VIOLENT ACTS AND INJURIOUS OUTCOMES IN MARRIED COUPLES: Methodological Issues in the National Survey of Families and Households

LISA D. BRUSH
University of Wisconsin—Madison

This analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) confirmed earlier findings: Much of the violence between married partners occurred in couples in which both partners were reported as perpetrators, and women as well as men committed violent acts in married couples. However, the NSFH data indicated that the probabilities of injury for male and female respondents differed significantly, with wives more likely to be injured than husbands. The NSFH differentiated between violent acts and injurious outcomes and provided an empirical rebuttal of the "battered husband syndrome." At the same time, the NSFH reproduced many of the problems of quantitative surveys as they are currently used to measure the incidence and consequences of intimate violence. The article discusses the major problems with both the content and the context of currently employed survey methodology, as exemplified by the NSFH.

This article presents the results of a study of violence and injury in married couples. The first section discusses feminist and nonfeminist approaches to violence in married couples. The second section presents an empirical dispute

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The National Survey of Families and Households was funded by a grant (HD21009) from the Center for Population Research at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The survey was designed and carried out at the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin—Madison under the direction of Larry Bumpass and James Sweet. The field work was done by the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University. The author acknowledges the support of Julia Adams, Hank Bromley, Larry Bumpass, Myra Marx Ferree, Elaine Fielding, Aldi Hagenaars, Nathan Janusz, Mary Klobucar, Judith Lorber, Lynn Magdol, Wendy Manning, Sara McLanahan, Patricia Miller, Beth Reninger, Laura Sanchez, Daniel Saunders, Judith Seltzer, James Sweet, and Elizabeth Thomson. Although this article would have been impossible without them, none of the people acknowledged above is responsible for errors of commission or omission remaining in the analysis or discussion.*

REPRINT REQUESTS: *Lisa D. Brush, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1180 Observatory Drive, Madison, WI 53706.*

GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 4 No. 1, March 1990 56-67

between the two approaches. The third section introduces the data set (the National Survey of Families and Households [NSFH]) and delineates the research design used to rebut the "battered husband syndrome" reported by previous researchers. The fourth section presents the findings of a multivariate log-linear analysis of the data on violent acts and injuries in the 5,474 married couples in the NSFH. The article concludes with a discussion of the problems of using NSFH-type survey data to study intimate violence.

PARADIGMS

Researchers interested in intimate violence deploy two main frameworks in their investigations. One group of researchers conducts their inquiries and presents their results in the context of "family systems." Researchers like Straus and his collaborators view violent acts in married couples as a specific instance of the violence endemic to society, which they deplore. Their research has contributed to our understanding of the household as a dangerously violent place for many people and has pioneered the use of surveys to gather data on domestic violence. Methodologically, these researchers are primarily concerned with generating reliable measures of the incidence of violent acts. Researchers use variants of Straus's Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) to measure the frequency with which respondents report a continuum of confrontational tactics, such as using reason, bringing in someone else to support a position, shouting, hitting, and threatening with a weapon (see, for example, Gelles and Straus 1988; Straus 1987; Straus and Gelles 1986; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980).

According to feminist critics of this approach, the measures of violence in Straus's CTS are inadequate to the task of describing or analyzing intimate violence because they confound acts with outcomes and lump together settings and persons. A "family systems" approach, critics claim, overlooks important gendered variations in norms, legitimation, and above all, power. A man's striking a woman has different effects, consequences, and meanings than a woman's striking a man, these feminists hold, which the universalizing effect of the "family systems" approach obscures. In the "family systems" paradigm, the vital question of self-defense and the context of violent acts goes unexplored, women's actions are misinterpreted and misrepresented, and the dynamics of domestic violence are misunderstood (Breines and Gordon 1983; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Kurz 1989; Saunders 1988a, 1988b).

Some researchers and activists combine the concern with power dynamics and woman abuse from the feminist approach and the concern with domestic

violence in general from the more universalistic "family systems" perspective. These investigators analyze abuse of an intimate partner ("battering") as a social relation. They focus on relationships of domination rather than individual acts of violence. This approach holds that while acts of violence may be mutual, power relations are not; it is impossible to be dominant and subordinate in the same relationship simultaneously (Card 1988). This analysis recognizes the prevalence of violence in society and women's own violence. At the same time, it emphasizes women's definition and analysis of their experiences and promotes a feminist critique of intimacy, power, and safety. In particular, Hart's work (1986) on battered lesbians indicates that there is more to woman abuse than gender issues and suggests that researchers must be clearer about what questions, data, and analysis further understanding of the complex and painful issue of violence between intimate partners.

