Conceptualization and Measurement of Battering: Implications for Public Policy*

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to identify some of the many ways in which "battering" or "abuse" of a partner in a married or cohabiting relationship have been conceptualized and measured and to illustrate the consequences of these differences. The consequences include tremendous differences in incidence rates, differences in findings on etiology, and differences in policy intended to reduce physical assaults on women by their partners. For example, some authors emphasize the occurrence of injuries as part of the definition of abuse (Breines & Gordon, 1983; Frieze & Browne, 1989), whereas others base it on whether an attack has occurred (Straus, 1979, 1990), regardless of whether the attack produced an injury. Incidence rates using attack as the criterion may be twenty times higher than those based on injury because, contrary to popular impressions, most physical assaults do not result in injury. Differences in

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etiology are illustrated by data on gender differences. If injury is part of the definition and measurement, it is primarily a male crime; if attack is the criterion of abuse, the rates are about equal for men and women (Straus, 1989).

THE CONCEPTS OF BATTERING AND ABUSE

The history of science is not always a record of progressive clarification of concepts and measures. In some cases, the passage of time brings instead, increased confusion. To a certain extent this seems to be the case with the concepts of "abuse," "wife beating," and "woman battering." The reasons are complex and space permits discussion of only three of them.

Expansion of the Definition

One reason for the current state of confusion stems from the expansion of standards of humane conduct to include not just physical assaults, but also a variety of other noxious behaviors between married or cohabiting partners. For example, using physical force to have sexual relations with a wife is now a criminal act in most states (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985). Until the early 1980s, this was a husband's legal right. The concepts of "battering" and "abuse" are also coming to include verbal aggression and domineering behavior by husbands. This is based on the sound principle that "names" can hurt more than "sticks and stones."

The last 20 years have also produced measurement techniques to operationalize varying conceptions of battering and abuse. These range from a concentration on physical assault (the perspective of this chapter) to definitions which encompass any act which harms or has the potential for harming, economically, psychologically, or physically. Even when the conceptual focus is restricted to physical violence, it has been operationalized in different ways, as: (1) violent acts (Straus, 1974; Schulman, 1979; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980), (2) injuries (Washburn & Frieze, 1981; Berk et al., 1983), (3) both violent acts and injuries (McLeod, 1983; Pagelow, 1984), and through a "battering syndrome" involving repetitive acts of physical violence and psychological harm (Walker, 1979, 1984).

This diversity accurately reflects a complex reality. All of these behaviors should be the focus of remedial policies and should therefore be the focus of careful research; but subsuming them under the general heading of "abuse" or "battering" has created conceptual confusion and probably has inhibited the development of theory and public policies to deal with each of these forms of maltreatment. For example, measures which operationalize the expanded
perspective by including both physical and verbal assaults in the same score (e.g., Hudson & McIntosh, 1981) preclude estimating the extent of either because verbal and physical assaults are combined into one "abuse" score. Such an overall abuse measure also makes it impossible to compare the rate of "woman battering" with "street violence" and therefore hinders integrating family violence theory and research with criminological theory and research.

Normative Ambiguity

Confusion over the concepts of abuse and battering also occurs because of a lack of clear normative standards. On the one hand, a physical assault against a partner, if it involves an act that has a high probability of producing an injury such as kicking or attacks with objects, is typically seen as "criminal violence." On the other hand, there is a lack of consensus on whether "minor" violence, such as slapping and throwing things at a partner, should be similarly conceptualized. Slapping one's partner is clearly violent behavior, but the public is far from unanimous in believing that it is criminal to the same degree as slapping a neighbor. The reluctance to view "minor" violence within the family as a criminal assault has inhibited research on the links between family and non-family violence.

This reluctance reflects normative confusion over behavior in families which is clearly violent but not viewed as criminal because of the implicit cultural support that exists for this kind of behavior (Straus, 1980; Gelles, 1982). Part of the normative ambiguity arises from important ethical and practical problems connected with "criminalizing" behavior in the family which would be a crime if it took place between strangers (Straus & Lincoln, 1985). It is by no means clear whether families and society would be better off if the police, the courts, and the public adopted the principle that the same standards should be used to judge crime within the family as outside the family.

Crime is only one of many types of behavior for which there are different rules and expectations for the family compared to other groups or situations. These differences are part of what makes the family such a unique and important institution. For example, the family is concerned with "the whole person," not just some specific aspect of the person. An employer will be concerned about things which have to do with the quality of one's work whereas the family will be concerned with work performance as well as with its members' religious, political, and leisure patterns of behavior. The tendency to apply different standards to crime within the family is partly a reflection of the fact that what goes on in families and expectations about family relationships are different from other groups in many ways.
Caution in treating crime within the family the same way as crime between other persons also arises because the state has conflicting interests. On the one hand, there is the interest of the state in maintaining a "civil" society in which citizens can live without fear of victimization. This implies a commitment to vigorous action to prevent and punish crime. On the other hand, the state has an interest in encouraging and protecting the family as a social institution. Consequently, the family is subject to restrictions, protections, and exemptions which do not apply to other groups. The most obvious of these are the restrictions on terminating a family. Parents cannot abandon children and husbands and wives must secure permission to terminate a marriage. For the same reasons, the state is reluctant to take actions which, however justified on other grounds, might break up a family.

