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## Intimate Partner Violence and Gender A/Symmetry: An Integrative Literature Review

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### Abstract

Gender stereotypes have largely been discussed in the occurrence of marital violence, mainly in international literature. The objective was to map and analyze scientific literature, published between 2010 and 2015, using the databases *ISI Web of Science*, *Academic Search Complete*, *Medline Complete*, *PsycInfo* e *SciELO*. Strings used were: a) first search strategy – “intimate partner violence” AND “gender symmetry”; b) second search strategy – “intimate partner violence” AND “gender asymmetry”. We analyzed 48 journal articles entirely available online. Most publications are from The United States (60.41%) and use quantitative research designs (60.41%). The most frequently used instrument was the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2), even though criticized because of its checklist structure. Disagreement remains about gender a/symmetry in conjugal violence, however, an emerging perspective affirms that these cases should not be generalized and each couple’s specificities must be assessed. National studies are necessary to contemplate different aspects of this phenomenon.

**Keywords:** symmetry; asymmetry; gender; conjugal relationships; intimate partner violence

### Violência entre Parceiros Íntimos e As/simetria de Gênero: Revisão Integrativa da Literatura

#### Resumo

Estereótipos de gênero têm sido bastante discutidos na ocorrência de violência conjugal, principalmente na literatura internacional. Objetivou-se mapear e analisar a literatura científica, publicada entre os anos de 2010 e 2015, nas bases: *ISI Web of Science*, *Academic Search Complete*, *Medline Complete*, *PsycInfo* e *SciELO*. Empregou-se os descritores: a) primeira estratégia de busca – “intimate partner violence” AND “gender symmetry”; b) segunda estratégia de busca – “intimate partner violence” AND “gender asymmetry”. Foram analisados 48 artigos disponíveis na íntegra. Predominaram as publicações realizadas nos Estados Unidos (60,41%), preponderantemente de delineamento quantitativo (60,41%). O instrumento mais utilizado foi a *Revised Conflict Tactics Scales* (CTS2), embora criticada por se tratar de uma escala do tipo *checklists*. Ainda existem discórdias acerca da as/simetria de gênero na violência conjugal, porém surge uma perspectiva que defende a não generalização desses casos e considera fundamental avaliar as particularidades de cada casal. Estudos nacionais são necessários para contemplar as diferentes facetas desse fenômeno.

**Palavras-chave:** simetria, assimetria, gênero, relações conjugais, violência entre parceiros íntimos

### Violência Marital y As/simetría de Género: Una Revisión Integradora de la Literatura

#### Resumen

Los estereotipos de género han sido ampliamente discutidos en la ocurrencia de violencia conjugal, sobre todo en la literatura internacional. Se objetivó mapear y analizar la literatura científica publicada entre los años 2010 a 2015, en las bases: *ISI Web of Science*, *Academic Search Complete*, *Medline Complete*, *PsycINFO* y *SciELO*. Se emplearon los descriptores: a) primera estrategia de búsqueda – “intimate partner violence” AND “gender symmetry”; b) segunda estrategia de búsqueda – “intimate partner violence” AND “gender asymmetry”. Fueron analizados 48 artículos disponibles en su totalidad. La mayoría de los publicaciones se realizaron en Estados Unidos (60,41%), principalmente de delineamiento cuantitativo (60,41%). El instrumento más utilizado fue la *Revised Conflict Tactics Scales* (CTS2), aunque fue criticado por tratarse de una escala de tipo *checklists*. Todavía existen desacuerdos sobre las as/simetría de género en violencia conjugal, sin embargo, en la actualidad surge una perspectiva que defiende la no generalización de esos casos y considera que es fundamental evaluar las particularidades de cada pareja. Se necesitan estudios nacionales para contemplar las diferentes fases de este fenómeno.

