Predicting Self-Reported Likelihood of Battering: Attitudes and Childhood Experiences

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The present study tested the hypothesis that self-reported likelihood of wife battering is related to childhood experiences of violence and attitudes supportive of family violence. One hundred ninety-one male university students were administered three attitude measures and a survey of childhood experiences, and were asked to rate their potential likelihood of wife battering (LB) in a variety of situations. Most subjects (79%) indicated some likelihood of battering. This likelihood covaried with violent Attitudes Toward Wife Abuse (AWA), conservative Attitudes Toward Women (AWS), Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (AIV), and, to a lesser extent, physical abuse as a child and witnessing one's mother being battered. © 1987 Academic Press, Inc.

A survey of the recent popular and scientific literature suggests that violence against women is considerably more prevalent in our society than previously thought (Russell, 1984). Workers in this area have increasingly implicated broad social forces in the etiology of acts such as rape (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Malamuth, 1984) and child abuse (e.g., Butler, 1978; Herman, 1981). This perspective holds that interpersonal aggression is partially a function of widely held attitudes and beliefs which condone violence against those with lesser power. Burt (1980), for example, defines rape as "the logical and psychological extension of a dominant–submissive, competitive, sex-role stereotypic culture" (p. 229). Other writers have described developmental events in which such attitudes and expectations might be socialized, including witnessing media and/or family scenes of male violence against women and children, or the experience of having been abused oneself as a child (e.g., Bandura, 1973; Carroll, 1977; Malamuth & Briere, in press).

The present study was concerned with the application of this theoretical

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perspective to the study of husbands' violence against their wives ("wife battering"). The presence of widespread cultural norms supportive of wife battering has been demonstrated by various writers, perhaps most notably Straus and his colleagues (e.g., Straus, 1980; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Straus posits that such attitudes and beliefs tend to reinforce men's power and status in the nuclear family, and provide a rationale to the batterer for his use of physical violence to maintain a superior position. In support of a social learning perspective on this phenomenon, several investigations indicate that approximately 50–80% of batterers were raised in families where wife battering was modeled by male authority figures (Carroll, 1977; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981; Stacey & Shupe, 1983).

Despite a theoretical basis for expecting a relationship between attitudes supportive of family violence and subsequent battering behavior, little empirical work has been done in this area. Difficulties inherent in such research include (a) the logistics involved in identifying a sufficiently large criterion group of batterers for adequate study, (b) the probable nonrepresentativeness of batterer samples if selected from mental health or criminal justice populations, (c) the specification of otherwise equivalent nonbattering control groups, and (d) the absence of a concrete measure of attitudes and beliefs supportive of wife abuse. Similar problems plagued early investigations of the social psychology of sexual aggression (Malamuth, 1981), prompting the development of an instrument which, in the absence of representative rapist samples, tested university students' self-reported "propensity to rape" (Malamuth, 1981, p. 140). Later research has shown that this "likelihood of raping" measure covaries with subjects' actual aggression against women in laboratory and naturalistic settings, and is reliably predicted by socially transmitted rape-supportive attitudes (e.g., Briere & Malamuth, 1983; Malamuth, 1981, 1984; Malamuth & Check, 1980).

In light of the success of Malamuth's measure in approximating actual sexual aggression, the current study applied a variant of this methodology to the study of the etiology of wife battering. It was hypothesized that given a social theory of wife abuse, a relatively large number of "normal" (not clinically referred for violent behavior) university students would indicate some likelihod of battering a future wife, and that this likelihood would covary with battering-supportive attitudes and early experiences with family violence.

METHOD

One hundred ninety-one male university students participated in an "Attitude Survey" for partial course credit in introductory psychology. Included in this survey was the short form of the Attitudes Toward Women scale (AWS; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973),

and the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence scale (AIV; Burt, 1980). The AWS is a popular measure of attitudes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women in society, ranging from "conservative" to "non-traditional," whereas the AIV has been shown to be an effective predictor of sexually aggressive proclivities and behaviors in men (e.g., Briere, Corne, Runtz, & Malamuth, 1984; Malamuth, 1984). Also included in this survey was a newly created Attitudes Toward Wife Abuse scale (AWA), along with five items tapping self-reported likelihood of battering one's future wife under a variety of conditions, and two items regarding early experiences with family violence.

