

**Cognitive, Contextual,  
and Personality Factors in Wife Abuse**

by  
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Cognitive, Contextual, and Personality Factors  
in Wife Abuse

by

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B.S., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1989  
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A DISSERTATION

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requirements for the degree

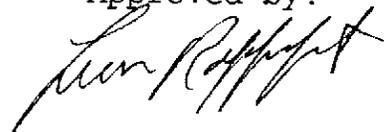
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## Abstract

This study is designed to show how personality dispositions and cognitive variables may combine with social norms to influence wife abuse. Prior research examining the role of individual differences in wife abuse has been sparse, unsystematic, and appear questionable for two reasons.

First, these studies have not considered that contextual norms and cognitive variables are likely to interact with dispositional variables to either facilitate or discourage abuse.

Second, the theoretical relationship between dispositional variables and macrolevel approaches (i.e. feminist and sociological) has not been investigated. How demographic variables, contextual norms, and individual differences interact may have important implications for the study of wife abuse.

The present project addresses these issues by focusing on a description of the relationship between personality (authoritarianism & sex-role attitudes), cognitive variables (self-consciousness & the hostile attribution bias), contextual norms (military experience & regional background) and wife abuse.

149 males completed a questionnaire containing the Conflict Tactics Scale, RWA scale, Self-Consciousness Scale,

Adversarial Sexual Beliefs Scale, and the Attitudes Toward Women Scale. Furthermore, subjects responded to a variety of demographic items designed to assess income level, age, regional background, alcohol consumption, educational level, and military experience.

Results suggest three principal conclusions. First, they show that the hostile attributional bias is the most powerful predictor of verbal and physical abuse. Analyses consistently indicated that subjects possessing hostile attributions toward women are the most likely to verbally and physically abuse their present partner.

Second, the contextual norms and demographics emphasized in past models of abuse were found to interact with personality and cognitive variables. The effect of military experience, Southernness, and alcohol use were mediated by personality and cognitive variables.

Finally, the present results are consistent with past studies showing that abusers consume more alcohol, are younger, and earn less than non-abusers.

Insofar as the results show significant relationships between relevant of cognitive, personality, and contextual factors, they provide a new, more accurate description of the problem, and may allow more effective forms of prediction, intervention and treatment.

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Finally, I want to thank my wife, Maria. Without whose love and support I would never have completed this project.

# Cognitive, Contextual, and Personality

## Factors in Wife Abuse

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine how personality dispositions may interact with situational variables to facilitate wife abuse. Feminist and sociological investigators have offered broad approaches to understanding the causes of wife abuse (Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gelles, 1983; Goode, 1971; Straus, 1973), but psychosocial research on the role of individual differences has been sparse and unsystematic. Such research appears necessary for at least two reasons.

First, current personality theory emphasizes that dispositions are often mediated by cognitive and situational variables (Buss & Cantor, 1989; Cantor & Zirkel, 1993; Mischel, 1993). However, studies of wife abuse have not considered that contextual norms and cognitive variables are likely to interact with dispositional variables to either facilitate or discourage abuse.

Second, the theoretical relationship between dispositional variables and macrolevel approaches (i.e. feminist and sociological) has not been addressed. How demographic variables, contextual norms, and individual differences interact may have important implications for the

study of wife abuse.

The present project investigates the foregoing issues and examines the relative importance of socioeconomic variables, contextual norms, personality, and cognitive variables as correlates of wife abuse. Results of this study should have both theoretical and practical implications for understanding wife abuse.

### **Introduction**

Despite the fact that American men were legally entitled to beat their wives as recently as the turn of the century (Gelles & Cornell, 1990), the home has historically been regarded as a place of safety for women. Acceptance of this belief has prevailed among the public and scholars alike (Bograd, 1988).

However, there has recently been increased attention to the prevalence and seriousness of spousal abuse by both the media and academics. A variety of statistics indicate the reason for concern.

In 1984, 1,310 wives were murdered by their spouse (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1985). Researchers have estimated that between 21% and 34% of all women will be physically assaulted by their male partner (Russell, 1982) and that each year 2 to 3 million women in the United States are assaulted by their mate (Straus & Gelles, 1990; Straus,

Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Furthermore, reports of such abuse are most often obtained through surveys and interviews which do not include the destitute and those who do not speak English (Browne, 1993; Goodman, Koss, Fitzgerald, Russo, & Keita, 1993).

Awareness of the problem has also been increased by lobbying, organizational activities, and the establishment of shelters by the women's movement (Van Hasselt, Morrison, Bellack, & Hersen, 1988). Why are women the object of this often serious form of violence? What cultural, situational, personality, and cognitive factors precipitate wife abuse? What methodologies should be employed when studying wife abuse? The answers to these questions have important implications for detection, prevention, intervention therapy programs, and legal issues concerning wife abuse. As a result of recent efforts to address these issues several theoretical perspectives have evolved.