**Palabras-clave:** simetría; asimetría; género; relaciones conjugales; violencia de pareja.

## Introduction

The concept of gender emerged in the late 1940s with the research of John Money, a psychologist who worked with surgery and hormone therapy for individuals then called hermaphrodites (Cyrino, 2013). Although Money had considered the social construction of gender (Butler, 2006), it is only since the 1970s that the movement and feminist theory embraced the

concept as a size analysis of the society and unequal relations between men and women (Mayorga, Coura, Miralles, & Cunha, 2013). This milestone allowed an understanding of the differences between male and female as no longer static and immutable (Santos & Izumino, 2005).

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines biological sex as the chromosomal, gonadal, reproductive and genital characteristics of male and

female phenotypes (APA, 2011). Gender, in turn, refers to the attitudes, feelings and behaviors that a particular culture associates with sex, that is, the normality of gender depends on the cultural expectations of male and female roles (APA, 2011). Thus, the notion of gender posits a construction of meanings made from psychological, social and cultural characteristics, in addition to the biological dimension referred to as sex (Days & Machado, 2008).

The gender asymmetry, seen as inequality between men and women, reveals differences in the performance of social, cultural and family roles. To masculinity, are assigned the duties of manhood, strength and a position of power in relationships. On the other side, on the female universe, is expected the practice of motherhood, care of children / household. It is expected that men and women engage in different tasks, which distance each other in terms of reason and emotion, respectively. However, even if one sees benefits in the social hierarchy of genres, it is often framed in certain social and cultural models that, if breached can cause pain (Guedes, Silva, & Coelho, 2007; Krishnan et al., 2012; Oliveira & Souza, 2006).

The sizeable impact of these differences motivates various studies in the genre issue, especially in regards to its combination with the occurrence of violence in marital relationships. Some cross-cultural studies show that the socially constructed differences between female and male put women at a disadvantage in relation to men (Guedes et al., 2007; Lamoglia & Minayo, 2009), reinforcing feminist currents which understand that the fragility of a woman in relation to a man characterizes domestic violence mostly as gender violence, expressed in one way - offender man and victim woman (Gomes Diniz, Araújo & Coelho, 2007; Pazo & Aguiar, 2012). From this perspective, although men and women can commit acts of violence, there are significant differences in manner and intensity, being the woman the most debilitated (Lee, Stefani, & Park, 2014).

In contrast, another line of theory understands that blaming the men (and consequent victimization of women) may reinforce the distinction between genders (Falcke, Olive, Pink, & Bentancur, 2009; Straus, 2008). The need to look at the marital relationship, which is dynamic and not static, leads to perceive couples in violent relationships as co-authors of the marital history. Thus, male or female, both can suffer or perpetrate any form of violence in the marital relationship. Studies have reported similar levels of perpetration and victimization of violence between men and women (Fortin,

Guay, Lavoie, Boisvert, & Beaudry, 2012; Gomez & Montesino, 2014), which leads to think that domestic violence can take on a bias that takes gender symmetry into consideration (Straus, 2008) and where marital violence is understood as an interactional phenomenon (Alvim & Souza, 2005; Falcke et al., 2009; Williams & Frieze, 2005).

There is controversy and lack of consensus in the scientific literature regarding how the gender influences the occurrence of intimate partner violence between spouses, which brings out the need to investigate the issue. The goal of this paper was to map and analyze the scientific literature published between the years 2010-2015, about intimate partner violence and gender as/symmetry, taking into consideration the goal, method, sample characteristics and the instruments used, as well as the main study results.

## Method

For this integrative literature review (Mendes Silveira, & Galvão, 2008), we carried out searches on articles indexed in five databases: ISI Web of Science, Academic Search, Medline Complete, PsycInfo and Scielo. In order to locate articles that addressed the issues related to domestic violence and gender a/symmetry, two strategies have been carried out, with the following descriptors and Boolean operator: a) first strategy - “intimate partner violence” AND “gender symmetry”; b) second strategy - “intimate partner violence” AND “gender asymmetry”. We opted to search for the descriptors in English language because the research in Portuguese had no results.