The items of the AWA were based on the author's clinical experience with over 100 wife batterers, which led him to hypothesize that certain attitudes and beliefs are common to this group. The scale consists of eight items, including two taken from the AIV,[1] and reflects subjects' endorsements of a variety of attitudes supportive of violence against wives (e.g., "Some women seem to ask for beatings from their husbands," and "A husband should have the right to discipline his wife when it is necessary"—see Appendix 1). Each AWA item was scored on a 7-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. This scale was intentionally composed of a relatively diverse group of items since, as noted by Golden, Sawicki, and Franzen (1984), when "the domain of interest is multidimensional [e.g., wife battering], a heterogeneous scale may be more useful" than more factorially homogeneous scales (p. 30).

The two family violence items elicited information on subjects' experiences of physical abuse as a child (ranging from beatings which caused bruising or bleeding to battering which required medical treatment) and of having witnessed one's mother being beaten by one's father. Each item was scored dichotomously as 0 (no history of violence) or 1 (a history of violence).

The likelihood of battering (LB) items were prefaced with the statement "If you were married, how likely (if at all) would you be to hit your wife in an argument if she" (followed by the five possibilities shown in Table 1) (e.g., "had sex with another man"). A range of target situations were offered both to increase the specificity of subjects' responses (e.g., one subject might batter in situation A, but not in situation B), and to reduce the defensiveness that otherwise might be engendered by a single item on overall willingness to hit one's wife. The specific scenarios used were those which, in the author's experience, are frequently presented by batterers as preceding the abuse. For each item, subjects rated their likelihood on a 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all likely* to *very likely*. As per the procedure advocated by Malamuth (e.g., 1980, 1984), these multipoint scales were then collapsed into dichotomous variables where 0 represented no likelihood and 1 represented some (greater than zero) likelihood of aggression.[2]

Statistical analysis followed a "three-tiered" multivariate approach (Briere, Downes, & Spensley, 1983). Canonical correlation analysis was done to determine the overall relationship

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[1] Two items of the AIV scale directly address wife battering, and thus were also included in the AWA. Because of these common items, the correlation between AIV and AWA may have been augmented to a minor degree. On this basis, standardized coefficients were used in the discriminant analyses of these data. This procedure considers the *unique* contribution of each variable to the total discriminant function, thereby partialing out any variance common to the two scales (Tatsuoka, 1971).

[2] Items were presented to subjects as 5-point scales in order to decrease the social undesirability potentially involved in making affirmative disclosures on forced-choice (violent versus nonviolent) likelihood items. As shown in Table 1, however (and as per Malamuth, 1981), the distribution of such items was highly skewed, precluding their use as continuous variables. A multiple regression analysis which *did* use continuous LB variables, however, produced results highly similar to the present findings.

TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF SUBJECTS ON FIVE "LIKELIHOOD OF BATTERING" (LB) VARIABLES

Variable	No likelihood (1)	Some likelihood			
		(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) If she refused to cook and keep the house clean	163(85.3%)	19	7	1	1
(2) If she had sex with another man	47(24.6%)	26	42	44	32
(3) If she refused to have sex with you	123(64.4%)	45	19	3	1
(4) If she made fun of you at a party	117(61.3%)	36	26	10	1
(5) If she told friends that you were sexually pathetic	67(35.1%)	39	42	26	17
Likelihood of at least one of the above	40(20.9%)	151(79.1%)			

between a variable set consisting of the five likelihood of battering measures (each scored dichotomously) and the set of attitude and family violence variables. Given a significant canonical correlation, five individual discriminant analyses were then performed, using the attitude and family violence measures to discriminate between subjects indicating no likelihood of battering under a specific circumstance versus subjects indicating some likelihood. Finally, simple correlations were calculated in the event of a significant discriminant function, to assess the univariate (redundant) relationship between the discriminating variables and the relevant likelihood of battering variable.

