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## 2 The Marriage License as a Hitting License: A Comparison of Assaults in Dating, Cohabiting, and Married Couples

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Gelles and Straus coined the term "the marriage license as a hitting license" in the early 1970s in response to the discovery that the assault rate among married couples was many times greater than the assault rate between strangers. They argued that the common law rule which gave husbands the right to "physically chastise an errant wife," although not formally recognized by the courts since the mid 1800s, lived on in popular culture and in the way the criminal justice system actually operated (Straus, 1975; 1976). Since then, the pervasiveness of violence in intimate relationships has been well documented by the two National Family Violence Surveys and by other investigations. Each year, more than 3 million married couples experience one or more severe assaults (Straus & Gelles, 1988).<sup>1</sup>

Subsequent investigations revealed that violence in cohabiting relationships is also quite common. In fact, physical assaults may be more common and more severe among cohabiting couples than married couples (Yllo & Straus, 1981; Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985). Given that cohabitation as an alternative living arrangement has steadily increased since 1970 (Glick & Spanier, 1980; Spanier, 1983), more individuals may be at risk not only of minor violence, but severe violence.<sup>2</sup>

The most recent research shows that dating violence is also pervasive and is a hidden serious social problem (Bogal-Allbritten & Allbritten, 1985). About 20 percent of college students have been physically assaulted by a dating partner (Makepeace, 1981; Cate et al., 1982; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987).

The findings on violence between cohabiting couples and between dating couples raise questions about the implication that the status of being married is

one of the factors accounting for the high rate of violence among married couples. While some research suggests that the overall assault rate in dating may be comparable to or higher than that found in marriage (Bernard et al., 1985; Makepeace, 1986), the comparisons are questionable because the rates are not based on the same measure (for example, Makepeace, 1981). Even when the same measure is used, researchers do not usually identify which partner is violent, the severity of the assault, or whether the behavior is different from that found in marriage or cohabiting relationships (for example, Cate et al., 1982). A similar problem occurs when cohabiting and marital violence are compared because of the failure to identify which partner is violent and the severity of the assault. In response to these problems, the present research compares physical assaults across dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships using the same measure. Additionally, we examine which partner is violent and the form of abuse used across marital status groups.

It should be pointed out that there has been a long tradition in sociology of studying group differences in terms of rates in order to better understand the phenomenon under study. For example, Durkeim (1951) found that suicide was related to social integration only after comparing suicide rates of Catholics versus Protestants, married versus single people, men versus women, and young versus old people. A comparison of group rates is also used in epidemiology studies. However, in order to study group differences, accurate comparative rates are needed. Consequently, in this study, the rate of physical assault not only has to be measured in the same way across the different groups, but also other factors that may influence the group rates must be controlled. We do this in the present study by controlling on key demographic variables, including age, education, and occupation.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary objective of this research is to compare the frequency and form of violence among those who date, cohabit, or are married. The following questions will be addressed.

1. *Are there differences in the frequency of assault across marital status groups?* Given prior research, we anticipate that violence will be more common in cohabiting than marital relationships (Yllo & Straus, 1981; Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985). Researchers have not adequately explained why cohabitators are more violent than married individuals. Later, we discuss why this pattern might arise. We do not know how those who date will compare with the other marital status groups.

2. *Does the severity of the assault vary by marital status?* Based on prior research (Yllo & Straus, 1981), we expect that violence will be more severe in cohabiting than in dating or marital relationships. Later, we discuss why this might occur.

3. *Does the partner who is violent vary by marital status?* Prior research has

not directly examined whether the use of violence by men and women varies across different marital status groups. There is evidence that husbands are victims of marital violence as often as wives [Steinmetz, 1978; Nisonoff and Bitman, 1979; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980; Straus & Gelles, 1986 (see also the summary in Straus and Gelles, 1988; Stets & Straus, 1989)]. However, other studies reveal that most offenders are men (Dobash & Dobash, 1979) and that if women hit, it is usually for self-defense (Saunders, 1986). The finding that women are more likely to hit for retaliation or self-defense (Straus, 1980) has not been supported by the most recent studies on this issue, which show that women *initiate* violence as often as men (Straus & Gelles, 1988; Stets & Straus, 1989).

The mixed results may be due to the use of different samples. On the one hand, studies based on clinical populations find that men are more violent than women and that when women hit, it is for self-defense. On the other hand, community surveys find that women are as violent as men and that women initiate violence as often as men (see Stets & Straus, 1989).

Evidence on the frequency with which men and women use violence while dating is also mixed (see the summary in Straus & Gelles, 1988). For example, some researchers have found no difference in the assault rate by sex (Deal & Wampler, 1986; Arias, Samios & O'Leary, 1987; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987). Others reveal that men are more likely than women to be the aggressors (Makepeace, 1983), and that if women hit, it is usually for self-defense (Makepeace, 1986). Still others find that women are more likely than men to be the aggressors (Plass & Gessner, 1983). More research is needed to resolve these contradictory findings.

This chapter examines violence by both men and women in dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships. We view violence as a mutual problem of both sexes (Breines & Gordon, 1983), even though, when injury occurs, it is probably not as grave for men as for women because men, on average, are physically stronger (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980; Greenblat, 1983). Indeed, recent research reveals that female victims of violence are more likely than male victims to experience physical and psychological injury (Stets & Straus, 1989).

This research attempts to answer the above questions and controls for age, education, occupational status, and gender of the respondent. These controls are introduced to help rule out spurious relationships. Because many other controls could be introduced, our results are suggestive and not definitive of physical assaults across marital status groups.

## METHOD

### Samples

For the dating couples, a survey was administered to a probability sample of students at a large midwestern university during the spring of 1987. The re-

sponse rate was 83 percent. A total of 526 individuals had complete information on physical violence and were included in our analysis.