The inclusion criteria were: online articles, complete, unpaid, published in the years between 2010 and 2015. Reviews, books, theses and dissertations were excluded. Then we scanned for duplicated articles between bases and also between the two searches with different descriptors. Seeking greater data reliability, the search was carried out by two independent researchers. If there was disagreement, a third researcher would have been consulted (Zoltowski, Costa, Teixeira & Koller, 2014), however, this was not necessary. In all, 113 articles were found, of which 81 were drawn from the bases after application of the inclusion criteria. After the exclusion of repeated and not fully available, 53 articles were selected for reading and content analysis, on which the categories were defined a posteriori (Bardin, 1977). The flowchart in Figure 1 illustrates the strategy used:

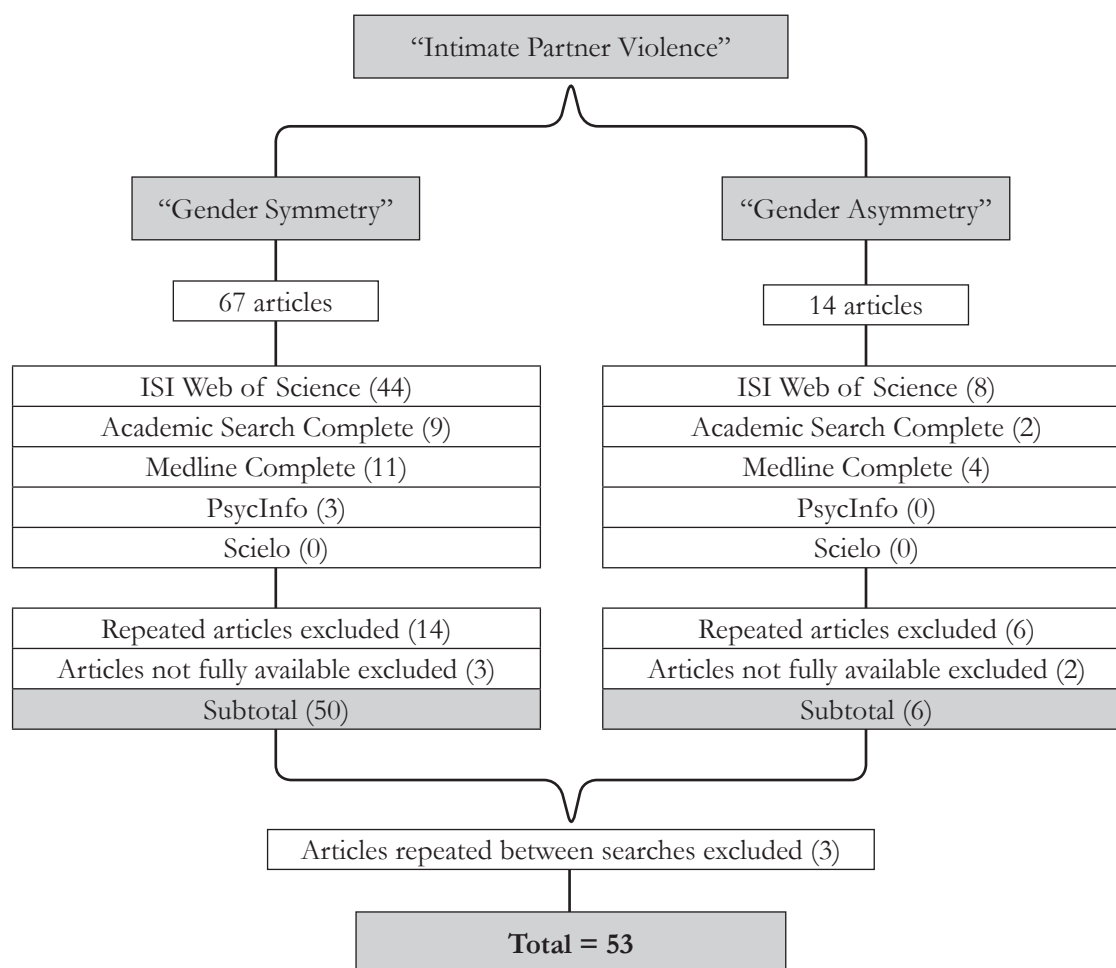


Figure 1. Flowchart

## Results

Upon reading the articles, we found that, in regard to the country of origin of the study, the majority (58.49%) comes from the United States (31 articles). Following the distribution, the production came from the United Kingdom (5), Sweden (4), international studies (3), Australia (2), China (2), Canada (1), Ecuador (1), Israel (2), Slovenia (1) and Ireland (1). All were written in English and none were from Brazil.

Varied proposals were identified in the objectives of the articles, however, all of them dealt with the different manifestations of violence and its consequences on the health of those involved. For some, the predominant was a theoretical research of controversies existent in the literature on gender a/symmetry (Chan, 2011; Enander, 2011; Hamby, 2015; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Stark, 2010; Winstok, 2015). In other

cases, the influence of male and female in different models of relationships was analyzed: in heterosexual individuals (Marshall, Jones, & Feinberg, 2011), homosexual couples (Messinger, 2011), married (Chan, 2012), separated (Johnson, Leone, & Xu, 2014) or dating (Hamby & Turner, 2013; Volpe, Hardie, & Cerulli, 2012). Another highlight for the goals was the interest in validating (Lehmann, Simmons, & Pillai, 2012) or exploring (Nybergh, Taft, & Krantz, 2012) instruments, as well as to answer the questions made on the validity of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) or the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) (Straus, 2012).

Regarding the methodological outline, we found different results, as shown in Table 1.

