

Victims and Aggressors in Marital Violence

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One of the cruel ironies of marriage is that, although husband-wife relationships are largely male-dominant, the use of physical violence seems to be one of the few aspects of marriage which approach equality between spouses.

There is irony in this also because, except for the rare instances when a desperate or enraged woman seizes a knife or gun and is effective in using it, the *effects* of this violence are far from equal. *She* may cast the first coffee pot, but *he* generally casts the last and

Author's Note: *This article is one of a series of publications of the Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire. The program is supported by the University of New Hampshire and by NIMH grants MH27557 and T32 MH15161. A program bibliography and list of available publications will be sent on request. Like most of the work produced in the Family Violence Research Program, this article owes a great deal to the contributions of the dedicated and skilled members of the program, including graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, secretaries, department colleagues, and data analysts. In relation to this article special thanks are due Shari Hagar for the dawn to past midnight computer work which enabled me to complete the article in time, and David Finkelhor for valuable comments and suggestions.*

most damaging blows. If one could tally the number of men and women who require medical attention because of marital violence, the rate would be many times greater for women. The reasons for this start with the greater size and strength of men, but also include powerful economic, psychological, and sociological factors which put women at a disadvantage in this literal battle of the sexes (Gelles, 1976; Straus, 1977b, 1977c).

In previous articles (Straus, 1975, 1976, 1977a) and books (Straus et al., 1980; Straus and Hotaling, 1980), I presented data on a nationally representative sample of 2143 couples which show a close correspondence between the violence rates of husbands and wives. This article will report new findings on the victim-aggressor relationship and also present a theoretical analysis to explain why the violence rates of women are so high within the family, despite the fact that outside the family the violence rates for women are only a fraction of male rates, and despite the fact that women are the predominant victims of marital violence.¹

INCIDENCE OF VIOLENCE BY HUSBANDS AND WIVES

As already indicated, the violence rates of husbands and wives in this sample of American families are quite similar: For husbands the annual incidence rate was found to be only slightly higher (12.1 per hundred husbands) than for violence by wives against husbands (11.6 per hundred wives).²

We deliberately interviewed the husbands in a random half of the sample and the wives in the other half to be able to obtain data on the different perspectives of men and women, and to check on possible biases in the data. The results turned out to be remarkably similar irrespective of whether the data came from husbands or wives. In fact, contrary to the expectation that each spouse would tend to "cover up" his or her violence, the rates for each spouse are slightly higher when the computation is based on data provided by the spouse of that sex (Straus et al., 1980: Appendix Table B-1).

MUTUALITY IN INCIDENCE

None of this, however, tells us about the focus of this article: the victim-aggressor relationship. One way of getting at this issue is to separate out the violent couples from the rest of the sample. There were 325 couples in which at least one violent incident occurred during the survey year. In 49.5% of these families *both* the husband and the wife committed at least one violent act. Thus, about half of the violence is mutual. The remaining half is split about equally between violent husbands and violent wives. The husband alone was violent in 27.7% of the couples, and the wife was the only violent spouse in 22.7% of the cases. The results are essentially the same when the tabulations are done according to the sex of the respondent who provided the data.

SEVERITY OF VIOLENCE

Most of the violence accounting for the figures just given are acts such as pushing, shoving, slapping, and throwing things. These are what Richard Gelles and I have called the "normal violence" of family life—normal in the sense that they are statistically frequent, and normal in the sense that many people tend to regard such minor violence as an undesirable *and* "understandable" or justified part of married life.

These covert or unrealized cultural norms add an implicit clause to the marriage license making it a hitting license. But it is not an unlimited license. The limits on the hitting aspect of the marriage license include the fact that there must be "justification" for hitting. This means that one's partner must be doing something seriously wrong and that the partner "won't listen to reason." In addition, just as a driver's license does not allow going over the speed limit, the marriage license also has a limit on violence. Generally speaking, the national "speed limit" on marital violence is that it must not be severe enough to cause an injury requiring medical treatment. Of course, as in the case of the automobile speed limit, both lower and higher limits exist in different sectors of the population.

In order to focus on violence which almost everyone would regard as exceeding the permitted amount of "justified" marital violence, sex differences in rates of violence and of victimization were reexamined using only acts of violence which exceed the assumed national upper limit. To do this a "severe violence" rate was constructed by dropping the pushing, slapping, shoving, and throwing things items. The resulting index is confined to acts with a high likelihood of causing an injury which needs medical treatment. The specific acts included are items N through R of the Violence Index of the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979): kicking, biting, punching, hitting with an object, "beating-up," and attacking the spouse with a knife or gun.