The data on married and cohabiting couples is from the National Family Violence Resurvey conducted in the summer of 1985 (Straus & Gelles, 1986). The interviews were conducted by telephone, using random digit dialing to select a nationally representative sample. The respondent was the husband (or male partner) for a random half of the cases, and the wife (or female partner) for the other half. A total of 6,002 people were interviewed. However, the number used in this chapter is lower because single parent families are excluded, and because data on certain questions are missing. The response rate, calculated as completed interviews as a portion of eligible interviews was 84 percent. The sample is described in more detail in Straus and Gelles (1986, 1988). In this study, we analyze 5,005 married and 237 cohabiting couples.

### Violence Measures

*Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS)*. The CTS (Straus, 1979, 1987b) was used to measure the incidence of violence in dating, cohabiting and marital relationships. Respondents were asked how often, within the past year, they engaged in each of the following acts of physical violence against their partner: (1) threw an object; (2) pushed, grabbed or shoved; (3) slapped; (4) kicked, bit, or punched; (5) hit or tried to hit with an object; (6) beat up; (7) threatened with a knife or gun; or (8) used a knife or gun. If any violent acts occurred, then violence was coded one; otherwise, it was coded zero. Following this, respondents again filled out the CTS, but in reference to how often, within the past year, their partner used violence against them. Again, if violence occurred, a score of one was given; otherwise, violence was scored zero.

Minor and severe categories of violence were also calculated. If acts 1–3 above occurred, a score of one was given for minor violence; otherwise, this category was zero. If acts 4–8 occurred, a score of one was given for severe violence; otherwise, this category was zero. When severe violence occurred, there was almost always minor violence. Consequently, the “severe violence” measure does not exclude minor assaults. In other words, one who used any of acts 4–8 also could have used any of acts 1–3.

*Assault Rate and Violence Type Percentages*. Three different but overlapping measures of violence are used in this chapter because each serves to illuminate a different facet of interpersonal violence. The first measure is the *assault rate* per 100 couples. This provides information on the incidence of physical violence among married, cohabiting, and dating couples. These data will be shown in the form of figures.

The second and third measures are typologies. These violence types are used for a more detailed analysis of the subset of respondents who experienced one or more violent acts during the year of the survey. These data will be given in tables.

Two violence types are identified: *Physical Violence I* and *Physical Violence II*. *Physical Violence I* identifies the violent partner: male only, female only, or both. *Physical Violence II* uses the same categories of violent actors, but also accounts for the severity and mutuality of assaults. There are eight categories:

1. Male used minor violence, and female did not use violence.
2. Male did not use violence, and female used minor violence.
3. Both used minor violence.
4. Male used severe violence, and female did not use violence.
5. Male did not use violence, and female used severe violence.
6. Male used severe violence, and female used minor violence.
7. Male used minor violence, and female used severe violence.
8. Both used severe violence.

### Demographic Measures

The married and cohabiting respondents were individuals who resided in households containing a currently married or cohabiting heterosexual couple. Households with a single parent or recently terminated marriage were excluded. The dating respondents were individuals who had dated during 1986. Married individuals were excluded.

For married and cohabiting respondents, the respondents were grouped into four age categories: 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, and 45 and over. The dating respondents included only those ages 18–24.

Married and cohabiting respondents were grouped into five education categories: no education through eighth grade, some high school education, high school graduate, some college, and college graduate and postgraduate work.

The occupational status of those who date was not collected because all respondents were attending school full-time. Married and cohabiting respondents were classified as “blue collar” and “white collar” (which are somewhat parallel to “working class” and “middle class”), using the Bureau of Labor Statistics revised Occupational Classification system. Each Bureau of Labor Statistics occupation code was classified as either blue collar or white collar using Rice’s list of occupations classified by these categories (see Robinson et al., 1969).

If respondents were currently unemployed or were housewives, their occupational code was based on their most recent paid job. If they never held a job for pay, they were coded as missing. To establish the occupational status of the relationship, the respondent’s occupational status was used. When we examined the relationship between husbands’ and wives’ occupations, we found that two-thirds of the cases were concordant. Therefore, respondent’s occupational status approximates the occupational status of the relationship.

## RESULTS

Figure 2.1 shows that cohabiting couples are more likely to have experienced violence than those in dating or marital relationships ( $\chi^2 = 84.4, p < .01, df = 6$ ).<sup>3</sup> The line for "either" shows that almost 35 out of every 100 cohabiting couples experienced a physical assault during the previous year compared to 20 per 100 dating couples and 15 per 100 married couples. Moreover, cohabiting couples have the highest rates for each of the three specific types of violence. For example, in 18 out of every 100 cohabiting couples, both were violent, which is about double the rates for dating and married couples.

Two other points worth noting about the rates in Figure 2.1 are that female only violence is less common among the married than the other marital status groups, and the lowest rate for male only violence is among dating couples.

Table 2.1 focuses on the subsample who reported one or more assaults. It shows the distribution of types of violence among those couples who experienced violence. Comparison of the percentages in the first column shows that female only violence type is a larger proportion of the violence among dating couples (39.4 percent) than other marital status groups (28.6 percent and 26.9 percent for those who are married and cohabit, respectively). Male only vio-