We found that 32 studies used data collection instruments, of which 15 (46.87%) worked with the CTS or CTS2, or specific subscales of these instruments (Ackerman, 2012; Bates, Graham-Kevan, & Archer,

Table 1

*Articles distributed by research outline*

Outline	Number of Articles	Percentage
Literature Review/ Theoretical	18	33.96%
Quantitative (explanatory)	14	26.41%
Quantitative (exploratory)	10	18.86%
Quantitative (descriptive)	06	11.32%
Qualitative	02	3.77%
Mixed	02	3.77%
Method Development	01	1.88%

2014; Chan, 2012; Jaquier & Sullivan, 2014; Johnson et al., 2014; Leonard, Winters, Kearns-Bodkin, Homish, & Kubiak, 2014; Lövestad & Krantz, 2012; Marshall et al., 2011; Renner, Habib, Stromquist, & Peek-Asa, 2014; Sillito, 2012; Sullivan et al., 2010; Volpe et al., 2012; Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2014). Other instruments used for the investigation of domestic violence were: Relationship Behavior Rating Scale (RBRBS); Ineffective Arguing Inventory; The Relationship Attribution Measure; Personal and Relationship Profile; Domestic Violence Screening Instrument Revised; Male Role Norms Inventory-Revised; Hostile Sexism scale; Dominance Scale; Richardson Conflict Response Questionnaire; WHO's Violence Against Women. In cases where the objective was the investigation of domestic violence from the perspective of children and adolescents, the following instruments were used: Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence Scale; Past Abusive Behavior Inventory; Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire; Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory. For the investigation of coercive behaviors: Yllo's Controlling Behavior Questions; CCB (Checklist of Controlling Behaviors); Coercive Control Scale; Controlling Behavior Scale; Hostile Control and Control; Sexual Relationship Power Scale. The authors also used other data collection techniques such as individual interviews, focus groups, life history and document analysis.

In regard to the characteristics of participants / samples of the studies, 22 empirical studies used women and men. Of the studies that used women and men, only five conducted their research with couples (Chan, 2012; Leonard et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2011; Renner et al., 2014; Tanha, Beck, Figueredo, & Raghavanet, 2010). Seven studies used a sample composed only of women (Goicolea, Öhman, Torres, Morras,

& Edin, 2012; Jaquier & Sullivan, 2014; Lehmann et al., 2012; Messinger, 2011; Simmons, Farrar, Frazer, & Thompson, 2011; Sullivan et al., 2010; Volpe et al., 2012). Finally, three studies used an exclusively male sample (Nybergh et al., 2012; Whitaker, 2013; Zanoni et al., 2014).