AN EMPIRICAL DISPUTE

A long-standing empirical dispute in violence research involves quantitative comparisons of reports of violent acts by husbands and wives. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) reported that 12.1 percent of male and 11.6 percent of female respondents reported violent acts toward their partners during the course of a conflict in the year covered by their survey of 2,143 opposite-gender couples. An update of these results by Straus and Gelles (1986) showed that the overall rate of husband-to-wife violence was 11.3 percent and the overall rate of wife-to-husband violence was 12.1 percent in 1985. The differences between the two periods were not statistically significant nor were the differences between the reported rates of husbands' violence toward wives and wives' violence toward husbands in either period. Steinmetz (1978; see also Steinmetz and Lucca 1988) cited evidence from the original survey and other sources to support her claim that women's violence toward their partners constituted a "battered husband syndrome." Her results continue to be cited by men's rights groups lobbying for custody, child support, and shelter reforms (Ansberry 1988; Fathers for Equal Rights Organization 1988; McNeely and Robinson-Simpson 1987). In part because they were appropriated by antifeminist groups, the findings stirred controversy, despite disclaimers attached to the report and subsequent reappraisals by at least one of the principal investigators (Straus 1987).

Many researchers questioned the methods and assumptions behind Steinmetz's initial report of a "battered husband syndrome." Their comments

fell into three categories. The earliest critics claimed that Steinmetz distorted her research findings and fabricated her claim from improperly reported data (Pleck et al. 1978). A second group concentrated on extending the analysis of data similar to that used by Steinmetz in ways that temper the potentially antifeminist implications of Steinmetz's results (see, for example, Wendt 1986). A third group, made up primarily of feminist critics, specifically questioned the focus on violent acts, instead of the outcomes of those acts (Breines and Gordon 1983; Dobash and Dobash 1979).

In an effort to resolve the debate over the "battered husband syndrome," this study used quantitative data from a random national survey to look not only at the incidence of acts of violence but also at the incidence of injurious outcomes of those violent acts. This article reports the analysis of data collected in the NSFH. The analysis replicated the finding of no significant difference between men and women in committing violent acts but refuted the "battered husband syndrome" by showing that women were more likely to be hurt than men were, even in situations in which both partners were reported as being violent.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data

The NSFH was a national, multistage, area probability sample survey of the United States population of persons aged 19 and older, living in households. Respondents were interviewed in either English or Spanish. Data were collected in face-to-face interviews over a 14-month period ending in May 1988. The survey included a cross-section sample of 9,643 households plus a double sampling of blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and recently married couples. The total sample (main plus oversample) consisted of 13,017 primary respondents (for details on sampling method, oversample, interviewer training, and survey content and development, see Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988). A self-enumerated section of the questionnaire posed questions about couple relationships, including violence. In an effort to produce figures at least roughly comparable to previous surveys, the analysis was limited to married primary respondents living with a spouse (unweighted total N = 5,474) in the main and oversamples.

The self-enumerated portion of the questionnaire included a section on how couples handle disagreements, with questions about the frequency with

which disagreements "become physical" and result in the respondent or partner (or both) acting violently and being hurt. The questionnaire asked specifically if the respondent or partner (or both) was hurt, not if one or the other of them had to seek medical attention or call the police. Thus help-seeking behavior was not confounded with injuries (this has been a consistent problem in violence research; see, for instance, Gelles and Straus 1985, 14). For the questions about violent acts, the time frame was "during the past year." For the questions about injury, the time frame was "ever [in the current relationship]." The response rate on the questions of interest was about 90 percent for both male and female respondents.

Variables

Four questions from the self-enumerated questionnaire of the NSFH explicitly measured couple violence and injury. The first two asked about violent acts: *During the past year, how many fights with your partner resulted in YOU hitting, shoving, or throwing things at him/her?* and *During the past year, how many fights with your partner resulted in HIM/HER hitting, shoving, or throwing things at you?* These two questions were coded on a frequency scale (none, once, twice, three or more times), but because of the rareness of the event, they were recoded as dichotomous variables. The second two asked about injurious outcomes: *Have YOU ever been cut, bruised, or seriously injured in a fight with your partner?* and *Has your PARTNER ever been cut, bruised, or seriously injured in a fight with you?* These two questions were coded as dichotomous variables. Both pairs of questions followed what was intended to act as a sort question about how often disagreements became "physical" and thus were supposed to be answered only if fights actually "became physical."

