Life is full of paradoxes, and perhaps even more so in the family than elsewhere. Two of these ironic or paradoxical aspects of the family concern the high level of stress and the high level of violence that is characteristic of American family life.

In the case of violence, the paradox is that the family is, at one and the same time, the most physically violent group or institution that a typical citizen is likely to encounter (1–5) and also the group to which most people look for love, support, and gentleness. So the hallmarks of family life are both love and violence.

Much of the work of the Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire has been designed to unravel that paradox. We are a long way from a full explanation. However, some progress has been made. This chapter examines one of the several factors which go into that explanation: the link between stress and violence.

Another irony of family life is the fact that although the family is a place where one can find respite from the tensions of the world, the family is at the same time a group with its own inherently high level of conflict and stress. The theoretical case for this view is detailed elsewhere (6, 7). In this chapter we will illustrate but two stress-producing aspects of the family.

One source of family stress is the fact that, in addition to the normal differences and
conflicts between two or more people, the family has built into its basic structure both the
so-called battle of the sexes and the generation gap. A second source of stress is inherent
in what is expected of families. For example, families are expected to provide adequate
food, clothing, and shelter in a society which does not always give families the resources
necessary to do this. Another example is the expectation that families bring up healthy,
well-adjusted, law-abiding, and intelligent children who can "get ahead in the world." The
stress occurs because these traits, and the opportunity to "get ahead," are all factors
which are to a greater or lesser extent beyond the control of any given family.

The basic argument of the chapter is probably clear by what has just been said: that a
major cause of the high rate of child abuse is the stress and conflict which tends to charac-
terize families. Of course, this is only a plausible argument. Brenner (8), for example, has
shown a clear relationship between stress as indexed by the unemployment rate and the
rate of assault and homicide in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. But is it that
people are assaulted or murdered by unemployed members of their own families? This
needs to be demonstrated with empirical data. Consequently, a major part of this chapter
is devoted to such an empirical study.

The Theoretical Model

Although the empirical findings will start with the relationship between the level of stress
in families and the level of child abuse, it is not argued that stress directly causes child
abuse. Violence is only one of many possible responses to stress. Among the alternatives
are passivity, resignation, or just leaving. University departments, for example, are also
stressful environments, but the rate of physical violence within such departments is close
to zero.

The absence of any necessary link between stress and violence is shown in Brenner's
data on the correlates of unemployment (8). Unemployment is highly correlated not only
with assault and homocide, but also with annual rates of hypertension, deaths from heart
attacks, mental hospital admissions, and alcoholism. Similarly, Brown and Harris (9)
studied a random sample of women in London using highly reliable and valid data on life
stresses. The interesting point is that they demonstrated a clear tendency for these women
to respond to stress by depression rather than violence. In a few instances, case control
studies or lower socioeconomic clinical samples suggest either an ambiguous or negligible
relationship between stress and child abuse (10–12).

On the other hand, others argue for theoretical formulations such as the multifactorial
model of Gil (13) and the ecological model of Garbarino (14) based on Bronfenbrenner's
work (15). Both Gil and Garbarino categorize stress largely in socioeconomic terms,
while other investigators have gone beyond the chronic nature of stress-related poverty to
a consideration of the acute nature of stressful life changes. For example, the prospective
study of Egeland and his associates (16) found that stressful life events, along with par-
ticular maternal-infant interaction patterns and infant characteristics, were major predic-
tors of child abuse. Similar findings have been reported by other researchers (17–20),
although these authors point to the importance of stress as mediated by other variables
such as social support, intergenerational family violence, and youthful parents. In par-
Partial model of relationship between stress and family violence. This diagram is labeled as a "partial" model for two main reasons: First, it includes only a sampling of the intervening variables which could be included in the center box. Second, it omits negative feedback loops (i.e., deviation dampening processes) which must be present. Without them the violence would escalate to the point where the system would self-destruct—as it sometimes, but not typically, does. See Straus (1) for a systems model of family violence which includes negative feedback processes and other elements of a cybernetic system.