The results showed the different perceptions about the discussion of symmetry and asymmetry of gender and the controversies generated by this dilemma in the literature. An analysis revealed six distinct categories of results, as shown in Table 2.

- 1) Studies show that both men and women can be perpetrators in situations of violence, however levels differ depending on the subtypes of violence (Bates et al., 2014; Chan, 2012; Corbally, 2015; Hamby & Turner, 2013; Johnson et al., 2014; Lövestad & Krantz, 2012; Melander, Noel, & Tyler, 2010; Myhill, 2015; Post, Mezey, Maxwell, & Rhodes, 2011; Tanha et al., 2010), which needs to be taken into account planning interventions (Allen, 2011; Brown, 2012; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Stark, 2010). Also, violence tends to start asymmetrically and becomes symmetrical with time (Leonard et al., 2014).
- 2) Studies that emphasize the relevance of gender in domestic violence (Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012; Enander, 2011; Gerstenberger & Williams, 2013; Hamby, 2014; Johnson, 2010; Umubyeyi, Mogren, Ntaganira, & Krantz, 2014) and show that there are differences between genders in the understanding of the phenomenon. A quantitative study was conducted in the United States to check whether child custody evaluations are affected or not by the statements of judges and lawyers

Table 2  
*Summary of the results of the analysed studies*

Category	Content	Number of Articles	Articles
1	Men and women can be perpetrators in situations of violence, however, the levels vary according to the subtypes of violence	15	Allen, 2011; Bates, Graham-Kevan, & Archer, 2014; Brown, 2012; Chan, 2012; Corbally, 2015; Hamby & Turner, 2013; Johnson, Leone, & Xu, 2014; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Leonard, Winters, Kearns-Bodkin, Homish, & Kubiak, 2014; Lövestad & Krantz, 2012; Melander, Noel, & Tyler, 2010; Myhill, 2015; Post, Mezey, Maxwell, & Rhodes, 2011; Stark, 2010; Tanha, Beck, Figueredo, & Raghavanet, 2010
2	Gender asymmetry and marital violence	8	Cross, Tee, & Campbell, 2011; Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012; Enander, 2011; Gerstenberger & Williams, 2013; Hamby, 2014; Hans, Hardesty, Haselschwerdt, & Frey, 2014; Johnson, 2010; Umubyeyi, Mogren, Ntaganira, & Krantz, 2014
3	Gender symmetry in marital violence	8	Carlyle, Scarduzio, & Slater, 2014; Chan, 2011; Fincham, Cui, Gordon, & Ueno, 2013; Marshall, Jones, & Feinberg, 2011; Sullivan et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2010; Winstok, 2013; Zanon, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2014
4	Explanation of differences in feminist studies and other approaches	2	Bumiller, 2010; Goicolea, Öhman, Torres, Morras, & Edin, 2012
5	Investigation of factors that predict marital violence	12	Ackerman, 2012; Caldwell, Swan, & Woodbrown, 2012; Jaquier & Sullivan, 2014; Melander et al., 2010; Messinger, 2011; Nybergh, Taft, & Krantz, 2013; Nowinski & Bowen, 2011; Renner, Habib, Stromquist, & Peek-Asa, 2014; Selic, Svab, & Gucek, 2014; Sillito, 2012; Volpe, Hardie, & Cerulli, 2012; Whitaker, 2013
6	Various themes and instrument validation	6	Lehmann, Simmons, & Pillai, 2012; Messinger, Fry, Rickert, Catallozzi, & Davidson, 2014; Miller, Cater, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2014; Nybergh, Taft, & Krantz, 2012; Simmons, Farrar, Frazer, & Thompson, 2011; Straus, 2012