The results do change. Now, only a little over a third (36.2%), rather than half, are cases of mutual violence. The proportion of couples in which the husband was the only aggressor is identical to the figures based on all violent acts (27.7%). The big change is an increase in the proportion of violent couples in which the wife is the only person using severe violence, i.e., acts roughly comparable to an "aggravated assault" in the sense of risk of serious bodily harm.

An important limitation of this data is that it refers to acts of violence which occurred during a one-year period. We do not know the sequence in which the acts occurred. Consequently, the causal direction underlying the statistics on mutual violence cannot be determined. However, a plausible interpretation of the fact that a larger proportion of women are the sole users of severe violence follows from the fact that men tend to be larger and stronger than women. When a family conflict escalates to physical violence, the higher proportion of women engaging in acts of severe violence might be a response to what they feel is the need to defend themselves from a dangerous assailant.

PREVALENCE OF VIOLENCE

Up to this point the results have been presented as incidence rates. A couple was counted as violent if one *or more* violent

incidents occurred during the year. Prevalence, as measured by how often violent acts occurred during the year, is also important for understanding victim-aggressor relationships. The statistics presented so far could mask large differences in prevalence. Specifically, it is possible that violent husbands are more continuously violent than are violent wives.

OVERALL PREVALENCE

To investigate this issue, violence indexes were computed consisting of the number of times each of the violent acts occurred during the year under study. The theoretical range of this index is 0 to 200 (see Straus, 1979). The 148 violent husbands had a mean of 7.1 violent acts per year using this index, compared to the mean of 6.8 acts per year for the 177 violent wives—a relatively small difference.

PREVALENCE OF SEVERE VIOLENCE

Perhaps husbands have a greater prevalence of the most severe types of violence? Two indexes were computed to investigate this issue. The first is a "Severe Violence Index." It is similar to the index just described, except that it excludes the minor violence acts (pushing, shoving, slapping, and throwing things at the wife). The violent husbands averaged 1.9 severely assaultive acts per year. The mean for the violent wives was identical.

Finally, a "Severity Weighted Index" was computed. For this index, the violent acts were weighted from one to eight. Acts with the least potential for producing a serious injury (pushing, shoving, slapping, throwing things) were given a weight of one, and the most dangerous acts (attacks with a knife or gun) were weighted eight. The frequency of each act was multiplied by its severity weight and summed. The mean for the violent husbands was 11.4 and the mean for the violent wives was slightly higher (11.8%) but very close.

Thus, contrary to our original expectations, the wives in this sample maintain their rough equality with respect to violence,

irrespective of whether one measures it by incidence rate, mutuality of violence, degree of severity of the violent act, or prevalence of violence at each level of severity.

MUTUALITY IN PREVALENCE

There is one additional way to investigate mutuality in violence using the data available for this sample. This involves examining the frequency of a spouse's violence for each level of severity and frequency of *the partner's* violence. This analysis is based on the 325 couples in which one or the other partner committed at least one violent act during the year.

Figure 1 plots the frequency of violence of each spouse by the partner's frequency of violence. For both husbands and wives, this produced a curve which approximates a second-order polynomial.

One plausible interpretation of the initial dip in the amount of violence by spouses married to partners who hit them "only" once or twice during the year is that this level of violence stayed within the speed limit on the hitting license clause in the marriage license. Consequently they did not reciprocate. But, as the level of violence by the partner increases, two processes probably set in to increase the level of violence by the victim. The first is the principle of "if hit, hit back." The second is the "need" to defend oneself.

ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE

There is no direct evidence for this sample to sort out the relative importance of self-defense versus simple retaliation. However, it is possible to approach the issue indirectly by examining the extent to which each spouse used more severe violence than the partner.

I have already indicated that a substantial number of both husbands and wives assaulted spouses who had *not* carried out any act of violence. In addition, the first points plotted at the left