In particular, Justice, Calvert, and Justice (19) utilized multiple measures for their controlled clinical sample and concluded that both recent life changes and a violent social script significantly differentiated abusive from nonabusive parents.

Mediating Variables

The above suggests that other factors must be present for stress to result in violence. The central box in figure 3.1 illustrates some of the other variables. For example, people are unlikely to respond to stress by violence unless this is part of the socially scripted method of dealing with stress and frustration—as it is in our society. So, an important part of the model is the existence of norms or images of behavior which depict striking out at others when under stress as part of human nature.

However, these are very general behavioral scripts. They cannot explain family violence, because they are part of the society’s image of basic nature in all types of situations. They may be part of the explanation, but they are not sufficient. To find the additional variables which will lead to a sufficient explanation, one has to look at the nature of the family itself.

Normative Legitimacy of Family Violence

One very simple but nonetheless important factor is that the family has different rules about violence than other groups. In an office or a factory, the basic rule is that no one can hit anyone else, no matter what they do wrong. A person can be a pest, an intolerable bore, negligent, incompetent, selfish, or unwilling to listen to reason. But that still does
not give anyone the right to hit such a person. In the family the situation is different. There the basic rule is that if someone does wrong and "won't listen to reason," then violence is permissible and sometimes even required.

This is clearly the case with respect to the rights and obligations of parents, but it also applies to spouses. As one husband said about an incident in which his wife threw a coffee pot at him, "I was running around with other women—I deserved it." Statements like that are made by many husbands and wives. In fact, the evidence suggests that a marriage license is also a hitting license (2, 21). Still, that does not explain why or how such a norm arose or why it persists. Here again there are a number of factors, one of which is shown in figure 3.1: the "nonabusive" use of violence in child rearing, that is, physical punishment.

*Family Socialization in Violence*

Physical punishment provides the society's basic training in violence, but, of course, training which applies most directly to behavior in the family. At least some use of physical punishment is just about universal in American society, typically beginning in infancy (22). What are the reasons for saying that learning about violence starts with physical punishment?

When physical punishment is used, several things can be expected to occur. Most obviously, the infant or child learns to do or not to do whatever the punishment is intended to teach, for example, not to pick up things from the ground and put them in his or her mouth. Less obvious, but equally or more important, are four other lessons which are so deeply learned that they become an integral part of one's personality and world view.

The first of these unintended consequences is the association of love with violence. Mommy and daddy are the first, and usually the only ones, to hit an infant. For most children this continues throughout childhood (23). The child therefore learns that the primary love objects are also those who hit.

Second, since physical punishment is used to train the child or to teach about dangerous things to be avoided, it establishes the moral rightness of hitting other family members.

The third unintended consequence is the "Johnny, I've told you ten times" principle—that when something is really important, it justifies the use of physical force.

Fourth is the idea that when one is under stress, is tense, or angry, hitting—although wrong—is understandable, that is, to a certain extent legitimate.

*Involuntary Nature of Family Membership*

The last of the mediating variables we will discuss is the simple fact that the family is only a semivoluntary institution. This is most obvious in the case of children. They cannot leave, nor can parents throw them out until a legally set age. So leaving—which is probably the most widely used and effective method of avoiding violence—is not available as an alternative in the parent-child relationship.

A number of other factors should be included in figure 3.1 and in this discussion. Those which have been discussed, however, should be sufficient to illustrate the theory which guided the analysis in this chapter.
By way of summary, the theory underlying this chapter rejects the idea that humans have an innate drive toward aggression or an innate tendency to respond to stress by aggression. Rather, a link between stress and aggression occurs only (a) if the individual has learned an “aggressive” response to stress, (b) if such a response is a culturally recognized script for behavior under stress, and (c) if the situation seems to be one which will produce rewards for aggression.

Sample

The data used to examine this theory were obtained in January and February of 1976. Interviews were conducted with a national-area probability sample of 1,146 persons with at least one child age three through seventeen living at home. Each respondent had to be between eighteen and seventy years of age and living with a member of the opposite sex as a couple. However, the couple did not have to be formally married. A random half of the respondents were female and half were male. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, were completely anonymous, and interviewers were of the racial or language group which was predominant in the sampling area for which they were responsible (4).