on the occurrence of domestic violence. Clinical vignettes were presented to men and women and there was difference in the understanding of the data. Upon reading, men were 60% more likely to perceive mutual assault allegations, while

women demonstrated being up to 40% more likely to understand unidirectional aggression (Hans, Hardesty, Haselschwerdt, & Frey, 2014). Men tend to inhibit their aggressiveness when with their partners, not because they are their partners, but



because they are women, while women increase their aggressiveness with partners, not because they are men, but because they are their partners (Cross, Tee, & Campbell, 2011).

- 3) Studies that show similarity in female and male perpetration, revealing gender symmetry in domestic violence (Carlyle, Scarduzio, & Slater, 2014; Chan, 2011; Fincham Cui, Gordon, & Ueno, 2013; Marshall et al., 2011; Sullivan et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2010; Winstok, 2013; Zanoni et al., 2014).
- 4) Articles that meditate on the differences in feminist and family studies (Goicolea et al., 2012), understanding that the feminist explanatory framework, failing to contribute to the theory and practice, made room for the triumph of “gender neutral” approaches (Bumiller, 2010).
- 5) Researches that investigated predictors of marital violence, such as education, depression and drug use (Melander et al., 2010), bisexuality (Messinger, 2011), social support, growing up with domestic violence and not being married (Nybergh, Taft, & Krantz, 2013); ethnicity and homosexuality (Nowinski & Bowen, 2011); power and control (Caldwell, Swan & Woodbrown, 2012; Volpe et al., 2012; Whitaker, 2013), education and unemployment rates (Selic, Svab, & Gucek, 2014) and post-traumatic stress disorder (Jaquier & Sullivan, 2014). In the same line, some investigated predictors of violence, such as depressive symptoms (Renner et al., 2014), marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Ackerman, 2012), worse physical health, depression and fear in female victims and not in male victims (Sillito, 2012).
- 6) Articles that addressed diverse topics associated with the gender a/symmetry and proved the validity of instruments for measuring violence (Lehmann et al., 2012; Straus, 2012), the influence of family origin (Miller, Cater, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2014), strategies to increase the search for help (Simmons et al., 2011), that violence in intimate relationships between adolescents differs from that seen in adults (Messinger, Fry, Rickert, Catallozzi, & Davidson, 2014) and that boundaries between acts of psychological, physical and sexual violence were indistinct among the men exposed to domestic violence (Nybergh et al., 2012).

Although there are different perspectives, researchers alert that the assumption that violence is symmetrical or asymmetrical can lead to the practice of dangerous interventions that instead of reducing the levels of violence would cause the opposite effect (Allen, 2011). Different types of violence require different types of interventions, and no single factor explains all sorts of intimate partner violence (Brown, 2012; Johnson, 2010; Keating, 2015; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Stark, 2010; Straus, 2012). Criticizing this thought, Caldwell et al. (2012) report that the effects of violence are not equal and that women suffer more, especially in terms of injuries, fear and post-traumatic stress. With this in mind, studies suggest assessing the consequences of violence, and not only its manifestations, when planning interventions (Renner et al., 2014; Sillito, 2012).

## Discussion

The systematic review enabled the mapping of productions on gender a/symmetry in domestic violence, considering country of origin of the studies, characteristics of sample and tools, outlines and results. It was found that, especially in the studies of quantitative design, most of the researches used the CTS and / or CTS2 to measure the perpetration and victimization of domestic violence. This instrument consists of 78 items that describe possible actions of the respondent and, reciprocally, of their partner. It has five subscales that assess: 1) physical violence; 2) psychological aggression; 3) sexual coercion; 4) injury and 5) negotiating. Each dimension is divided into grave and minor, to assess the severity of the acts of violence. In Brazil, this instrument was validated by Moraes, Hasselmann, & Reichenheim (2002). The researches using the scale, mostly obtained results that showed a tendency to gender symmetry. Criticizing this, Hamby (2014) points out that self-reported methods such as the CTS have very disparate results in comparison to other investigations. These instruments, or just checklists, do not represent the majority of data on intimate partner violence.