RESULTS

Most (79.1%) subjects in the current study reported some hypothetical likelihood of using physical violence in a marital relationship under at least one circumstance (see Table 1). The mean proportion of subjects indicating some likelihood of battering on any given item, averaged across all 5, was 46%. Those circumstances most frequently endorsed were if she "had sex with another man" (75.4%) and if she "told friends that you were sexually pathetic" (64.9%). Subjects were least likely to consider battering when she "refused to cook and keep the house clean" (14.7%).

Analysis of the Attitudes Toward Wife Abuse (AWA) scale indicated moderate internal consistency ($\alpha = .63$). Scores on the AWA ranged from 8 to 47, with a mean of 23.8, a median of 23.5, and a standard deviation of 7.2.

TABLE 2

MEANS FOR ATTITUDE, ABUSE, AND WITNESS VARIABLES ACCORDING TO FIVE "LIKELIHOOD OF BATTERING" VARIABLES

Likelihood variable	AWA		AWS		AIV		Abuse		Witness	
	0[a]	1[b]	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
1	22.65	30.09	46.01	40.87	3.03	3.75	0.02	0.04	0.11	0.17
2	20.40	24.77	48.33	44.30	2.70	3.27	0.00	0.03	0.09	0.13
3	22.04	26.98	46.33	43.25	2.98	3.44	0.01	0.05	0.08	0.20
4	21.75	26.84	46.18	43.89	2.97	3.39	0.01	0.05	0.10	0.14
5	21.75	24.73	46.36	44.73	2.90	3.25	0.02	0.03	0.07	0.15

[a] No likelihood.
[b] Some likelihood.

Canonical correlation analysis of subjects' attitudes and childhood experiences in relation to their LB scores revealed a significant association, $Rc = .486$, $F(25, 595.88) = 2.39$, $p < .001$. As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, subsequent discriminant function analyses found specific relationships for LB1 through LB4, but not for LB5.

Simple regression analyses indicated that all three attitude scales (AWA, AWS, AIV) were correlated with LB1 through LB4. Physical abuse as a child was correlated with LB3 and LB4, and witnessing wife battering was correlated with LB3. Inspection of the standardized discriminant coefficients indicated that the AWA made meaningful and unique contributions to the prediction of LB in three of four significant equations (LB1, LB3, LB4), whereas the AIV and AWS scales were unique predictors in, respectively, one (LB2) and two (LB1, LB2) equations. Early physical abuse and witness to battering were unique predictors in a single case (LB3).

DISCUSSION

The present data support a hypothesis that violence against wives is, to some extent, a socially acceptable phenomenon in North American culture. In the current study 79% of university males admitted to at least some likelihood of hitting a hypothetical wife in one or more of five situations. These data are similar to findings by writers such as Stark and McEnvoy (1970), who reported that approximately 20% of a sample of over 1000 American adults approve of slapping a spouse under certain circumstances. The current findings may be, in fact, conservative estimates of the social acceptability of wife abuse, given that they were derived from university students who might be less disposed to violence than might other males in the general population. It should be noted, however, that the LB items are not direct measures of wife battering, since the

TABLE 3

Discriminant Function Equations Predicting LB from Attitudes and Childhood Experiences

LB	AWA	AWS	AIV	Abuse	Witness	DFA	
						χ^2	p
1	.77(.33)	-.31(-.27)	.04(.25)	.06(.12)	.12(.12)	24.19	.0002
2	.20(.26)	-.54(-.24)	.47(.25)	.24(.09)	.08(.06)	18.89	.002
3	.70(.31)	-.22(-.25)	.02(.23)	.30(.15)	.40(.16)	25.03	.0001
4	1.04(.34)	.02(-.20)	-.14(.24)	.25(.14)	.06(.07)	22.53	.0004
5	—	—	—	—	—	9.11	ns

Note. LB = Likelihood of battering item; DFA = Discriminant function analysis statistics. Standardized discriminant function coefficients considered meaningful (italicized) when $|c| \geq .30$. Numbers in parentheses are simple correlations, italicized if $p < .05$.

LB items reflect a willingness to hit one's hypothetical spouse at a later date. Thus, they represent the subject's personal prediction of his future behavior under certain circumstances—a potential that may be countered by a variety of "real world" phenomena such as inhibitions about harming others, further maturity, characteristics of the marital relationship, etc. At minimum, the present data do suggest that such a proclivity, regardless of its ultimate behavioral result, is relatively common among university males.