**Figure 2.1**  
**Assault Rates by Marital Status**  
 ("either" category is sum of the other three)

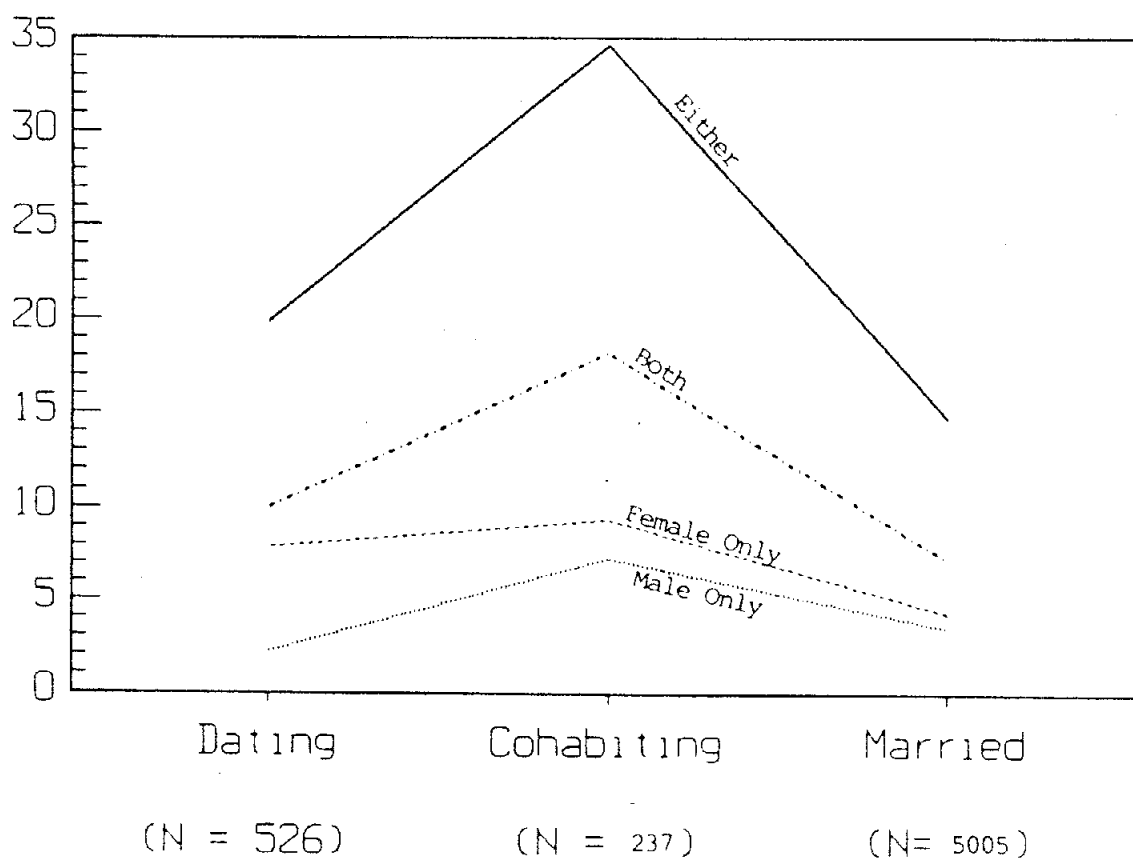


Table 2.1  
Violent Couples: Percent In Physical Violence Type I by Marital Status

Marital Status	Physical Violence Type I			N
	Female Only	Male Only	Both	
Dating	39.4%	10.5%	50.0%	104
Cohabit	26.9%	20.7%	52.4%	82
Married	28.6%	23.2%	48.2%	736

$\chi^2 = 10.4, p < .05, df=4$

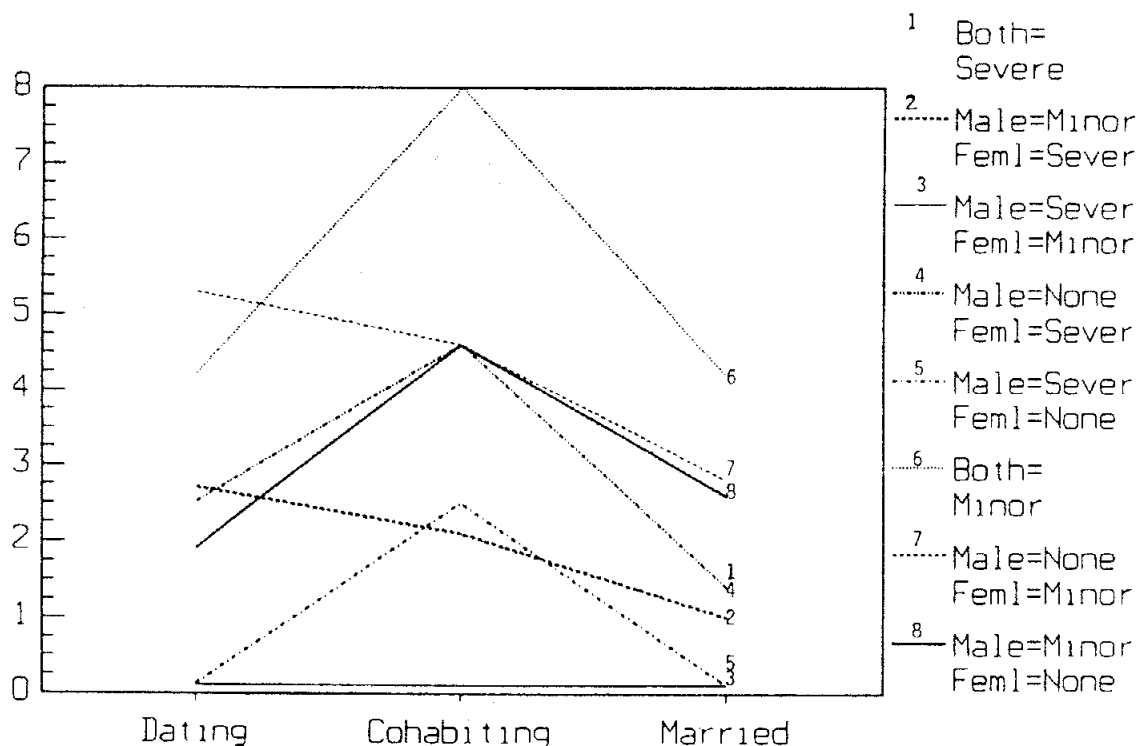
lence is a larger proportion of the violence in cohabiting (20.7 percent) and marital (23.2 percent) than dating (10.5 percent) relationships. There is little difference among marital status groups with respect to the both violent category.