Gender symmetry is found, as believes Chan (2011), especially in cases in which contexts, reasons and consequences of violence are not evaluated. It is recommended that large databases of criminological data and public health be investigated using other measures (Hamby, 2014). In response to these criticisms, Straus (2012), author of the CTS and CTS2 said

that this criticism of the results that show gender symmetry comes from the theory that puts in check the values of “patriarchal domination.” Used worldwide, the CTS2 has high levels of validity and reliability, including in a national (Brazilian) study (Bolze, Crepaldi, Schmidt & Vieira, 2013). The need for different instruments is evident for evaluation of violence in men and women, to include quantitative and qualitative paradigms.

The investigated population, men and / or women, also allows us to question the different results that were found. Some suggest that women are at a disadvantage and often suffer more violence than men (Caldwell et al., 2012), while others report that no significant differences were found when distinguishing by gender (Bates et al., 2014), and others still, mention differences in the types of violence perpetrated by men and women (Johnson et al., 2014). Of the seven studies that evaluated only women, some bothered to perform analyzes that investigate potential predictors of victimization in domestic violence, noting that women who have suffered some form of abuse in the past were more likely to suffer domestic violence. In articles that had men as participants, the search for control of the relationship led to the physical violence perpetrated by them and partly to sexual coercion, but was not related to psychological violence (Whitaker, 2013). Only four articles (Leonard et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2011; Renner et al., 2014; Tanha et al., 2010) looked to assess couples. The analysis of the marital set revealed that both men and women report victimization and perpetration of violence. Moreover, it was found that there was gender symmetry in the perpetration of violence, but differences in its frequency. In the same angle, a comprehensive study presented by Razera, Mosmann and Falcke (2016) found that men committed significantly more sexual coercion, while women perpetrated more psychological violence, which could be linked to socio-cultural issues. While there may be differences between the types of violence committed, to separately examine the victims and perpetrators may be a bias that influences the results, so it is relevant to do further research and assess this duo.

There are studies that identify with the feminist perspective evaluation of violence, characterizing the asymmetry of gender (Gomes et al., 2007, Pazo & Aguiar, 2012), as well as others that show a relational perspective and symmetry in the relations (Fortin et al., 2012; & Gómez Montesino, 2014, Straus, 2008). Beside the two approaches mentioned, another trend brings

some controversy about this theoretical gap, seeking to relativize many aspects of asymmetry, such as that of gender symmetry (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010). In this latter perspective, an extensive look at the phenomenon is built up, understanding it from the different manifestations of violence in marriage and proposing to do less of general and more of individualized analysis (Casimiro, 2008). The central premise is to think of the mental health of these spouses and not to find victims and / or perpetrators.

### Final Considerations

This systematic literature review identified the lack of Brazilian studies that address gender symmetry or asymmetry, within these search and inclusion criteria. In addition, it highlights the need for studies that propose to carry out investigations with the marital duo, since most evaluate men or women, usually under the perspective of victims and perpetrators. Although this proposal is bold, the results could contribute to more effective intervention practices in which it would be possible to work together with the spouses on different ways of resolving conflict, improving communication of the couple, as well as training them to identify the main triggers of violence and how to anticipate them.

It is believed that a wide look could assist in understanding the phenomenon, which due to its complexity and various aspects that may be linked to the occurrence of violence. Extremist perspectives can strengthen the phenomenon of violence when blaming one or both spouses for what happened, without regard to the uniqueness of each case.

One possible limitation of this article is that the grouped descriptors may have restricted the search, although they were intended to bring the maximum results of the proposed theme. Further studies with different methodological proposals can contribute to the scientific development of this area, which still needs attention. Only so one can then think of proposals for effective interventions to reduce the suffering of the people involved in domestic violence contexts.

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