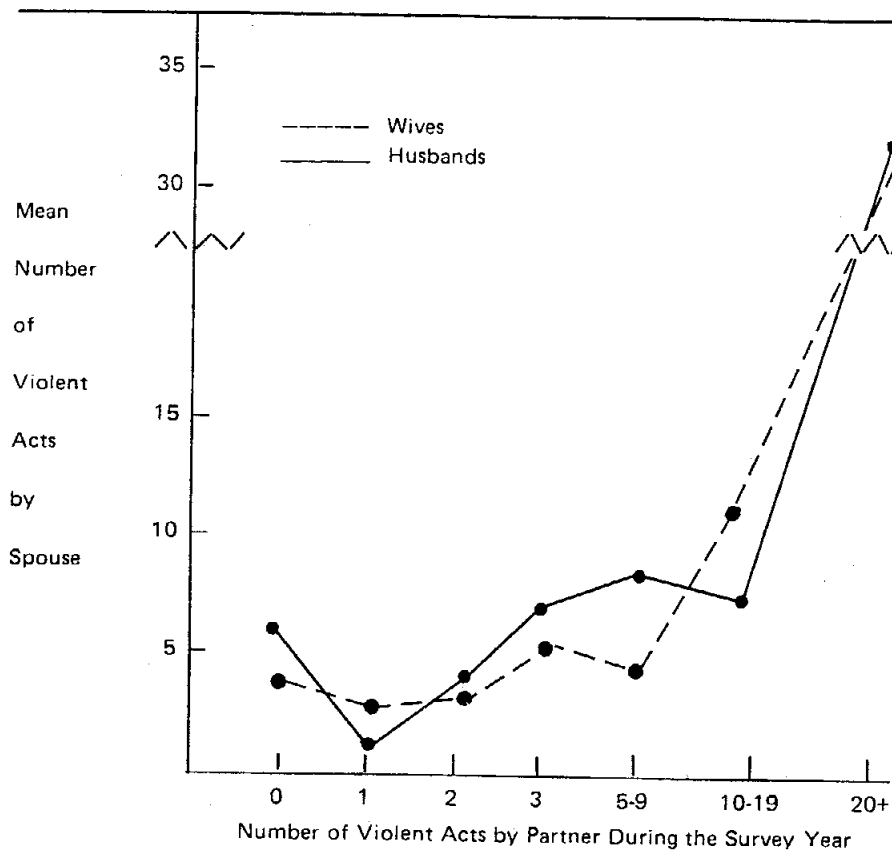


FIGURE 1: Mean Number of Violent Acts of Spouse, by Frequency of Partner's Violence

of Figure 1 show that the violent spouses married to *nonviolent* partners averaged about five acts of violence per year. These are clearly cases for which neither self-defense nor the principle of reciprocity in violence can account. Moreover, wives are about as likely to be the only violent person, and have about the same frequency of violence under such circumstances as husbands.

The results presented so far seem to show that both husbands and wives have about an equal tendency to violence. However, it is so inconsistent with the widespread belief that husbands are more violent, and also with my own impression based on a qualitative assessment of interviews with violent couples, that two

additional analyses were conducted. These investigate what might be called "escalation of violence."

HIERARCHY OF VIOLENT ACTS

First, Guttman scales were created by dichotomizing each of the acts of violence into 0 versus one or more occurrences. For violence by the husband, the scale has a coefficient or reproducibility of .92. For wives' violence, the coefficient is .89. The two Guttman scales were then cross-tabulated as a means of determining the percentage of husbands and wives who used violent acts of greater severity than their spouse. Taking just the 325 couples who experienced a violent incident during the survey year, this revealed that 44% of the husbands used a higher level of violence than their wives, whereas only 23% of the wives used a higher level of violence than their husbands. Here, for the first time, there is evidence of less violence by wives than husbands.

Figure 2 extends this analysis by showing the mean number of *severe* violent acts by spouses married to partners who used either no violence or varying amounts of *minor* violence (pushing, shoving, slapping, throwing things at the spouse).

The two data points at the left end show that the average number of severely violent assaults by husbands on nonviolent wives is three times greater than the number of severe assaults by wives on nonviolent husbands.

Second, the dashed line—which indicates severe assaults by wives on husbands—shows little increase as the number of acts of minor violence by the husband goes up from one to two, to three or four, to five to ten. It is only when the women in this sample have been the victims of ten or more minor violent acts during the year that the graph shows a high frequency of severe assaults by wives.

In contrast, the plot line for husbands reveals that, except for husbands whose wives carried out only one act of minor violence during the year, there is a sharp increase in the number of *severe* assaults with each increase in the frequency of *minor* violence by the wife. Husbands, then, give more than they receive in the way