Finally, it can be argued that, even if the same norms about crime are applied within the family, there may be good reason for not involving the legal system in enforcing those norms. Even if they were willing to devote the time to the case, the police and the courts cannot be expected to understand the unique circumstances of each family and cannot be depended on to take actions which are in the best interest of either the person committing the crime or the family as a whole.

Acts Versus Injuries

Finally, confusion occurs because of a failing to differentiate adequately between conceptualizations and measures which focus on abusive acts versus those which focus on injuries resulting from those acts. The two are distinct, both legally and operationally.

The legal definition of assault focuses on acts rather than on injuries. As Marcus (1983) puts it: "Physical contact is not an element of the crime..." or as the Uniform Crime Reports puts it: "Attempts are included [in the tabulation of aggravated assault] because it is not necessary that an injury result..." (U.S. Department of Justice, FBI, 1985:21). However, many family violence researchers believe that the criterion of assault is injury. Since minor violence, such as throwing something or slapping a partner, rarely causes an injury which needs medical attention (Stets & Straus, 1990), those who incorrectly define assault and violence by an outcome such as physical injury sometimes object to including so-called minor violence within the family as a criminal assault.

Some theories and operationalizations of battering focus on injured persons (usually battered women), whereas others focus on the assaults which may or may not produce an injury. The vast difference between these two conceptualizations and measures is indicated by the fact that physical assaults against female partners occur at a rate which is about 30 times greater than the rate of injuries requiring medical attention (Stets & Straus, 1990). Moreover,
the etiology of the type of assault which results in injury may be different (Straus, 1990).

DEFINITIONS

The preceding discussion clarifies the need for precise conceptual and operational definitions. Unfortunately, there is a lack of consensus on what those definitions should be. However, some progress can be made by explicitly differentiating the concepts of abuse, violence, and assault and by indicating their relation to the concept of aggression as used in social psychology.

Abuse or battering, violence, and assault are all "evaluative" concepts because the central element in each is the identification and labeling of certain acts as morally wrong. Therefore, acts which are regarded as "abuse" in contemporary American society might not fall into that category in other societies or other historical periods. Husbands had the common law right to "physically chastise an errant wife" until the mid-nineteenth century (Calvert, 1974) and the level of physical punishment often used on children in the eighteenth century would be considered child abuse today (Radbill, 1987). Letters between John Wesley and his mother Susanna (referring to her child-rearing methods circa 1700) show that she was both a devoted mother and a stern disciplinarian who, in a different historical period, would run the risk of being reported for child abuse. Referring to her children, she said "When turned a year old (and some before), they were taught to fear the rod and to cry softly..." (from Miller & Swanson, 1958:10).

Abuse and Battering

Abuse and battering are the most general of the three concepts. They cover many types of harmful acts including verbal abuse or verbal battering, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and fiscal abuse. Intention to do harm is not necessary for a behavior to be classified as battering or abuse. For example, the term "sexual abuse" refers to acts that usually have the intention of sexual gratification rather than of hurting the child. Husbands who engage in domineering behavior do not necessarily do so out of a desire to demean their partners, though it may have this effect.

Violence

Violence is an act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury to another person (Gelles & Straus, 1979). That a physical assault occurred is not sufficient to understand violence. Several
other dimensions must also be considered and measured separately so that their causes, consequences, and joint effects can be investigated. Among these other dimensions are the seriousness of the assault (which can range from slapping to stabbing and shooting), whether a physical injury was produced (which can range from none to death), motivation (which might range from a concern for a person's safety, as when a child is spanked for going into the street, to hostility so intense that the death of the person is desired), whether the violence is normatively legitimate (as in the case of slapping a child) or illegitimate (as in the case of slapping a spouse), and which set of norms are applicable (legal, ethnic or class norms, couple norms, etc.). Violence thus defined is synonymous with the term "physical aggression" as used in social psychology (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1962).

Assault

The Uniform Crime Reporting system defines assault as the "Unlawful intentional inflicting or attempted inflicting, of injury upon the person of another" (U.S. Department of Justice, 1989). The legal concept of assault differs from the concept of violence because not all violence is unlawful. Some violent acts, in fact, are required by law—capital punishment, for example.

Since the focus of this chapter is illegal violence, it is preferable to use the term "assault" rather than "violence" because violence includes legally permissible acts. "Assault" is also preferable to "battering" and "abuse" because these terms are sometimes applied to verbal attacks on a partner or to a partner who is domineering. However, for stylistic variation and for consistency with usage in other chapters, the terms battering and abuse will sometimes be used and should be taken to mean a physical assault.

