

The Sexuality of Women in Physically Abusive Marriages: A Comparative Study

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To examine female sexuality in physically abusive marriages, this study compared 60 abused women with a demographically matched sample of nonabused women in distressed marriages (aged 19–29). The physically abused women reported significantly lower levels of intimacy and compatibility in their marriages. In addition, abused women were found to evince a more traditional sex-role ideology, a greater negative or erotophobic disposition toward sex, and a stronger avoidance of sex than did nonabused women. Also, as compared to nonabused women in distressed marriages, the abused women rated themselves as having a lower degree of sexual assertiveness, arousability, and satisfaction. Despite these findings, the abused women reported a significantly greater frequency of sexual intercourse in their marriages than did the nonabused women.

KEY WORDS: abused women; domestic violence; female sexuality; intimacy; sexual behavior; marital sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

Although there has been an enormous proliferation in domestic violence research (Rosenbaum, 1988; Russell, 1988), the literature has yet to document the sexual attitudes, behavior, and relationships of physically abused women. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the sexuality of women who are in physically abusive marriages, and to address possible sources of dissatisfaction. In doing so, abused women were systematically assessed with a comparison group for compatibility and inti-

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macy, sexual assertiveness, frequency of sexual intercourse, sexual aversion, sex-role beliefs, sexual attitudes, sexual arousal, and sexual satisfaction.

Relationship variables, such as intimacy and compatibility, were chosen, because according to Waring *et al.* (1980), these variables consist of, among other attributes, mutual respect and trust, a positive view of one's partner, a readiness to self-disclose, mutually satisfying sexual activity, and the tendency to handle conflict through negotiation. It is logical to assume that in an abusive relationship the above qualities are lacking. In addition, intimacy and compatibility are sources through which many other forms of mutual satisfaction emerge in a relationship, and they can also be determining factors in assessing the relative health or pathology of the relationship as a whole (Russell, 1990).

Sexual assertiveness and values regarding sex role ideology were considered germane because the traditional woman tends to view sex as a method of expressing emotion and commitment to a relationship (Rotkin, 1976), and she partially judges the success of a physical encounter on whether her partner was sensitive to her emotional and physical needs (Rosenzweig and Dailey, 1989). These potential sources of satisfaction are usually denied women in abusive marriages, as there is little intimacy or compatibility. In such marriages, especially those in which the husband retains his position of dominance through force, and in which open expression of sexuality is proscribed for a woman (Rosenzweig and Dailey, 1989), it is likely that the wife's sexual satisfaction is not of paramount importance. To explore this hypothesis, and to develop an understanding of the sexuality and intimate relationships of physically abused women, several measures relating to sexual behavior were also included in this study.

METHOD

Subjects

The data were collected from a sample pool of 168 married women. Due to the process of screening and matching samples, however, the total study population consisted of 120 women. Each sample was stratified according to physical abuse and demographics. Simple random sampling was then employed to select an independent sample for each stratum. Samples were equivalently matched in numbers according to social status, race, and employment. Since military rank tends to be correlated with family income and education, social status was based on the military rank of the husbands (Hurlbert *et al.*, 1991). Age, education, length of marriage, and religion were matched as closely as possible.

The sample of abused women was obtained from couples who were enrolled in treatment under the Domestic Conflict Containment Program (DCCP), a specialized group therapy program for treating physically abusive marriages. Couples in this treatment program are identified through a military referral network, which includes emergency room and inter-clinic hospital consults; community mental health, chaplain, military commanders, and self-referrals; military police blotter reports; and in the event of civilian charges or arrest, courts and local police agencies. All the women in this sample had at least one documented case of being assaulted by their husbands. While enrollment and attendance in this program are mandatory for the abuser under military regulations, participation for the victim is voluntary.

