

Deadlier than the male? An examination of representations of female aggression as evil.

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Abstract

The media presents us with a world that is increasingly violent. News agencies report on conflict, war, ethnic cleansing and torture. Yet another young man is stabbed to death on the streets of a major city, sportsmen or celebrities are in court accused of monstrous sexual assaults. These news stories have one thing in common; they are about men and male aggression. There is an unvoiced understanding that this violence is male, or originated by men. If this seems a strange thing to point out, try to imagine how these events would be reported if the instigators were female. This paper sets out to examine why that suggestion makes us pause for thought, and to explore ideas about female aggression, its motives and outcomes, possibly exploding a few myths on the way.

1. Introduction

Aggressive behaviour, at an individual level, can be physical, mental or verbal, and the form in which it is expressed carries with it a perception of its acceptability that is tied into the motivation and the outcome. Motives for aggression are either hostile (affective/emotional or retaliatory and spontaneous) or instrumental (predatory or goal oriented) ¹. Instrumental aggression is seen as sinister and manipulative, only carried out to achieve some outcome beneficial to the aggressor, and manifestly evil. Theoretical explanations of aggression range from the global to the neurological, but all contain the view that men are more likely to express their aggression in ways that are physically violent (hostile), and that women will behave in indirect ways (instrumental), being incapable of exerting the same physical force ². In other words, female aggression is seen as either poorly expressed imitative behaviour of the male, or inherently directed to a goal that should be viewed as malevolent. This either minimises and trivialises women's behaviour, anger, perspectives and viewpoints, or transforms them into evil.

Female aggression is a fact of life, but one that is only lately being addressed by mainstream social and behavioural sciences. There is a wealth of animal research that examines female aggression, but applying these findings to human behaviour or emotional response is difficult at best. Studies on mice, or red-fronted lemurs, or even our genetically closest primates, concentrate on female aggression as the result of events that concern animals, such as competition for mates or food, or the protection of offspring. When we do find studies on humans, it is almost as if the peculiar lens of comparative

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psychology could be applied here, as researchers seem happy to compare female behaviour to that exhibited in the male, rather than as behaviour in its own right. Writings on the topic seem to view aggression by women or girls as either as this pale imitation of male aggression, or specific to certain situations, such as alcohol abuse or domestic violence. There is also a tacit agreement that female aggression has the same motivations and form of expression as male aggression. There is little acknowledgment that viewing it in this way minimises and trivialises women's behaviour, anger, perspectives and viewpoints. A review³ of 30 years of research on gender differences in aggressive behaviour found that assumptions that women are not aggressive could not be supported, as studies did, in effect, demonstrate the opposite. Women will respond to provocation and cannot be described as passive.

2. Aggressive women

Incidents of violence in which women are the victims has reached high proportions, not least because it is now more likely to be reported to, and followed up by police. However, there is evidence to suggest that reports of the violence and its prevalence are given in sexualised terms or in relation to intimate partner violence. Sexual or domestic violence are not the only aggression that women receive, but reports give the impression that it is. For example, in a 10-country study linking women's health and violence against women conducted by the World Health Organisation⁴, the statistics are presented in terms of reported physical or sexual violence by a husband or partner (ranging between 15% and 71% dependent on country), and non consensual sex. Similarly, in the USA, the Centers for Disease Control estimate over 5 million women suffer intimate partner victimizations annually, with around 1,300 of these resulting in the death of the woman. Such figures are horrific, but also serve to hide other forms of violence, and give the impression that women are always passive recipients. In fact, research has established that intimate partner violence is bi-directional and that such aggression is more highly correlated with substance abuse than with either ethnicity or gender⁵. This also is true when considering all forms and level of violence. Olsen & Lloyd⁶ suggest that less severe or "minor" cases of aggression, including those within intimate relationships, are relatively equal across men and women. A possible source of understanding why female aggression is seen as less prevalent than male aggression might be the definition of aggression and the conflating of types of violence. In Olsen & Lloyd's study, women reported they had initiated aggression in 54 percent of the events they discussed, although there was a confused view of what starting aggression meant. Some defined this as getting angry, or thought asking their partner to talk about issues of conflict was a form of aggression. Moreover, 63% of conflicts contained only verbal aggression linked to the dynamics of conflict and communication in the relationship. Thus, women

define aggression as a complex issue, beyond (and before) the striking of blows. Women in this study also identified a range of motives for aggression, with rule violation and to gain attention or compliance the most likely reasons, together with psychological factors. This was supported by a study⁷ in which 32% of women who were in a relationship admitted they used physical aggression against their partners. Additionally, they reported that they used it more than their male partners, with anger at partners and poor communication being cited as reasons. However, they also reported that their male partners were more likely to be sexually coercive than they were, and they were more dissatisfied with their relationships than the women who did not report using or experiencing violence within them.