In general, these results answer research questions 1 and 3. Figure 2.1 indicates that among all couples, there is a tendency for assaults to be most common in cohabiting relationships and slightly more common in dating than marital relationships. In couples among whom there is an assault, female only violence most often occurs in dating relationships and male only violence mostly occurs in marital and cohabiting relationships, as shown in Table 2.1. Situations in which both partners are violent occur about equally often in all marital status groups.

Figure 2.2 and Table 2.2 extend the analysis by taking into account the *severity* of assault by men and women in marital, cohabiting, and dating relationships. With two exceptions, the plot lines in Figure 2.2 show that cohabiting couples have the highest assault rate ( $\chi^2 = 135.4, p < .01, df = 16$ ). For minor violence committed by both partners, cohabiting couples have roughly double the rate of the other two groups (8.0 versus 4.2 and 4.2; sixth category in Figure 2.2). For severe violence committed by both partners, cohabiting couples have more than six times the rate of the dating and married couples (first category in Figure 2.2). Exceptions to the tendency for assault to be greatest among cohabiting couples involve a more severe level of violence by the female partner than the male partner (second and seventh categories in Figure 2.2).

Turning to the subsample of violent couples, Table 2.2 indicates some types of violence in which there is little difference among dating, married, and cohabiting couples, and other types in which the difference is large. There is little difference in the percentage of violent couples who are in the both minor category (both partners engaged in minor assaults). However, there is a large difference in the both severe category (both severely violent). For 22 percent of violent cohabiting couples, both partners used severe violence compared to less than 11 percent for violent dating or married couples. Furthermore, the

**Figure 2.2**  
**Assault Rates (II) by Marital Status**



high percentage of female only violence while dating and male only violence while cohabiting and married typically manifests itself in minor violence.

In sum, the results in Figure 2.2 and Table 2.2 answer research question 2. They suggest that not only are cohabiting couples at greatest risk for violence, but, in addition, the most dangerous forms of violence occur when individuals cohabit. This is because severe violence that is carried out by both partners is most common in cohabiting relationships.

These conclusions are the type that might be made across different studies, if the dependent variable (physical assault) is measured in the same way in each case. However, these comparisons do not take into account the fact that

**Table 2.2**  
**Violent Couples: Percent in Physical Violence Type II by Marital Status**

	Physical Violence Type II								N
	M-Minor F-None	M-None F-Minor	Both Minor	M-Sev F-None	M-None F-Sev	M-Sev F-Minor	M-Minor F-Sev	Both Sev	
Dating	9.6%	26.9%	21.2%	.1%	12.5%	4.8%	13.5%	10.6%	104
Cohabit	3.5%	13.4%	23.2%	7.3%	13.4%	1.2%	6.1%	22.0%	82
Married	7.5%	18.9%	28.3%	5.7%	9.6%	2.4%	7.1%	10.5%	736

$\chi^2 = 33.9, p < .01, df=14$



married, cohabiting, and dating couples vary in other characteristics that might affect their overall violence rates. Unless those other factors are controlled, or otherwise standardized, incorrect conclusions may be drawn. To see this, we turn first to age-controlled results.

### Age

It is possible that the relationship between marital status and physical assault is spurious because age exerts an influence on both marital status and violence. Dating and cohabiting couples are likely to be younger than married couples. Additionally, studies have found that marital violence and cohabiting violence declines with age (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980; Yllo & Straus, 1981). Therefore, the relationship between marital status and violence may change or disappear when age is controlled.

To investigate this possibility, we analyzed the relationship between (1) age and marital status; (2) age and assault, and (3) marital status and assault with age controlled. With respect to age and marital status, younger couples are more likely to cohabit, and older couples are more likely to be married ( $\chi^2 = 298.0$ ;  $p < .01$ ,  $df = 3$ ). With respect to age and violence, age negatively influences the assault rate ( $\chi^2 = 357.3$ ;  $p < .01$ ,  $df = 6$ ). This is not surprising given that criminal violence is most common among the young (Uniform Crime Reports, 1984). These findings indicate the importance of controlling for age in reducing a spurious relationship between marital status and assault.