Since marriages with physical abuse have been shown to be discordant (O'Leary, 1988), and marital violence is believed to inhibit marital satisfaction (Hurlbert *et al.*, 1991; Meredith *et al.*, 1986), the sample of non-abused women was selected from couples who were enrolled in marital group therapy to control for any confounding effects of marital discord and dissatisfaction. All these women and their husbands were individually screened by interview for physically abusive behavior. As a result, five subjects who evidenced history of marital violence were excluded from this sample. Participation in this form of group marital therapy is voluntary. Since both groups volunteered for treatment, the women in the study samples also evidenced a desire for marital treatment.

Instruments

Prior to any treatment, all women were given a questionnaire battery, which included demographic information and the following nine measures to examine the variables under investigation:

Sexual Satisfaction

The Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS) was used to measure the subject's degree of sexual satisfaction (Hudson, 1982). This scale has demonstrated a high reliability (.90), and good face, construct, discriminant, and content validity in various samples across many cultures (Hudson, 1981; 1992). Scores range from 0 to 100, with lower scores indicating greater sexual satisfaction. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of internal consistency for this measure was found in the current sample to be .903 (Cronbach, 1970).

Sexual Attitudes

The Sexual Opinion Survey (SOS) was used to measure the extent to which women respond to sexual cues with negative to positive emotions, erotophobia-erotophilia (Fisher *et al.*, 1983; Fisher *et al.*, 1988). This 21-item measure has been shown to have high internal consistency, and a large amount of empirical evidence has been accumulated supporting the construct validity of this measure (Fisher *et al.*, 1988). Scores range from 0 (most erotophobic) to 126 (most erotophilic). In the current study, the internal consistency coefficient of this instrument was assessed at .847 for both samples ($n = 120$).

Intimacy and Compatibility

Since there is no known measure which specifically assesses intimacy and compatibility, the Affectionate Partners Test (APT), as shown in Appendix A, was developed for the purpose of this study to measure these constructs. Scores range from 20 to 140 on each subscale, with higher scores representing greater intimacy and compatibility.

Since the APT has yet to be used in research, an examination for concurrent validity and social desirability was conducted. This test, the Rubin's (1970) Loving Scale, Hudson's (1982) Index of Marital Satisfaction, and the Crowne and Marlowe (1964) Social Desirability Scale were administered to 80 soldiers (49 men and 31 women) enrolled in fire safety and prevention classes. The scores on the intimacy subscale produced coefficients of .635 with the Loving Scale and $-.487$ with the IMS. The compatibility subscale produced coefficients of .466 and $-.502$, respectfully, indicating statistically significant concurrent validity for both scales. It should be noted that higher scores on the IMS correspond to greater marital satisfaction. Neither the compatibility subscale ($r = .158$) nor the intimacy subscale ($r = .087$) was discovered to be significantly correlated with the Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale, indicating that both subscales of the APT appear not to be influenced by social desirability response sets. Test-retest reliability over four days for the APT was also excellent ($r = .853$). Split-half reliabilities were conducted separately for the intimacy subscale (.840) and the compatibility subscale (.871). In the final analysis, the APT was found in this study to have an overall internal consistency reliability alpha of .857 for both groups.

Feminism

The Sex-Role Ideology Scale (SRI-30) was employed to evaluate sex-role beliefs along a traditional to feminist dimension (Kalin and Tilby, 1978). This 30-item scale has evidenced good construct and concurrent validity. Split-half reliability ranges for this measure have been assessed from .57 to .84 in restricted samples to .91 in wide samples, and test-retest reliability correlations of .87 have been determined over a 3-week period (Kalin and Tilby, 1978). Scores range from 30 to 210, with higher scores representing a feminist position. In the current sample, this scale was assessed to have an internal consistency alpha of .813.

Sexual Aversion

The Sexual Aversion Scale (SAS) was used to assess the extent to which women avoid sex in their marriages (Katz *et al.*, 1989). This 30-item inventory has demonstrated high internal consistency (alpha = .85) and excellent test-retest reliability (.86 across four weeks) in a sample of college students (Katz *et al.*, 1989). Scores range from 30 to 120, with higher scores corresponding to greater sexual aversion. The alpha coefficient of internal consistency for this scale was .832 in the current sample.