These questions yielded two sets of dependent variables. First, a set of dichotomous variables indicated whether or not a given respondent reported being violent toward his or her partner (*rhit*), the partner's being violent toward the respondent (*phit*), the respondent's being injured by the partner (*rhurt*), or the partner's being injured by the respondent (*phurt*). Second, reports were categorized according to whether neither partner, both partners, the man only, or the woman only was reported as hitting (*hit*) or being hurt (*hurt*).

The primary independent variable was gender of respondent (man was the excluded category). Control variables, all constructed as dummy variables, included age (under 30 was the excluded category), race (white was the excluded category), marriage (first marriage was the excluded category), education (no high school degree was the excluded category), and presence

of children under 18 in the household (no children was the excluded category). These variables were chosen to control for the effects of using the entire sample (which overrepresented some age, race, marriage, and parenting groups) and to control for effects previous researchers have hypothesized as important in explaining the variance in violence across different groups (see, for example, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980).

FINDINGS

The NSFH data confirmed earlier evidence of women's acting violently in couples. There was no significant difference between wives and husbands in these respondents' reports of hitting, shoving, or throwing things in the current relationship. As one would expect from previously reported studies, among couples in which any violence occurred, the most common response (women, 3.4 percent; men 2.9 percent) was that both partners acted violently.

Critics of results based on the CTS have concentrated on the different outcomes of violence for men and women. A woman is more likely to sustain injury from violent acts by a man than vice versa, the argument goes. The NSFH data indicated that women were more likely than men (1.1 to 0.2 percent) to report that the woman was injured and also that only the man was injured (0.4 to 0.2 percent). Women's reports of their own injuries were 2.5 times men's reports of women's injuries in all cases in which women were hurt. Moreover, in cases in which women alone were reported injured, women reported a rate 5.5 times that which men reported about them. Thus, while men reported that men and women were hurt with equal frequency, women reported that women were hurt 2.75 times more than men.

Further analysis of the injury variable required testing the significance of the gender difference, controlling for other variables. It was female respondents' reports of their own injuries that accounted for differences between the levels of injury male and female respondents reported; therefore, only the *rhurt* variable was used in the remaining analyses. Because the dependent variable, *rhurt*, was dichotomous, and injury was a rare event, a log-linear model was used. Logit analyses using the control variables specified above did not eliminate the gender difference in reporting respondent's injury. Although there was a significant improvement in the fit of the models when the control variables were added, the difference in the probabilities of male and female respondents' being hurt remained significant. Age was the only other significant variable, with the probability of injury decreasing for respondents over 30 years of age (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Maximum Likelihood Estimates of Log-Odds of Respondent's Being Cut, Bruised, or Seriously Injured

	Base Model		*Full Model*	
	Coefficient	*Standard Error*	*Coefficient*	*Standard Error*
Intercept	-5.063	0.259	-4.543	0.485
Gender				
Women	0.873*	0.307	0.796*	0.310
Race				
Black			0.466	0.422
Other			0.754	0.413
Marital Status				
Second or more marriage			0.260	0.343
Age				
Over 30			-0.832*	0.300
Education				
High school, GED			0.041	0.374
Postsecondary			-0.292	0.454
College degree			-1.074	0.595
Children under 18				
One			0.012	0.393
Two			0.473	0.344
Three or more			-0.422	0.512
Log-likelihood	-283.30		-271.79**	
df	1		11	
N = 5474				

SOURCE: National Survey of Families and Households data file, version 1212. The data here include all married couples with spouse present in the household, in the main and oversamples, unweighted.
*Coefficient significant at .05 level; **chi-square test of improvement of fit between models is significant at .025 level.