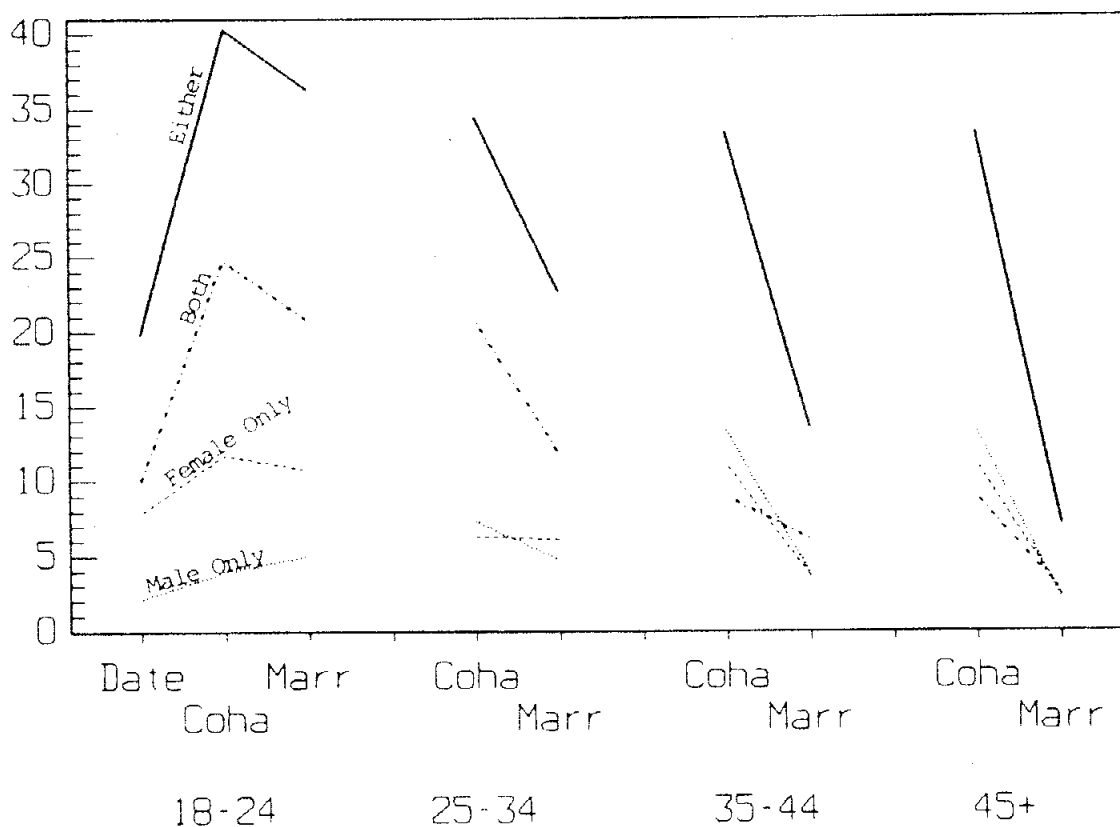
We then examined the effects of age and marital status on violence, using log-linear analysis (Knoke & Burke, 1980). This provides a test of the effect of age (net of marital status), marital status (net of age), and the interaction of age and marital status on violence. The dating category is omitted from the log-linear analysis because individuals are between ages 18 and 24. However, the descriptive statistics for the dating group are shown in Figure 2.3 discussed below.

The results indicate that, while age and marital status exert their own influence on violence, the interaction between age and marital status is nonsignificant (n.s.): ( $\chi^2$  for age = 30.6,  $p < .01$ ,  $df = 9$ ; marital status = 10.5,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 3$ ; age  $\times$  marital status = 11.0, n.s.,  $df = 9$ ). Thus, age and marital status each have its own independent effects on violence. The age effects are not contingent on marital status, and the marital status effects are the same for all age groups.

The rates for each of the cells in the log-linear analysis are displayed in Figure 2.3. All but 3 of the 16 marital status comparisons in Figure 2.3 show a higher rate for cohabiting than married couples, and most of the differences are large.

Table 2.3, like the other tables, is focused on the subsample of respondents who reported one or more assaults. The data for age-controlled respondents show that there is no strong tendency for age to be related to Physical Violence I or marital status.

**Figure 2.3**  
**Assault Rates by Marital Status and Age**



The importance of controlling for age is brought out by comparing the assault rate for those of ages 18–24 who are married, cohabiting, and dating. Without the age control, it seems as though dating couples are more violent than married couples (for example, see the line entitled “Either” in Figure 2.1). However, comparison of the violence rate for dating couples with the rates for married and cohabiting couples of the same ages (18–24) in the left panel of Figure 2.3 shows that violence is most common in cohabiting relationships and more common in marital than in dating relationships.

### Education

The low rate of violence among dating couples after controlling for age may be due to the fact that they have a higher education than the other marital status groups. Since education negatively influences husband-to-wife violence (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986), the violence rate in the dating sample may be depressed. We tested this by controlling for education in the age group 18–24 for married and cohabiting couples. We found that education did not significantly influence the rate of violence ( $\chi^2$  for marital status = 0.9, n.s., df = 3; for education = 0.7, n.s., df = 3; for marital status \* education = 3.4, n.s., df = 3). Consequently, education does not explain the lower rate of violence among dating couples as compared to married and cohabiting couples.

**Table 2.3**  
**Violent Couples: Percent Physical Violence Type I by Age and Occupational Status**

Control	Marital Status	Physical Violence Type I			N
		Female Only	Male Only	Both	
<u>Age</u>					
18-24	Cohabiting	29.0%	9.7%	61.3%	31
	Married	29.1%	13.6%	56.4%	110
25-34	Cohabiting	18.2%	21.2%	60.6%	33
	Married	26.9%	20.7%	52.4%	309
35-44	Cohabiting	33.3%	40.0%	26.7%	15
	Married	26.9%	28.0%	45.1%	175
45+	Cohabiting	66.7%	33.3%	0%	3
	Married	34.2%	29.4%	36.4%	142

$\chi^2$  for Age - 12.3,  $p < .10$ ,  $df=6$ ; Marital Status - 0.1, n.s.,  $df=2$ ;  
 Age\*Marital Status - 3.6, n.s.,  $df=6$

Occupational Status

Blue C.	Cohabiting	19.0%	31.0%	50.0%	42
	Married	30.8%	24.5%	44.7%	302
White C.	Cohabiting	38.2%	11.8%	50.0%	34
	Married	27.1%	23.5%	49.4%	399

$\chi^2$  for Occ. Status - 4.8,  $p < .10$ ,  $df=2$ ; Marital Status - 1.0, n.s.,  $df=2$ ;  
 Occ. Status\*Marital Status - 6.0,  $p < .05$ ,  $df=2$

