

BATTERED WOMEN:

Myths, Realities and New Directions for Future Research¹

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One of the least researched areas within the study of the family is interpersonal violence between adult family members. While a considerable body of research now exists on child abuse and neglect, the dynamics of adult violence remain relatively unexplored with the notable exceptions of work by Gelles,² Steinmetz³ and Strauss⁴ in the United States and the recent report for the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women by Linda Mac-

Leod, *Wife Battering in Canada: The Vicious Circle*.⁵ In this latter report, MacLeod outlines available evidence about the occurrence of wife battering and the reasons for the lack of support from friends, family and social institutions. The similarities between wife battering and rape in terms of social response are very striking. In addition, valuable information about new initiatives—transition houses, police crisis intervention, legal change—is in-



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Suzanne Swibold
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cluded. While MacLeod's report is a welcome addition to the field, the paucity of other material in this area is puzzling. If the nuclear family is a microcosm of the larger society in which attitudes and behaviours are internalized, one should certainly expect to see considerable amounts of interpersonal violence. As one researcher succinctly phrased the issue, violence as well as charity probably begins at home.⁶

The stance of most researchers vis-a-vis the issue could best be described as benign neglect. While investigators of working class and low income families frequently mention the general themes of violence and aggressiveness allegedly associated with such classes, the topic of intra-familial violence seems to be virtually non-existent in discussions of middle and upper class families. Admittedly, information is difficult to obtain on such a topic. Middle class Canadian and American cultures with their emphasis on civility, rationality and non-emotion interpret violence against a cohabitor as a sign of deviance, an indication that something is wrong and needs to be corrected. Typically, this is information which family members do not want made public for fear of the disapproval, pity and shame which would follow. Thus, that violence which does occur becomes 'hidden' from the eyes of other members of the society including social researchers.

In this paper we wish to briefly develop three issues within the research problem of adult family violence. First, we shall show that the incidence of physical violence directed against other adult members of a family is much greater than is commonly supposed and, moreover, appears to be only slightly associated with the class background of participants. Second, we shall attempt to dispel some of the myths associated with family violence such as the relationship between

alcohol and violence and the alleged masochistic tendencies of violence victims. Third, some suggestions for future research are proposed in light of our discussion of points one and two above.

Who is batterer?

While evidence is not as complete and unequivocal as one would wish, research which does exist in this area suggests the following: the incidence of intra-family adult violence is as high as 50% of all families; men are far more likely than women to initiate physical violence; there is, at best, a complex and subtle relationship between social class and the rate of physical violence; finally, if physical assault culminates in homicide, women are slightly more likely to kill men than vice-versa.

Because of the stigmatized nature of family violence among middle class Canadian and American families, an accurate measurement of such behavior is extremely difficult. Moreover, any measurement is obviously related to the definition of family violence which is utilized. Nonetheless, if physical violence is defined as, one or more of, slapping, hitting or pushing with intent to injure, then Gelles⁷ suggests that over 30% of American families are violent on at least one occasion per year and as many as 16-20% are routinely violent. Gelles bases these estimates upon a random sample of West Coast American families. Using a sample of stable, middle income families in New Hampshire, Strauss found that 16% reported such violence at least once in the previous year.⁸ The author of this research further suggests that such an estimate be considered a minimum statement of incidence because his sample over-represented middle-aged, stable, middle class families. A national United States sampling currently being carried out by Steinmetz, Gelles and Strauss demonstrates that a very large minority of American

families experience some type of violence at least once a year and, depending upon the definition of violence employed, such an estimate may be as high as 50%.⁹ Research such as the above suggests that adult family violence be seen as part of a routine, on-going process for many families and not necessarily as deviant or infrequent.

While the stereotype of the bullying, aggressive shrew of a wife verbally, and even physically, attacking her husband, boyfriend or lover is well known to all of us, it is more fiction than fact. Women are overwhelmingly the victims rather than the perpetrators of family violence. In roughly 96% of police calls for domestic disturbances, women initiate the request for assistance.¹⁰ Whenever injuries are reported, excluding homicides which we shall consider shortly, women comprise practically the entire list of victims. Although information as to who initiated violent behaviour is frequently very difficult to obtain in the explosive atmosphere associated with the violence, there is no credible evidence to suggest that very many women actually initiate the physical violence itself. Some women (particularly if they are better educated and verbally equipped than their 'husbands') may inflict verbal criticism which eventually culminates in violence, but the actual escalation to such violence, is overwhelmingly male-initiated.¹¹