3. Aggression as crime

Aggression and violence are inseparable from crime, and the fear of crime influences a great deal of our behaviour, and perception of others. It also influences research and practice in criminal psychology and other allied disciplines, and hence policy within justice systems. There is a particular phenomenon surrounding conviction of female offenders, referred to as chivalric justice. This is the situation of women receiving lesser sentences than men for the same kinds of crime. For example, the issue of sole female child molester generates responses of disbelief rather than the revulsion produced by male paedophiles⁸. Such an offender is also less likely to receive a custodial sentence than her male counterpart. The complementary reaction to female offenders is one expressed in the “evil woman hypothesis”, the view that women who offend outside normative sex roles are doubly deviant⁹. This is particularly evident when considering women who participate in sexual murder with a male partner¹⁰.

However, in most places around the world, at least those in which we can view statistics with confidence, crime rates are falling in proportion to population figures¹¹. The only crime that appears to be growing is violent crime perpetrated by female offenders, although many postulate that this is a result of changes in reporting and arresting behaviour rather than any increase in female violence per se¹². Similarly, Zahn¹³ suggests that the perceived change in offences and arrest rates are an artefact of policy changes that reflect cultural changes in the perception of gender roles and gendered behaviour. There is still an overwhelming difference in the number of incidents attributed to men/boys and women/girls, but the growth of female violence does bear scrutiny. Moore¹⁴ contends that the ways in which young male and female offenders exhibit aggression are very similar, and that this is bound up to constantly changing views of masculinity and femininity. This is particularly important to address in the light of the falling off in the rate of male-perpetrated violent crime, which is attributed to policies targeting this behaviour. Further issues surround the definition of gender difference itself, together with other social and individual factors that affect it. Richardson &

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Hammock¹⁵(2007) concluded that gender role is the better predictor of aggression than gender, and the effect becomes less distinctive when the type of aggression (direct versus indirect) is taken into account. This might be accounted for by differential paths of socialisation of boys and girls, and the development of social skills in respect of socially accepted gender role expression. For example, Gavin & Hockey¹⁶ demonstrated that young men with one or more offences in their history are more likely to make an aggressive response in situations where the socially accepted behaviour would be conciliatory. It has yet to be established how the ways in which women process such problems might differ. In addition, Farrington¹⁷ examined a large range of individual and socially derived risk factors that might lead to the development of delinquency in boys, including violence. No such study on the impact of developmental or psychological factors has been undertaken on women or girls, despite the perception of increasing crime rates for women/girls, and the challenge to readily accepted assumption of gender differences in crime, arrest and conviction¹⁸.

4. Bad press.

But is all aggression bad? Some aggressive acts might be deemed defensive or protective. Do women who demonstrate this form of violence have a better press? Historically this may not be the case. For example, take two well-known British warriors. William Wallace, better known to the world as Braveheart¹⁹, has obtained iconic status as a symbol for independence against the might of a conquering English army. Contemporary English chroniclers describe him as an outlaw, committing brutal atrocities, but the Scots and the rest of the world see him as a hero. Contrast this with the story of Boudiga. You may know her as Boudicca or Queen Boudicea. A victim of the occupying Roman army's inhuman treatment, stripped of her land and possessions, her son executed, her daughters raped and brutalised, Boudiga rampaged through what is now East Anglia. Her armies claimed to have destroyed the Ninth Legion, whose disappearance is still not understood. She was defeated by the governor Paulinus in what historians describe as a major tactical mistake. She then took poison in order to avoid what would certainly have been torture and public execution. Unlike Wallace, Boudiga is little known outside England, except as sycophantic description of the one woman who, ironically, almost destroyed Great Britain. Despite featuring as a symbol for early feminist movements, later depictions have her reduced to a marauding, vicious harpy rising up against friendly democratic patrons, ungrateful bitch that she was.

Similarly, consider the genesis of the vampire legend. Dracula is clearly a product of the sexual repression of Victorian England, and expresses seduction and sexuality in Gothic terms. He is not truly a depiction of death and gore. But his antecedents are. He has a real man and a real woman

hidden in the murky legends of his creation. The man is Vlad Tepes, son of Vlad Dracul, also known as Vlad the Impaler. Despite the 1970's rise in Death Tourism²⁰, Vlad was not in reality a blood sucker, but he did kill in some rather stomach turning ways. Notwithstanding the impaling and various other delightful forms of death, to modern Romanians and their historians, he is the saviour of their land against marauding Turkish armies. Contrast this with the rather bad press that Dracula's female ancestor has received. It is 16th century Hungary, and young peasant girls are going missing. They have been offered well paid work in the Castle Czejte, then never seen again. The king sends an army to the castle where they find one dead girl and one dying, several wounded, and others locked up. There are witnesses aplenty to testify against the Countess Elizabeth Bathory²¹. Describing atrocities such as severe beatings, insertion of needles, burning or mutilation of hands, faces and genitalia, all of them over a twenty-five year period, it sounds like the peasants were happy to get their own back on a woman who history has determined was probably medically and legally insane. Her depravities did not include the draining of blood from the young girls, drinking and bathing it, as has been widely described. However, Elizabeth is inextricably linked to the vampire legend, just as Vlad is, but the description of their grisly practices is very different, a liberating hero on one hand, an insane lady of the manor with a novel approach to servant discipline on the other.

