

Men Who Batter Women: A Study in Power

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The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between a batterer's perception of his partner's power and the severity of violent tactics. Subjects for this study were 21 males, who had been arrested for domestic assault. Batterers whose educational level was higher than their partners used more severity violent tactics in assault. A correlation was found between reward power and severity of abuse, indicating that batterers perceive their partners as having a high ability to reward.

KEY WORDS: spouse abuse; power; male batterers; domestic violence.

INTRODUCTION

Currently there are a variety of viewpoints for explaining aggression between adult significant others living together. One perspective suggests that abuse is caused by women coercing men into hitting them and "asking for the abuse" by their nagging. This perspective has not been validated by experimental study but remains supported by societal norms (Schechter, 1982; Wardell *et al.*, 1983). Another perspective attributes personality traits of the batterer as causal factors (Carlson, 1977; Pagelow, 1979; Roy, 1977). A third perspective explains battering historically as behavior that was learned growing up in a home where spouse abuse and child abuse regularly occurred (Coleman, 1980; Forsstrom-Cohen and Rosenbaum, 1985). The most heated debate occurs between proponents of "the battered husband syndrome" and feminist researchers. Steinmetz and others contend that men are frequently victims in their homes and view their wives as wielding power over them (McNeely and Robinson-Simpson, 1987; Steinmetz, 1977). Feminist researchers take opposition with the

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characterization of spouse abuse as victimizing males. Bograd (1984) and Yllo (1988) assert that the instrument used to validate the "battered husband syndrome" (Conflict Tactics Scale) is biased since it does not take in to account the severity of injury sustained. The omission of injury is biased against women since a blow by a female does not typically sustain as much tissue damage as a blow by a male.

In addition to issues of physical power, the implications of role reversal have also been examined. Some experimental research has indicated that when the traditional power hierarchy of husband being in the one-up position over his wife is challenged in a marriage, abuse is more likely to occur. This is particularly evident when a woman appears to have more status than her husband because of a higher educational level or occupation (Carlson, 1977; Gelles, 1980; Hornung *et al.*, 1981; O'Brien, 1974). This perspective is in direct contrast with the "battered woman syndrome," which attributes abuse to a woman's lack of power, (Walker, 1978) These studies and others indicate that the research is not conclusive and leaves many questions unanswered as to the relationship of power in battering relationships. The literature also reflects a gap in studying abuse from the batterer's perspective. Since batterers have not traditionally been arrested for hitting their wives and, therefore, not ordered into treatment, availability of this population for research study has been difficult. Early studies on domestic violence focused on women in protective shelters, and characteristics of men who batter were gathered by interviews with their wives (Carlson, 1977; Dobash and Dobash, 1978; Pagelow, 1981; Roy, 1977; Star *et al.*, 1979; Walker, 1979). More recently normative national samples have focused on the incidents of spousal violence in the general population utilizing the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1964; Straus *et al.*, 1980; Straus and Gelles, 1986). However, few studies have interviewed male batterers themselves nor have the conflict tactics of men identified as batterers been examined.

MALE BATTERERS

Male batterers have been described in the literature by characteristics that would appear to indicate a low perception of personal power. These characteristics include: low self-esteem (Sonkin *et al.*, 1985; Walker, 1979; Watts and Courtois, 1981; Weitzman and Dreen, 1982), low frustration tolerance (Star, 1983; Walker, 1979; Watts and Courtois, 1981); dependency conflicts on the woman they batter (Coleman, 1980; Purdy and Nickle, 1981; Star, 1983; Weitzman & Dreen, 1982); feelings of inadequacy as a male (Coleman, 1980; Star, 1983; Weitzman and Dreen, 1982), and lack of assertion (Hanks and Rosenbaum, 1977; Purdy and Nickle, 1981; Rosenbaum and O'Leary, 1981). Presence of these characteristics is explained by patterns in society that en-

courage domination of women by men and deter men from feelings of receptivity and dependence (Weitzman and Dreen, 1982). In addition, a man's personal experience with abuse as a victim of child abuse or as a witness of spouse abuse predisposes him to use violence in his intimate relationships (Coleman, 1980; Forsstrom-Cohen and Rosenbaum, 1985; Pagelow, 1981; Rosenbaum and O'Leary, 1981; Star, 1983; Straus *et al.*, 1980; Weitzman and Dreen, 1982).

COUPLE DYNAMICS IN BATTERING

An interaction among three factors contributes to violence occurring in a marital relationship: (1) an acceptance of violence as a response to conflict; (2) rigidity of relationship rules between partners; (3) a lower educational level of the husband than the wife. The assumption of violence as a response to conflict is learned through family of origin experiences with violence and through sex role conditioning (Weitzman and Dreen, 1982). Traditional sex role conditioning contributes to rigid sex role complementarity (strong-weak; stoic-hysterical; adequate-inadequate), narrow coping responses and relationship rules that allow for little flexibility (Dobash and Dobash, 1978; Hanks and Rosenbaum, 1977; Walker, 1979; Weitzman and Dreen, 1982). As long as the complementarity is uncontested, the violence can be avoided. However, when there is an open move toward symmetry, violence erupts as a homeostatic (stability regulating) mechanism which re-establishes the complementary position (Weitzman and Dreen, 1982).