### **Theoretical Explanations of Wife Abuse**

Three general theoretical approaches focus on the causes of wife abuse; the sociological, the feminist, and the psychological. Each of these perspectives has provided important insights concerning etiology and methodological issues. However, there are fundamental differences between the perspectives. Although one could view them as

complementary, this has rarely been the case. As a result, each theoretical outlook neglects or refutes important points raised by the other two. The following review provides a summary of important issues associated with the etiology of wife abuse.

### Sociological Contributions

Researchers employing the sociological perspective attempt to explain the causes of wife abuse through analyses of group behavior, social norms, dominant cultural values, and in terms of the individual's position in the social system. Important demographic characteristics of abusers and a number of theories addressing etiology have been suggested by those who have adopted this perspective.

Researchers examining demographic variables have found that age, race, and a number of socioeconomic variables are important predictors of abuse. Studies indicate that younger couples, under the age of 30, experience higher rates of abuse (Fagan, Stewart, & Stewart, 1983; Gayford, 1975; Okun, 1986; Roberts, 1987; Straus et al., 1980). However, Okun (1986) points out that such results may be due to the fact that younger women are more likely to report and seek aid in women's shelters.

In addition, Straus et al. (1980) have shown that race is a predictor of wife abuse. Minorities experience higher

rates of wife abuse than do whites. However, these results probably reflect the lower levels of education, employment, and income found among minorities (Gelles & Cornell, 1990; Okun, 1986).

Socioeconomic variables have proven to be consistent predictors of wife abuse. Increased levels of education and income are negatively correlated with wife abuse (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Walker, 1984). Males who are unemployed or part-time workers are most likely to be abusers (Gayford, 1975; Roberts, 1987; Straus et al., 1980).

These results do not mean that wife abuse is restricted to couples at the lower socioeconomic levels of society. Numerous case histories demonstrate that wife abuse is found throughout society (Okun, 1986), although it is more common in particular demographic groups.

In addition to describing important demographic variables, sociological theorists have addressed the etiology of family violence. Theoretical analyses addressing the causes of wife abuse include resource theory, exchange/social control theory, the subculture of violence thesis, and general systems theory.

The major theoretical interpretation based on resource theory has been suggested by Goode (1971). He argues that individuals have a variety of resources available to

influence others. These include economic power, prestige, attractiveness, and force. When one has access to a variety of resources, force is rarely used. However, when other resources are scarce force is more likely to be used. Resource theory explains why unemployed and low income men report higher rates of violence. This view has been supported by O'Brien (1974) who employed resource theory to explain why women with greater socioeconomic status, skills, or resources than their husbands are more likely to experience abuse.

Gelles (1983) has proposed an exchange/social control theory of wife abuse. He applies Homans' (1974) exchange theory, which states that human relationships are guided by rewards and punishment, to family interactions. However, he recognizes that unlike other social interactions familial relations cannot be terminated when conflict is experienced. Gelles postulates that violence will occur when there is an absence of social controls within the home. Thus "...people hit and abuse other family members because they can...family violence occurs in the absence of social controls which would bond people to the social order and negatively sanction family members for acts of violence." (p. 157).

Advocates of the subculture of violence thesis posit that certain segments of the culture are more positively

oriented toward violence than others. Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1982) propose that these subcultures are characterized by norms, values, and beliefs favoring the use of violence. This orientation toward violence is particularly prevalent among certain ethnic and lower-income groups explaining the elevated rates of family violence among these groups.

Finally, proponents of general systems theory consider violence to be a product of the family system (Straus, 1973). General systems theory integrates the role of the environment, role expectations, and reinforcement into a holistic explanation of family violence. The family is viewed as a system in which all members seek a homeostatic balance. The presence of violence will depend upon the positive and negative feedback the system receives. Straus et al. (1980) propose that certain attributes of the family, such as the intensity of member's involvement, amount of time spent together, intruding activities, etc., predispose the system to violence.

This brief review covers some of the more common sociological explanations for wife abuse (Margolin, Sibner, & Gleberman, 1988; Okun, 1986). However, the status of these theories remains problematic. According to Margolin et al. (1988) "There is a frustrating dilemma in attempting

to summarize theories regarding the etiology of wife battering: although the list of theories is quite long, the empirical data in support of such theories is quite meager. Moreover, empirical investigations pitting one theory against another are almost nonexistent, thereby making it difficult to compare the relative utility of the various theories" (p. 93).

Furthermore, many of the sociological approaches employ similar theoretical ideas. Correspondence between the sociological theories and some of the feminist and psychological approaches can also be found, resulting in even less theoretical clarity.