MEASUREMENT OF BATTERING AND ABUSE

By 1970, every state had adopted a compulsory child abuse reporting law. Year-by-year national statistics have been available since 1976. However, no official national statistics are regularly gathered on battered women or any other aspect of partner abuse except homicide (Straus, 1986). Nevertheless, considerable data are available. This section reviews the techniques used to obtain them.

Police Reports

The FBI does not publish data on assaults on women by their partners because the Uniform Crime Reporting System does not have a separate category
for this type of assault. In the last few years, a few states began requiring police departments to keep a separate record of partner assaults. In most of these states, data are only available by inspecting the records of each police department. In a few states, the results are aggregated to produce statistics for the state. No compilation for all the states requiring such records has ever been produced.

Compilations of police reports would be extremely helpful, provided their limitations are understood. These limitations are illustrated by the national child abuse reporting system which has been in place since 1976. Child abuse and neglect reports have increased each year since 1976 by 10 to 15 percent. The sexual abuse part of this rate approximately doubled each year since 1976, resulting in a 2,077 percent increase from 1976 to 1985 (American Association For Protecting Children, 1987). It seems unlikely that this many more parents began to engage in sex with one of their children during that brief period. Rather, sexual abuse became a national issue and cases that were previously ignored or treated in some other way were increasingly reported to child welfare departments. Thus, the national child abuse reports are a valuable indicator of interventions but not of incidence (Straus & Gelles, 1986).

Year-by-year statistics on police calls for partner assault would provide valuable data on intervention trends. However, as in the case of child abuse reports, these data must be understood in the context of why some cases are reported to the police but most are not. Correlates of a greater probability of a police report include: (1) an injury, or imminent threat of injury, (2) the assailant is a male, and (3) a long history of previous assaults. These correlates make reported cases unrepresentative. As will be shown below, the typical partner assault case involves no injury serious enough to require medical attention, the assailant is as likely to be the woman as the man, and few or no previous assaults took place (Feld & Straus, 1989).

The Conflict Tactics Scales

The most widely used procedure to measure the occurrence of woman battering is probably the Conflict Tactics Scales or CTS (Straus, 1979; 1990). This instrument is intended to measure the incidence, prevalence, chronicity, and severity of physical assaults within the family. The CTS also measures two tactics used to deal with intra-family conflicts: Reasoning and Verbal aggression. (The instrument is described in detail in Straus, 1979, 1990. A manual for the CTS, which includes a bibliography of more than 200 references on the CTS, can be ordered from the author.)

The introduction to the Conflict Tactics Scales asks respondents to think of situations in the past year when they had a disagreement or were angry with a
specified family member and to indicate how often they engaged in each of the acts included in the CTS. The 1985 version of the CTS (Form R) consisted of 20 items, including the following 9 on physical assaults against a partner in a married or cohabiting relationship: threw something at the partner; pushed, grabbed or shoved; slapped or spanked; kicked, bit or hit with a fist; hit or tried to hit with something; beat up the partner; choked the partner; threatened with knife or gun; used a knife or a gun.

The CTS has been employed by more than 40 investigators including Allen and Straus (1980), Cate et al. (1982), Dutton, 1988, Henton et al. (1983), Giles-Sims (1983, 1985), Hornung et al. (1981), Jouriles and O’Leary (1985), Jorgensen (1977), Straus (1974), Steinmetz (1977), Margolin (1988). Four studies have established that the CTS measures three factorially separate variables: reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence or physical aggression (Barling et al., 1987; Jorgensen, 1977; Schumm et al., 1982; Straus, 1979, 1990). The validity and reliability of the CTS and its independence from social desirability response set effects have been demonstrated in many studies (summarized in Straus, 1979, 1987).

The violent acts included in the CTS can be combined to form a number of different indexes. The following measures are used in this chapter:

*Overall Violence.* This measure indicates the percentage of partners who used *any* of the violent acts included in the CTS during the year covered by the study.

*Severe Violence.* This measure is restricted to acts that have a relatively high probability of causing an injury. Thus, kicking is classified as severe violence because kicking a partner has a much greater potential for producing an injury than an act of "minor violence" such as spanking or slapping. The acts making up the Severe Violence index are kicking, biting, punching, hitting with an object, beating up, choking, threatening with a knife or gun, and using a knife or gun.

The CTS has been widely used and widely criticized as an instrument to measure violence between partners (see Straus, 1990 for a summary of the criticisms). However, no satisfactory alternative has as yet been developed, as the following discussion of alternatives shows.

**The National Crime Surveys**

By far the largest and most thorough epidemiological survey of crime, including assaults, is the National Crime Survey (NCS). It is an annual survey of approximately 60,000 households conducted for the Department of Justice by
the Bureau of the Census. By standards of contemporary survey research it ranks high on all counts. Unfortunately, the NCS does not provide a valid measure of the incidence of woman battering. The inadequacy of the NCS as a measure of partner assault can be seen from the fact that it produces an incidence rate of only two tenths of a percent (Gaquin, 1977-1978). By comparison, the CTS shows a rate of 16.1 percent, which is more than 50 times higher.