The final step in the analysis of the NSFH data was to look specifically at respondents' reports of injuries when both partners were reported as acting violently. From the entire sample, the 154 cases in which both partners were violent were selected and then tested for gender differences in responses in the *rhurt* variable. While adding the control variables to the model did not significantly improve the fit of the model, in the full model, the probability of female respondents being hurt was significantly higher than that of male

TABLE 2
Maximum Likelihood Estimates of Log-Odds of Respondent's Being Cut, Bruised, or Seriously Injured, Given Both Partners Are Reported as Acting Violently

	Base Model		*Full Model*	
	Coefficient	*Standard Error*	*Coefficient*	*Standard Error*
Intercept	-1.680	0.328	-1.682	0.639
Gender				
Women	0.704	0.410	0.937*	0.451
Race				
Black			-0.093	0.608
Other			1.142	0.710
Marital status				
Second or more marriage			-0.064	0.530
Age				
Over 30			0.926	0.473
Education				
High school, GED			0.537	0.579
Postsecondary			-0.777	0.694
College degree			-0.767	0.795
Children under 18				
One			-1.058	0.575
Two			-0.555	0.555
Three or more			-1.759*	0.816
Log-likelihood	-79.75		-71.07	
df	1		11	
N = 154				

SOURCE: National Survey of Families and Households data file, version 1212. The data here include all married couples with spouse present in the household, in the main and oversamples, unweighted, in which both partners are reported as acting violently.
*Coefficient significant at .05 level.

respondents. Among these respondents, having three or more children under 18 in the household was the only other significant variable (see Table 2).

DISCUSSION

The data analysis presented in this article showed that, while NSFH respondents confirmed that women were not any more pacific than men in

the course of disagreements, women were more likely than men to report that they were injured in the course of disagreements with their partners. This result held even for those cases in which both men and women were violent. These findings empirically refute the "battered husband syndrome." At the same time, they demonstrate the importance of developing innovative methods of eliciting information about intimate violence from survey respondents.

The overall levels of reported violent acts were considerably lower in the NSFH than in previous surveys. There are several plausible explanations. First, no questions directly comparable to those asked in previous studies appeared in the NSFH. Second, the short series of questions in the NSFH did not have the same desensitizing effect as the longer series in surveys based more closely on the CTS, which may have made respondents less willing to respond honestly to the NSFH. Third, the NSFH questions appeared in the middle of a lengthy interview, so respondents were more likely to be tired or inattentive than in surveys aimed exclusively at determining the incidence of domestic violence. Fourth, the NSFH asked only general questions about acts and outcomes, compared to the detail of studies based more closely on Straus's CTS. While the NSFH questions did not mix acts of physical and verbal aggression in the same question, the questions did include a range of acts or outcomes in a single measure, which may have produced underestimates of the incidence of violence and injury. Fifth, the time spans covered by the NSFH questions about violent acts and injurious outcomes do not replicate exactly previous research, rendering comparisons of incidence problematic. Finally, the salience of the issue may also be lower in the minds of respondents to NSFH than in the minds of respondents to surveys specifically aimed at the violence issue, again leading to underestimates of violence and injury.

The NSFH overcame a serious flaw in earlier research on intimate violence by asking questions that differentiated between violent acts and injurious outcomes. However, because it was designed in part to facilitate replication of earlier results, the violence section of the NSFH reproduced some of the problems of earlier studies, including underestimation of violence rates. Like the CTS, the NSFH interview schedule referred to violence only in the context of disagreements, although violent and nonviolent abuse may occur without a precipitating disagreement. Similarly, the NSFH included no measure of sexual violence. The NSFH failed to consider the extent to which nonviolent argumentative techniques are used as tools of intimidation and domination in abusive relationships. The questionnaire did not ask

about the use of suicide threats or the use of violence or threats of violence to property, pets, children, or other relatives as forms of domination and control. It did not ask about who initiated the violence or consider self-defense. Furthermore, the NSFH survey reproduced the most serious failing of quantitative research on intimate violence because it did not enable researchers to investigate the context (other than disagreements) or meanings of violent acts and their outcomes for the perpetrators or survivors of violence. Thus the NSFH not only precluded any graduated analysis of the severity of violent acts and injuries but also failed to measure any gender differences in the consequences (other than injury) and meanings of intimate violence.

Survey instruments characteristically used to conduct quantitative research on intimate violence have reproduced a bias toward nonfeminist interpretations of power and violence in relationships. The flaws in survey instruments that generate this bias are not limited to the content of interview questions. The most important barrier to adequate assessments of the extent and dimensions of intimate violence through surveys is the context of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. To elicit adequate information about the highly stigmatized, traumatic phenomenon of battering requires an infusion of trust, safety, and intimacy into the interviewing relationship. Methods of empirical inquiry used in battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers, consciousness-raising groups, and explicitly feminist research provide models for the transformation in survey methods that would establish new research practices and relationships, appropriate to studying violence (see Heldke 1988; Knorr-Cetina 1981, 1982; Smith 1979, 1987).