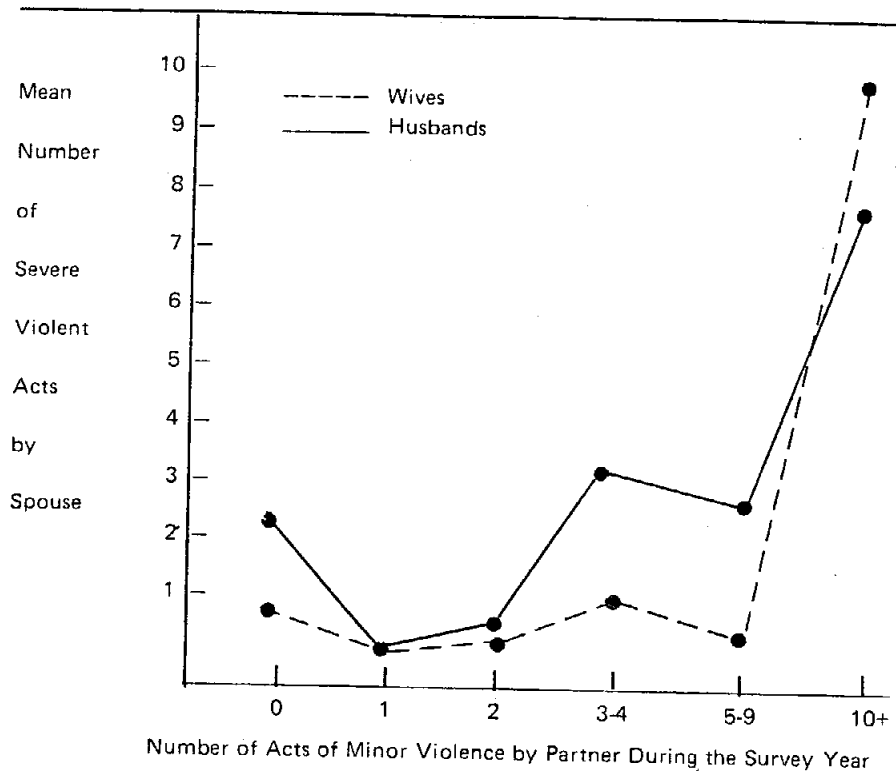


FIGURE 2: Mean Number of Severe Violent Acts of Spouse, by Frequency of Minor Violence by Partner

of violence. But the same process is relatively rare for wives until they have been victims of virtually continuous streams of minor violence by husbands.

SELF-DEFENSE AND GETTING EVEN

Figure 2 shows that women tend to tolerate a great deal more victimization by their husbands before engaging in severe assaults. This is not necessarily the same self-defensive violence. In fact, Figure 2 essentially separates out from Figure 1 the mutual violence which is *not* self-defense. It shows the number of violent acts which were more severe than the violence of the spouse.

It is unfortunate that the data for this sample do not indicate the sequence of events. That would permit a more direct answer to

the question of how much of the violence by wives is self-defensive and how much is tit-for-tat. However, we can get a very rough estimate of this by assuming that wives who are violent when subjected to severe assaults by their husbands are acting in self-defense, whereas those who respond to a husband's minor violence by severe violence are not.

Of the women who were severely assaulted by their husbands, 73% engaged in at least minor violence during the year. Let us assume that in most of these cases, the wife's violence was self-defensive.

Of the wives whose husbands used only minor violence, 29% used *severe* violence against their husbands. Let us assume that in most of these cases it was not an act of self-defense.

Comparing the 73% who were assumed to be acting in self-defense with the 29% who were not, it is possible to interpret the figures as showing that self-defensive violence by wives is 2½ times greater than violence in which self-defense was not likely to be an element. Obviously, this estimate is based on a number of unproved assumptions. There is clearly a need for research on a representative sample of couples which approaches this issue directly.

WHY THE EQUALITY IN MARITAL VIOLENCE?

In a series of previous articles I presented theoretical and empirical analyses of the factors accounting for the high incidence of wife-beating (Straus, 1974b, 1976, 1977c). The fact that first attention was given to wives as victims of marital violence reflected the point made in the introduction to this article: Despite the approximate equality in number of violent acts carried out by husbands and wives, it is wives who are the major victims of this system.

Although I have given first priority to understanding the processes underlying assaults on wives by their husbands, marriage is a system of social relationships. Consequently, to fully understand how this system operates—either as a scientific

question or for its practical implications in reducing the victimization of women—one must also understand how and why women participate in their own victimization as part of this system. The balance of this article is a start in that direction.

HIGH RATE OF ASSAULT ON WIVES

The preceding section has already indicated one of the major factors accounting for the rough equality in violence between husbands and wives. It is simply that women are the victims of a great deal of violence by their husbands. Outside the family, the cultural norm which makes hitting a woman more taboo than hitting a man prevails—but not so inside the family. Men who would not dream of hitting a woman, hit their wives.

One consequence of the high rate of violence against women in the family follows from the principle that, ironically, victimization tends to train people to victimize others. Being a victim of violence does not turn one against violence. On the contrary, it tends to be a powerful pro-violence learning experience (Carroll, 1977; Owens and Straus, 1975). Therefore, the more a wife is assaulted by her husband, the more likely she is to incorporate violence in her own behavioral repertory. This also helps explain the discrepancy between low violence rates of women outside the family and their frequent violence within the family. The difference is partly a reflection of the fact that, outside the family, women are rarely subject to physical assault compared to men. But within the family they are as frequently assaulted as men, and therefore learn to be violent within the family to about the same extent as men.

The frequency with which women are assaulted by their husbands also provides additional, more direct explanations for the high rate of family violence by wives. Specifically, as indicated by the discussion of the last set of data, a large part of women's marital violence can be attributed to their acting on the basis of two social norms which legitimize violence: (1) self-defense, and (2) the principle of "if hit, hit back."

