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The Normative Protection of Women from Violence

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The literature on the relationship between violence against women and a norm protecting women (NPW) is reviewed. I suggest that the effects of the NPW are suppressed because violence against women tends to occur in intimate relations and such disputes tend to be kept private. The offsetting effects of NPW and intimacy (or relational distance) are demonstrated in a study of 384 self-reported violent disputes. In support of an NPW effect, I find that disputes are more likely to be reported to the police if an attack on a woman is witnessed by third parties. This gender effect is offset by the fact that disputes between intimates tend to be concealed from the police and from witnesses.

KEY WORDS: violence against women; norm protecting women; intimacy; relational distance; violent disputes; chivalry.

INTRODUCTION

Some scholars view male violence against women as normative behavior (e.g., Archer, 1994; Bograd, 1988; Dobash and Dobash, 1979). From this perspective, patriarchal societies allow husbands to use violence to control their wives, and men to use violence to dominate women (Brownmiller, 1975; Cazenave and Zahn, 1992; Lips, 1991). The legal system and the larger male-dominated society tolerate and even support violence against women in order to maintain male domination.

I present an alternative point of view in this paper. I suggest that violence against women is antinormative or deviant behavior, and that it

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violates a special norm protecting women (NPW) from harm. That norm discourages would-be attackers and encourages third parties to intervene on behalf of women who are under attack. However, that protection is undermined by the fact that violence toward women usually occurs in marriage and other intimate relations, and therefore often does not come to the attention of the legal system and other third parties. The privacy of intimate relations, not tolerance for violence against women, leaves some women vulnerable to male violence.

I am not arguing that women *should* receive special protections. A norm protective of women may have various consequences that we view as negative. For example, the norm might limit women's opportunities by encouraging their dependence on men or by reinforcing stereotypes. Concerns about such negative consequences, however, should not blind us to the possibility that the norm has the proximate effect of deterring violence against women.[2]

I begin with a rather lengthy review of the literature on the NPW. Evidence of gender effects on both potential adversaries and third parties is discussed. I devote considerable attention to this literature since it has never been reviewed before, and since the existence of an NPW is so controversial. In the second section, I review the literature on the effects of intimacy (or relational distance) on third-party intervention and examine the implication of intimacy effects for the protection of women. Finally, I present an empirical study that demonstrates the offsetting effects of gender and relational distance on the likelihood that violent disputes are reported to the police.

THE NORMATIVE PROTECTION OF WOMEN

The NPW apparently protects females from females as well as males, and from nonhuman as well as human sources. For example, maritime rules give females priority over males in accessing lifeboats from a sinking ship. Also, neither gender is willing to deliver shocks to females in some of the experiments cited below. However, there may also be a special rule forbidding male violence against females.

The source of the NPW is unclear. The norm may be related to the physical and structural vulnerability of women. Women are physically vul-

[2]Ambivalence about special protection for women is not new. For example, in Victorian England, women's groups differed in their attitudes toward breach of promise suits against men who proposed marriage and then reneged (Frost, 1995). Some objected to the dependence of women implied by these suits while others were reluctant to take away the protection these suits provided.

nerable because they tend to be smaller and physically weaker than men. Their structural vulnerability is the result of their position in patriarchal marriages and societies. For example, in Victorian England, judicial decisions used the economic dependence of women on marriage to justify breach of promise suits against men who reneged on marriage proposals (Frost, 1995).

Both physical and structural vulnerabilities may lead women or their kin to seek protection. Thus, the NPW could reflect an attempt by groups—particularly the woman's kin—to counteract the temptation for individuals to engage in violence against vulnerable females. Groups sometimes develop norms to protect weaker parties and discourage the exercise of raw power (Thibaut and Kelly, 1959). The norm may also have developed out of an exchange process in which women, because of their vulnerability, traded submission for protection (see Brownmiller, 1974; Chesney-Lind, 1978; Visher, 1983).[3]

An alternative explanation is that the NPW developed in order to protect the reproductive and child-rearing role of women. Thus, the NPW may be an extension of the attempt to protect children rather than a reflection of any special value attached to women.[4] We may, for example, attach greater value to women's lives since a shortage of women limits the number of offspring in a group, whereas a shortage of men does not.[5] Unlike the vulnerability hypothesis, this explanation can account for why we might attempt to protect women from women and nonhuman sources.

Those who believe violence against women is normative often point to the high level of violence against women in the United States or elsewhere. However, that a behavior is common does not indicate that people approve of it. Norms vary in the degree to which they control behavior. The norm of reciprocity, for example, has an important impact on social behavior, but people frequently violate it.

The frequency of violence against women in the United States surely reflects the high level of violence generally, relative to many other countries (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994). Men who engage in violence against women

[3]It may be that protection is withdrawn if women fail to conform to gender roles. Note, however, that those who engage in deviant behavior may lose normative protection, no matter what their gender.

[4]The protection of women from sexual predators may reflect efforts to protect children by avoiding bastardy. Traditionally, efforts were made to prevent sexual relations outside of marriage—whether forced or consensual—primarily by regulating the behavior of women (Kertzer, 1993). These attempts to regulate sexuality were justified as protection of the woman's honor as well as the honor of her family.