Sexual Arousal

The Sexual Arousability Inventory (SAI) was used to assess female sexual arousal (Hoon *et al.*, 1976). Split-half reliability of this scale has been reported to be .92 and an 8-week test-retest correlation of .69 (Chambless and Lifshitz, 1984). In this 28-item inventory, descriptions of sexual activities are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from (-1) adversely affects sexual arousal to (+5) always causes sexual arousal. For the current sample, an internal consistency coefficient alpha of .824 was assessed on this measure.

Sexual Assertiveness

The Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness (HISA) was employed to assess the degree to which women exercise sexual assertiveness in their marriages (Hurlbert, 1988, 1991). This 25-item measure has demonstrated good internal consistency reliability and was also found to have quite good

discriminant, concurrent, and construct validity (Hurlbert, 1991; Apt and Hurlbert, 1992). Scores range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater sexual assertiveness. The alpha reliability coefficient on this index was assessed at .844 in the current sample.

Frequency of Sexual Intercourse

This data was obtained by asking each woman to recall the number of times she engaged in this sexual behavior with her spouse in a usual one week or seven day period during the last month.

Procedures

One-hundred percent of the women approached volunteered to participate in the study. Participants could discontinue the study at any time. Each subject signed an informed consent statement and an agreement to participate in this research project.

All subjects were told that the purpose of this research project was to acquire information about female sexuality that eventually might be used in helping women who were experiencing sexual problems.

In an effort to insure privacy, encourage honesty, and eliminate influence, data in this study did not involve names and consisted of confidential written responses to the questionnaire battery.

RESULTS

As shown in Table I, with the exception of religion, both groups were equally matched in numbers, but no significant differences were discovered between the two samples on any of the demographic variables.

The means and standard deviations for the nine measures for the two groups are shown in Table II.

When two-tailed *t*-tests were computed, all nine measures showed significant differences. The abused women demonstrated statistically lower levels of intimacy ($t = -4.064$, $df = 118$, $p < 0.001$) and compatibility ($t = -2.116$, $df = 118$, $p = 0.034$) in their marriages than did nonabused women as measured by the Affectionate Partners Test. The women in abusive relationships reported lower degrees of sexual assertiveness ($t = -4.518$, $df = 118$, $p < 0.001$), sexual arousal ($t = -2.237$, $df = 118$, $p = 0.026$) and a more traditional sex-role ideology ($t = -9.243$, $df = 118$, $p < 0.001$) than did the nonabused women. In addition, abused women reported

Table I. Demographic Characteristics Between Women in Abusive and Nonabusive Marriages

| | Women in Abusive Marriages | | Women in Nonabusive Marriages | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|------|----------------------------------|------|
| | $(X \pm SD)$ | | $(X \pm SD)$ | |
| Age | 25.805 \pm 3.781 | | 26.208 \pm 3.766 | |
| Education | 12.486 \pm 1.371 | | 12.711 \pm 1.410 | |
| Years of Marriage | 3.030 \pm 1.539 | | 3.252 \pm 1.315 | |
| Social Status | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % |
| E-3 | 8 | 13.3 | 8 | 13.3 |
| E-4 | 19 | 31.7 | 19 | 31.7 |
| E-5 | 24 | 40.0 | 24 | 40.0 |
| E-6 | 9 | 15.0 | 9 | 15.0 |
| Race | | | | |
| White | 32 | 53.3 | 32 | 53.3 |
| Black | 15 | 25.0 | 15 | 25.0 |
| Hispanic | 13 | 21.7 | 13 | 21.7 |
| Employment Status | | | | |
| Nonemployed | 36 | 60.0 | 36 | 60.0 |
| 35 h or more weekly | 9 | 15.0 | 9 | 15.0 |
| 34 h or less weekly | 15 | 25.0 | 15 | 25.0 |
| Religion | | | | |
| Catholic | 19 | 31.7 | 22 | 36.7 |
| Protestant | 32 | 53.3 | 30 | 50.0 |
| None | 9 | 15.0 | 8 | 13.3 |

