

Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research

Insights from Literature

Sports and 'spikes': Do major sporting events increase violence in the home?

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The Big Game and domestic violence

By the time you are reading this, more than likely, the outcomes of the 2018 AFL and NRL Grand Finals will be known. And, more than likely – though further down the page – there will have been media reports of “increases in domestic violence” accompanying these outcomes. We can predict this on the basis of previous reporting, not only reporting on previous Grand Finals but on other major sporting events too.

“State of Origin nights see a 40 per cent increase on average in domestic assault” (“Domestic violence spikes”, 2018) reported ABC news. It backed up its claim with reference to research from the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics. The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education also chimed in:

In the twelve-hour window from 6pm to 6am on State of Origin game night, women and children in New South Wales are almost 40 per cent more likely to become victims of domestic Violence. This is a significant and consistent spike across the three-game series in each and every one of the years examined (“Domestic violence surge”, 2018).

Australia doesn't have this on its own of course. Association football in England and American football in the USA show similar ‘spikes’ in domestic violence when high-profile sporting events take place. Even smaller events, such as the [Calgary Stampede and the Grey Cup Final](#) in Canada, demonstrate the same trend (“Whether teams win or lose”, 2018).

I don't think any of the sources represented above is making the simplistic argument that “sport causes domestic violence”. In fact further reading reveals that these correspondents tend to argue that other factors such as alcohol, gambling, heightened emotions, tribal behaviour, and rivalry are typical ingredients in a fizzing, hostile mixture. Such accounts sometimes also refer to something that might be described as *toxic masculinity* or *hyper-masculinity*. While audiences to sporting events include women (who might also be drinking) it is commonly conceded that men are predominantly responsible for violence against their partners and children following these games (e.g., “Whether teams win or lose”, 2018).

In making this connection between The Big Game and domestic violence however there is an implicit assumption in such reporting that the extent of this type of violence can be measured by data that is in the form of hospitalisations, police call outs, and contact with such services such as women's shelters. By inference then we take it that domestic (and family) violence

(DFV) can be defined in terms of the palpable evidence of events such as calls for help, cuts, bruises, fractures, and breakages. By such logic, the 'amount' of DFV is therefore reflected in these incidents. While injury, displacement and vandalism are not to be discounted, and the role of intoxicants, high emotion, rivalry, and tribalism should not be dismissed, there is a sense in which our tendency to focus on these outwardly 'measurable' manifestations of violence hides a more compelling, darker, but ultimately more useful account of this profound public health problem.

Incidentalism & reductionism

The habit of measuring DV by counting incidents of violent events and then attributing these incidents to combinations of single-factor 'triggers' (such as sport or alcohol) is attractive in its simplicity but problematic in at least two ways. In the first place the incidents themselves tend to conceal a more sinister and enduring pattern of conduct; and secondly, references to triggers and causes lend themselves to excusing violence by characterising it as a manifestation of seemingly irresistible drives and forces, such as addiction or rage.

So what is going on here? Why do major sporting occasions appear to 'trigger' violent responses from male sports fans? One kind of explanation surrounds the kind of theory and research that is based on these incident measurements and cause-and-effect explanations. The idea in this kind of literature is to log each separate and discrete incident of aggression occurring in the home and to come up with causative explanations for it. This research has tended to conclude that *'women are just as violent as men'* (e.g., Dutton & Corvo, 2006) and that such violence occurs when tensions and conflicts, which 'inevitably' build up within family systems, get out of control. The solution according to this logic is in working with couples and families to discern the contribution of each family member to the out-of-control escalation and inevitable blow up. From this kind of ('family systems') approach, the responsibility for individual incidents – pushes, shoves, punches, barges, slaps, and so on – appear to be shared more or less equally among men and women; and so women are seen to be as responsible as men regarding their contributions to cycles of argument, moody withdrawal, interpersonal manipulation, and so on.