There is no direct way to use the data on this sample to accurately estimate what proportion of the violence by women is and is not "responsive violence" (i.e., either self-defense or simple retaliation). However, a very tentative estimate can be made, as follows.

There were 248 women who were violent during the year under study. In 89 of these cases the husband was *not* violent. So, at a minimum, 36% of the violence by women in this sample was *not* "responsive violence." What about the remaining 159 cases in which both partners were violent? Let us assume that the husband initiated the violence in 80% of such cases, and the wife in only 20% of the cases. This produces an estimate of about 32 additional nonresponsive violent cases ($.20 \times 159 = 32$). Now, adding together the 89 cases in which the wife was the only violent spouse, with the estimated 32 cases in which the wife initiated the mutual violence, gives a total of 120 cases of violence which was not in response to a physical assault by the husband. This is almost half of the cases in which the wife was violent. Thus, even though assault by a husband is probably the largest single factor accounting for the high rate of marital violence by women, we are left with approximately half of female marital violence which must be explained by other factors. The sections which follow will describe four such factors.

THE MARRIAGE LICENSE AS A HITTING LICENSE

The fact that there are social norms which legitimize the right to hit other members of one's family is fundamental to understanding the high rate of marital violence. It is also something which is difficult to grasp and difficult to document. One reason it is difficult to grasp is because there are also seemingly contradictory cultural rules which require love and supportiveness in family relationships.

Another reason is that this is one of many instances in which the very existence of the rule is not generally realized (Garfinkel, 1964). The situation is somewhat analogous to the rules followed by a six year old in speaking English. Although their vocabulary

is limited, six year olds follow the rules of English grammar about as well as adults. Yet almost no child this age can tell you what those rules are. Nor can many readers of this article.

Another reason for the difficulty in documenting the extent to which the marriage license is also a hitting license is the fact mentioned early in this article: Like the driver's license, it can be used only with certain restrictions. Generally speaking, the violence of marital partners is "understandable" (that is justified) if the spouse is (1) doing something wrong, (2) the wrongdoing is serious in the eyes of the aggressor, and (3) the spouse "won't listen to reason" and persists in the wrongdoing. Consequently, an interview question which simply asks if it is all right to hit a spouse will be wide of the mark. Unless the circumstances are specified, almost everyone will say no.

These principles were well illustrated in one of the first interviews I conducted on marital violence. As is typically the case, the man I interviewed described many aspects of his marriage including difficulties and conflicts, but never mentioned anyone hitting. Finally, I got around to asking if they had ever gotten into a big enough hassle for someone to slap or push or throw something. He said, "Yeah—about three years ago. I was running around with another woman. She [his wife] kept badgering me about it, but . . . I guess I sort of just . . . didn't do anything . . . didn't pay much. . . . Finally she just blew up . . . threw a coffee pot at me. . . . Maybe I deserved it."

There are several important aspects to this incident. First, the incident fits each of the rules I have just given. Second, the wife was the one who initiated the violence. Third, the husband acknowledged the legitimacy of the violence. Finally, it developed later in the interview that he became enraged at the pot throwing and she ended up black and blue.

The fact that this man severely assaulted his wife despite acknowledging that she was justified is neither rare nor contradictory. It simply involves another of the previously mentioned norms legitimizing violence: If hit, hit back. Most parents explicitly or implicitly teach children this rule. In fact, data from another nationally representative sample reveal that 70% of

Americans endorse the statement, "When a boy is growing up it is very important for him to have a few fistfights" (Stark and McEvoy, 1970).

The survey question just quoted is also interesting because it is predicated on the fact that outside the family, it is *male* violence which is normatively approved. There is no doubt about the large sex differences in nonfamily violence. Within the family, however, the rules regarding violence apply about equally to men and women. What evidence is there to support that claim?

First, the same national survey which contained the question on boys' fistfights also asked each respondent if he or she could think of circumstances in which it would be all right for a husband to hit a wife, and circumstances in which it would be all right for a wife to hit her husband. The results do reveal a sex difference, but also a considerable degree of approval by wives of hitting a spouse. Specifically, one out of six women interviewed agreed that there are circumstances in which it would be all right for a husband to hit a wife, compared to one out of four men. With respect to a wife hitting a husband, one out of five women approved of that, compared to one out of four men (Stark and McEvoy, 1970).

Turning to the data from my national sample of families, even though quite different methods were used (see Straus, 1977d), the results are comparable: 31% of the husbands could see some justification in hitting a spouse versus 25% of the wives. Remember that these are minimum estimates because of the simultaneous existence of conflicting norms which enjoin love and gentleness toward one's husband or wife, and because of the inevitable underestimation of such direct questions on sensitive topics. It is noteworthy that, despite these difficulties, substantial proportions of wives as well as husbands find justification for marital violence.