#### Feminist Perspectives

The feminist perspectives take the broadest approach to the etiology of wife abuse (Gelles, 1983). Although there are a variety of feminist theories, their common element is an emphasis upon the patriarchal structure of society (Okun, 1986). Wife abuse is seen as the product of male domination in a sexist society (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

Feminist theories are characterized by five important features. Chief among them are power and gender (Bograd, 1988). According to feminists, a focus upon general family violence obscures the importance of gender. Feminists argue that wife abuse is woman abuse, and therefore, should be

theoretically distinguished from family violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Sociological terms such as spouse abuse or family violence are typically rejected (Bograd, 1988; Okun, 1986).

Second, by concentrating on woman abuse as the focus of study, feminists are able to incorporate a variety of other forms of violence against women (Okun, 1986). Accordingly, wife abuse is often examined in relation to such issues such as rape, prostitution, incest, and pornography (Barry, 1979).

Third, feminist approaches describe the family within an historically situated framework (Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Martin, 1976; Okun, 1986). Feminist writers examine wife abuse within the historical context of the Western nuclear family, capitalism, and the socio-economic roles resulting from these developments (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Martin, 1976).

Fourth, feminists emphasize the importance of economic discrimination as an integral part of the reason why women stay in abusive relationships (Martin, 1976; Okun, 1986).

Finally, feminist theoreticians have also attacked the traditional methodology utilized when examining wife abuse. Feminist writers often reject the logical positivist approach followed by most social science researchers and

adopt a context-specific approach (Dobash & Dobash, 1983). This approach involves the use of qualitative methods such as those employed in an interview format similar to ethnographic studies (Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1983). The result is a methodology which specifies the role of values in research, relies upon greater use of open-ended questions, and employs a less detached relationship between the researcher and respondent (Bograd, 1988). However, many feminist researchers also accept traditional quantitative work (Dobash & Dobash, 1983).

The feminist approach to studying wife abuse produces insights often not available from more traditional sociological or psychological approaches, but, this perspective fails to account for the relationship between wife abuse and other forms of family violence (Bograd, 1988).

#### Psychological Perspectives

Psychological researchers explain the causes of wife abuse in terms of individual characteristics and motivations. In this connection, social learning theory and personality theory have been applied to the problem of wife abuse.

#### Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Burgess &

Akers, 1969; Sutherland & Cressey, 1970), linking cognitive processes together with operant and classical conditioning theory, has been well received by investigators of wife abuse (Okun, 1986). Research has shown that batterers are more likely to come from families characterized by a high frequency of violence (Gayford, 1975; Straus et al., 1980; Straus & Gelles, 1990). As others have noted, modeling provides the most succinct explanation for this intergenerational transmission of violence (Margolin et al., 1988).

In addition to the effects of modeling, social learning theory emphasizes the rewarding effects of violent interactions. The batterer's behavior usually goes unpunished and is often positively reinforced (e.g. release of tension, getting what they want, etc.). Furthermore, by accepting blame for the beating the wife may be negatively reinforced because such actions often result in stopping the assault (Margolin et al., 1988).

Walker's (1984) cycle theory of domestic violence illustrates the role of reinforcement mechanisms (Okun, 1986). She states that following the violent episode there is usually a reconciliation (or at least a reduction of tension). Such an intermittent positive reinforcement "schedule" may routinize the couple's pattern of

interaction.

Pagelow (1981) has integrated feminist thought and social learning theory. She asserts that patriarchal ideology is transmitted through modeling and reinforcement. The result is an acceptance of the violence by both men and women.

Finally, some aggression researchers have adopted modified versions of social learning theory when examining family violence. Berkowitz (1983) has applied his cognitive neoassociationist view of aggression to family violence. He emphasizes the role of emotions and goal oriented behavior in spousal interactions. For example, one act of violence may be an effort to be coercive whereas another may be more impulsive. Zillman's (1983) excitation transfer theory, which postulates that residual emotional arousal is often an important ingredient in aggression, has also been linked to family violence (Stacey, Hazelwood, & Shupe, 1994).

#### Personality Approaches

Personality explanations addressing the etiology of wife abuse have developed from two lines of psychological literature. The first, based on clinical cases of wife abuse, addresses the role of psychopathology. The second, based on personality assessment studies, identifies personality variables and attitudes associated with wife

abuse.

### Clinical Views

Clinically oriented investigators have examined the relationship between wife abuse and psychopathology, alcohol use, stress, and aggression. Each of these variables plays some role in wife abuse but how great of a role is disputed (Tolman & Bennett, 1990).

Researchers investigating the relationship between psychopathology and domestic violence have characterized victims as depressive, low in self-esteem, borderline schizophrenic, and as experiencing feelings of helplessness (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Rosewater, 1986; Walker, 1984). Batterers have been described as possessive, jealous, depressive, and low in self-esteem (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Hamberger & Hastings, 1986; Walker, 1984). In addition, research has consistently shown that batterers are more likely than non-batterers to abuse alcohol (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Straus & Gelles, 1990; Straus et al., 1980; Walker, 1984).