[5]A sociobiological perspective might suggest that the tendency to protect women is somehow coded into human genes.

tend to engage in other types of crime and deviant behavior as well (e.g., Fagan *et al.,* 1983). Wife beaters are breakers not bearers of society's norms.[6]

In addition, victimization surveys show that males are much more likely to be the target of violence than females (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992). This difference is observed in spite of the fact that females tend to be more physically vulnerable than males and thus less costly to attack (Felson, 1996). The gender difference in victimization may be due to the NPW. However, it could also be due to the greater tendency of males to provoke others, or to the routine activities of males that put them at greater risk (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995; M. Felson, 1993).

The evaluation of evidence for an NPW requires an examination of the effects of the gender of a target on the attitudes and behaviors of potential adversaries and third parties. The norm implies that, in similar situations, potential adversaries are more likely to target men than women. It also implies that third parties respond more negatively to those who attack women than they do to those who attack men. If violence against women is deviant behavior, then third parties are likely to evaluate it more negatively, and punish it more severely than violence against men. In addition, third parties should be more likely to intervene on behalf of females who are under attack. Thus, combatants seeking allies in wartime emphasize the enemy's attacks on "women and children" in their propaganda. The publicizing of stories on rapes committed by Serbian soldiers in Bosnia is but one example.

The research literature on the NPW comes from a variety of disciplines employing a variety of methods and data sources—surveys, experiments, archival data from the criminal justice system, and historical research. Let us now turn to the research in each of these areas.

Survey Research

Survey research reveals strong moral condemnation of violence against wives. Rossi *et al.* (1974) found that respondents ranked beating up a spouse as a serious offense—more serious than beating up an acquaintance but less serious than beating up a stranger. Rossi *et al.* reported a high level of agreement between men and women, and between blacks and whites, in their evaluation of these offenses.

Other survey research indicates that most people disapprove of more mild forms of spousal violence, such as slapping, although many can imagine

[6]It is possible that there are subcultures in which violence against women is normative, even though the behavior is perceived as deviant in the larger society. In these subcultures violence against men may also be acceptable.

instances in which such behavior might be justifiable (Straus *et al.,* 1994; Arias and Johnson, 1989; Greenblat, 1983). In these studies, respondents generally evaluate violence against wives more negatively than violence against husbands. That some respondents may be giving a socially desirable response only adds further support to the notion that respondents consider violence against wives deviant behavior.

A typical method of distinguishing normative from deviant behavior is to compare public and private behavior. People are more likely to engage in normative behavior in front of an audience and conceal their deviant behavior. Survey research shows that the presence of an audience inhibits violence in mixed-gender disputes but encourages violence in conflicts between males (Felson, 1982). When men attack their wives or other women, at least in this society, they prefer to do it when no one is watching. The reason violence against women is hidden is that it is deviant behavior (Frude, 1994).

Experimental Research

Experimental research is useful in controlling for provocation and opportunity, and in isolating any normative effect of gender on victimization. These studies consistently find that subjects are much more likely to deliver shocks to males than females (e.g., Taylor and Epstein, 1967; Dengerink, 1976; Kaleta and Buss, 1973). Sixth graders deliver higher intensities of noxious noise to boys than to girls, suggesting that children learn the NPW at an early age (Shortell and Miller, 1970). The gender difference has been found in a large number of experimental studies using different procedures, different measures of aggression, and different subject populations (Baron and Richardson, 1994).

Audience effects have also been shown experimentally. Scheier *et al.* (1974) found that men deliver less intense shocks to women in front of an audience than in a control condition. In addition, observer subjects judge males who aggress against a female target as less moral than males who aggress against a male target (Kanekar *et al.,* 1981).

Subjects facing a mirror are particularly unlikely to deliver shocks to female targets (Carver, 1974; Scheier *et al.,* 1974). Evidence shows that mirrors decrease the incidence of antinormative behavior because they focus subjects' attention on their own internalized standards. Thus these studies show that college student subjects have internalized the NPW. On the other hand, these same studies show that mirrors can increase or decrease shock delivery to males, depending on whether subjects perceive the aggression as justified.

Traditional gender role expectations and the code of chivalry require a "gentleman" to show special courtesies to women. Since the NPW reflects traditional attitudes, one might expect traditional men to be less likely to use violence against women than nontraditional men. The survey evidence regarding whether males who commit violence against their wives are more or less traditional is mixed (see Hotaling and Sugarman, 1986, for a review). In a controlled laboratory study, however, traditional males were less likely to hit females with pillow clubs than males with more liberal attitudes toward gender roles (Young *et al.,* 1975). The difference between the two groups of men was reduced in the second bout when the female confederate became more aggressive. Inhibitions about attacking females may be lower if females attack first (Baron and Richardson, 1994). In general, people may be less inhibited about attacking deviant targets regardless of their gender (Tedeschi and Felson, 1994).

Gender effects on evaluations of violence in hypothetical scenarios have also been demonstrated experimentally. Harris (1991) manipulated the gender of actor and target, and their relationship to each other in an argument in which one adversary slapped the other. Subjects evaluated aggressors who targeted females more negatively than aggressors who targeted males, regardless of whether they believed the adversaries were spouses, friends, strangers, or siblings.

Experimental studies of helping behavior have also demonstrated NPW effects. A meta-analysis of these studies shows that women are consistently more likely to receive help from subjects than men (Eagly and Crowley, 1986). In addition, male subjects are consistently more likely than female subjects to provide help, at least in short-term encounters between strangers in experiments. Gender differences in helping and being helped were stronger when an audience was present. Eagly and Crowley attribute gender differences in altruism to chivalry on the part of male subjects.