Table 1 presents a more direct approach to the question of whether a tendency to accept violence as a part of marriage accounts for the violence of wives as well as husbands. Although we cannot be sure of the causal direction with cross-sectional survey data, the findings in the table are consistent with that

TABLE 1
Approval of Marital Violence by Victims and Aggressors,
Occupational Class of Husband, and Sex of Respondent

Marital Violence Type	Blue-Collar		White-Collar	
	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife
Nonviolent	26.4	20.8	26.9	21.7
Wife only victim	38.5	32.3	44.4	41.7
Husband only victim	25.0	29.6	57.1	37.5
Both violent	71.4	62.2	70.0	53.1
Chi-Square ^a	41.9	38.6	22.8	19.4
p (df = 3)	.001	.001	.001	.001

a. The N's used for chi-square and for the percentages are: Column 1: 405, 26, 12, 49; Column 2: 453, 31, 27, 45; Column 3: 331, 18, 14, 20; Column 4: 443, 12, 16, 32.

theory. Specifically, they show that violent wives, as well as violent husbands, express more approval of violence than do nonviolent husbands and wives. (Table 1 also shows important differences by sex and class which the space limits of this article preclude discussing.)

FAMILY TRAINING IN FAMILY VIOLENCE

Early in the Family Violence Research Program it became clear that the principle of the family as the primary agent of socialization applies especially strongly to violence. One reason for this is that family violence in the form of physical punishment starts in infancy and, for at least half of all American children, does not end until they physically leave home (Straus, 1970, 1974b; Steinmetz and Straus, 1974). Physical punishment is the way most people first experience violence, and it establishes the emotional context and meaning of violence. When physical punishment is used, several things tend to occur in addition to learning to do or not do whatever the punishment is intended to teach.

The first of these unintended consequences is the association of love with violence. Mommy and daddy are the first and usually the only ones to hit an infant. For most children this continues

throughout childhood and adolescence. The child therefore learns that those who love him or her the most are also those who hit.

Second, since physical punishment is used to train the child or to teach about dangerous things to be avoided, it establishes the moral rightness of hitting other family members.

The third unintended consequence is the lesson that when something is really important, it justifies the use of physical force.

These indirect lessons are not confined to providing a model for later treatment of one's own children. Rather, they become such a fundamental part of the individual's personality and world-view that they are generalized to other social relationships, and especially to the relationship which is closest to that of parent and child: that of husband and wife.³

All of the above suggests that early experience with physical punishment lays the groundwork for the normative legitimacy of all types of violence but especially intrafamily violence. It provides a role model—indeed a specific “script” (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Huggins and Straus, 1978)—for such actions. In addition, for many children, there is not even the need to generalize this socially scripted pattern of behavior from the parent-child nexus in which it was learned to other family relationships. This is because, if our estimates are correct, millions of children can directly observe and role model physical violence between husbands and wives.

For the above to be part of the explanation for the high rate of physical aggression by wives, it must be shown to apply to women as well as men. Since a large part of the violence by wives has already been attributed to self-defense, to the general social norm of reciprocating violence, and to the learning which occurs as a result of being a victim of marital violence, the early family training in violence need not be as intensive for women as it is for men since it needs to explain less of the variance than for men.

In general, this is what the results of the present study show. For example, 45% of the wives in this sample could recall being physically punished by their mothers when they were teenagers compared to 53% of the husbands. For physical punishment by

fathers, the percentages are 37% of the wives and 59% of the husbands. Thus, although more of the men were hit by their parents as teenagers, a large percentage of teenage girls are also physically punished. Moreover, these figures are likely to be underestimates because much is forgotten in the intervening years.

Granted that girls as well as boys experience and observe violence as children, this still does not demonstrate that these experiences influence the likelihood that, as adults, they will assault a spouse. To firmly establish that point requires longitudinal data. But there is enough cross-sectional data from the present sample of families, and from research by others, to make a strong case. In view of space limitations, and because the evidence is presented in detail in the book-length report on this sample (Straus et al., 1980), I will only illustrate the point with the data in Table 2.

Let us first look down the column headed "husbands." The husbands in marriages in which neither partner used violence during the survey year and the husbands who were victims but not aggressors experienced the least physical punishment. The husbands who were either the sole aggressors or in marriages in which both partners were violent experienced considerably more physical punishment as teenagers—from 27 to 66% more depending on the means being compared.

The differences for wives are even greater. Wives in marriages in which neither partner was violent or marriages in which the wife was the only victim experienced the least physical punishment as teenagers, whereas wives who were either the sole aggressors, or in marriages in which both were violent, had the highest average punishment index. In this case, however, the differences in amount of physical punishment experienced by the violent wives ranged from 46 to 82% higher than the nonviolent wives.