Hamberger and Hastings (1986, 1988, 1991) have systematically examined the relationship between psychopathology, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence, and report that: a) most batterers' personality profiles indicate a psychological disorder (Hamberger & Hastings,

1986; Hamberger & Hastings, 1988), b) when compared to other men, batterers are more likely to be dysphoric, less conforming, and to experience cognitive and affective problems (Hamberger & Hastings, 1988), and c) alcoholic wife abusers show the greatest levels of psychopathology when compared to both non-batterers and batterers (Hamberger & Hastings, 1991).

Investigators have also examined the role of aggressive and anger-prone personalities in domestic abuse. Initial evidence indicated that most men who battered were also violent outside the home (Walker, 1984). This finding is supported by the fact that many batterers commit other crimes (Okun, 1986). However, there has been mixed evidence on the question of whether batterers are more likely to possess an anger prone personality (Tolman & Bennett, 1990). Therefore, although it has been shown that many batterers are violent outside the home, the role of an anger-prone personality disposition remains unclear.

Finally, the relationship between stress and domestic violence has also been equivocal (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). It is presently thought that stress alone does not contribute to wife abuse. Instead, stress interacts with other variables (i.e. alcohol, exposure to violence as a child, low income) to produce violent behavior (Berkowitz,

1993; Rouse, 1988).

The clinical view of wife abuse has been attacked for focusing on individual causes of a social problem (Adams, Jackson, & Lauby, 1988; Gondolf, 1988). Nevertheless, in a review of the domestic violence literature Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) concluded that, "The pattern of findings for abusers is supportive of a viewpoint that has been rejected time and again in the husband to wife violence literature: the psychiatric perspective...what is known indicates a number of antisocial concomitants of battering including general violence and aggression, excessive drinking, involvement with the police, and adjustment problems in school, work, and interpersonal relationships" (p. 120).

#### Personality Variables and Attitudinal Correlates

Aside from pathological variables, investigators have examined a number of personality factors and attitudes associated with wife abuse. Attitudes toward sex roles and a "need for power" have been addressed most frequently in the domestic violence literature.

Examinations of the relationship between sex role attitudes and wife abuse have produced inconsistent findings. Some research demonstrates that batterers hold traditional sex role stereotypes (Martin, 1976; Walker, 1979, 1984). However, other studies indicate no difference

between batterers and non-batterers regarding sex role stereotypes (Coleman, Weinman, & Hsi, 1980; Neidig, Friedman, & Collins, 1986). There have also been investigations concerning the batterer's sex role identity. Rosenbaum (1986) has shown that batterers are lower in masculinity, less likely to be androgynous, and more likely to be undifferentiated than non-batterers.

Results of research addressing abused women's sex role attitudes have also been mixed (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). Some researchers report that abused females hold traditional stereotypes of women's roles (e.g. homemaker)(Okun, 1986) while others have found battered women to be more liberal (Walker, 1984).

Finally, studies have shown that women are more likely to be beaten when they earn as much or more than their husbands (O'Brien, 1971; Yllo, 1983, 1984). This finding suggests some relationship between traditional sex role stereotypes and frequency of wife abuse.

Another personality variable which has been examined is the batterer's need for power. Past studies indicate that males with a high need for power have more difficulty in intimate relationships (Stewart & Rubin, 1976; Winter, 1973). Recently, Dutton and his colleagues (Dutton & Browning, 1987; Dutton & Strachen, 1987) have extended this

analysis to abusive relationships. They found that, when compared to "maritally conflicted men" abusive men were high in need for power but lacked the appropriate verbal skills to obtain this power. Therefore, these men resorted to violence in order to retain their authority.

In addition to sex role attitudes and need for power, isolated examinations of other personality characteristics have also been reported. Walker (1984) found that abused women had an internal locus of control. Batterers have been characterized as less efficacious (Rouse, 1984). Also, Neidig et al. (1986) found no differences between batterers and non-batterers on measures of empathy, dogmatism, and authoritarianism.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

Each of the approaches reviewed have made a notable contribution to understanding wife abuse. As evident from Figure 1, the feminist and sociological levels of analysis have received the most theoretical attention. These perspectives often overlap or contain complementary concepts. In addition, feminists and sociologists frequently adopt a social learning perspective to explain the intergenerational transmission of key behavioral patterns.

Feminist theories have taken the broadest approach to

understanding the causes of wife abuse. The importance of power relations, gender, occidental history, and economic inequality are emphasized by feminists when examining the causes of wife abuse.

Sociological theories are characterized by their focus on group norms and the social system. Theoretical contributions from the sociological perspective include the