Why is the NCS rate so low? The most likely reason is that the NCS is presented to respondents as a study of crime whereas the CTS is presented as a study of family problems. The difficulty with a "crime survey" as the context for determining incidence rates of woman battering is that most people think of being kicked by their partner as wrong but do not think of it as a "crime" in the legal sense. Thus, only a minute proportion of assaults by partners are reported.

In addition to drastically underestimating incidence rates, the special circumstances which lead the few people who do report domestic assaults to the NCS produce problems. The first circumstance which prompts reporting is the occurrence of an injury. This causes the NCS injury rate from domestic assaults to be extremely high. The second circumstance leading respondents to report domestic violence to a NCS interviewer is an assault by a former partner. This results in statistics which appear to indicate that women are more vulnerable to assault by a former than a present partner. Both of these "findings" are erroneous.

Other Partner Abuse Interview Scales

Alford (1982) developed an instrument to measure "dispute styles" which he describes as "similar in some respects" to the CTS. This instrument has some useful features such as measuring the degree of intimacy of the relationship and the frequency of contact with the other person in the relationship. However, it confounds verbal aggression and physical aggression in a way that makes it impossible to determine an assault rate. The same problem applies to the "Index of Spouse Abuse" (Hudson & McIntosh, 1981).

Emergency Room Protocols

Many victims of woman battering go to hospital emergency rooms for treatment. However, the fact that an injury was intentional is usually not divulged. Moreover, even when it is divulged or there are indications of intentional injury, it tends to be ignored (Stark, Flitcraft, Zuckerman & Gray, 1981). Procedures have therefore been developed to identify battered women so more
appropriate treatment and referral can be provided (McGrath et al., 1980). One such protocol was used to examine case records at Yale-New Haven hospital. It found that about 20 percent of female trauma cases were the result of intentional injuries (Stark et al., 1981). These findings indicate that emergency room protocols should be used more to provide treatment and referrals.

Emergency room protocols can also be used to identify cases for research, particularly in-depth analyses and longitudinal analyses. However, as noted earlier, only a small fraction of battered women are injured seriously enough to require medical attention. Thus, incidence rates based on them will seriously underestimate the prevalence of women battering. Nevertheless, if one is careful to indicate that the phenomenon being measured is "women who are beaten seriously enough to require medical treatment" and that this level of injury is rare even among severely assaulted women, these would be extremely useful data in any community.

Randomized Response Technique

This technique was first developed by Warner (1965) and later modified by others (Kolata, 1987; Tracy & Fox, 1986). In its most commonly used format, respondents are asked two unrelated questions, one sensitive and the other not, and then given some randomizing device (like flipping a coin) for deciding which question to answer. The researcher does not know which question the respondent is actually replying to but does know the overall odds that each question will be answered. If the researcher also knows the prevalence of the non-sensitive characteristic (because it is fixed in the population, like being born in September, or because it can be determined from other sources), then the prevalence of the sensitive characteristic can be readily calculated. This technique is attractive because the researcher can promise the respondent complete anonymity of response.

The technique has been used in regard to child abuse. Zdep and Rhodes (1976) estimated that 15 percent of a national probability sample of 2000 responded "yes" to the question, "Have you or your spouse ever intentionally used physical force on any of your children in an effort specifically meant to hurt or cause injury to that child?" Finkelhor and Lewis (1987) obtained estimates of 17 percent and 4 percent to split samples of 1313 in a national probability survey in response to the question "Have you ever sexually abused a child at any time in your life?". However, the divergence of their two estimates and the absence of associations with expected characteristics of sexual abusers led Finkelhor and Lewis to conclude that the estimates were probably invalid. Randomized response technique has not yet been used in a study of partner
abuse but offers some intriguing possibilities. It must be refined in order to produce valid and reliable results.

INCIDENCE RATES

In view of the problems mentioned above, the rates of partner assault presented below are based on the Conflict Tactics Scales. The data are from the 1985 National Family Violence Survey (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Straus & Gelles, 1986, 1990). This is a survey of a nationally representative sample of 6,002 married and cohabiting couples interviewed in 1985. In approximately half the cases, the data were obtained from the wife or female partner. Husbands or male partners were the respondents for the other half of the couples.

Overview of Rates

The 1985 survey, like the parallel survey conducted a decade earlier (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980) revealed that about 16 percent of the couples experienced a violent incident during the year and that over one-third experience one or more incidents of assault during the course of a marriage.

It has been argued that these findings indicate a relatively low assault rate (Scanzoni, 1978) because 16 percent means that 84 percent of the couples did not experience an assault. Moreover, the relevance of these assaults for public policy tends to be discounted because most of the incidents are "simple assaults" such as slapping, shoving, or throwing something at a partner, rather than "aggravated assaults" and, as indicated previously, there are implicit norms tolerating this level of family violence (Straus, 1976). However, there are grounds for regarding even these levels of minor violence as an important social problem and as central to understanding severely assaultive behavior.