Definition and Measures of Stress

There has been considerable debate about the concept of stress (24–31). Is the stress caused by illness, unemployment, family conflict, getting married, or being promoted to a new job a property of the situation? For some people, a new set of job responsibilities is experienced as stress, whereas for others, lack of such new responsibilities is a stress.

The definition used here treats stress as a function of the interaction of the subjectively defined demands of a situation and the capacity of an individual or group to respond to these demands. Stress exists when the subjectively experienced demands are inconsistent with response capabilities. This can be demands in excess of capabilities or a low level of demand relative to response capabilities. A more adequate formulation of the concept of stress includes a number of other elements. For example, Farrington (6) has identified six components which need to be taken into account in research on stress: the stressor stimulus, objective demands, subjective demands, response capabilities, choice of response, and stress level. Important as these six components are, they will be ignored in this chapter because there is no way to investigate them with the data available.

There is a gap between the definition of stress given above and data actually reported here. This is because the methodology of this chapter assumes (a) that some life event, such as moving or the illness of a child, produces a certain, but unknown, degree of demand on parents, (b) that on the average this is subjectively experienced as a demand, (c) that the capabilities of parents to respond to these demands will not always be sufficient, and (d) that the result is a certain level of stress. On the basis of these assumptions, it is possible to investigate the relationship between such stressful life events and the level of violence in the family. Obviously, this leaves a large agenda for other investigators to develop a more adequate measure of stress.

As indicated above, the aspect of stress which is measured in this study is limited to
TABLE 3.1 Percentage Experiencing Life Stresses during Previous Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressful Event</th>
<th>Male (N=519)</th>
<th>Female (N=616)</th>
<th>Total (N=1135)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Troubles with the boss</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Troubles with other people at work</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Layoff or job loss</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Arrest or conviction for serious crime</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Death of someone close</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Foreclosure of a mortgage or loan</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Pregnancy or birth of a child</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Serious sickness or injury</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Serious problem with health or behavior of a family member</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Sexual difficulties</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. In-law troubles</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. New, serious financial problems</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Separation or divorce</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Big increase in arguments with spouse/partner</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Big increase in hours worked or job responsibilities</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Move to different neighborhood or town</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Suspension or expulsion of child from school</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Apprehension of child in illegal act</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

what are called stressor stimuli. These data were obtained by a modified version of the Holmes and Rahe stressful life events scale (32). Because of limited interview time, the scale used here was restricted to the eighteen items listed in table 3.1.1 The scores on this scale ranged from 0 to 13, with a mean of 2.4 and a standard deviation of 2.0.

Sex Differences

The 519 fathers in this sample experienced a somewhat higher number of stressors during the year (2.7) than did the 616 mothers (2.1). Despite this fact, table 3.1 shows that for the most part the experiences reported by the fathers and mothers are quite similar. The exceptions are events to which men and women have different exposure. For example, fewer women have paid employment, so it is not surprising that two to four times as many

1SeeThoits (46) for a comprehensive analysis of the "life events" methodology. The stress index used in this study actually departs in other ways than length from the Holmes and Rahe scale. (a) One of the criteria used to select items from the larger original set was to eliminate stresses which have a positive cathexis. This was done on the basis of methodological studies which show that it is the negative items which account for most of the relationship between scores on the stress index and other variables (47, 48). We modified some items and added some which are not in the Holmes and Rahe scale to secure a set of stressors which seemed best for the purpose of this research. (c) The Holmes and Rahe weights were not used in computing the index score for each respondent. This was based on research which found that weighting makes little difference in the validity of scales of this type (49) and of the Holmes and Rahe scale specifically (50).

An important limitation which this stress index shares with the Holmes and Rahe index is that one does not know the time distribution of the stressful events. At one extreme, a person who experienced four of the stressors during the year could have had them spread out over the year, or at the other extreme, all four could have occurred at roughly the same time.
men as women experienced an occupationally related stress, such as trouble with a boss or job loss.²

There are a few other interesting sex differences. First, item 4 shows that four times as many men were arrested or convicted of a serious crime. An interesting sidelight is that there is such a high rate of arrest or conviction (2 per 100 men).