Archival Data from the Criminal Justice System

The NPW may also limit punishment of women convicted of criminal behavior. Its effect should be limited in this context since the discretion of police, juries, and judges is constrained by formal rules, and since those who violate norms sometimes lose normative protection. Still, according to a recent meta-analysis, about half of the fifty studies reviewed show more lenient treatment for females than males, about one-quarter show mixed effects and one-quarter show no effects (Daly and Bordt, 1995). These gender effects could in part reflect concern for the family obligations of female offenders (Steffensmeier *et al.,* 1993). They could also be due to

a tendency to assign more blame to male offenders, because of real or imagined gender differences in behavior. However, the tendency to attribute less blame to females and to protect their childrearing role could reflect the NPW as well.

The gender of the *victim* of violent crime also affects treatment by the criminal justice system. A recent study finds that charges of first degree murder are more likely to be reduced when the victim is male than when the victim is female, controlling for prior record, relationship of offender and victim, victim provocation, and other circumstances of the crime (Beaulieu and Messner, 1996). Sentences are, on average, ten years shorter for wives convicted of killing their husbands than for husbands convicted of killing their wives, controlling for victim provocation (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995). Both the offender's and the victim's gender may produce this large difference in sentence length. A woman who kills her husband receives a more lenient sentence because she is a woman, and because her victim is a man.[7]

Historical Research

Historical research in Western societies shows that third parties have played an important role in the protection of women from their husbands. There have been special laws against wife beating in the United States, and sometimes severe punishments, since the 1600s (Pleck, 1979, 1989; Gordon, 1988). By 1870, wife beating was illegal in most states. Before special laws existed the courts could punish husbands using general laws prohibiting assault and battery. According to Pleck (1979), attitudes toward wife beating in 19th century America were similar to what they are today, but control was more extensive and punishment was more severe. In the 19th century, punishment was usually informal. Vigilante groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, sometimes beat up, whipped, or publicly shamed offenders. Ritual public shaming was also applied to wife beaters in 19th century England (Dobash and Dobash, 1981). Today, the legal system treats violations more leniently, provides more procedural safeguards, and orders counseling as well as punishment. Of course, crime and deviance in general are treated less severely today than in the 19th century.

Historically, some societies tolerated minor forms of violence by husbands. In ancient Rome, for example, a husband had the right to use moderate levels of physical discipline with his wife (Pleck, 1987). Castin

[7]For some offenses a woman may be punished more severely. For example, the "double standard" implies greater condemnation of female than male sexual promiscuity. Thus, in 19th-century Italy, unwed mothers were punished more severely than the child's father for illicit sexual liaisons (Kertzer, 1993).

(1976) reports that mild forms of physical chastisement by husbands were allowed in 18th-century France. Some appellate courts in 19th-century America accepted this point of view, but these opinions were atypical, according to Pleck (1979). Most court rulings in England and America rejected the idea of any form of physical chastisement.

Perhaps some people viewed mild violence by husbands as an acceptable expression of male dominance. Violence does not necessarily follow from male dominance or beliefs in male dominance, however. Some relationships involving dominance produce violence (e.g., parent–child), while others do not (e.g., employer–employee). It may be that violence is more likely in relationships characterized by dominance. However, Coleman and Straus (1986) find that male-dominant families (and female-dominant families) are no more violent than egalitarian families unless the couple disagrees about the prevailing power structure. It may be that conflicts over dominance, not dominance itself, leads to aggression and violence.

The general consensus regarding mild forms of physical violence is difficult to determine from the historical record, given the absence of opinion surveys. That mild forms of domestic violence were rarely prosecuted does not necessarily mean that violence against women was viewed as acceptable behavior (Fagan and Browne, 1994). Violence by wives against their husbands was not prosecuted either. The failure to prosecute could reflect issues related to the privacy of the family rather than attitudes toward women. The judicial decisions reviewed by Pleck (1987) clearly express the privacy issue. It will be discussed further below.

In sum, the evidence for an NPW is overwhelming. Women are less likely to be harmed than men by subjects in experiments, by criminal offenders, and by agents of the criminal justice system. Audiences and mirrors, which are known to inhibit antinormative behavior, inhibit violence against women. Third parties react more negatively to violence against females in experiments, in opinion surveys, and in the criminal justice system. They condemn violence against wives as well as violence against women outside the family. Finally, subjects in experiments are more likely to provide help to women than men, particularly when an audience is present.

If violence against women is deviant behavior, as this evidence shows, why is it often tolerated? The historical data suggests that the effects of family privacy may counteract the effects of the NPW. Let us now turn to that issue.

THE EFFECTS OF RELATIONAL DISTANCE

In a classic book, Donald Black (1976) argues that the "relational distance" between adversaries is a key factor affecting whether the police and

other third parties intervene in disputes. Relational distance (i.e., the degree of intimacy) affects the "quantity of law," that is, the activation of a response from the legal system. The greater the relational distance between adversaries (or between offender and victim) the greater the quantity of law.[8] Thus, violent disputes between strangers are more likely to activate a legal response, while disputes between intimates are more likely to be handled privately (see also Gelles, 1983). When the police do intervene in conflicts between people who know each other, according to Black, they are more likely to seek reconciliation rather than punishment (but see Smith, 1987).

The effect of relational distance on third-party intervention in violent disputes should have important implications for the protection of women, since women are much more likely to be involved in violent disputes with people they know than they are with strangers (e.g., Wolfgang, 1958; Browne and Williams, 1993; Reiss and Roth, 1993). If disputes between intimates are not reported to the police, or if the police take a laissez-faire approach, females are less likely to receive protection.