Thus, although the wives experienced less physical punishment as teenagers, that experience is more closely linked to violence against a spouse than for the husbands. There are several possible reasons for this. In the space available, all I can do is suggest that

TABLE 2
Mean Physical Punishment Experienced by Victims and Aggressors

Marital Violence Type	Mean Punishment Experienced by	
	Husband	Wives
Nonviolent	27.6	17.3
Wife only victim	35.1	20.8
Husband only victim	26.1	31.4
Both violent	39.5	30.4

for men the network of factors leading to an assault against a wife is larger and more powerful. One of the most important of these factors is the cultural definition of the real man as physically powerful and violent. Consequently, the experience of physical punishment by itself plays a relatively less important role in accounting for marital violence by men.

THE HIDDEN AGENDA OF CHILD CARE

The last two generations have seen a slow movement toward greater equality in marriage. The amount of change differs from one aspect of marriage to another (Brown, 1978). An aspect which has seen little or no change is responsibility for the care of children. At best, husbands now "help out."

The fact that women have almost all the day-to-day responsibility for child care might at first seem unrelated to marital violence. One could even argue that the spouse who has this nurturing and loving responsibility should, because of that, be less inclined to violence. That would be a reasonable speculation were it not for the fact that the child care role in our society is virtually synonymous with the punishing role, including physical punishment.

The mothers in this sample used ordinary physical punishment more often than did the fathers, and also had considerably higher rates of child abuse (see Straus et al., 1980: Appendix Table B-1). Moreover, this is not a new development. The idea that in our grandfathers' or great grandfathers' time, mothers left physical punishment to fathers is a myth. Going back one generation, the

mothers of the husbands and wives in this sample used more physical punishment than did the fathers. Perusal of actual family documents from previous generations shows the same thing.

The point I am coming to is based on the idea that violence in one sphere of life tends to carry over into other spheres (Straus, 1974a). The closer the sphere, the greater the carryover. Consequently, the fact that women are typically violent in what is often their most intimate and loving relationship—with a child—means that there will be a strong tendency to carry over this same pattern with the next most intimate and loving relationship—with a husband. Moreover, this tends to occur under the same circumstances: when the loved one is doing wrong and will not listen to reason. In short, there is a violent script which mothers of young children practice almost daily. Under the right circumstances this tends to be enacted vis-à-vis their husbands.

Longitudinal data are also needed to adequately test this theory. Still, Table 3 shows (1) a greater use of physical punishment by mothers than fathers, and (2) a tendency for the amount of violence toward a child to be associated with marital violence, and more so for women than for men.

It seems, then, that the use of physical punishment carries in its wake two sets of victims. It is not just that children learn to victimize the next generation of children and spouses. In addition, if this interpretation is correct, the system of physically punitive child-rearing also helps explain why women participate in the system of marital violence, despite the fact that they are its primary victims.

ENTRAPMENT IN MARRIAGE

Although the process which links frustration and aggression has been the subject of controversy for almost two generations (Gelles and Straus, 1978), there is little doubt that in our society aggression is a frequent response to stress and frustration. Therefore, the higher the level of frustration experienced in a social relationship, the greater the probability that this relationship will be characterized by aggression. This principle clearly applies to the marital relationship (Straus, 1980). But what is its

TABLE 3
Mean Parent-to-Child Violence Used by Victims and Aggressors

Marital Violence Type	Mean for:	
	Fathers	Mothers
Nonviolent	8.0	12.2
Wife only victim	9.0	21.6
Husband only victim	8.8	28.0
Both violent	19.3	29.8

relevance for explaining the fact that women are so much more violent within marriage than outside of marriage?

The causal theory I will put forth starts with the assumption that marriage is a more central and critical aspect of the lives of women than of men. Certainly this is true of the half of all married women who are not employed outside the home. I believe it is also true for most other married women. In the case of the present sample, 47% of the women rated the marriage as the most important aspect of their life, compared to 37% of the men. Had the question been phrased to refer to "your family" (i.e., to include children and kin), the difference would probably have been greater.

The second assumption on which this theory is based is that husbands rather than wives tend to have the final say in marriage.

Third, to the extent that this is the case, it means that women are in the position of being relatively powerless in the very sphere of life which is most central to them. Moreover, because the family is so central a part of the lives of women, and because the society is organized in a way which severely restricts a large investment by women in other spheres of life, women do not have the same opportunity as men to focus their lives outside the family.

The final step in this train of reasoning is that in a society in which the socially scripted response to frustration is aggression, the frustrations inherent in being relatively powerless in a sphere of life which is central (and for which there is often no alternative), produces a high probability of aggression, including physical aggression.