The only other item with a nontrivial difference is item 7, experiencing a pregnancy or having a child. This difference is probably due to men misunderstanding the question. It was meant to apply not only to the women but also to the men in the sample whose wives became pregnant or had a child in the last year.

**Frequency of Different Stressors**

The most frequently occurring stress among the eighteen items on the list is the death of someone close to the respondent (item 5). This happened to 37% of our respondents during the year we asked about. The next most frequent stress is closely related: a serious problem with the health or behavior of someone in the family (item 9). This occurred in the lives of 25%. For men, however, occupational stresses occurred more frequently. Over 28% had a difficulty with their bosses (item 2), and, at the positive end, over 33% had a large increase in their work responsibilities (item 15).

**Definition and Measure of Child Abuse**

Measuring child abuse also poses many difficulties (33). The technique used in this study is known as the Conflict Tactics Scale (34). It consists of a checklist of acts of physical violence. The respondent is asked about difficulties with other family members in the past year and then is asked if, in the course of such difficulties and conflicts in the past year, he or she did any of the items on the list. The list starts with nonviolent tactics, such as talking things over, and then proceeds on to verbally aggressive tactics, and finally to physical aggression, that is, violent acts.

**Child Abuse**

The list of violent acts in turn was designed to represent a measure of the severity, as well as the frequency, of family violence. The list starts out with pushing, slapping, shoving, and throwing things. These are what can be called the “ordinary” or “normal” violence of family life. It then goes on to kicking, biting, punching, hitting with an object, beating up, and using a knife or gun. This latter group of items was used to compute a measure of “severe violence” which is the measure of child abuse in this chapter, because it consists of acts that put the child at risk of serious injury.

²See Straus (21) for a discussion of the reasons for the higher rate of child abuse by mothers. In respect to the difference in the relationship between stress and child abuse for mothers and fathers, it is interesting that this reverses when the dependent variable is spouse abuse. When the dependent variable is violence against a spouse (either ordinary violence or severe assaults), it is violence by wives which is most closely correlated with stress (see Straus [45] and p. 00).
TABLE 3.2 Violent Acts and Child Abuse Index Rates by Age of Child (per hundred children)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Tactics and Child Abuse Index</th>
<th>3–4 (N=179)</th>
<th>5–9 (N=347)</th>
<th>10–14 (N=365)</th>
<th>15–17 (N=238)</th>
<th>Total (N=1129)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kicked, bit, punched</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit with an object</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Beat up” child</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used a knife or gun</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Abuse Index</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Incidence of Child Abuse

The rates of child abuse revealed by this method are truly astounding. Each year, 14 out of every 100 American children, age three through seventeen, experienced an assault that was serious enough to be included in our Child Abuse Index (see table 3.2). This means that of the 46 million children of this age group in the United States who live with both parents, approximately 6.5 million are abused each year.

It might be objected that this index uses too liberal a definition of child abuse, because one of the items is “hitting with an object.” For some parents, that could be the traditional strap, cane, or paddle, rather than an out-of-control assault. So, we recomputed the index, leaving out the data on hitting with objects. The rates drop sharply to “only” 3 or 4 out of every 100 parents and to an estimate of 1.7 million children per year.

The data just presented might overstate the amount of child abuse, because a family is included if even one isolated incident of abusive violence occurred during that year. On the other hand, these rates may understate the extent to which children are severely assaulted by their parents, because the figures do not take into account how often such assaults occurred. The answer to this question is that if one assault occurred, several were likely. In fact, in only 6% of the child abuse cases was there a single incident. The mean number of assaults per year was 10.5 and the median 4.5.

It is obvious that the incidence of child abuse obtained by this method is many times that estimated by the American Association for Protecting Children (AAPC). AAPC has published figures indicating approximately a million children per year are abused. However, that includes neglect, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse. The physical abuse figure they report is approximately 480,000. What accounts for the difference between that half million and our minimum figure of almost 2 million? There are two main reasons:

1. The AAPC figures are based on incidents which come to official attention. This leaves out the vast number of cases in which physical abuse is suspected and not reportedly, as well as the equally vast number of cases in which a child is nonaccidentally injured, but there is no suspicion of abuse.