The invitation to engage in this kind of reductionism with specified causes harks back to the thinking of nineteenth-century science, and particularly the physics of hydraulics. Just like

steam under pressure or bodies in motion, it's as if domestic and family violence emerges out of a maelstrom of dynamic forces, which can be measured in terms of calibrations and quantity. The first concern with such arguments is that they are out of alignment with contemporary understandings of human conduct, which are more ready to acknowledge human agency and accountability. But more importantly they fail to account for the *intentions* behind the use of violence in family settings.

An important point to note here is that people resort to acts of aggression, and what we might call *violence*, for myriad purposes: resistance, dominance, revenge, defence, expression, subjugation, retaliation, and so on and so on. Moreover however, this line of argument is irreconcilable with what we are increasingly coming to know is at the core of the work in DFV practice: that the overwhelming majority of cases resulting in severe and long-term harm to wellbeing is carried out by men toward women and children (ABS, 2017). We know from the experiences of those who are victimised in this way that the nature of such harm is principally to do with the impact of experiences of oppression and confinement held in place by an enduring sense of fear within the context of intimate relationships.

The terms 'coercive control' (Stark, 2007) and 'intimate terrorism' (Johnson, 2008) have been coined to represent these experiences and are based on research related to the accounts of those who have survived this systematic and enduring kind of abuse. Such outcomes have little to do with spikes of heightened emotion from someone 'driven to breaking point' (by which we tend to excuse men – but, interestingly, rarely women) or accounts of bottled-up flows of testosterone. No, this kind of systematic abuse is better explained with reference to an intentional and sustained pattern of conduct. Here, the *intention* of the man is to do with securing control and compliance of family members; the strategy is to induce fear through the invasive and intrusive tactics of intimidation, confinement, restriction, surveillance, isolation, and threat. Unlike other manifestations of violence that occur outside the home, this strategy is enabled by the culturally-shaped expectations of marital roles, the legacy of protecting the 'privacy' of the family environment, and much wider gender-based imbalances of power. This motivation for abuse, however, is rarely addressed in public media, and such tactics are, by design, not easy for its victims to report or for those who might help to detect. It is rather easier to see the bruises and breakages that might well be the result of a tactic (physical

violence) that is in fact less common and typically only used as a final resort – if at all (Crossman, Hardesty, & Raffaelli, 2016).

More efficient tactics for the perpetrator are the telling gesture, the ‘accidental’ barge, the opening of a stubby, or ‘that look’ – which has the rest of the household trained to be on alert and “walking on eggshells” (Jenkins, 1990) in fear of a possible escalation to overt violence. As a result, actions that are often considered types of abuse in themselves (psychological, emotional, sexual, financial) might be more helpfully characterised as tactical tools in a strategy of coercion and control.

Domestic violence is a process not an event

The violence that we ‘see’ after The Big Game then may not be merely because she (or her child) was in easy reach when the cup was lost, but more of a reminder of who is the boss. Perhaps this incident did happen in the context of an intoxicating mix of ingredients, such as alcohol, the need to win, an ‘anger problem’ and, ultimately, frustration. But these ingredients are, I think, more realistically regarded as destabilising or disinhibitory factors in a context of broader controlling intentions and assumptions about entitlement and privilege. In which case, rather than enquiring about what *caused* this violence on the day of the Final then we might instead ask: “What is the history of abuse in this household that has prompted this man to choose *explicit* violence on this occasion?”

Yet there is scope for optimism given the centrality of sport. Sports play an important role in the lives of many boys and men – both as recreation and a place where masculine peer groups are formed. Given our contemporary understanding that domestic and family violence has its roots in our history and cultures then, we might expect that sports can become an important forum for change. Sports can be targeted as an entry point for the development transformative cultures of masculinity. There is surely promising scope to invite top level players, coaches, and parents to be recruited as role models. Such modelling would promote respectful relationships and appreciative attitudes toward girls, women, and anyone who doesn’t subscribe to out-of-date, dangerous narrow and rigid blueprints for gender.

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