First, over one-third of these incidents do involve severe assaults such as punching, kicking, and attacks with objects or weapons (Straus & Gelles, 1988). In addition, 16 percent is a "lower bound" estimate. The "true" annual incidence rate is probably much greater than 16 percent because it is almost certain that there was underreporting. Moreover, when an assault occurred, it was typically part of a repeated pattern. Two-thirds of the couples who experienced an assault reported more than one incident during the base year of this study.

Then too, even if one regards 16 percent as a low rate, a large number of people are still involved. If this rate is applied to the 54 million cohabiting couples in the United States in 1984 it yields an estimated 8.7 million assault victims (Straus & Gelles, 1988).
Furthermore, violence between partners tends to be transmitted from generation to generation (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Straus, 1983) and is related to assaults and other crime outside the family (Hotaling & Straus, 1988). And finally, even though the bulk of the assaults which occur in marriage are minor, they could continue indefinitely and escalate into more severe assaults. A number of studies report such a pattern (Feld & Straus, 1989; Giles-Sims, 1983, 1985; Pagelow, 1981; Walker, 1979).

How Many Battered Women?

Before one can determine the number of beaten women, one must define what this term means. My own view is that any hitting makes a woman a beaten wife or partner just as any hitting of a secretary makes her a beaten employee. However, although the common law right of a husband to "physically chastise an errant wife" has not been recognized by the courts since the mid-nineteenth century (Calvert, 1974), the marriage license remains a de facto hitting license provided the assaults are not too severe or frequent (Straus, 1980).

*Popular Conceptions Of Battered Women.* Consistent with these implicit norms, the general public tends to think of a "battered woman" as one who is repeatedly and severely assaulted by her partner. This conceptualization apparently affects those who seek refuge in shelters for battered women because studies of two different shelters show an average frequency of about 60 assaults per year (Straus, 1990). This contrasts sharply with the average of "only" about six per year for women in the National Family Violence Survey almost none of whom had used a shelter.

*Any Assault as the Criterion.* Nevertheless, public standards concerning the frequency and severity of assault which are tolerated in marriage are slowly changing. For this reason, and because the occurrence of minor assaults increases the risk of more severe assaults (Feld & Straus, 1989), it is important to estimate the number of beaten women using the criterion of "even one" incident of minor violence, such as being slapped. This is given in the first row of Table 2.1. It shows that, if the criterion is set at any assault, over 6 million women are beaten every year in the United States. This is a "lower bound" estimate and the true figure easily could be double that.

*Severe Assaults.* The second row of Table 2.1 shows that if the criterion is a more severe assault than "just a slap" the figure drops by two-thirds. Using this criterion produces a lower bound estimate of 1.8 million women who experienced one or more dangerous assaults during the year, such as being kicked, punched, choked or attacked with an object or weapon.

For most people, however, a single punch or kick does not constitute a "beaten wife." Consequently, the remaining rows of Part A of Table 2.1 show
the effect of using multiple assaults as the basis for estimating the number of beaten women. Setting the criterion at 3 or more assaults during the year results in an estimate of 600,000. Setting it at 5 or more produces an estimate of 450,000 cases and at 12 or more an estimate of 270,000 beaten women each year in the United States.

Table 2.1  Rates of partner assault and estimated number of cases by severity and chronicity of assault and source of data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Partner Violence</th>
<th>Rate per 1,000 couples*</th>
<th>Estimated Number Assaulted**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. ANNUAL INCIDENCE OF ASSAULT ON WOMEN ESTIMATED FROM THE 1985 NATIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE SURVEY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Assault on Female Partner</td>
<td>116.0</td>
<td>6,250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or More Severe Assaults on Female Partner</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>1,800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or More Severe Assaults</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or More Severe Assaults</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>450,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 or More Severe Assaults</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>270,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault Resulting in Injury to Female Partner</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>189,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. ANNUAL INCIDENCE ESTIMATES FROM OTHER DATA SOURCES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Disturbance Calls to New Jersey Police</td>
<td></td>
<td>643,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Crime Survey, 1973-76</td>
<td></td>
<td>125,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. ANNUAL INCIDENCE OF ASSAULT ON MEN ESTIMATED FROM THE 1985 NATIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE SURVEY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Assault on Male Partner</td>
<td>124.0</td>
<td>6,800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or More Severe Assaults on Male Partner</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>2,600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault Resulting in Injury to Male Partner</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>32,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The rates in Sections A and C differ from those in Straus and Gelles (1986) because the rates in that paper were computed in a way which enabled the 1985 rates to be compared with the more restricted sample and more restricted version of the Conflict Tactics Scale used in the 1975 study.

** The "Number Assaulted" in Sections A and C was calculated by multiplying the rates shown by the estimate of 54 million couples in the United States in 1984, as given in the 1986 Statistical Abstract of the United States.
The last row of Part A in Table 2.1 shows that when the criterion includes an injury which requires medical attention, the estimate drops to 189,000 or 1/33 of the number estimated on the basis of "any assault."