2. Probably the most important reason why our rates are so much higher is that our data are based on violent acts carried out, rather than on injuries produced. Fortunately,
children are resilient. Many are the children who have been thrown against walls and who simply bounced off with, at most, a bruise. Only the relatively rare instances in which immediate and obvious injury occurs stand much chance of being suspected as parental abuse.

**Why These Figures Are Underestimates**

For reasons described elsewhere (4), the sample did not include children in the high-risk-of-abuse first two years of life. This is one of several factors which make even our very high rates of child abuse an underestimate. The second such factor is that these are self-reports by parents to a stranger doing a survey. Not every parent who has punched or kicked a child is going to admit that in such an interview. Third, the Conflict Tactics Scale includes only a limited list of all the possible abusive acts. For example, we omitted burning a child, wiping out the child’s mouth with noxious substances, and sexual abuse. Fourth, we interviewed either the father or the mother and have data only on that person’s abuse of the child. But most children have two parents and therefore twice the risk—or at least a higher risk—of being abused than our figures show. A fifth factor making these underestimates is that our data are based on children living with two parents. The two parents need not be the child’s natural parents. However, the omission of children living in one-parent households may lead to underestimating because child abuse may be greater under the strain of trying to raise children without the aid of a partner.

**Stressful Life Events and Child Abuse**

The data plotted in figure 3.2 show that the higher the stress score, the higher the rate of child abuse. However, the relationship between stress and child abuse is minimal for mothers. Perhaps this is because, even under low-stress conditions the rate of child abuse by mothers is high (see n. 2). But for fathers, there is a clear increase in abuse as the number of stressors experienced during the year increases.

An analysis identical to that in figure 3.2 was done, except that the dependent variable was not limited to severely violent acts. That is, the measure included pushing, slapping, shoving, and throwing things. Except for the fact that the rates are much higher, the results are similar.

The importance of this similarity is that it helps establish a connection which is extremely important for understanding child abuse. Over and over in our research, we find a clear connection between the “ordinary” violence of family life, such as spanking children or pushing or slapping a spouse, and serious violence such as child abuse and wife beating. Actually, the connection goes deeper. *Verbal* aggression is also part of this pattern of relationships. People who hurt another family member verbally are also the ones most likely to hurt them physically (35). Moreover, the same set of causal factors applies to both the milder forms of violence and to acts of violence that are serious enough to be considered child abuse or spouse abuse. The similarity of the relationship between stress and the overall violence indexes with the relationship between stress and child abuse is but one of many such examples found for this sample (4).
Child abuse rate by stress index score. The number of fathers and mothers on which each of the rates is based is: 0 = 73 fathers and 123 mothers; 1–2 = 198 fathers and 273 mothers; 3–4 = 147 fathers and 141 mothers; 5–6 = 59 fathers and 45 mothers; 7–8 = 19 fathers and 16 mothers; 9+ = 6 fathers and 4 mothers.

Factors Linking Stress and Child Abuse

Interesting as these findings are, they do not reflect the theoretical model sketched at the beginning of this chapter in figure 3.1. One might even say that the data just presented distort the situation because the graph tends to draw attention away from a very important fact: most of the parents in this sample who experienced a high degree of stress did not abuse a child.

A critical question is brought to light by this fact. Why do some people respond to stress by violence, whereas others do not? Part of the answer was suggested in the center box of figure 3.1 and the accompanying explanation. It will be recalled that this theory asserts that stress will result in aggressive acts (such as child abuse) only if certain mediating variables are also present. The balance of this chapter will be devoted to an empirical test of this theory.¹

¹Figure 3.1 is intended to illustrate the general nature of the theory rather than to list all the variables which need to be taken into account. There are also two aspects of the model which are included simply to alert readers to their importance, but which will not figure in the empirical analysis. First, this chapter will not deal with feedback processes. Second, within the center box illustrating some of the intervening variables, the arrows show that each of these variables is related to the others. They are a mutually supportive system, and interaction effects are no doubt also present. However, in this chapter these and other intervening variables will be dealt with one by one.
The first step in the analysis designed to take these mediating or intervening variables into account was to distinguish between parents in the sample who experienced none of the stressful events in the past year (n = 149). These two groups were then further divided into those who were in the high quarter of each mediating variable versus those in the low quarter. This enables us to see if the mediating variable was, as specified in the theoretical model, necessary for life stresses to result in violence.