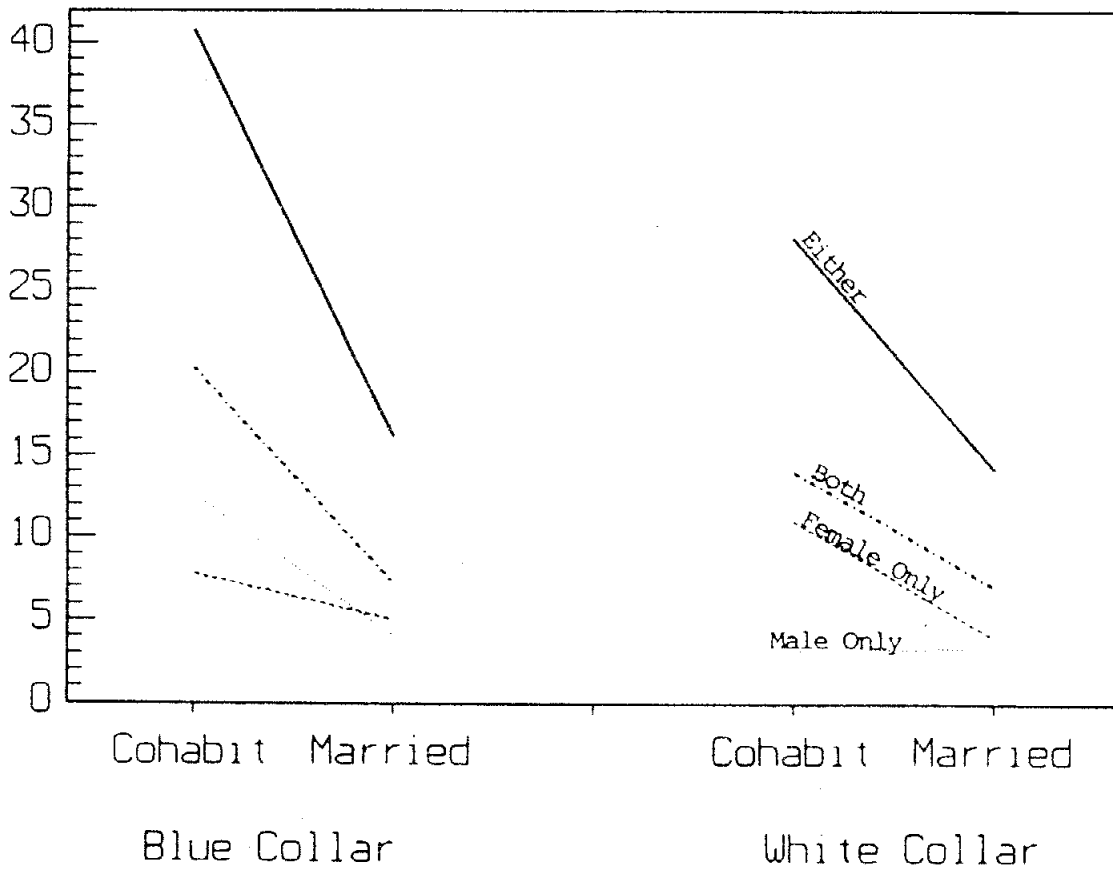
### Occupation

The relationship between marital status and assault may also be influenced by occupational status. For example, Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz (1980) found a lower rate of marital violence among white collar than blue collar workers. Similar results are found in this survey; that is, violence is more common in blue collar than white collar relationships ( $\chi^2 = 10.2$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 4$ ).

A log-linear analysis of violence by occupational status and marital status reveals significant main effects for marital status, occupational status, and a significant marital status by occupation status interaction ( $\chi^2$  for Occupational Status = 10.2,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 3$ ; for marital status = 47.3,  $p < .001$ ,  $df = 3$ ; for occupational status  $\times$  marital status = 7.9,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 3$ ). Figure 2.4 displays the rates.

Figure 2.4 shows an overall tendency for the assault rate to be lower among marital couples compared to cohabiting couples, and for white collar rates to be lower than blue collar rates, but the difference between married and cohab-

**Figure 2.4**  
**Assault Rates by Marital Status and Occupational Class**



f-2;

iting couples is somewhat less pronounced among white collar couples than blue collar couples.

The Occupational Status-controlled data in Table 2.3 show that among violent couples, there is no significant main effect for either marital status or occupational status. However, there is a significant interaction effect between these variables: The proportion of female only and male only changes from blue collar to white collar, but only for those who cohabit.

In summary, our results reveal that after controlling for age, education, and occupation, the marital status difference in assault rates remain; that is, cohabiting couples have the highest assault rate, followed by dating and married couples. However, it should be pointed out that after controlling for age, dating couples have a lower rate of assault than married couples.