Historically, the privacy of family life has obstructed efforts to protect wives from their husbands (Pleck, 1989). The conditions under which the government, the church, or other outsiders should intrude in family matters appears to be the subject of enduring controversy. In the 17th century, an Englishman coined the phrase "a man's home is his castle," in an attempt to discourage the government from interfering with family life (Pleck, 1987). The Puritans, on the other hand, believing neighbors and the church had a duty to regulate family life, instituted the first law against wife abuse in the western world in 1641. According to Pleck (1989), state intervention in family violence in the United States has been episodic, depending largely on attitudes related to domestic privacy. For example, she attributes the decline of interest in family violence from 1830 until a reform period that begin in 1875 to "the growing distrust of government interference in the family, the increasing respect for domestic privacy, and the waning zeal for state enforcement of private morality" (1989:30).

The conflict between the concern for protecting family members and the concern for privacy is still a factor in the jurisprudence of family violence (Zimring, 1989). The concern for family privacy sometimes inhibits state intervention in family conflict. Thus, verbal attacks and mild forms of physical violence (e.g., spanking of children) elicit a legal response only if they occur outside the family. Recent legal reforms have attempted to increase state intervention in various forms of domestic violence, at the expense of privacy concerns (Zimring, 1989).

[8]This relationship is actually curvilinear, since the law is less likely to be involved in disputes between people who live in different societies than in disputes between strangers in the same society (Black, 1976:41).

Privacy due to physical isolation is a factor inhibiting third-party intervention in domestic violence in smaller-scale societies (e.g., Baumgartner, 1993; Chagnon, 1977; Landes, 1971; Levinson, 1989). Typically, a woman's kin or other third parties intervene on her behalf when she has been assaulted by her husband. In some cases, the group designates a brother or some other male at marriage as the wife's protector. The further wives live from family support, the more likely they are to suffer abuse from their husbands. For example, Yanamomo women abhor being married to men in distant villages (Chagnon, 1977). They know that their fathers and brothers cannot protect them if they live too far away. Among the Ojibwa Indians of North America, newly married couples move to distant areas with virtually no neighbors or way of communicating to family members (Landes, 1971). Ojibwa women living in these arrangements are at risk of physical abuse by their husbands.

The legal system typically becomes involved in violent disputes in modern societies when citizens call the police (e.g., Reiss, 1971). Victims are unlikely to report an attack by an intimate to the police if they consider the dispute a private matter or if they think the police will view it this way (Gelles, 1983). When victims of assaults by nonstrangers in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) are asked why they did not call the police they frequently respond that they considered it a private matter (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992).

Concerns for privacy, thus, help explain why relational distance affects reporting to the police. However, the notion of privacy may actually cover a variety of motives for nonreporting in conflicts between intimates. A woman may not call the police out of embarrassment, sympathy with her adversary, or a desire to preserve the relationship. It seems unlikely that a woman would want to report her violent husband to the police if she desires reconciliation. Her point of view would be consistent with traditional legal policy, which was not to prosecute unless the victim of spousal violence wished to separate from the offender (Zimring, 1989).

Third parties may also call the police, if they witness the event. However, couples may hide domestic violence from third parties because of privacy concerns. If violence against a woman is involved, there may be an additional reason to conceal the behavior. These factors are likely to limit the ability of third parties to report domestic violence to the police.

In addition, third parties who observe a violent dispute between intimates may be reluctant to intervene. One reason is because they also view disputes between intimates as a private matter. Thus, bystanders in the infamous Kitty Genovese case stated that they did not intervene because they thought it was "a lover's quarrel" (Rosenthal, 1964). Further evidence comes from an experimental study in which subjects observed a staged fight in which a man attacked a woman (Shotland and Straw, 1976). Subjects

were much more likely to intervene in the fight if they believed the participants were strangers than if they thought the fight involved a married couple. Virtually all subjects who did not intervene in the fight involving the couple said they felt the fight was "none of their business."[9]

The effect of relational distance on whether citizens report assaults to the police has been the subject of prior research. Block (1974) found that respondents were less likely to report a violent incident to the police if they knew the antagonist, particularly if the antagonist was a relative. A recent analysis of data from the redesigned NCVS, on the other hand, yields mixed results (Felson *et al.,* 1999). Third parties were less likely to report minor assaults involving family relationships than minor assaults that involved strangers, particularly if the offender and victim were a couple. However, relational distance did not affect victim reporting nor did it affect the tendency of third parties to report more serious assaults. The failure to find effects for victims could be due to the fact that the NCVS only includes violent incidents in which respondents believe they have been the victim of a crime; once respondents consider an incident criminal then they may report it regardless of their relationship with the offender. The survey described below (like Block's 1974 study) asks respondents about violent incidents, not criminal victimization.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The literature reviewed above suggests that both the NPW and relational distance affect intervention in violent disputes involving women. In the empirical portion of this paper I use a multivariate framework in order to disentangle their effects. The central issue is whether disputes in which a woman is involved are more likely to be reported to the police, controlling for relational distance. I hypothesize that the effects of relational distance offset the effects of gender, since women's violent disputes are more likely to involve intimates (see Fig. 1).