To test this theory, the wives who rated their marriage as "the center of my life" were divided into those who rated the marriage very important and those who rated it as less than very important. Each of these groups was then compared on the basis of whether the husband's power was low, middle, or high as measured by a modification of Blood and Wolfe's Decision Power Index (Blood and Wolfe, 1960).

The results only partly support the theory. They are consistent with the theory in that, among the women for whom the marriage is central, the level of violence (as measured by the wife's Severity Weighted Index described earlier) goes up threefold from a mean of 0.7 for women in the low male power marriage, to 1.1 in the middle male power marriages, to 2.5 in the male-dominant marriages. However, contrary to the theory, the violence rates among wives for whom the marriage is not a central part of their lives are higher and show an even greater correlation with the husband's power. Thus, although the results do not support the "central life interest" part of the theory, they provide additional confirmation of the fact that male-dominant marriages tend to be the most violent (Allen and Straus, 1980; Straus et al., 1980).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article addressed two main issues: (1) To what extent do husbands and wives occupy the role of victim and aggressor, or of both victim and aggressor, in marital violence? (2) What factors account for the high level of violence by women within the family, as contrasted with their very low rate of violence outside the family?

The data used to examine these questions come from interviews with a nationally representative sample of 2143 American couples. The results show that there is little difference in the overall violence rates of husbands and wives, or in the rate of severe assaults on a spouse. Moreover, about the same proportion of wives attack nonviolent husbands as husbands attack nonviolent wives.

On the other hand, when the analysis takes into consideration the extent to which each spouse uses more violence than was used

by the partner, the tabulations show a considerably greater tendency for husbands to escalate the level of violence than was found for the wives. Moreover, there is indirect evidence suggesting that a substantial part of the violence by wives is self-defensive.

The data were interpreted as suggesting that perhaps half of all marital violence by women is in response to attacks by the husbands: either tit-for-tat violence or self-defensive violence. Moreover, even when the woman initiates the violence, she is likely to be hurt more—both physically injured as well as suffering psychological, social, and economic penalties.

The reasons underlying the self-defensive violence by wives need no further explanation. But, assuming that on the average women are victimized more by marital violence than are men, the question of why so many women participate in their own victimization needs to be understood. The second half of the article therefore examined five factors which might account for the high rate of marital violence by women:

- (1) *The high rate of assault on women by their husbands leads to a high rate of retaliatory violence. In addition, evidence from previous research suggests that victims tend to learn the role of aggressor. Therefore, the frequency with which wives are victims of violence within the family also increases the probability that they will initiate family violence.*
- (2) *Implicit cultural norms which make the marriage license also a hitting license are accepted to about the same degree by women as by men.*
- (3) *Childhood training in the use of violence within the family is experienced to almost the same extent by women as by men.*
- (4) *Child care in American society involves role practice in violence because well over 90% of parents use physical punishment. Since women have almost all the day-to-day responsibility for child care, they engage in far more normal physical punishing and also more child abuse. Consequently, the fact that women are typically violent in what is often their most intimate and loving relationship—with a child—means that there will be a strong tendency to carry over this same pattern to the next most intimate and loving relationship—with a husband.*

- (5) *There is a high degree of frustration involved in marriage* because the male-dominant nature of the family makes women relatively powerless in a central aspect of their lives.

In conclusion, what has been reported in this article strongly suggests that the high rate of violence by women can be largely accounted for by the same set of social-structural factors which accounts for the high rate of wife-beating in American society—especially sexist and violent behavior and cultural norms. These norms and behavior are so much a taken-for-granted part of American families and American society that their very existence tends to be either not perceived or denied. Consequently, the fact that sexism and violence in the family are as much a cause of *female* family violence as male family violence also tends to be overlooked or denied.

NOTES

1. The terms husband and wife will be used in this article even though the sample includes a small proportion of cases in which the couple was not legally married. A separate analysis of the latter group reveals that although they have a higher rate of marital violence than married couples, this is largely a function of the large proportion of low-socioeconomic-status couples in the cohabiting group. In general, the same factors which are correlated with marital violence are also correlated with violence among unmarried couples. See Yllo and Straus (1980).
2. The method used to obtain data on violence is the Violence Scale of the Conflict Tactics Scales. This instrument, together with data on validity, reliability, and norms, is described in Straus (1979). The sample and sampling method is described in Straus et al. (1980).
3. None of what I have just said should be taken as indicating that physical punishment causes psychological damage to the child. On the contrary, the available evidence does *not* show a connection between the use of ordinary physical punishment by parents and psychological problems. It seems that physical punishment produces people who are as healthy as anyone else—mentally or in any other way—but also people who have learned to use violence as a means of solving problems or expressing anger.

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