Although they are the only likely remedy to the problems of standard survey research, experimental survey methods like those advocated and practiced by some feminists are unlikely to receive financial support in the current research climate. Nationwide, face-to-face surveys are expensive to mount and funding is scarce and dependent largely on male-dominated state and scientific bureaucracies. The principal investigators on such projects are generally researchers with little or no commitment to feminist scholarship. Moreover, feminist analysts of violence exhibit a pervasive and profound skepticism of quantitative survey methods. Thus the researchers most likely to be able and motivated to make the necessary improvements in the content and context of surveys on violence are least likely to have access to the resources such changes require. Nevertheless, this is the direction in which the feminist critique of recent quantitative violence research calls investigators to move.

REFERENCES

Ansberry, C. 1988. Calling sexes equal in domestic violence, article stirs clash among rights groups. *Wall Street Journal,* 5 May.

Breines, W. and L. Gordon. 1983. The new scholarship on family violence. *Signs* 8:490-531.

Card, C. 1988. Lesbian battering. American Philosophical Association *Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 1 (November):3-7.

Dobash, R. E. and R. Dobash. 1979. *Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy.* New York: Free Press.

Fathers for Equal Rights Organization, Inc. 1988. *Father's Review* (February):1.

Gelles, R. J. and M. A. Straus. 1985. Physical violence in American families – A resurvey. New York: Louis Harris and Associates. Typescript of questionnaire.

———. 1988. *Intimate violence.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hart, B. 1986. Lesbian battering: An examination. In *Naming the violence: Speaking out about lesbian battering,* edited by Kerry Lorbel. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.

Heldke, L. 1988. Recipes for theory making. *Hypatia* 3:15-29.

Knorr-Cetina, K. D. 1981. *The manufacture of knowledge.* New York: Pergamon.

———. 1982. The constructivist programme in the sociology of science: Retreats or advances? *Social Studies of Science* 12:320-24.

Kurz, D. 1989. Social science perspectives on wife abuse: Current debates and future directions. *Gender & Society* 3:489-505.

McNeely, R. L. and G. Robinson-Simpson. 1987. The truth about domestic violence: A falsely framed issue. *Social Work* 32:485-90.

Pleck, E., J. H. Pleck, M. Grossman, and P. Bart. 1978. The battered data syndrome: A comment on Steinmetz's article. *Victimology* 2:680-84.

Saunders, D. G. 1988a. Wife abuse, husband abuse, or mutual combat? A feminist perspective on the empirical findings. In *Feminist perspectives on wife abuse,* edited by K. Yllö and M. Bograd. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

———. 1988b. Other "truths" about domestic violence: A reply to McNeely and Robinson-Simpson. *Social Work* 33:179-83.

Smith, D. 1979. A sociology for women. In *The prism of sex: Essays in the sociology of knowledge,* edited by J. Sherman and E. T. Beck. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

———. 1987. *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology.* Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Steinmetz, S. K. 1978. The battered husband syndrome. *Victimology* 2:499-509.

Steinmetz, S. K. and J. S. Lucca. 1988. Husband battering. In *Handbook of family violence,* edited by V. B. Van Hasselt et al. New York: Plenum.

Straus, M. A. 1987. The Conflict Tactics Scales: An evaluation and new data on validity, reliability, norms, and scoring methods. Paper presented at the Annual Meetings, National Council on Family Relations.

Straus, M. A. and R. J. Gelles. 1986. Societal change and change in family violence from 1975 to 1985 as revealed by two national surveys. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 48:465-79.

Straus, M. A., R. J. Gelles, and S. K. Steinmetz. 1980. *Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family.* Garden City, NY: Anchor.

Sweet, J., L. Bumpass, and V. Call. 1988. The design and content of the National Survey of Families and Households. Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for Demography and Ecology.

Wendt, M. J. 1986. Violent interaction between American couples. M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin—Madison.

Lisa D. Brush is a graduate student in sociology at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Her interests include feminist theories, practices, and institutions, social policy and welfare state history, and the responses of gay men and lesbians to antigay violence.