The effects of gender on whether someone calls the police should depend on whether witnesses are present during the dispute. The NPW should lead witnesses to call the police when they observe women under attack. A normative effect implies a statistical interaction between gender and the presence of witnesses: gender effects should be stronger in front

[9]In a series of experiments, these investigators showed a number of other reasons why bystanders do not intervene in violent disputes involving couples. They found that subjects are less likely to believe the woman wanted help if the man was her husband than if he was a stranger. Subjects also assumed the husband's attack was less damaging to the woman. Finally, subjects thought that if they intervened, the husband was more likely to stay and fight, while a stranger would run away. In general, when couples are fighting, bystanders perceive the need for intervention as low and the costs as high.

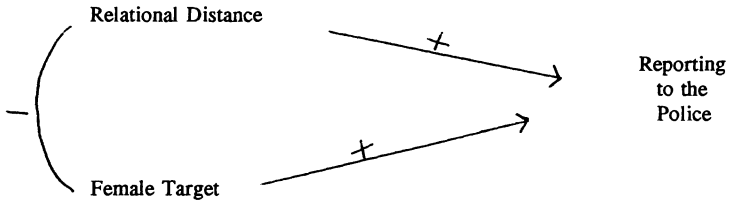

Fig. 1. Offsetting effects of relational distance and gender.

of witnesses. If the NPW protects women from harm generally, then both mixed-gender disputes and disputes between women should be more likely to be reported to the police than disputes between men. If the NPW only protects women from men, then only mixed-gender incidents should be reported more frequently than disputes between men.

To be sure, women engage in some of the violence in mixed-gender disputes. Mixed-gender violence should be less often reported to the police if the woman is the one who has engaged in a violent attack—the NPW is irrelevant unless there is fear of retaliation against her. In addition, people tend to view violence by women as less serious than violence by men (Straus, 1993; Feld and Robinson, 1993). The effect of female violence could, therefore, suppress the relationship between gender and police intervention. Violence by females—which obviously cannot occur in disputes between males—may lower the likelihood that an incident is reported to the police. To control for this factor, I include a measure of whether there was a physical attack by a female during the incident.

According to Black's proposition about the quantity of law, the greater the relational distance between two antagonists in a dispute, the more likely citizens should report the incident to the police. Police intervention should be highest in violent incidents involving strangers and lowest in incidents involving couples. Incidents involving other relationships should produce an intermediate level of police intervention.

The effects of relational distance may be due to the desire of the antagonists to avoid police intervention in their private disputes. In addition, disputes between intimates may be less often observed by witnesses, who could potentially call the police. The presence of witnesses will be examined as a possible mediator of the effects of relational distance on calling the police.

METHODS

Sampling Design

The analyses are based on interviews in Albany County, New York, with persons ages 18–65 in 1980. Albany county's violent crime rate ranked

8 out of 62 counties in New York, according to statistics obtained from police reports (Criminal Justice Services, 1993). It ranked 23 in terms of its rate of hospitalizations due to assault in 1992 (New York State Department of Health, 1994). No information is available on the assault rate in Albany County in 1980, but we know from NCVS data that, nationwide, the assault rate in the 1990s is similar to what it was in 1980 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994).

Data was obtained from three samples: a representative sample of the general population in Albany County ($N = 245$); a sample of ex-mental patients ($N = 148$); and a sample of ex-criminal offenders ($N = 141$). The data were originally collected in order to compare the violent behavior of ex-mental patients and ex-criminal offenders to the general population. I chose this data set because it provides detailed information on violent disputes.

I used all three samples in order to preserve sample size. The observation of similar effects in these diverse samples will give us confidence in their generality, provided that we observe the same effects for all three samples. In addition, the results are generalizable to at least the general population of Albany County, if variables representing the samples do not statistically interact with the variables of interest in their effects.

The representative sample of the general population was obtained through multistage sampling. The streets in each census tract and then the dwellings on those streets were randomly sampled. Male and female respondents were then chosen in equal number. The response rate was 76%.

The sample of ex-mental patients was drawn from social clubs for ex-mental patients in the area. Only respondents who were living in the community and had not been hospitalized for at least six months in the preceding year were selected. This sample was quite similar on most major demographic characteristics to our sample of the general population (see Steadman and Felson, 1984), although they were more likely to be unmarried and uneducated. Comparisons with a statewide sample of released patients revealed that this sample was younger, and included more females, and fewer nonwhites.

The sample of ex-criminal offenders included parolees and local offenders who had been identified by the Department of Corrections as living in the community for at least six months. The ex-offenders were more likely to be nonwhite, unmarried, male, young, and uneducated than the general population. They were more likely to be males, even though female ex-offenders were purposefully oversampled. (See Steadman and Felson, 1984, for a more extensive description of the samples.)

Measurement

Respondents were asked to recall the last clearly remembered dispute they were involved in where "there was slapping or hitting with a fist but

no gun or other weapon was involved." Respondents who could recall a dispute (N = 384) were asked a series of questions about the incident and about the antagonist. Respondents were only asked about fights that occurred when they were living in the community.

Respondents were asked about the antagonist's relationship to them, whether anyone was injured, and whether there was anyone else present during the dispute. I control for injury since it is likely to correlate with the other variables; for example, citizens are more likely to report violence to the police when someone is injured (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992; Straus, 1993).