Table II. Means and Standard Deviations of Measures^a

| Measures | Abused Women $(X \pm SD)$ | Nonabused Women $(X \pm SD)$ |
|------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Sexual dissatisfaction | 30.223 \pm 10.078 | 25.600 \pm 9.111 |
| Erotophilia | 63.133 \pm 12.878 | 65.883 \pm 14.685 |
| Intimacy | 79.600 \pm 18.225 | 89.867 \pm 15.258 |
| Compatibility | 80.033 \pm 15.844 | 84.233 \pm 15.898 |
| Sexual Aversion | 55.400 \pm 11.188 | 50.917 \pm 10.286 |
| Feminism | 94.600 \pm 12.865 | 110.307 \pm 15.129 |
| Sexual assertiveness | 63.267 \pm 10.076 | 68.567 \pm 8.703 |
| Sexual arousability | 76.650 \pm 17.256 | 83.733 \pm 17.430 |
| Intercourse (1 week) | 3.250 \pm 1.068 | 1.950 \pm 1.346 |

^aHigher scores correspond to greater frequency or agreement with the above noted measures.

greater sexual dissatisfaction ($t = 2.013$, $df = 118$, $p = 0.022$), a more negative or erotophobic disposition regarding sex ($t = -1.923$, $df = 118$, p

= 0.054), and a stronger tendency to avoid sexual activity ($t = 2.807$, $df = 118$, $p < 0.01$). Despite these results, the abused women reported a statistically higher frequency of sexual intercourse with their spouses ($t = 5.862$, $df = 118$, $p < 0.001$) than did the women in nonviolent marriages.

No significant interactions were discovered using ANOVA methods to examine each of the nine measures for social class, race, religion, and employment status, indicating that these variables may act separately.

No relationships were found with Pearson's r between the nine measures and the subject's age, education, and length of marriage.

DISCUSSION

The first finding of this study was that the abused wives expressed lower levels of intimacy and compatibility than did the nonabused women; this is not surprising in light of the fact that their relationships were physically abusive in nature. The findings that the abused women did not report high levels of sexual assertiveness or sexual arousal and demonstrated a traditional sex role ideology are consistent with the discussion of gender roles discussed in the introduction. However, it should be pointed out that it is possible that feminism and assertiveness may have operated as intervening variables. Although we do not have data on the husbands of the abused wives, based on a recent study of the sexual characteristics of abusive husbands (Hurlbert and Apt, 1991), it would stand to reason that abused women might not consider their husbands to be particularly sensitive to their needs and would neither enjoy or desire sex on a regular basis.

Although data on the sex role values of the abusive or nonabusive husbands was not obtained, many researchers have found that abusive husbands tend to be more traditional and less egalitarian than husbands who do not physically abuse their wives (Bernard and Bernard, 1984; Bernard *et al.*, 1985; Coleman, 1980; Hurlbert *et al.*, 1991; Sonkin, 1985). In addition, Coleman and Straus (1986) put forth that marriages in which there is an equal, or near equal, sharing of power tend to be those relationships in which the incidence of conflict and violence is the lowest.

The abused women in this study were in traditional marriages in which the husbands maintained his superior position by force, and in which there was little intimacy and compatibility. Therefore, it is not surprising that the abused women in this study expressed greater sexual dissatisfaction,

more negative attitudes toward sex and a stronger tendency to avoid sexual activity than did their nonabused counterparts.

The finding that the abused women express a higher frequency of sexual intercourse than did the nonabused women is consistent with our description of abusive relationships. We would, however, hypothesize that the decision on when and how to have sex is not hers; it is her husband's. These sexually self-serving power dynamics in physically abusive marriages are readily played out in the bedroom, with the abusive male usually controlling the sexual encounters (Hurlbert and Apt, 1991). As in other aspects of the marriage, the wife must submit to the will of her husband when it comes to sexual intercourse.