The current study also suggests that certain attitudes and beliefs are associated with self-reported likelihood of battering. Attitudes Toward Wife Abuse, Attitudes Toward Women, and Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence were all correlated with four of five likelihood conditions. Discriminant analyses further indicated that each attitude scale (especially the AWA) uniquely contributed to one or more LB endorsements. Together, these data suggest that self-reported likelihood of battering exists within a matrix of socially defined conservative and violent attitudes toward women.

The effectiveness of the AWA in predicting LB, both alone and in conjunction with other measures, points to the utility of directly testing attitudes supportive of domestic violence in the study of potential wife battering. The α coefficient derived from the AWA (.63) is slightly lower than that preferred by test constructors (e.g., .7 or above), but was considered acceptable for the present study given (a) the wide variety of attitudes sampled, (b) the conservativeness of α as an estimate of reliability when a test is heterogeneous (Allen & Yen, 1979), and (c) the exploratory nature of the current investigation. In the presence of continuing middle-range reliabilities, future studies might consider augmenting the number of items in the AWA, and/or decomposing it into more homogeneous subscales.

Data on the contribution of violent childhood experiences to likelihood of battering were more equivocal than the attitude results. Physical child abuse was correlated with LB in two of five instances, and witnessing wife battering was a significant predictor in only one case. This was a relatively unexpected finding, given the reports of Stacey and Shupe (1983) and others that wife batterers are often victims of child abuse themselves. The only moderate relationship between a violent childhood and adult reports of a likelihood of battering suggests several possibilities. First, as noted by Stacey and Shupe (1983), it is possible that the role of childhood abuse may have been overstated in recent analyses of wife abusive behavior. Most studies in this area have not directly compared the childhood histories of wife batterers to equivalent control groups of nonbatterers. Thus, it is unclear to what extent the base rate of physical child abuse for the samples studied (e.g., clinical or forensic subjects)

may vary according to the presence of battering per se. Second, the university status of the present subjects may have limited the observable effects of child abuse on potential for family violence since, as noted by Runtz and Briere (in press), college samples are likely to include fewer seriously abused and seriously dysfunctional individuals. Third, verbal self-reports of willingness to hit one's wife may relate most directly to cognitive acceptance of wife battering (e.g., attitudes) as opposed to the more emotion-laden aspects of a negative childhood experience. Finally, the retrospective nature of subjects' reports of violence during childhood may have introduced error variance in these measures due to forgetting, reinterpretation, etc. With regard to this last point, however, it should be noted that many recent studies of child abuse effects (e.g., Briere, 1984; Briere & Runtz, in press; Finkelhor, 1979) support the validity of such retrospective data. In any event, the current data appear to be more supportive of a social psychological explanation of wife abuse than of a primarily ideographic/clinical perspective emphasizing childhood trauma alone. Additional research is indicated in this area, however, both to further validate the construct validity of LB variables and to replicate this methodology in the prediction of actual violence against wives. The latter might be approximated in a university sample, for example, by using males' self-reported physical violence against female partners in "date" relationships as a criterion variable.

In conclusion, the present study provides evidence that self-reported likelihood of battering one's wife is associated with attitudes and beliefs supportive of family violence and, to a lesser degree, a history of childhood exposure to violence. To the extent that these self-reports can be generalized to actual aggression, such data indicate a significant psychosocial component to wife battering, and suggest the potential utility of social/educational interventions in the prevention and treatment of such behavior.

APPENDIX 1: THE ATTITUDES TOWARD WIFE ABUSE (AWA) SCALE

1. A wife should move out of the house if her husband hits her.[a]
2. A man is never justified in hitting his wife.[a]
3. A husband should have the right to discipline his wife when it is necessary.
4. A man's home is his castle.
5. A man should be arrested if he hits his wife.[a]
6. A man is entitled to sex with his wife whenever he wants it.
7. Wife beating is grounds for divorce.[a]
8. Some women seem to ask for beatings from their husbands.

[a] Items scored in reverse.

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