**Gender of Respondent**

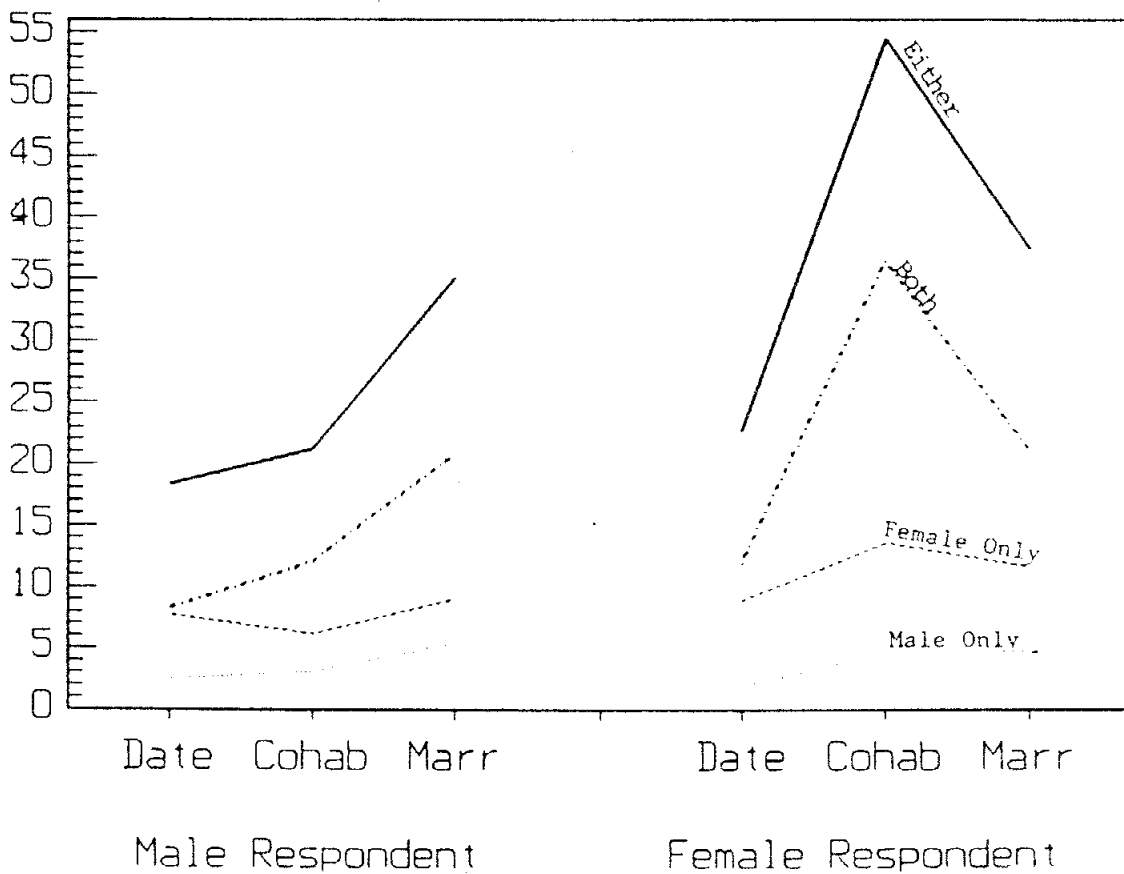
Returning to Figure 2.1, we find that female only violence is more common than male only violence in every marital status group. These differences may be due to gender differences in reporting assaults. In other words, the percentage of female only violence may be higher than the percent of male only violence,

not because the former actually occurs with greater frequency, but because men are less likely than women to report their violence, as previous research revealed (Szinovacz, 1983; Jouriles & O'Leary, 1985; Edleson & Brygger, 1986). It has been suggested that men who batter may deny their use of violence (Coleman, 1980; Pagelow, 1981; Walker, 1979) more than women. The gender difference in reporting violence may be another example of the "his/her marriage" (Bernard, 1982) or Rashomon effect (Condran and Bode, 1982) where wives have different perceptions of their marriage than the husbands.

The analysis to investigate whether violence by gender is due to differences in reporting violence was conducted for respondents aged 18-24 (the only age group for which we have data on all three marital status groups). The results are presented in Figure 2.5.

The left side of Figure 2.5, which displays the violence rates as described by male respondents, is clearly different from the right side, which is based on information provided by female respondents. However, in every marital status category, the female only assault rate is greater than the male only assault rate ( $\chi^2$  for sex = 10.0,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 3$ ; for marital status = 27.5,  $p < .01$ ,  $df = 6$ ; for sex  $\times$  marital status = 6.6, n.s.,  $df = 6$ ).

**Figure 2.5**  
**Assault Rates by Marital Status and Gender of Respondent**



We investigated two factors that might explain the high rate of female violence in this study. First, we examined minor and severe violence separately to see if the higher rate of female only violence was mainly due to more minor violence by women, but we found no support for this ( $\chi^2$  for sex = 3.7, n.s., df = 7; for marital status = 7.9, n.s., df = 14; for sex  $\times$  marital status = 9.6, n.s., df = 14).

Another possibility is that the high rate of female only assaults in Figure 2.5 occurs because those data refer to young couples (ages 18–24). We therefore replicated the analysis for men and women of ages 25 and older who were married or cohabiting. The results showed that, consistent with other research, the female only assault rate is similar to the rate of male only assaults ( $\chi^2$  for sex = 2.6, n.s., df = 3; for marital status = 2.5, n.s., df = 3; for age = 8.3, n.s., df = 6; for sex  $\times$  marital status = 1.3, n.s., df = 3; for sex  $\times$  age = 2.4, n.s., df = 6; for marital status  $\times$  age = 6.2, n.s., df = 6; for sex  $\times$  marital status  $\times$  age = 6.4, n.s., df = 6).

These analyses rule out the possibility that the results are due to confounding with age and gender. However, they leave unresolved the reasons for the high rate of female only violence among young couples and indeed the even more fundamental question of why violence by females primarily occurs within the family (see Straus, 1980 and Straus & Gelles, 1988 for some suggestions).

## DISCUSSION

This study compared the rate of physical assault between partners in 526 dating couples, 237 cohabiting couples, and 5,005 married couples. Three research questions were investigated. The findings indicate that (1) the highest *rate* of assault is among the cohabiting couples; (2) violence is most *severe* in cohabiting couples; and (3) for all three marital status groups, the most frequent pattern is for both partners to be violent, followed by female only, and the least frequent pattern is male only violence.

We examined whether the high rate of female only violence is due to gender differences in reporting violence. After controlling for gender of respondent, female only violence is still more common than male only violence in all three marital status groups. After controlling for age, female only violence is similar to male only violence.

This may seem like a surprising finding, but similar results have been reported in a number of previous studies (summarized in Straus & Gelles, 1988). The high rate of assaults by women in this study is also consistent with the data on homicidal assaults. The rate of homicides committed by women overall is one-fifth the rate of homicides by men, but within the family, women commit nearly half (48 percent) of all homicides (Plass & Straus, 1987).