Family violence is frequently associated in the literature with working class and lower class families.¹² There are a number of reasons for this association. First, working class families are more accessible to researchers. Second, there is a masculine image of toughness and aggressiveness associated with such families—although the exact relationship between such characteristics and violence is not clearly developed. Third, many of the families

chosen for research from such class backgrounds are 'multi-problem' and thus might be more susceptible to violence. Fourth, women most likely to come to transition houses, the source of most Canadian data, are those with the least financial resources—the poor. Nevertheless, a review of the literature suggests that family violence is reasonably evenly distributed throughout the class structure. Strauss,¹³ Gelles,¹⁴ Barrett¹⁵ and others¹⁶ find no clear-cut relationship between social class and incidence of violence. Those researchers, such as Gayford, who do report a relationship could just as easily account for the over-representation of working class and lower class families in terms of their sampling procedures. Gayford interviewed 100 battered wives who utilized an out-patient clinic in a working class hospital.¹⁷ Thus, while family violence is certainly much more visible to social researchers in some class contexts than others, the exact relationship remains elusive and unconfirmed.

There is a small, but nonetheless highly important, segment of violent behaviour where men and women are roughly equal in the incidence of violence directed against each other. This segment involves homicide or the death of one of the combatants. Admittedly, this is a very small part of all physical violence which occurs in the family, but it is worth noting that homicide statistics reveal that women are slightly more likely to kill men than vice-versa in domestic quarrels.¹⁸ The precise meaning of this statistic, however, is very elusive. It is possible that many more women than men commit homicide in self defense. At the present we possess little or no evidence on the levels of physical and verbal abuse leading up to such homicides. Thus, a great deal more work needs to be done before the significance of homicide statistics can be assessed in the context of family violence.

Myths Surrounding Family Violence

An important section of the MacLeod review focuses on common beliefs or myths about wife beating. Three myths in particular are noteworthy. One myth concerns the alleged relationship between alcohol and family violence; a second concerns the alleged masochistic tendencies of many female victims of violence; a third myth focuses on the decision by the victim to continue or terminate a violent relationship.

Much of the research on family violence stresses the relationship, sometimes causal,¹⁹ other times merely correlative,²⁰ between such violence and alcohol use. A number of researchers elevate alcohol to a causal role in family violence by suggesting that such violence seldom, if ever, occurs in its absence. According to this argument, violent men and their victims alike invoke alcohol as a type of suspender of culpability. Some women are supposed to say, by way of excusing the men who beat them, "It wasn't his fault because he was 'on the bottle'". Similarly, men claim they lost control and somehow should not be held fully responsible for their acts because they were acting under the 'influence'. Alcohol is thus seen as a primary cause for their behaviour (It should be noted that it need not be the only cause present). Other researchers do not go as far as to assign alcohol to a primary causal role. Rather, they note the high association between family violence and alcohol use. Alcohol here might be termed a facilitating rather than causal agent. Alcohol reduces inhibitions and thus provides a certain legitimacy to 'speak one's mind'. Insofar as there already exist tensions or violent tendencies, alcohol use facilitates their expression.

A number of comments may be made on this supposed relationship between alcohol and violence. First, a significant number of violent

incidents—from 25 to 60% depending upon the study²¹—do not cite alcohol as being present. Moreover, there seems to be considerable confusion among those researchers who invoke alcohol as a causal agent. This confusion stems from the confusing of what might be termed physiological and cultural conceptions of 'being in control'. As we have said, to be 'drunk' excuses a fair amount of responsibility for one's actions in our culture. Yet, few, if any, individuals become so intoxicated that they lose conscious recognition of the fact that they are physically attacking another individual. It is difficult, therefore, to understand how intoxication could "cause" violence. It is frequently said that many individuals display high levels of aggression and violence when consuming alcohol and yet are calm and even gentle when sober. It would appear that more likely what is happening is that alcohol is providing cultural license for violence but that in its absence some other rationale would be used to excuse the behaviour. This suggests that assigning alcohol any causal role is of dubious value.

