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Assessment of Wife Assault with the Conflict Tactics Scale: Using Couple Data to Quantify the Differential Reporting Effect

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The Straus Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) has been used frequently in past research to assess incidents of assault between spouses. The majority of these studies have relied on CTS scores from only one member of a couple. Szinovacz (1983) corrected this shortcoming by administering the CTS to 103 nonassaultive couples. In the current study the CTS was administered to 30 assaultive couples where the husband was undergoing treatment for wife assault. Differential reporting was found whereby husbands tend to view their marital relationship as mutually violent, while wives view it as husband-violent. Except when weapons were implicated, the husband-wife correlation on specific items of the CTS ranged from +.32 to +.57, indicating considerable disparity in recall for violence. The methodological and clinical implications of these findings are discussed.

Marital therapists have noticed the phenomenon of differential reporting in their work with couples (e.g., Jacobson and Margolin, 1979; Wile, 1981), and the issue has received attention in the marital research literature as well (e.g., Safilios-Rothschild, 1969; Olson and Cromwell, 1975; Jacobson and Moore, 1981; Quarm, 1981; Thompson and Walker, 1982). Despite evidence from these sources that spousal agreement is usually poor, the predominant methodological approach to research on the family has been to

obtain self-report information from only one respondent (Klein, 1982, as cited in Szinovacz, 1983).

The area of domestic violence has been particularly plagued with methodological problems, including (a) the use of vague or unstandardized measures, (b) lack of control groups, and (c) inattention to the offender as the respondent (Rosenbaum and O'Leary, 1981; Dutton and Browning, 1983). Most information about wife assault to this point has come from studies using interviews with victims. On the basis of a literature review and some preliminary research in which the offenders were respondents, Browning (1984b) concluded that there was a risk of producing two separate literatures on wife assault—one stemming from victim reports and another from offender reports.

Straus (1979) has developed a standardized scale with which to measure the frequency and severity of family violence called the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). The CTS has been widely used in survey research (e.g., Straus, 1977; Straus, Gelles,

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and Steinmetz, 1980) and has been adapted for use in some clinical settings (Stordeur, 1983; Browning, 1984a). In an attempt to demonstrate the validity of the CTS, Bulcroft and Straus (1975) correlated students' ratings of their parents' spousal violence with the parents' own ratings. They found a correlation of $+.64$ for husband-student reports and $+.33$ for wife-student reports. Correlations between spouses' ratings have not been available from Straus, because he has not collected CTS ratings from both partners in the same couple. However, when Szinovacz (1983) gave a modified version of the CTS to 103 middle-class married couples, she found little agreement between spouses on the occurrence of specific violent behaviors, but moderate agreement on whether or not violence, in general, had occurred. She also noted that aggregate husband-wife data tended to obscure differences that were apparent when couple data were used. Szinovacz concluded that the generalizability of the findings was limited by the modest size of her assaultive subsample.

The intent of this paper is to present CTS couple data derived from a clinical sample of wife assaulters. The purpose is to examine further the differential reporting of violence and to extend the data base on the CTS by drawing on a population where the violence is sufficiently frequent and severe to allow statistical analysis.

METHOD

Sample

The clinical sample consisted of 30 couples in which the husband had been referred to one of two groups in the Vancouver area that provide therapy for assaultive husbands—the Assaultive Husbands Project¹ and the Redirecting Anger Group for Men.² Five men were attending as a condition of their probation; the remaining 25 men were attending on a voluntary basis. Demographic information was available for the men only. The average age of the men was 34.3 ($SD = 6.8$); average years married was 8.2 ($SD = 5.4$); modal occupation was skilled laborer; average years of schooling was 11.0 ($SD = 2.2$). Only two men had attended college and only six were employed in white-collar occupations.

Procedure

The men were asked to fill out the CTS-Form N as part of the research component of the therapy groups. The men completed the CTS in the presence of a male therapist within five weeks of beginning the therapy. Demographic information was collected from standard intake forms for

the groups. CTS ratings were obtained from each man's spouse in one of two ways: (a) during a standard clinical interview that took place as part of the assessment process or (b) if an interview was not possible, by sending the woman a copy of the CTS with detailed instructions and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Sixteen women were interviewed and 14 completed the form through the mail.