Without controlling for age, dating couples have a higher rate of assault than married couples. When age is controlled, dating couples have the lowest assault rate of the three marital status groups. However, controls for age, education,

and occupational status do not alter the finding that there is much more violence, and more severe violence, among cohabiting than married or dating couples. These findings are consistent with an earlier study (Yllo & Straus, 1981). Thus, the greater risk of assault typically occurs when individuals live together but are not married.

If age, education, and occupation do not explain the differences in assault rates by marital status, then what does? What is unique about cohabiting couples when compared to dating and married couples that might explain the higher assault rate? We offer some suggestions.

Cohabiting couples may be more likely to be isolated from their network of kin than dating or married couples. For those who are dating or are married, being tied to one's kin may have the unintended consequence of helping to monitor violent behavior. Whether cohabiting couples are isolated by choice or because of a lingering stigma attached to this type of relationship, physical violence may be less likely to be recognized or challenged (Cazenave & Straus, 1979).

Issues of autonomy and control also may be relevant in explaining why assaults are more common in cohabiting than dating or married relationships. It is possible that some enter cohabitation rather than marriage in order to keep more of their own independence, only to find that there are frequent arguments over rights, duties, and obligations that may lead to violence. This suggests that successfully controlling another, or being controlled by another, may be more problematic in cohabiting than in married relationships and thus may lead to more incidents of violence. Indeed, research indicates that where the issue of control frequently arises, violence often occurs (Burke, Stets, & Pirog-Good, this volume, Chapter 4; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1988; Stets, 1988).

The issue of control may not be as problematic among dating and married couples as it is among cohabiting couples. On the one hand, those who date but are not serious about their partner may feel that they do not have the right to control the other. Consequently, conflict over control may be less likely to arise and hence explain the lower rate of dating assault. On the other hand, those who are married and are more committed to one another may not only feel that they have the right to control the other but also may agree to be controlled. Married individuals may "give in" to their partner's wishes, believing that they need to make sacrifices or compromises for the sake of keeping the relationship intact. In this sense, the marriage license may also be a control license.

It should be pointed out that as dating relationships become more serious, control may take precedence and violence may become more frequent. Therefore, research that has shown that the more serious and involved the partners, the more likely that violence will occur (Hotelling & Straus, 1980; Cate et al., 1982; Laner & Thompson, 1982; Laner, 1983; Henton et al., 1983; Sigelman, Berry & Wiles, 1984; Roscoe & Benaske, 1985; Arias, Samios & O'Leary,

1987) may, in part, be explained by conflict arising over control (Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987).

Finally, the investment in the relationship may help explain the high rate of assaults while cohabiting. Cohabiting couples may be more violent than married couples because although both relationships tend to share certain features that give rise to conflict, the former may lack some features of marriage that serve to constrain the conflict from escalating into physical assaults. The feature that cohabiting couples share with married couples is the conflict inherent in a primary group relationship (Straus & Hotaling, 1980; Straus, 1987a). To take one example, in a marital or cohabiting relationship, everything about the partner is of concern to the other and hence little or nothing is off-limits for discussion and conflict. Consequently, there is an inherently high level of conflict in marriage and cohabiting.

Nevertheless, conflict does not necessarily lead to violence. There are other modes of resolving conflicts, or one party may implicitly decide that the potential costs of violence cannot be risked. These costs may be greater for married than for cohabiting couples to the extent that married couples have a greater material, social, and psychological investment as well as a greater long-term interest in the relationship. Consequently, married couples may be more constrained to control assault in order to avoid the risk of such acts terminating the marriage and to lessen the risk of the partners' being injured or even killed, resulting in a greater loss (Straus, 1987a). Thus, although the marriage license may be an implicit hitting license in a normative sense (Straus, 1976), the structural realities of marriage also tend to impose a ceiling on the frequency and severity of violence, whereas the similar normative tolerance of violence in cohabiting couples is not subject to the same structural constraints.

Dating couples may be less violent because they are less involved in a relationship, and thus the conflict-generating characteristics do not apply as strongly in their case as they do among cohabiting and married couples. In this respect, they are different from cohabiting couples. However, they share with cohabiting couples the low investment in the relationship as compared to married couples. It is possible that as a dating relationship becomes more serious, the rate of assault may approximate that found in cohabiting relationships, given not only their increased level of conflict and low investment in the relationship, but also, as discussed above, the more frequent issue of control.

Our suggestions on the cause for the high rate of assault among cohabiting as compared to dating and married couples is speculative and not definitive. Future research needs to directly examine these factors. Identifying what might explain cohabiting violence may help us obtain a better understanding of why violence occurs at all.

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## NOTES

1. For purposes of this chapter, the term "violence" refers to *physical* violence. Violence is defined as an act carried out with the intention or perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury. This definition is synonymous with the legal concept of "assault" and the concept of "physical aggression" used in social psychology. Consistent with the legal concept of assault, physical injury is *not* a criterion. As Marcus (1983:89) puts it, "Physical contact is not an element of the crime" or as the *Uniform Crime Reports* of the FBI (1984:21) puts it, "Attempts are included [in the tabulation of aggravated assault] because it is not necessary that an injury result."

The theoretical ambiguity of the terms "abuse" and "violence" and a conceptual analysis of these and other related terms is given in Gelles (1985) and Gelles and Straus (1979). See also Straus and Lincoln (1985) for a theoretical analysis of the "criminalization" of family violence.

2. However, it is projected that by 1990 only about 3 percent of all households and 5 percent of all couple households will comprise cohabitators (Glick, 1984).

3. Since the X-axis variable is not continuous, readers familiar with graphing conventions will wonder why line graphs were used rather than bar charts. Graphs were explored because the tables were difficult to comprehend. However, the bar chart versions were equally or more difficult to comprehend, especially Figures 2.2, 2.3, and 2.5. The line graphs, in our opinion, bring out the main points more clearly than any other mode of presentation.

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