The measure of whether a female had engaged in violence was obtained from a description of the dispute. Respondents were asked to describe in detail "what happened in this incident in the exact order in which it occurred. Begin with the first thing that happened, then the second, and so on." The interviewer then went back over the sequence to make sure the information was accurate. The description was recorded on tape for later coding. Each description was coded as a sequence of actions with an actor and target identified for each action. From these sequences, I determined whether a female had engaged in or threatened to engage in a physical attack at any point.

The dependent variable was based on a question in which respondents were asked "Did the police get involved?" Responses were coded as yes or no. It is reasonable to assume that if the police became involved, it was due to the fact that someone reported the incident to them (Reiss, 1971). I cannot determine from these data whether a witness or one of the antagonists called the police. However, knowing who called the police is not necessarily useful information (and it may be misleading), since the caller may not have been the person who made the decision to report the incident (Skogan, 1984). While crime victims or witnesses sometimes call the police on their own, evidence shows that third parties strongly influence the decision of victims to call the police (Van Kirk, 1977; Greenberg and Ruback, 1992). In addition, victims sometimes request third parties to report the crime. An ideal measure would be one that revealed who influenced the decision to call the police. A limitation of this study (as well as previous research) is that the dynamics of this decision-making process are not measured.

It may be possible to infer who was influential in the decision to call the police from the pattern of results. For example, if gender only has an effect on police involvement when a witness is present, we can assume that the witness either called or influenced someone else to call the police.

It is possible, of course, that the police may discover a dispute themselves. Perhaps this is more likely for disputes involving strangers since they are more likely to occur in public places. However, analyses not

presented show that whether the fight occurred in a public place or not did not affect the likelihood of police involvement (controlling for the other variables). Any measurement error in the police involvement variable is therefore likely to be random. Since instances in which the police stumble upon a fight are rare, this error should not be significant.

Earlier research with these data shows that males are more likely to report an incident than females, and younger adults are more likely to report an incident than older adults (Steadman and Felson, 1984). Ex-offenders and, to a lesser extent, ex-mental patients are more likely to report a violent incident than the general population. The samples also differed in the recency of the incidents they reported. The mean number of years since the incident occurred was 6.2 for the general population, 4.6 for ex-patients, and 1.7 for ex-offenders.

RESULTS

I present the descriptive statistics in Table I. The results show that most of these violent incidents are between men, and most are between people who know each other. Most are witnessed by someone, but relatively few are reported to the police. Attacks by females are relatively infrequent, suggesting that males are much more likely to be the violent party in these incidents. Note that attacks by both genders sometimes occur in the same incident.

The relationship between gender and relational distance is depicted in Table II. There must be a relationship between these variables for their effects on calling the police to offset each other. I present the results for the three samples combined. I obtain similar results when I restrict the analysis to the general population. The results show that mixed-gender disputes are much more likely to involve couples (spouses, ex-spouses, or lovers) than others who know each other, and they rarely involve strangers. Mixed-gender disputes, on the other hand, are most often between people who know each other. Fights between males are much more likely than fights between females to involve strangers. These results are consistent with past research in showing that when females are involved in violent disputes their antagonists are usually their partners or other people they know.

I also examined the relationship between relational distance and whether third parties witnessed the incident. The results show that third parties are much less likely to witness incidents involving couples than incidents involving people in other relationships. Of the incidents involving couples, 27.1% occurred in public, compared to 65.5% of incidents involving others who knew each other and 84.6% of incidents involving strangers

Table I. Marginal Distributions

	Percentages
Gender	
Mixed	30.2
Men only	54.2
Women only	15.6
Relationship	
Couples	19.0
Other nonstranger	61.5
Stranger	19.5
Witness present	
Yes	63.1
No	36.6
Reported to police	
Yes	19.3
No	80.7
Female engages in attack	
Yes	22.1
No	77.9
Injury	
Yes	36.9
No	63.1
Respondent's race	
Nonwhite	25.0
White	75.0
Sample	
Ex-offender	33.9
Ex-patient	28.9
General population	37.2

(chi-square = 51.0 [2]; $p < .001$). These results show that third parties cannot intervene on behalf of females in many incidents involving couples (even if they wanted to) because third parties do not usually witness incidents involving couples.

In the major analyses, I use logistic regression to estimate effects on police involvement. I created dummy variables based on whether the inci-

Table II. The Relationship Between Gender and Relational Distance (Percentages)

	Relationship				
Gender	Strangers	Known	Couple	Total	*N*
Males	30.8	68.8	0.5	100%	208
Females	11.7	83.3	5.0	100%	60
Mixed	3.4	37.1	59.5	100%	116
N	75	236	73		384

Table III. Logistic Regression Coefficients Representing Determinants of Reporting to Police

Independent variables	General population (1)	Total sample (2)	Witnessed subsample (3)	Unwitnessed subsample (4)
Intergender	1.45	1.41[a]	1.54[a]	1.03
Women only	.72	.80	.72	1.75
Couples	−2.75[a]	−1.81[a]	−.85	−4.74[a]
Other nonstrangers	−1.03	−.55	−.11	−3.14[a]
Education	−.15	−.11	−.10	−.07
Nonwhite	−.17	−.24	−.17	−1.33
Ex-offender		.49	.57	.85
Ex-patient		.51	.54	.54
Female attack	−.56	−1.22[a]	−1.13[a]	−1.45
Injury	2.24[a]	1.06[a]	1.01[a]	1.65[a]
Witnesses	.39	.84[a]		
N	140	368	232	136

[a]$p < .05$.

dent involved male and female antagonists, females only, or males only (the omitted category). Dummy variables were also created to represent the relational distance between the respondent and antagonist: (1) spouse or lover, (2) other persons known to the respondent, and (3) strangers (the omitted category). Preliminary analyses indicated that a more detailed breakdown of relationship was unnecessary.