POWER/CONFLICT TACTICS

Physical force (hitting, punching, kicking or choking) or the threat of physical force are power tactics used for gaining and maintaining control in the family. Since males are more heavily socialized in instrumental and aggressive behaviors, they are more likely than women to utilize physical force against an affront to their authority (Dobash and Dobash, 1978; Gwartney-Gibbs *et al.*, 1987; O'Brien, 1969; Straus, 1976). Although mutual couple violence has been cited by researchers (McNeely and Robinson-Simpson, 1987; Steinmetz, 1977), women suffer more tissue damage in violent incidents than do men because of their physical size and strength.

Given the relative paucity of research on men identified as batterers, and the controversy regarding power in abusive relationships, the present study was designed to examine the conflict tactics used by men arrested for domestic assault and their perception of their partners' power. More specifically, the following questions were examined: (1) Is there a relationship between a man's

perception of his partner's power and the severity of spousal abuse? If there is a relationship, then there should be a significant positive correlation between the results of instruments which measure those same two factors. (2) Is there a relationship between higher educational level of the female partner and spouse abuse? If there is a relationship, then spouse abuse will be more severe when women have a higher educational level than their male partners.

METHOD

Participants

Our sample consisted of 21 men who had been ordered into assessment by the court following an arrest by the police for domestic assault. The subjects ranged in age from 21 to 54 years, with a mean age of 32 (SD = 8.5). Twenty of the subjects were White (one was Black). All of the subjects were cohabitating or married at the time of the assault. The mean relationship length of the subject group was 51.7 months (mode = 48 mo; SD = 32.7 mo). Their mean and modal educational level was high school graduate with a range from 8 to 17 years of schooling (SD = 1.9). Their partners as a group had similar education (Mean = 12.9; Mode = 12; SD = 1.7). They were predominantly working class individuals engaged in labor, construction, and maintenance occupations.

Procedure

Data for this study was gathered during a 60-min face-to-face interview with the male subject. At the onset of the interview, the men were provided with a written and oral information summary informing them of their rights as participants, and then we obtained written consent from each participant. An information release was also signed so that details of the domestic assault arrest could be obtained from the court. A demographic sheet was then completed, including a history of spouse abuse, child physical and sexual abuse, alcoholism, and criminal activity. The Conflict Tactics Scale and the Measure of Interpersonal Power were then administered.

Following the interview session, one of the authors and a research assistant coded the conflict tactics that were described in the police reports. All arrests for domestic assault in the previous year were coded for each subject.

Measures of Physical Violence

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Form N)

The CTS (Straus, 1979) is an eighteen-item self-report inventory consisting of a list of actions which a spouse might take in a conflict with his partner. The modes of dealing with conflict are scored on three scales: Reasoning, Verbal Aggression, and Violence. The entire Violence scale was used as a measure of the dependent variable in this study. High scores on this scale indicate the use of physical force against another person as a means of resolving conflict. The Conflict Tactics Scale is one of the most widely used measures of spousal violence. The CTS is reported to be both a valid and reliable measure by researchers in the field (Allen and Straus, 1979; Straus, 1973; Straus, 1974; Straus *et al.*, 1979). Reliability for the subscales range from .50 to .83 and validity .19 to .64 (Straus, 1979).

Police Report

The second measure of violence in this study were the conflict tactics that were described by the arresting officer in their official arrest report. The content of the police report is based on the officer's observations as well as interviews with both parties involved in the assault. The reported conflict tactics were coded by two interviewers using the Severity Weighted Index of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1981). Interrater agreement was checked periodically during coding.

Measure of Interpersonal Power

The Measure of Interpersonal Power (Garrison and Pate, 1977) is a 34-item multidimensional scale that assesses persons' perception of others' power along three dimensions: (a) leadership, for example, "My spouse has a great deal of influence over my behavior."; (b) coercive power, for example, "When people don't agree with my spouse he/she penalizes them for their behavior."; (c) rewarding power, for example, "My spouse is able to reward others." Several investigators have supported the ability of these scales to assess husbands' and wives' perceptions of their partner's power (deTurck and Miller, 1986; Garrison and Pate, 1977). The reliability of the subscales ranges from .86 to .60.

RESULTS

To test the prediction that CTS violence is related positively to the measure of violence on the police report, a linear regression analysis was conducted with the subject's CTS violence score as the predictor variable and the police report as the criterion variable. One subject was omitted from the data analysis because his CTS score was an extreme outlier ($CTS > 6$ s.d.). Omitting the subject gave a regression equation that was more representative of the group as a whole. When this subject's score was eliminated and the regression analyzed, the predictive validity of CTS was not significant ($F(1,19) = 1.74, p > .05$). There was little variability among the scores with batterers reporting a low level of violence on CTS ($X = 7.8, SD = 6.5, \text{variance} = 42.7$). Due to the lack of correlation between the two measures ($r = .31$), both the self report measure (CTS) and the police report ($X = 5.7, SD = 2.9, \text{variance} = 8.95$) were used as measures of violence in the remaining analyses.