If the theory outlined in figure 3.1 is correct, the parents who had the combination of both high stress and the presence of a mediating variable will have a high rate of child abuse, whereas parents who also experienced high stress, but without the presence of a mediating variable, will not be more violent than the sample as a whole, despite the fact that they were under stress during the year.

Socialization for Violence

In the first section of table 3.3, the first line runs directly contrary to the theory being examined. It shows that parents who were physically punished the most by their mothers when they were teenagers were less abusive under stress than the parents who were not hit at this age by their mothers. On the other hand, the second line of table 3.3 shows that parents whose fathers hit them as teenagers have a child abuse rate which is 33% higher than parents who were under equally high stress that year, but who did not experience this much violence directed against them as teenagers. The difference between the effect of having been hit by one's mother versus by one's father suggests that violence by the father against a teenage child is a more influential role model for violent behavior which the child will later display under stress.

The next two lines of table 3.3 refer to violence between the parents of the parents in this sample. The child abuse rate by parents whose own fathers had hit their mothers was 44% higher than the rate for parents whose fathers never hit their mothers (22.7 per 100 versus 15.8). Surprisingly, there is only a small difference (and in the opposite direction) for parents who had grown up in families where their mothers had hit their fathers.

Legitimacy of Family Violence

The second section of table 3.3 reports semantic differential scores (36) in response to questions about slapping a child and slapping one's husband or wife. Each score is made up by combining the ratings for how "necessary," "normal," and "good" the respondent rated slapping.

The first line of the second section shows that parents who approved of slapping a child had a slightly greater rate of child abuse than did the parents with a score of zero on this index. When it comes to approval of slapping a spouse, there is a 72% difference in the predicted direction. These findings are consistent with the theoretical model asserting that the relation between stress and child abuse is a process that is mediated by social norms rather than a direct biologically determined relationship. However, since these are cross sectional data, the findings do not prove the correctness of the model. It is also quite plausible to interpret the greater child abuse rate by parents who approve of violence as an after-the-fact justification. Except for a few variables which clearly occurred at a previous
TABLE 3.3  Effect of Intervening Variables on Incidence of Child Abuse by Parents Experiencing High Stress (per hundred children)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervening Variable</th>
<th>Indicator of Intervening Variable</th>
<th>Child Abuse Rate When Intervening Variable is:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood Experience with Violence:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical punishment after age 12 by mother</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>4+ per yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical punishment after age 12 by father</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>4+ per yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s father hit mother</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1+ per yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s mother hit father</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1+ per yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimacy of Family Violence:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval of parents slapping a 12 yr. old</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High ¼</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval of slapping a spouse</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Any approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Satisfaction, Importance of Marriage, and Violence:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Satisfaction Index</td>
<td>High ¼</td>
<td>Low ¼</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage less important to husband than to wife</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence between the parents</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Any in past year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>High ¼</td>
<td>Low ¼</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s occupation</td>
<td>White collar</td>
<td>Blue collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>$&gt;22,000</td>
<td>&lt;$9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES Index for family</td>
<td>High ¼</td>
<td>Low ¼</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Power:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Norm Index</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Husb. should have final say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Power Index</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Husb. has final say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Integration:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Participation Index</td>
<td>11+</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious service attendance</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>0–1 per yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatives living near</td>
<td>13+</td>
<td>0–2 per yr.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: The N’s vary because, even though the intent was for the high and low groups to be the upper and lower quarters, this was not always possible. In the case of occupational class, for example, the comparison is between a dichotomous nominal variable. In the case of continuous variables, we sometimes wanted to preserve the intrinsic meaning of a score category, such as those with a score of zero, even though this might be more or less one-quarter of the sample. Another factor causing the N’s to vary is that the division into quarters was based on the distribution for the entire sample of 2,143, rather than just the subgroup of high-stress parents analyzed in this table.
time, such as the ones on violence experienced as a child, this caution applies to most of the findings to be reported.