Other variables include whether a female engaged in an attack, whether anyone witnessed the incident, and whether someone was injured or not, all measured as dichotomies. I also include measures of years of education, race (nonwhite vs. white), and two dummy variables for the three samples.

I present the results from the logistic regressions in Table III. The results for the general population are presented in the first column, while the results from the three samples combined are presented in the second column. A similar pattern of coefficients is observed, although the effects of the key variables are not all statistically significant in the smaller sample. Statistical analyses using product terms involving sample and the other variables confirmed the absence of statistical interactions. These results justify the combination of samples in the remaining analyses.[10]

The results from column 2 provide support for the NPW. The police are more likely to become involved in disputes between men and women than in assaults between men. There also appears to be an effect for disputes between women, but it is smaller and statistically insignificant. Finally,

[10]The use of statistical tests of significance, given the nonrepresentativeness of the special samples, is perhaps questionable. The pattern of coefficients described in this study, however, is clear-cut.

incidents are less likely to be reported to police when females engage in violence.[11]

Relational distance also has effects. The police are less likely to become involved in disputes involving couples or other disputants who know each other. The effect for other disputants who know each other is smaller and statistically insignificant.[12]

It is useful to examine results from equations in which either the measures of relational distance or gender are omitted. The results show the extent to which the effects of gender and relational distance offset each other. Two equations were re-run, one omitting the two measures of relational distance, the other omitting the three variables related to gender. When the measures of relational distance are omitted, the effect of the mixed-gender variable is smaller and statistically insignificant ($B = .60$, $p = .08$, vs. $B = 1.41$, $p = .002$). When the gender-related measures are omitted, the effect of the couples variable is smaller and statistically insignificant ($B = -.92$, $p = .08$, vs. -1.81, $p = .004$). The other coefficients change very little.

Two other variables also have significant effects in the equations presented in column 2. First, the police are more likely to be called when someone is injured. Second, the police are more likely to be called when there are witnesses present during the incident. These results, in combination with the crosstabulations presented earlier, show that the presence of third parties mediates some of the effects of relational distance on police involvement. Violence involving people who know each other, particularly couples, is less likely to be reported to the police than violence between strangers because it is less likely to be witnessed by third parties.

It was hypothesized that, because of the NPW, mixed-gender disputes are more likely than disputes between males to be reported to the police when witnesses are present. In order to evaluate this hypothesis, I added a product term—witness presence × mixed-gender—to Eq. (2). The product term is statistically significant ($B = 1.73$; $p < .05$) and in the predicted direction, thus supporting the hypothesis.

It was also hypothesized that disputes between women would be more likely to be reported to the police than disputes between males, when witnesses are present. There is no support for this hypothesis. A product term—witness presence × women only—was not statistically significant and not in the predicted direction ($B = -.25$).

[11]Note that the value of the female attack variable must be zero in disputes between males.

[12]An alternative way of analyzing the data is to examine the effect of the antagonist's gender, estimating separate equations for male and female respondents. A similar pattern of results was observed using this method. In other analyses, I examined the effects of age and alcohol intoxication (for both respondent and antagonist). No effects were found.

To explore interactions further, I present equations in Table III for incidents in which witnesses were present [Eq. (3)] and incidents in which there were no witnesses [Eq. (4)]. The interaction between mixed-gender disputes and the presence of witnesses described above is apparent. When witnesses are present, the police are much more likely to be called in mixed-gender disputes than in disputes where both parties are males. The mixed-gender effect is weaker and not statistically significant when there are no witnesses present.

The effects of relational distance also depend on whether witnesses are present. When there are no witnesses, police are much less likely to be called in disputes involving couples or other people in ongoing relationships than they are in disputes involving strangers. When witnesses are present, the effects of relational distance are much weaker and statistically insignificant. The results suggest that relational distance has a stronger effect on police involvement when there are no witnesses present. Presumably, privacy is less important to witnesses than it is to adversaries.

I evaluated the interaction between relational distance and the presence of witnesses for statistical significance by adding product terms to the equation for the total sample. The couples $\times$ witnesses term was statistically significant (couples: $B = 1.96$, $p < .05$) while the nonstrangers $\times$ witnesses term was not ($B = 1.06$, $p = .15$).

It may be that the NPW depends on a woman's social class: the higher the social class the more likely others will attempt to protect her. I examined this issue by selecting incidents in which the respondent was a woman and there was a witness to the violent incident. I then looked at the effect of the woman's education on the likelihood that the police were involved. The effect was nonsignificant and close to zero.[13]

DISCUSSION

The evidence presented above shows that violent disputes between men and women are more likely to be reported to the police, particularly if they are witnessed by third parties. Either witnesses call the police or they influence female victims to do so. I attribute the statistical interaction between gender and the presence of witnesses to the effect of the NPW. The pattern of effects suggests that witnesses attempt to protect females from males. There is also some evidence that same-gender incidents involving women are more likely to be reported to the police than same-gender

[13]It was impossible to compare gay and lesbian couples to heterosexual couples given the small numbers (see Table II).

incidents involving men, although the differences are not statistically significant. The failure to achieve statistical significant may be due to the fact that violence between women is relatively infrequent.

