

Barbara Kay: Alberta study paints false picture of domestic violence

[National Post](#) - Wednesday March 14th, 2012

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) has just published the results of a Leger Marketing poll of 1000 men age 18 and over on their views of domestic violence.

According to the survey, most men think it is never acceptable to physically assault a woman. More than 90% of men responding to questions of what is "acceptable behaviour towards women" considered "physical assault" "never" acceptable when: "she refuses to have sex," "she admits to having sex with another man," "she does something to make him angry," and so forth. To me, that isn't bad news, epidemiologically at least.

Interestingly, though, media reports on the survey turned this fairly upbeat news on its head. Almost unanimously they focused on variations of the headline used by the CBC: "OK to hit women if angry, 8% of Alberta men say."

Whoa, now it's not upbeat at all! It's very alarming! At least the CBC got the figure correct; CTV and others rounded the figure up to "one in ten".

On an issue of such importance, honesty and accuracy are critical. But I find this survey superficial. What, for example, does "she does something to make him angry" mean? The survey doesn't break it down, or give any indication of a spectrum of incitements to anger. Is the provocation to anger burning his toast, or hitting him over the head with a frying pan? There is a qualitative difference between the two.

There have been surveys that did ask specific questions with regard to when violence against a woman might be acceptable in a man's mind. In 2001, for example, there was a U.S. survey (Simon et al) covering a far more numerous and more nationally representative sample than the ACWS one. It polled 5,238 men and women, equally divided by numbers.

Of the men polled, 9.8% said it was okay to hit a woman if she hits him first." Only 2% said it was okay to hit a woman as a means of controlling her. Interestingly, of the women polled, 7.8% agreed that it was okay for a man to hit a woman if she hit him first.

I believe my scepticism is especially justified because this survey is so one-sided. Domestic violence happens by and to both men and women. We need both views, as in the U.S. survey above, to form an opinion.

In the ACWS survey, we have the troubling finding that only 39% of respondents agree that a parent slapping a child's face should be considered family violence. Jan Reimer, provincial co-ordinator for the ACWS, said she found it "quite concerning," for example, that so many men don't consider slapping a child's face to be a form of domestic violence. But what if the survey had asked the same question of women? If the figure were the same or even higher amongst women, would her concern be mitigated? Would Ms Reimer's condemnation shift to a less indignant register?

From the Alberta survey, one takes away the impression that only males have a problem with physical aggression, which is demonstrably not the case. When one looks at surveys where both sexes are polled, one sees that anger management issues are a problem for a fraction of less than 10% of the population of both sexes in intimate partnerships — similar to the figure in the Alberta survey, but one that applies to both sexes. Yes, a problem, but a community problem not a gender one.

This survey is about men's "views." But what is more important? Views or actual behaviour? From U.S. and Canadian government reports, as well as many peer-reviewed studies — not marketing company surveys — we know that in terms of actual behaviour between intimate partners, women are as likely — or more likely in younger cohorts — to initiate mild to moderate physical aggression than men (up to and including knifing). They are also more likely to be physically abusive to children.

So I am left to wonder what purpose this survey has served. We have a clue in Ms Reimer's linking of the negative male views to the feminist mantra: "centuries of control and male privilege." If women had been polled and their views lined up with the male views, it would put paid to that simplistic conclusion.

My own conclusion is that the goal of the exercise was to further entrench the already well-established myth that only men perpetrate domestic violence and only men are a danger to their children. It has doubtless succeeded in that goal. But as original, valuable and objective insight on a thorny social issue to the Canadian public (as it should have been), I'd say it was money down the drain.

National Post