Marital Satisfaction, Importance of Marriage, and Violence

The first line of the third section compares parents who were low in marital satisfaction with parents in the high quarter. The low quarter parents had an 87% higher rate of child abuse. A similar difference is shown by comparing couples in which the husband rated the marriage as a less important part of his life than the marriage played in the life of his wife. Finally, the third line of the third section shows that child abuse occurs at a 30% higher rate in families in which there was an incidence of physical violence between the parents during the year.

Of course, as noted above, these differences, like a number of others reported in this chapter, could reflect the effect of family violence rather than being a cause. Only a longitudinal study can adequately sort out this critical issue. On the basis of this study, it can only be said that the findings are not contrary to the idea that parents under stress are more likely to be violent if they do not find the marriage a rewarding and important part of their lives.

Socioeconomic Status

Four aspects of socioeconomic status (SES) are examined in the fourth section of table 3.3. The first of these, the educational level of the couple, shows findings which many will find surprising. Parents in the high quarter of education were only slightly less violent than those in the low quarter. This is inconsistent with the widely held view that less-educated people are more violent. Actually, a careful review of the available studies fails to support this widespread idea (37). A number of studies (including an analysis of this sample by Finkelhor [38]) suggest there is little or no difference in aggression and violence according to education.

The husband’s occupational class also makes little difference for child abuse (second line of the fourth section). On the other hand, if the combined income of the couple was $9,000 or less, the rate of child abuse was 75% higher than in families with a more adequate income (25.0 per 100 versus 14.3 per 100).

The last line of the fourth section attempts to take into account the several aspects of family socioeconomic status. We computed an index which combined the occupational levels, educations, and incomes of both the husband and the wife. The combination of these factors turns out to be very important. Parents in the low quartile on the SES index had a child abuse rate that is double that of parents in the top quarter of the SES distribution.

Marital Power

One of the most important factors accounting for the high rate of marital violence is the use of force by men as the “ultimate resource” to back up their position as “head” of the families (2, 3, 37, 39, 40). Perhaps similar processes are at work in respect to child abus
The first line of the fifth section of table 3.3 shows that the assault rate of parents who subscribe to the norm of male dominance in family decisions is 136% higher than it is for couples who are not committed to such male dominance norms. However, the second line suggests that in respect to the actual decision power, the difference is minimal. Perhaps the closer association between male dominance norms and child abuse than between actual male dominance in family decisions and child abuse is because many of the male dominant marriages are male dominant by mutual agreement or at least by acquiescence.

Social Integration

The last set of mediating factors included in this chapter explores the theory that child abuse will be higher in the absence of a network of personal ties. Such ties can provide help in dealing with the stresses of life and perhaps intervention when disputes within the family become violent. In particular, Garbarino and Gilliam (41) have equated both the cultural legitimacy of violence against children and social isolation as conditions central to the existence of child abuse. The finding that social support mediates the stress/child-abuse relationship is confirmed by a number of empirical studies (16, 17, 19, 42-44).

The first line of the sixth section of table 3.3 shows that parents who belonged to no organizations (such as clubs, lodges, business or professional organizations, or unions) had a substantially higher rate of child abuse than did the parents who participated in many such organizations. The same applies to parents who attended religious services as compared to those who rarely or never did.

The third line of the sixth section, however, shows opposite results. Parents who had many relatives living within an hour's travel time had a higher rate for child abuse than did those with few relatives nearby. This finding is not necessarily inconsistent with social network theory. The usual formulation of that theory assumes that the network will be prosocial. Usually that is a reasonable assumption. However, a social network can also support antisocial behavior. A juvenile gang is an example. That is the essence of the differential association theory of criminal behavior. In the present case, the assumption that the kin network will be opposed to violence is not necessarily correct. Many parents experiencing difficulty managing their children are advised by their own parents to give the child a "sound thrashing."