When I leave measures of relational distance out of the equation, the mixed-gender effect disappears. Thus, there is clear evidence that the effects of relational distance on police involvement undermine the effects of gender. When women participate in violent disputes, their adversaries are usually partners or someone else that they know. This fact reduces the likelihood of police protection, since conflicts involving intimates are much less likely than conflicts between strangers to be reported to the police. The offsetting effects explain how people can perceive violence against women as evil and tolerate it at the same time.

The impact of gender on police involvement is limited for another reason. The evidence shows that third parties are more likely to witness stranger violence than they are to witness violence involving couples and other people in ongoing relationships. In addition, the police are more likely to be called when there are witnesses present. Thus, some of the effect of relational distance on police involvement is mediated by the presence of witnesses during disputes. Since disputes involving women are unlikely to involve strangers, they are less likely to be witnessed by third parties, and therefore less likely to be reported to the police.

Alternative Interpretations

Concern for privacy is not the only possible explanation of why violence involving couples is unlikely to be reported to the police. Perhaps women do not report attacks by their husbands because they fear reprisals. Three pieces of evidence argue against this explanation. First, if women fear retaliation from males for reporting, then mixed-gender incidents should be less often reported to the police. It is male strength and aggressiveness that women are likely to fear. However, the evidence suggests that mixed-gender incidents are more, not less, likely to be reported to the police. Second, incidents involving parties who know each other in any way are less likely than incidents involving strangers to be reported to the police, at least when there are no witnesses present. This pattern is more consistent with a privacy and relational distance interpretation. Finally, it is not clear whether women whose partners have abused them should be more or less fearful of future attacks if they go the police. It is just as likely that fear of another attack would lead them to seek police protection. In fact, victims in the NCVS frequently mention fear of future attack as a reason why they reported an assault to the police; victims rarely give fear of reprisal as a reason for *not* reporting an assault (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992). On

the other hand, privacy is frequently mentioned as a reason for not reporting.

The NPW is not the only possible explanation of the witness-gender statistical interaction. An alternative interpretation is that witnesses call the police because they believe that males are particularly dangerous to females either because they are more violent, or bigger and stronger. Perhaps the response of witnesses reflects the effect of a general norm discouraging violence against physically weaker people of either gender. The evidence that witnesses are more likely to report disputes between women (as well as mixed-gender disputes) than disputes between males argues against this line of reasoning. In addition, in analyses not presented, we examined whether witnesses were more likely to call the police when one of the antagonists was bigger or stronger than the other, compared to when they were equal in size and strength. The size–strength inequality variable had no effect on whether witnessed incidents were reported to the police (controlling for gender and the other variables). I obtained similar results in analyses restricted to witnessed incidents between males.

There is another possible interpretation of the statistical interaction between witnesses and gender. According to Black (1993), third parties are more likely to act as partisans in disputes when they are closer to one antagonist than the other. Perhaps women are more likely than men to have partisan third parties present—due to gender differences in closeness to others—and these partisans call the police on their behalf. Fortunately, the data set includes information on the relationship of the third party to the respondent and antagonist. We constructed a measure reflecting whether the witness was an intimate of one of the antagonists or not (when there was a witness). This measure was unrelated to gender, and unrelated to whether the incident was reported to the police. Nor did it have a noticeable effect on the other coefficients when I included it in equations for witnessed violence.

Generalizability

The data for this study come from a single county in New York in 1980. The generalizability of the findings to other cities, countries, or historical periods cannot, of course, be established. However, there is no theoretical reason why the results should not be generalizable, at least to other counties in the United States. In addition, it is encouraging that the results for the two special populations were similar to the results for the general population. Finally, the ethnographic and historical research on violence against women suggests that effects of the NPW and relational distance on third-party intervention are pervasive.

Arrest policies for domestic violence have changed in New York State (and elsewhere) since 1980, when the data were collected. It is difficult to know what effect, if any, these changes would have on the tendency of citizens to report domestic violence to the police. Knowing the police would be likely to make an arrest could increase the likelihood that victims or third parties call the police to report an incident of domestic violence. On the other hand, a policy that leads to arrest could inhibit reporting, if victims prefer to avoid the arrest of their spouse. To the extent that the effect of relational distance changes over time, its role in offsetting gender effects should also change.

To some extent the generalizability issue is beside the point. The key empirical relationships that are described in this study have been established in past research: gender is associated with relational distance, relational distance is associated with third party reporting, and gender is associated with third party reporting. Given the direction of these associations, gender and relational distance *must* have offsetting effects. The empirical portion of this paper uses a multivariate approach to demonstrate the pattern.

The analyses presented here are based on incidents involving unarmed physical violence. In analyses not presented, I examined a much smaller number of incidents in which guns or knives were used. The pattern of effects was similar to the pattern observed in these data, although the effects were somewhat weaker. Few effects were statistically significant, probably due to the small sample size. The effects of relational distance and gender may be less important factors in incidents involving weapons, since lives are in danger. In addition, the greater coercive power of males, and thus the need to protect females, is neutralized if females have weapons.

In sum, the effects observed in this study are consistent with an extensive literature showing that violence against women is evaluated more negatively than violence against men. Research, past and present, suggests that the role of the NPW should be acknowledged in discussions of violence against women. The present research shows statistically how the NPW's impact is limited because violence against women usually occurs among couples and others who know each other. Third parties, including the legal system, tend not to get involved in what are seen as private squabbles. The privacy of the family in society limits the extent to which women are protected.

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