The second research question examined the prediction that a man's perception of his partner's power is related positively to spouse abuse. A multiple regression analysis was conducted with partner's attributed power as the predictor variables (leadership, coercion, and reward) and the police report as the criterion variable. The combined effects of partners' power did not significantly influence the degree and severity of abuse ($F(3,17) = 1.865, p > .05$). When the analysis was duplicated using CTS as the criterion variable, no significant difference was found ($F(3,17) = .45, p > .70$).

A stepwise multiple regression was then performed to determine if any of the three power subscales were significantly related to violence. Reward power by the spouse significantly influenced the degree and severity of abuse when measured by the police report ($F(1, 19) = 5.295, p < .03$), however, leadership and coercion were not significant. None of the power subscales significantly influenced the degree and severity of abuse, when measured by CTS.

The third research question relating to higher educational level of the female partner and spouse abuse was investigated by performing a linear regression of spouse abuse on differences in educational level (defined as female minus male). Differences in educational level were statistically significant as a predictor of spousal violence when the police report was the criterion variable ($F(1, 19) = 9.73; p = .01; R^2 = .35$). When CTS scores were used as the criterion variable, no significance was found ($F(1, 19) = 2.02; p = .17; R^2 = .10$). However, the nature of the relationship was opposite to what was hypothesized. Women who have less education than their male partners were more severely abused.

Since differences in educational level had a significant effect, a stepwise regression was carried out to determine the effect of power on severity of violence controlling for educational differences. The results of this analysis in-

licated that when educational level was controlled for, none of the power subscales explained a statistically significant proportion of the residual variance, suggesting that educational differences are a more powerful predictor of violence than power.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicated that severity of abuse toward a female partner is related to the batterer's perception of the partner's rewarding power. Men whose used the most severe violent tactics perceived their partners as having high rewarding power.

One possible explanation of this result is that battering males look to their partners to provide their primary personal support and, therefore, perceive their partner as having high rewarding power. This is confirmed by previous literature which has indicated that battering males have dependency conflicts with the women they batter (Coleman, 1980; Purdy and Nickle, 1981; Star, 1983; Weitzman and Dreen, 1982).

Further evidence suggesting the importance of reward power as a variable differentiating between abusive and nonabusive men can be found by comparing these results with those of deTurk and Miller (1986). deTurk and Miller (1986) studied a group of men who were not identified as batterers and reported a mean of 13.58 for MIP reward. This mean value is noticeably different from the mean value found in this research ($X = 25.05$). The differences in these values suggest that men who batter may perceive their wives as more rewarding than men who do not batter. Further research is needed comparing battering and non-battering males to determine if men who batter uniquely attribute high reward power to their spouses. In addition, an investigation of abused women to determine the degree to which they reward others and reward self would provide insight on the partner's use of reward.

The results of the study also indicate that the best predictor of severity of violence was couple difference in educational level. The direction of this correlation was opposite from the hypothesis. The most severely abused women had less education than their partners. This finding disagrees with the status inconsistency theory of O'Brien (1981) and Carlson (1977) that women with more education threaten their partner, encouraging violence to erupt. However, the results are consistent with the theory that differences in educational level do not follow the same pattern of status inconsistency as occupation (Hornung *et al.*, 1981). Hornung contends that it is not differences in educational level that determine violence potential, but the level of education of the female partner. College educated women perceive a greater number of alternatives for

themselves and are not as frequently victims of battering. The majority of female partners in this study had not attended college.

Results of this study confirm the finding that in self report, battering males tend to underreport violent tactics (Browning and Dutton, 1986; Edleson and Brygger, 1984; Jouriles and O'Leary, 1985). The number of subjects and methodology of this study, however, did not allow for testing the predictive powers of the Conflict Tactics Scale. Further research is needed in this area, since CTS is the commonly used criterion measure for male battering. In addition, it would be useful in further investigations to include a measure of social desirability in assessing the validity of self-report measures for this population. Results of this study appear to indicate that for men that have been arrested for domestic assault, the police report of the incident is a more accurate measure of violence.

One of the limitations of this study is the selection of men who have been arrested as representative of male batterers. Since mandatory arrest for the officer noting victim injury is not standard procedure in all states, these findings may not generalize to other samples. In addition, since men who come to the attention of the police tend to be homogeneous with respect to socioeconomic, sociocultural, and demographic characteristics (Hornung *et al.*, 1981), it would be useful to determine whether the current findings apply across a more diversified sample of couples where battering occurs. In further research it would be helpful to expand the number of subjects to allow for more robustness in the statistical analyses.

A more detailed examination of power in relationships where battering occurs might be obtained by using observational coding of these couples attempting to resolve a high-conflict issue. Research by Gottman and Krokoff (1989) and others has provided insight on the interaction patterns that couples use that contribute to negative outcome. One of the difficulties in carrying out this type of research method with battering couples is the potential for the research task precipitating a violent incident when the couple leaves the laboratory.

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