An additional point might be made as well. The overwhelming majority of batterers are portrayed by their victims and police reports as highly possessive and jealous people. Alcohol use is often associated with parties and other social contexts where jealousy might be easily triggered. The interaction of alcohol and a gala atmosphere might precipitate violent reactions on the part of jealous males. Certainly the role, if any, that alcohol plays in family violence is more complex than a simple causal sequence. A good deal more research needs to be done to further clarify its relationship to violence.

Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* provides a partial glimpse of another myth surrounding family violence, namely the shrew-like, masochistically inclined woman

who provokes, and even secretly covets, physical violence directed against her. Everyone knows of the 'nagging bitch' who must at least share some of the blame for the violence directed her way. If she's masochistically inclined as well, she sees such acts of violence as legitimate and even gestures of care and affection.

There are two elements to this mythical female stereotype. The first has to do with her nagging, shrew-like qualities. It is difficult to gather precise information on the verbal exchanges preceding the onslaught of violence. No doubt many women are equal to or even superior to the men they are involved with in terms of intelligence and verbal skills. Some might even act in such a way that might be construed as nagging, particularly if the woman has a higher level of education and greater aspirations than the male.²² It seems ridiculous, however, to argue that any verbal abuse could somehow be made license for the male to escalate the quarrel to a violent level. It should also be noted that a large number of women report practically no verbal exchanges prior to the outbreak of violence.²³

The second part of this stereotype suggests that both the batterer and the victim feel that the woman needs to be hit occasionally to 'straighten her out'. To be sure, a number of women, though still only a minority, have internalized some version of this stereotype. A not uncommon sentiment is "I know he gets into a rage when I mention that . . . maybe it's my fault". It is hard to understand how such verbal interchange can be interpreted as justification for assault. It is certainly not grounds within the legal system. The fact that some women have internalized such sentiments does not make it any more excusable. It should also be noted in concluding this discussion of the stereotype that records from transition houses and the scattered research

reports state that the vast majority of women neither provoked nor accepted as legitimate their battering.

A third myth follows from the preceding discussion. This myth holds that large numbers of women will not leave the men who assault them because they are committed to the sanctity of the marriage and fear the consequences of such an action for their children. To be sure, many women remain in violent relationships because of some attachment to the male be it romantic, sexual or otherwise. A few others, as suggested earlier, may even feel guilt and blame themselves, thereby curbing their desires to leave. Still others are indeed concerned about the impact of such violence upon their children and attempt to weigh the consequences of remaining or leaving the relationship. The breaking point in many such relationships occurs at the point where violence is directed toward the children as well as the women.²⁴

Despite the factors listed above, an examination of transition house records suggests the main constraint upon a woman moving out is economic. Most victims of family violence are trapped economically and socially. With limited labour market skills (even if education levels are relatively high), little labour market experience and meager savings, most women simply do not possess the economic resources to set up a separate household. This is particularly true for families at lower income levels but also holds across all classes. Moreover, when advice and social support is sought from neighbours and kin, such advice is usually to 'stick it out'. This entrapment frequently leads to depression, guilt, anxiety and frustration—all of which reinforce the original entrapment.

Taken collectively, the debunking of these

myths require us to alter our thinking quite dramatically about the phenomenon of family violence. The violent home can no longer be set aside and analyzed as some form of abnormality. To be sure, there are levels of degree of violence and what we need to research is this level of severity and not its presence or absence. Similarly, our conceptions of victims and victimization needs to be recast. All too often, a focus on victims (i.e., victimization) leads us to a type of 'blaming the victim' stance. The myths surrounding family violence make it easier in this area than many others.

New Directions in Family Violence Research

Recognizing interpersonal violence as an on-going, frequent form of behaviour in between 15% and 50% of all family relationships requires the development of new theoretical tools for understanding its causes and maintenance. Such theoretical tools must be developed at an inter-personal (micro) level as well as a more societal (macro) level. At the present, little analytical work exists in this area since virtually all work done up to now has been descriptive in nature. While it is far beyond the scope of this paper to develop new analytic tools, a few comments can be made about the kind of work we feel needs to be pursued at the different levels of analysis.

At the inter-personal level, we obviously need much more accurate information on the incidence of violence. We need to develop new paradigms to account for various dimensions of this violence. One dimension which is receiving interesting treatment is the decision to vacate a violent relationship. Using an attribution paradigm derived from social psychology, Frieze and others are examining the calculus, from the woman's perspective, which leads her to leave a violent relationship.