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter was designed to determine the extent to which stressful life experiences are associated with child abuse and to explore the reasons for such an association. The data used to answer these questions come from a nationally representative sample of 1,146

*However, an alternative interpretation of the effects of relatives' proximity needs to be considered. Family proximity may in fact be more characteristic of the kinship network of lower socioeconomic groups; lower socioeconomic status has already been shown to be strongly associated with higher abuse rates. An analysis detailed elsewhere (51) examined network embeddedness and family violence. This analysis, controlling for race and class differences, revealed that structural measures of social integration (number of years in the neighborhood, number of non-nuclear family adults living at home, and number of husband-wife relatives living nearby) are associated with lower rates of child abuse.*
parents. Stress was measured by an instrument patterned after the Holmes and Rahe scale. It consisted of a list of eighteen stressful events which could have occurred during the year covered by the survey. Child abuse was measured by the severe violence index of the family Conflict Tactics Scale. This consists of whether during the past year the parent had punched, kicked, bit, hit the child with an object, beat up the child, or attacked the child with a knife or gun.

The findings show that parents who experienced none of the eighteen stresses in the index had the lowest rate of child abuse. As the number of stressors experienced during the year increased, so did the rate of child abuse. This was most clear in the case of the fathers.

The second part of the analysis was designed to test the theory that stress by itself does not necessarily lead to child abuse. Rather, it was assumed that other factors must also be present. Several such factors were examined by focusing on parents who were in the top quarter in stresses experienced during the year. These parents were divided into low and high groups on the basis of variables which might account for the correlation between stress and child abuse. It was assumed that, if the theory is correct, the parents who were high in the presumed intervening variable should have a high rate of child abuse, whereas the parents in the low category of these variables should not be more assaultive than the sample as a whole, despite the fact that they were under as much stress during the year as was the other high-stress subgroup of parents.

The results were generally consistent with this theory. They suggest the following conclusions: (a) Physical punishment by the fathers of the parents in this sample and observing their own fathers hit their mothers trained parents to respond to stress by violence. (b) Parents who believe that physical punishment of children and slapping a spouse are appropriate behaviors have higher rates of child abuse. However, a longitudinal study is needed to establish whether this is actually the causal direction. (c) Parents under stress are more likely to abuse a child if marriage is not an important and rewarding part of their lives and if they engage in physical fights with each other. (d) Education by itself does not affect the link between stress and child abuse. However, the combination of low income, education, and occupation does. (e) Parents who believe that husbands should be the dominant person in a marriage, and to a lesser extent husbands who have actually achieved such a position of power, had higher child abuse rates than parents in more equalitarian marriages who were also under stress. (f) Parents who were socially isolated (in the sense of not participating in clubs, unions, or other organizations) had higher rates of child abuse, whereas those who were involved in supportive networks of this type, did not have higher then average rates of abuse, despite being under high stress. However, the opposite was found comparing those with many versus few relatives living nearby.

Although consistent with the data, the interpretation presented here was not proved by the data. Many of the findings are open to other equally plausible interpretations, particularly as to causal direction. The question of causal direction can only be adequately dealt with by a longitudinal study. In the absence of such prospective data, the following conclusions must be regarded only as what the study suggests about the etiology of child abuse.

We assume that human beings have an inherent capacity for violence, just as they have an inherent capacity for doing algebra. This capacity is translated into actually solving an
equation, or actually abusing a child, if one has learned to respond to scientific or technical problems by using mathematics, or learned to respond to stress and family problems by using violence. Even with such training, violence is not an automatic response to stress, nor algebra to a scientific problem. One also has to believe that the problem is amenable to a mathematical solution or to a violent solution. The findings presented in this chapter show that violence tends to be high when these conditions are present: for example among those whose childhood experiences taught them the use of violence and whose present beliefs justify the appropriateness of hitting other family members. If conditions such as these are present, stress is related to child abuse. If these conditions are not present, the relation between stress and child abuse is absent or minimal.

References