The Conflict Tactics Scale

The CTS-Form N is described in an article by Straus (1979). It consists of three subscales, which tap reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical violence as means of dealing with disagreements. Only the violence subscale will be presented here. This subscale consists of eight items, ranging in severity from "threw something at the other one" to "used a knife or gun" (see Table 3 for a list of the items). Each spouse was asked to rate on a frequency scale how often each behavior had been performed by themselves and their spouse during the past year. The frequency scale ranged from zero ("never") to 6 ("more than 20 times"). Straus's regular scoring system, which involves summing the frequency ratings over the eight items, allowed a range of possible scores from zero to 48.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for husband's and wife's ratings are presented in Table 1. A one-way repeated-measures analysis of variance, conducted to test for an overall difference among the means, yielded a significant result, $F(3, 87) = 26.045$; $p < .001$. Tukey a posteriori comparisons were then calculated to assess specific differences between (a) husband's and wife's ratings of husband violence, (b) husband's and wife's ratings of wife violence, (c) husband's ratings of husband violence and wife violence, and (d) wife's ratings of husband violence and wife violence. The results indicated that the wives rated significantly more violence for their husbands than the husbands acknowledged for themselves ($p < .01$). While the husbands reported slightly more violence for their wives than the wives acknowledged for themselves, this difference was not statistically significant. The wives perceived significantly more

TABLE 1. MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR HUSBAND'S AND WIFE'S CTS SCORES

	Husband's Rating		Wife's Rating	
Husband violence	9.27	(7.19)	17.33	(9.75)
Wife violence	6.67	(6.29)	3.90	(4.37)

TABLE 2. MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR SPECIFIC CTS ITEMS

Item	Husband's Rating of Husband Violence	Wife's Rating of Husband Violence	Husband's Rating of Wife Violence	Wife's Rating of Wife Violence
Threw something at the other one	1.27 (1.57)	2.17 (2.29)	1.13 (1.38)	1.07 (1.57)
Pushed, grabbed, or shoved	2.50 (1.36)	3.87 (1.68)	1.67 (1.54)	1.07 (1.48)
Slapped	1.63 (1.61)	2.97 (2.11)	0.93 (1.17)	0.60 (1.10)
Kicked, bit, or hit with a fist	1.37 (1.38)	2.67 (2.02)	1.17 (1.44)	0.53 (0.86)
Hit or tried to hit with something	0.93 (1.41)	2.33 (2.11)	1.13 (1.55)	0.63 (1.07)
Beat up	1.17 (1.44)	2.13 (2.01)	0.07 (0.37)	0.03 (0.18)
Threatened with a knife or a gun	0.30 (0.88)	0.60 (1.16)	0.37 (1.22)	0.07 (0.25)
Used a knife or a gun	0.07 (0.25)	0.23 (0.50)	0.13 (0.57)	—

violence by their husbands than by themselves ($p < .01$), while husbands' ratings of husband violence and wife violence did not differ significantly.

Spouses' perceptions of the overall "relationship violence" were then examined. For the purposes of this analysis, a spouse was deemed to view the relationship as "equally violent" if the couple's husband and wife scores were within one point in either direction, and "husband violent" or "wife violent" if scores for husband or wife violence differed by at least two points. On the basis of this format, 26 of the 30 wives perceived the relationship to be "husband violent"; 2 saw it as "wife violent"; and 2 saw it as "equally violent." In contrast, only 14 husbands viewed the relationship as "husband violent"; 7 viewed it as "wife violent"; and 9 saw it as "equally violent." In summary, while wives almost universally saw the relationship as "husband violent," less than half of the husbands had a similar perception.

Table 2 contains a list of means and standard deviations for ratings on specific CTS items. Table 3 lists correlations between husband's and wife's ratings for husband violence and for wife violence on each CTS item and the total violence

score. Spousal ratings of husband violence were positively and significantly correlated for each specific item as well as total violence. The relationship between the ratings appears to be stronger for more severe forms of violence (e.g., items ranging from "kicked, bit, or hit with a fist" to "used a knife or gun"). Spousal ratings of wife violence are also positively correlated, with the exception of "beat up," although most are weak and nonsignificant statistically. Total spousal ratings of wife assault (summed over specific violence items) were not significantly correlated in this sample.