Another suggestion at this level of analysis would be to attempt to construct a 'career paradigm(s)' of the various stages in family conflict which would predict which conflicts and which relationships were more likely to lead to violence. Strauss has attempted part of such a career model in his analysis of the relationship between verbal abuse and violence.²⁵

At a societal level, we need to understand much more clearly, the relationships between the socio-economic order and family violence. As suggested earlier, the relationship between social class and family violence is still unclear. Marxist analysis with its emphasis upon power relationships, alienation and exploitation may offer rich potential here. Much of the victim's plight in family violence stems from her treatment as less than equal to the man. Understanding the economic order will better allow us to assess the validity of those explanations for family violence which suggest that the male is displacing his frustration with alienation and exploitation in his work life upon those individuals over whom he has some control.

Although we have been discussing family violence as though it were a rarefied, intellectual problem, it should be kept in mind that family violence creates great amounts of physical and mental anguish. As much or more than any other area of social research, there is a need for relevant, yet objective research which can aid in eliminating it as an aspect of all too many family relationships.

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented to the Atlantic Association of Anthropologists and Sociologists—March 16-18, 1979, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, N.S.
2. Richard J. Gelles, *Conjugal Violence: A Study of Physical Aggression Between Husband and Wife* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1974).

3. Suzanne Steinmetz, *The Cycle of Violence, Assertive, Agressive and Abusive Family Interaction* (New York: Praeger, 1977).
4. Murray Strauss, "Levelling, Civility and Violence in the Family," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, (February 1974) pp. 13-29. See also, Murray Strauss and Suzanne Steinmetz, *Violence in the Family* (New York: Dodd-Mead, 1974).
5. Linda MacLeod, *Wife Battering in Canada: The Vicious Circle*. Prepared for the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1980). This report is concise, well-researched and inexpensive, making it an ideal tool for use in the classroom and for public education.
6. Steinmetz, *The Cycle of Violence*.
7. Gelles, *Conjugal Violence*.
8. Strauss, "Levelling, Civility and Violence in the Family".
9. Opening address delivered by Professor Murray Strauss, Violence in the Family Symposium, March 1978, Vancouver, British Columbia.
10. Morton Bard, "Family Intervention police teams as a Community Mental Health Resource", *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science* Vol. 60 (June 1969). See also Del Martin, *Battered Wives* (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1976).
11. Strauss and Steinmetz, *Violence in the Family*.
12. See, for the classic statement, Oscar Lewis, *La Vida* (New York: Random House, 1966).
13. Strauss and Steinmetz, *Violence in the Family*.
14. Gelles, *Conjugal Violence*.
15. Eugene Barrett, "Domestic Assault Directed against Spouses", *Canadian Social Worker* (June 1975).
16. Joanne Downey and Jane Howell, *Wife Battering*, position paper prepared for the United Way of Vancouver, Social Policy and Research Division, September 1976, Vancouver, British Columbia. See also Maria Roy, *Battered Women: A Psychological Study of Domestic Violence* (New York: Van Nostrand-Reinhold, 1977).
17. J.J. Gayford, "Battered Wives: Research on Battered Wives," *Royal Society of Health Journal*, Vol. 95, No. 6 (Dec. 1975).
18. Morton Bard, "Family Intervention Police Teams as a Community Mental Health Resource," See also T.M. Driscoll and R.G. Shane and C.F. Meyer, "Training Police in Family Crisis Intervention," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1973).
19. For example, see Gelles, *Conjugal Violence*. See also G. Ballard "Alcohol use and Conjugal Violence," *Journal of Alcohol Abuse*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (April 1974).
20. For a good review of this literature see Gerald J. Leger, *The Roles of Alcohol in Violence and Aggression: A Critical Review*, Non-Medical uses of Drugs Directorate, Ministry of Health and Welfare, Ottawa, January 1976.
21. Gelles, *Conjugal Violence*. See also J. Downey and J. Howell, *Wife Battering*.
22. Steinmetz, *The Cycle of Violence*.
23. Erin Pizzey, *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear You* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1974). See also Strauss and Steinmetz, *Violence in the Family* and Gelles, *Conjugal Violence*. Such findings are further substantiated by the reports of approximately twenty transition houses in Canada based on their client records.
25. Arlene Gröpper and Janet Currie, "A Study of Battered Women," M.A. Thesis, School of Social Work, University of British Columbia, March 1976.
25. Strauss, "Levelling, Civility and Violence in the Family."