**Estimate Based on Police Calls.** The figure of 643,000 in the first row of Part B in Table 2.1 was calculated from data based on the first year of a New Jersey law requiring police departments to keep a separate record of domestic violence calls (*New York Times*, December 11, 1983, p. 56). The assumptions which had to be made to arrive at this estimate suggest it is probably an "upper bound" estimate.¹

**National Crime Survey.** The second row of Part B gives the figures from the NCS. Over 70 percent of these cases involve an assault by a divorced or separated husband because, as explained earlier, assaults by a current partner are rarely considered a "crime" unless they produced a serious injury. This figure is therefore invalid as an estimate of the number of beaten women but is presented because NCS data are widely used.²

**Trends**

One of the purposes of the 1985 National Family Violence Survey was to compare rates of partner assault with the rates estimated from the first National Family Violence Survey conducted in 1975 (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980). The overall rate of assaults by men declined slightly from 121 to 113 per thousand couples—a 6.6 percent decrease which is not significant. However, the rate of severe assaults decreased substantially from 38 to 30 per thousand—a 21 percent decrease which is almost significant (t = 1.60, p. <.10). On the other hand, the overall rate of assaults by women on their male partners increased slightly from 116 to 121 and the rate of severe assaults by women decreased slightly from 46 to 44 (Straus & Gelles, 1986).

Straus and Gelles' interpretation of these data hinges on comparisons of the rates of change in different types of family violence. The 1975-1985 comparison of child abuse rates revealed a statistically significant decrease. For assaults against partners, Straus and Gelles (1986) point out that only the change in the rate of severe assaults on women (which is the closest of the rates to "battered women") even approaches statistical significance. They argue that one of the reasons the rate of physical assaults on children and women changed more than the others is because, of the six types of family violence they studied, child abuse and wife beating were the only two which were the subject of major ameliorative efforts. Of these, child abuse has been the focus of the longest and most intense ameliorative effort and it showed the largest decrease. Woman battering, which showed the second largest decrease, was also the subject of a
major campaign although not as long or as intense as the campaign against child abuse. Straus and Gelles suggest that the correspondence between the duration and intensity of ameliorative effort and the decrease in severe assaults on women reflects a real change during this decade rather than a chance fluctuation.3

SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF DIFFERENCES IN CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT

Statistics as Justification for Policy

In contemporary American society, statistics are used to inform, guide, and justify social policy. The belief in statistics is so great that when the public or a legislature wishes to act and there are no statistics, statistics must somehow be created to fill the vacuum. Unfortunately, these statistics are often biased toward supporting the proposed policy.

Creating and interpreting statistics, like other modes of communication, is not a mechanical process. Non-random error affects the process as shown by Allport and Postman's classic experiment on "The Basic Psychology of Rumor" (1945). Inevitable errors in transmitting information tend to distort it in a way that reflects the values and beliefs of society as well as those of individual communicators.

The process of creating the statistics to justify a policy is illustrated by the statistics used to support establishing the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The statistical centerpiece of a 1984 congressional hearing was the statement that "two million children disappear each year in the United States." Gerald Hotaling (personal communication, 1989) has traced the origins of this figure and found a process analogous to that found by Allport and Postman's research on the origin of wartime rumors. Each retelling of the story produced distortions which made the statistics fit the preexisting belief that many children are abducted. The starting point was a 1974 analysis of National Youth Survey data. This analysis did yield an estimate of 2 million children. However, 1.85 million of these were runaway children, not abducted children, leaving 160,000 non-runaway children. Moreover, the original figures were for a three-year period, leaving a one-year estimate of 53,333 who "disappeared" rather than 2 million. Finally, most of those who "disappeared" were abducted by former spouses or other relatives. Similar distortions operated to create the widely cited figure of 5,000 children kidnapped and murdered (New York Times, 1982). The true figure is probably in the range of 52-158 (Hotaling & Finkelhor, 1989).
The process which leads to an acceptance of false statistics can also lead to a rejection of statistics which contradict the intentions of a legislature or the thrust of a social movement. More realistic estimates of the number of kidnapped and murdered children were presented but ignored. Another example of statistics which are ignored because they contradict a prevailing opinion is discussed below: the research which shows that women assault their male partners at about the same rate as men assault their female partners.

Assaults by Women

Data from the 1985 National Family Violence Survey on the high rate of assaults by women on their male partners is in Table 2.1, Part C. Similar findings from the 1975 survey are reported in Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) and in more than a dozen other studies such as Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs (1985), Laner and Thompson (1982), O'Leary, Barling, Arias, Rosenbaum, Malone, and Tyree (1987), and Steinmetz (1977-78). However, these data tend to be ignored or dismissed as biased and irrelevant. The most frequently mentioned reasons for dismissing these extremely robust findings are that they fail to take into account whether the assault was in self-defense and whether the assault resulted in an injury.