DISCUSSION

The finding that both spouses report more violence for their partner than they are willing to acknowledge for themselves is consistent with Gelles's (1979) assertion that spouses tend to be more likely to report their own victimization rather than their own use of violence. Possibly the most interesting finding from a clinical point of view is that the husbands tend to see the relationship as mutually violent, whereas the wives view the relationship as husband-violent. This clearly demonstrates the phenomenon of differential reporting in this assaultive population and is con-

TABLE 3. PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR SPOUSAL RATINGS OF VIOLENCE

Item	Husband's & Wife's Ratings of Husband Violence	Husband's & Wife's Ratings of Wife Violence
Threw something at the other one	+.32*	+.52**
Pushed, grabbed, or shoved	+.38*	+.07
Slapped	+.41*	+.25
Kicked, bit, or hit with fist	+.57***	+.40*
Hit or tried to hit with something	+.49**	+.32*
Beat up	+.47**	-.03
Threatened with a knife or a gun	+.80***	+.25
Used a knife or a gun	+.68***	—
Total score	+.65	+.26

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

sistent with clinical descriptions of the assaultive husband's minimization of the violence and externalization of blame (cf. Ganley, 1981), or what Bandura (1979) calls the "neutralization of self-punishment." Of course, these data do not allow us to make any conclusive statements about the actual level of violence in the relationship.

It is clear from the "perceived relationship violence" figures that there is some variation among the husbands in their perceptions of the violence. Almost half acknowledge that they are the more violent partner (at least in terms of frequency of violence), while the other half perceive the relationship as mutually violent or wife-violent. While these ratings cannot be taken as absolute indicators of denial, they can cue the clinician to assess more thoroughly any potential denial in a particular client. Having access to wives' reports of violence is obviously helpful in this cuing process.

The husband's view of the relationship as mutually violent concurs with our observation in the clinical setting that the men tend to discount the differential consequences of male and female violence. Many assaultive husbands emphasize the frequency of violence, while ignoring the fact that their actions caused severe injury or hospitalization to their wives. One of the major weaknesses of the CTS itself is that it does not consider injury resulting from the violent act nor the context of the act and, as a result, tends to equate male and female violence (Straus, 1981). It is useful to keep in mind that the current sample of assaultive men may be atypical inasmuch as the men are involved in treatment. One could argue that the men might see themselves as unfairly pressured into seeking therapy and consequently minimize their own role as an aggressor. On the other hand, men willing to succumb to this pressure may externalize and deny *less* than the average assaulter. Similarly, the women in this sample may be atypical in that they have managed to pressure their husbands into treatment (i.e., they may be more acutely aware of their husband's violence). The issue of generalization is an empirical one and could be addressed by survey research using couple data. However, the generalization of present findings to other clinical populations seems warranted.

In terms of the correlations between the husband's and the wife's reports of the husband's violence, the increase in the strength of agreement for the more severe forms of husband violence is consistent with Straus's (1979) assertion that more dramatic, emotionally charged behaviors are better remembered by family members. Agreement between spouses on wife violence was much poorer for most items and for the total violence

score. Bulcroft and Straus (1975) also found overall agreement to be lower for wife violence, although in Szinovacz's (1983) sample, agreement was *higher* for wife violence. The reasons for the poor agreement on wife violence in this sample and in Bulcroft and Straus's sample (1975) are not readily apparent. Straus (1977) makes a sensible argument that wife violence should be over-reported because it violates sex role expectations and is therefore more memorable. However, if wife violence is more memorable, there should be higher agreement on its occurrence. Perhaps in relationships where there is extreme male violence, female violence is overshadowed, less accurately remembered, and therefore more open to post hoc bias in the reconstruction phase of the reporting. The fact that the context of data collection was a treatment group for male assaultive behavior may also have increased the focus on male violence and consequently improved agreement.

While these correlations indicate unilaterally that the CTS was a poor measure of wife violence in this sample, conclusions are less clear for husband violence. A correlation of $+ .65$ could be characterized as an indication of rather poor interrater reliability or moderately good concurrent validity, depending on how the statistic is interpreted. What is clear is that gross discrepancies in perceptions of violence often occur between spouses, and despite a positive correlation, the wives almost always rate more husband violence than the husband does. Therefore, it would seem prudent when conducting research with the wife assaulter to obtain measures of violence from both husband and wife so that both ratings may be considered in group selection or correlation with theoretically relevant variables.

FOOTNOTES

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2. The Redirecting Anger Group for Men is a program sponsored by Family Services of Greater Vancouver. The authors thank Deryl Goldenberg for his assistance in data collection.

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