous measure of partner monitoring could produce misleading impressions about technology-facilitated control. Looking at your partner’s Facebook page is likely to be innocuous. However, without asking about the context, meaning, or motives of these behaviours, the study findings are both uninterpretable and misleading.

Another study reporting on the development and validation of a cyber dating abuse questionnaire among young couples. Borrajo and colleagues (2015) created a 20 item questionnaire that,

collected information about various types of cyber dating abuse, such as threats, identity theft, control, and humiliation. Each item consists of two parallel items: one for victimization and another for perpetration (e.g., ‘My partner or former partner made a comment on a wall of a social network to insult or humiliate me’ and ‘I wrote a comment on the wall of a social network to insult or humiliate my partner or former partner’; p. 359)

Borrajo et al., (2015, p. 364) reported that “prevalence of control victimization was 75%, and the prevalence for perpetration was 82%.”

In another example, Bennett et al., (2011) created a 22 item survey that they said investigated “four categories of electronic victimization: hostility, humiliation, exclusion, and intrusiveness. Nearly all participants (92%) reported some electronic victimization in the past year, with males reporting more victimization and females anticipating more distress” (p. 410).

These examples show how decontextualised lists of behaviours can result in overreporting of behaviours that may be categorised by researchers as controlling or abusive but experienced as normal or innocuous by participants. Clearly, measures that find nearly universal rates of abuse have expanded the concept of abuse to meaninglessness.

Conclusion

Technology-facilitated coercive control is best understood as part of coercively controlling domestic violence rather than the misuse of particular emerging technologies. Abusers have always used all technologies available to them to engage in abuse and exert control. Survivors have likewise historically used the technology available to them to survive and escape abuse. Researchers have a responsibility to study and represent the dynamics of technology-facilitated abuse as accurately as possible. This is to avoid unintended harmful consequences to survivors that may result from presenting a distorted picture of the problem.

Scholars have a responsibility to collect and present data in ways that maximise the interpretability of research findings and minimise the potential for confusion or harm due to data misuse. Domestic violence is difficult to measure, especially non-physical forms of abuse. However, there are simple measures scholars can take to produce meaningful and interpretable research on technology-facilitated coercive control. This chapter has recommended keeping the focus on domestic violence; asking about context, meaning, and motives; including all incidents rather than capping counts of abuse; including current and past partners in dating, de facto, and spousal relationships in research to capture pre- and post-separation abuse; recruiting domestic violence survivors rather than the general public if you want to understand the dynamics of domestic violence; including sexual violence in research on coercive control; taking physical violence seriously; looking at the whole research picture; and recognising that abusers and survivors participate in research, which has implications for self-reporting.

It is exciting to see a new group of researchers moving into research on technology-facilitated coercive control. Researchers from different disciplines such as computer science and media studies will bring new research methods and insights to bear on the problem and its solutions. However, some researchers new to the area may not be well-educated about domestic violence or the solutions to measurement problems. Care should be taken to consider well-documented measurement issues when designing research on technology-facilitated coercive control. Interdisciplinary research teams consisting of experts on domestic violence, computer science, and digital media studies will be best positioned to move the field forward.

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