The above findings illuminate the degree to which physically abusive marriages impact on many aspects of the relationship as a whole, and point particularly to the effect that abuse has on female sexuality within such a union. It is difficult to say, for instance, whether low levels of intimacy and compatibility expressed by the abused women were a result of the abuse, or whether they were contributing factors to it. Further research could shed some light on that issue. And finally, a study that examines data on the husbands as well as on the wives of abusive marriages could generate a wealth of understanding about the sexualities and other components of such troublesome relationships.

Although samples of abusive marriages in the military are believed not to represent any extremes in physical violence (Hurlbert and Apt, 1991), one limitation of the study may be the representativeness of abused women married to soldiers. Certainly, military wives may experience greater disruption of intimacy (e.g., Whitaker, 1989) than married women in the general public because of time and space separations from their husbands due to extended military training exercises and overseas assignments. Also, soldiers may be less sensitive to violence and may adopt a more traditional male role than men in the general population. Being married to soldiers and the disruption of intimacy characteristic to such marriages might influence the marital and sexual relationships under study.

In addition, women volunteering for treatment as compared to those in the general population who do not enter therapy may influence the results. Although volunteers tend to have lower authoritarianism scores, higher need for approval, and higher educational levels than nonvolunteers (Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1969), Kaats and Davis (1971) found that volunteers who completed questionnaires on sexual behavior and attitudes did not differ from nonvolunteers on these dimensions.

Despite these sample limitations, there were clearly many significant differences between the two groups in this study, and the demographic similarities between these groups appears to contribute strong support for physical abuse as the one variable responsible for those differences.

APPENDIX A

The Two Subscales of the Affectionate Partners Test (APT)

Compatibility

1. In general, I enjoy my partner's company.
4. My partner and I share many of the same opinions.
5. I respect my partner as a person.
6. My partner is the most important person in my life.
8. In general, I get along well with most of my partner's friends.
15. I think my partner and I argue too much. (R)
16. In general, my partner gets along well with most of my friends.
18. It is difficult for me to respect many of my partner's opinions. (R)
20. I feel that I put too much into making this relationship work. (R)
21. In addition to other emotions, I feel my partner really likes me.
23. My partner and I usually agree on the major issues.
25. I like to do many of the same things my partner does.
28. In general, I would rather be with my partner than anyone else.
30. When my partner and I have a disagreement, we are usually able to work it out quickly.
32. My partner is often reluctant to make compromises. (R)
33. In general, I am fond of my partner as a person.
34. My relationship with my partner is more important to me than any other relationship I currently have.
38. I think we argue more than most couples. (R)
39. I have a lot of interests in common with my partner.
40. When my partner and I have a disagreement, we usually seem to stay mad at each other for a long time afterward. (R)

Intimacy

2. My partner has a lot of close friends.

- 3. I feel free to talk about very personal matters with my partner.
- 7. My partner knows me better than anyone else knows me.
- 9. I value my relationship with my partner.
- 10. I think that my partner and I are more affectionate than most other couples.
- 11. In general, I enjoy sex with my partner.
- 12. I am glad that my partner is a part of my life.
- 13. It is hard for me to be totally honest with my partner. (R)
- 14. My partner often understands what I am thinking or feeling without me having to explain it.
- 17. I feel my partner would never do anything to hurt me.
- 19. I feel comfortable in sharing intimate feelings with my partner.
- 22. I would like to spend the rest of my life with my partner.
- 24. I am not very affectionate with my partner. (R)
- 26. I feel that my partner does not trust me at times. (R)
- 27. My partner is a person that many people would like to have in their lives.
- 29. I think my partner shares a lot of deep thoughts and feeling with me.
- 31. My partner is someone I enjoy spending time with.
- 35. I think that my partner enjoys our sexual relationship.
- 36. It is difficult for me to trust my partner. (R)
- 37. I think my partner is honest with me.

Note: (R)everse scored items. Items are scored accordingly:

| | | | | | | |
|----------|---|---|---|---|-------|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Disagree | | | | | Agree | |

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