In more modern times we see similar disparities in the way the aggression of men and women is depicted. The Moors murderers, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, are accurately seen as a degenerate couple, who sexually assaulted and killed children in the area of Manchester in the 1960's. Both were sentenced to life imprisonment, Brady was declared insane and sent to a high security psychiatric hospital, from where he campaigns for the right to die, while taunting the parents of his victims, and performing other attention seeking shenanigans. Hindley died in prison, and the press dubbed her "the most hated woman in Britain". There had been campaigns for her release, but the notoriety attached to her never allowed these to be successful. Hindley will be forever labelled an evil monster, Brady simply a madman, yet she was the accomplice, and he the murderer²². Such gendered hatred extends to women such as Maxine Carr (the partner of Ian Huntley, the Soham murderer)²³.

Violence then, is different for women, aggression is seen as male, female aggression as manipulation, and when it becomes physical violence, a certain element of femininity is lost. In Britain, this loss of femininity is clearly linked to the rise in female violence, and the young women who are the subject of this debate being named "ladettes"²⁴. The behaviour is purported to be the result of the adoption of the attitude of the "lad", the loveable rogue who will grow out of the demeanour, rather than that of the female heroine. Hence our ladette is both lauded and vilified at the same time. Furthermore,

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there are attempts to make her reclaim her femininity, such as the reality TV show “Ladette to Lady”²⁵. Such representations of women are unhelpful in tracing the route of woman from compliant to complicit to committed. Even more confusing is the fictional depiction of our aggressive, transgressive women, with the general public identifying “Sex in eh City” as a feminist drama²⁶.

Where does this leave us trying to understand and deal with the rise in violence by women, whilst trying not to negate the anger and frustration that brings it about? How can we acknowledge the truth of aggression whilst considering the history of its growth and representation? How do we resolve the insidious depiction of aggressive women as harpies and harridans? Much more research is needed in the various issues touched upon here. Examining female aggression as an emotional, physical, or psychological response to the world in its own right, rather than poorly expressed imitative behaviour may move us forward from the ready representation of the aggressive woman as evil.

¹Notes

[Siegel & Victoroff](#), (2009) summarised the difference between hostile and instrumental aggression in terms of the neurological differences.

² Sneath & Van Puymbroeck examine the rise of female physical aggression in the light of social learning theory.

³ Richardson, 2005 reviewed research on female aggression concluding that the research findings were at odds with public perception.

⁴ World Health Organisation 2010 report on domestic and sexual violence concentrates on women as victims not perpetrators.

⁵ Sullivan et al, 2009).

⁶ Olsen & Lloyd (2005)

⁷ Hettrich & O'Leary (2007),

⁸ Gavin, 2010 a study on public perceptions of female child molesters discovered disbelief or sympathy as a normal response to the idea.

⁹ Hamilton, K. and Hayes-Smith, R. , 2010

¹⁰ Gavin, (ibid)

¹¹ Official statistics from the UK Home Office, (Flatley et al, 2010) & the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, (Rand & Truman, 2010) both show declining rates in violent crime being reported.

¹² Schwartz et al, 2009).

¹³ Zahn, 2009

¹⁴ Moore 2007

¹⁵ Richardson & Hammock (2007)

¹⁶ Gavin & Hockey (2010)

¹⁷ Farrington, 2005

¹⁸ Farrington et al, 2010

¹⁹ "Braveheart", a feature film directed by and starring Mel Gibson, is a dramatized version of the life of William Wallace.

²⁰ Briston, R. & Newman, M. (2004) write about the ways in which the darker aspects of a region can attract tourism revenue more successfully than other forms.

²¹ Gregory Branson-Trent's book *Vampires Among Us: The Children of the Night*, explore the myths and realities of the vampire tradition

By New Age Productions

²² Hayward and Presdee 2010

²³ Maxine Carr provided a false alibi for Ian Huntley when he was suspected of killing two young girls. She was sentenced to three and a half years in prison; on her release she had to be given a secret identity to protect her from threats of attack
BBC News.

²⁴ Muncer et al 2001

²⁵ The RDF Media production takes young women whose behaviour is viewed as laddish (uncouth, drunken behaviour being the norm) and attempts to turn them into ladies. It is criticised for being staged, but there have been several series to date.

²⁶ Owen, Vande Berg, & Stein (2006)' publication *Bad girls: cultural politics and media representations of transgressive women*, describes the ways in which women are portrayed in the media with particular emphasis on women who step outside socially accepted gender roles.

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