It is unlikely that the similarity of the wife-to-husband and husband-to-wife assault rates can be dismissed on the grounds that wife-to-husband assaults are acts of either self-defense or retaliation. In the 1985 survey, we asked who hit first. According to the men, they struck the first blow in 44 percent of the cases, the woman in 45 percent of the cases, and they could not remember in the remaining 11 percent of the cases. According to the women, the man struck the first blow in 53 percent of the cases, they did in 42 percent of the cases, and the remaining 5 percent of the women could not disentangle who hit first (Stets & Straus, 1990; see also Straus, 1980).

The second most frequent criticism of the National Family Violence Survey rates of assault by women is that assaults by men are more likely to cause physical injury and should therefore be the primary focus of public policy (Straus, 1977; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980). To investigate this issue, the 1985 National Family Violence Survey included data on injury. These data were used to compute the injury adjusted rates which are on the last line in Parts A and C of Table 2.1.

The 1985 National Family Violence Survey found a physical injury rate of 3 percent for female victims and 0.5 percent for male victims (Stets and Straus, 1990a). Somewhat lower rates are reported by Brush (1989) for another large national sample—1.2 percent of women victims and 0.2 percent of men victims. The injury adjusted rate in Part A of Table 2.1 was computed by multiplying the
assault rates in the first row of Part A by the higher of these two injury estimates (expressed as a proportion = .03). Similarly, the injury adjusted rate in Part C was obtained by multiplying by .005.

The resulting injury adjusted rates shown in Table 2.1 correspond more closely to police and NCS rates than to rates based only on whether an attack occurred. They result in a rate of domestic assaults by men that is almost six times greater than the rate of domestic assaults by women, thus bringing out an important aspect of domestic assault. On the other hand, there are several disadvantages to using rates based on injury (Straus, 1990b:79-83). Three will be mentioned.

One disadvantage is that the criterion of injury contradicts new domestic assault legislation and new police policies. These statutes and policies (for example, New Hampshire RSA 173-B) encourage arrest on the basis of attacks and do not require an observable injury.

Another disadvantage of injury as a criterion for domestic assault is that injury based rates omit the 97 percent of assaults by men which do not result in injury but which are nonetheless a serious social problem. Without an adjustment for injury, the National Family Violence Survey produces an estimate of over 6 million women assaulted by a male partner each year of which 1.8 million are "severe." If the injury adjusted rate is used, the estimate falls to 189,000 assaulted women per year. The figure of 1.8 million seriously assaulted women every year has been used in many legislative hearings and countless publications to indicate the prevalence of the problem. If that estimate was replaced by 189,000, it would understate the extent of the problem and handicap efforts to educate the public and secure funding for shelters and other services. Fortunately, that is not necessary. Both estimates can be used since each highlights a different aspect of the problem.

A final limitation of using a rate based on injury is that it makes it too easy to ignore the fact that the attack rate, not the injury rate, is about the same for men and women. Although first priority does need to be given to ameliorating the plight of battered women, assaults by women are extremely important because they suggest policies which have profound implications for preventing assaults against women.

Let us assume that most of the assaults by women fall into the "slap the cad" genre and are not intended to, and do not, physically injure the husband (Greenblatt, 1983; Stets & Straus, 1990). The danger to women of such behavior is that it helps legitimate assaults by men. Sometimes this is immediate and severe retaliation. But regardless of whether that occurs, the fact that she slapped him provides the precedent and justification for him to hit her when she is being obstinate, "bitchy," or "not listening to reason" as he sees it. Unless women also forsake violence in their relationships with male partners and children, they are unlikely to be free of the risk of being assaulted. Women
must insist as much on non-violence by their sisters as they rightfully insist on it by men. That is beginning to happen. After years of denial, shelters for battered women are confronting this problem. Almost all shelters now have policies designed to deal with the high rate of child abuse; some are also facing up to the problem of female-to-male violence. But primary prevention requires carrying this message to women in general.

This will not be easy to accomplish, in part because the cost of publicizing violence by women is that it may be used to justify male violence. The National Family Violence Survey data on assaults by women have, in fact, been used against battered women in court cases and to minimize the need for shelters for battered women. However, failing to educate women about their own violence is a major obstacle to reducing the rate of woman battering. There may be costs associated with acknowledging the fact of violence by women in the family; but the cost of denial and suppression is even greater. Rather than attempting to deny the existence of such violence (see Pleck et al., 1977 for an example of such denial and the reply by Steinmetz, 1978), a more productive solution is to confront the issue and work towards eliminating violence by women. The achievements of the 20-year effort to reduce child abuse and the 10-year effort to reduce woman battering (see Straus & Gelles, 1986) suggest this is a realistic goal.

Survey Data, Clinical Data, and Policy

The section on "How Many Battered Women" showed that the estimate can vary from 125,000 to over 6 million. But even this understates the degree to which the procedures used to obtain data on battered women affect rates and the utility of one's findings. This section focuses on two variations in measurement procedure: the extent to which frequency of assault is used as a criterion and use of "clinical" versus random samples.

Frequency of Assault. The 1985 National Family Violence survey found that women who were assaulted by their partners during the year of the survey experienced an average of 6 assaults during the year. Since the average number of assaults was so high, it seemed as though the survey had been successful in identifying a group of "battered women" and that an analysis of the experiences of these women could provide clues to the prevention and treatment of woman battering. On the other hand, there are a number of discrepancies between the findings of our surveys and findings based on police calls and shelter populations. These discrepancies raise questions about the validity of generalizing from the experiences of assaulted women in the survey to battered women in shelters and suggested the need for a direct comparison of the two groups.
Two studies which used the CTS with women in shelters were located. Giles-Sims (1983) interviewed 31 women at a shelter in Portland, Maine. These women reported an average of 68.7 assaults during the year preceding their shelter stay (p. 53). A second study by Okun (1986) is based on 300 women in a shelter in the Ann Arbor, Michigan area who reported an annualized frequency of 65 assaults. These averages of more than one assault per week are about 11 times greater than the 6 assaults per year experienced by the women in the National Family Violence Survey. It seems plausible that, despite what seemed to be a very high average number of assaults experienced by the women in the national survey, the women in these two shelters had suffered a qualitatively as well as a quantitatively different experience.

Whatever the reason for much higher frequency of assault on shelter clients than on assaulted women in the National Family Violence Surveys, this difference may explain some of the discrepancies in research findings based on the two populations. One of the most controversial differences is the finding that women in the two national surveys had a high rate of assault on their partners and often hit first whereas studies of women in shelters show that they almost never assault their partners (Saunders, 1986). Perhaps this is because the shelter women were assaulted so frequently—an average of more than once a week—that they did not dare hit back.

The "Clinical Fallacy" and the "Representative Sample Fallacy." Sociologists sometimes use the term "clinical fallacy" to call attention to the fact that research based on "clinical" samples (i.e., samples of persons or families receiving assistance or treatment for a problem) may not be generalizable because those who seek or receive "treatment" are often not representative of the entire population with the problem. An extreme example of this fallacy is manifested in such statements as "Once abuse starts, it gets worse and more frequent over time" (leaflet published by the Domestic Violence Project, 1988) or, as Pagelow (1981:45) puts it, "One of the few things about which almost all researchers agree is that batterings escalate in frequency and intensity over time."

These statements are based on the experience of thousands of battered women who have received help from shelters. However, their experience cannot be generalized to all battered women because women whose partners stopped assaulting them are unlikely to seek help from a shelter. Of course, it could apply to all assaulted women but the longitudinal analysis reported in Feld and Straus (1989) shows that this is not the case.

The other side of the coin is a similar problem that I call the representative sample fallacy. This refers to the danger of trying to generalize from the characteristics and experiences of the total population who manifest a certain problem (such as assaults on a female partner) to populations receiving assistance for the problem (such as clients of battered women's shelters).
The representative sample fallacy refers to the assumption, implicit in most survey research, that a representative sample of the population is always superior to clinical samples. This assumption is unwarranted if persons in the general population who manifest the problem are different from a "clinical" population manifesting the problem. The preceding section on frequency of assault provides an example. Women in shelters experienced a frequency of assault that is so much greater than that experienced by assaulted women in the general population that it is reasonable to assume a qualitatively different experience for these two groups of women. As noted above, this difference could explain why studies based on women in shelters show that very few report assaulting their partner whereas survey findings reveal that women tend to assault their partners at about the same rate as men assault their partners and indeed often hit first. The survey findings are the basis for the recommendation that part of the effort to prevent wife battering should stress the importance of non-violence by women. However, for women who are assaulted more than once a week, this is not likely to be helpful in alleviating their immediate situation.

A similar situation exists in research on elder abuse and other types of deviant behavior. The characteristics associated with abuse of a representative sample of persons 65 and over in the Boston metropolitan area studied by Pillemer and Finkelhor (1987) differ in important ways from the characteristics associated with abuse cases known to the State Adult Protective Services departments reported by Steinmetz (1988). Pillemer and Finkelhor find that the victims tend to be men in their 70s who are assaulted by their wives whereas Steinmetz finds that victims tend to be older, widowed women. She suggests that the difference arises because the minor assaults by elderly women on their husbands rarely produce the type of injury that will bring a case to the attention of Adult Protective Services.

Criminologists point out that research on criminal behavior using samples of incarcerated persons is analogous to research on business using samples of businesses that have failed. In both cases, one learns about what produces failure and that is important. But it is also important to realize that the findings may not apply to the majority of criminals who are not apprehended and incarcerated nor to the majority of businesses which do not fail. Similarly, findings based on samples of successful criminals and successful business may not be useful in working with failed criminals (i.e., those in prison) and failed businesses because such studies do not provide evidence on the causes of failure.

In mental health research, discrepancies have been found between alcoholics identified among the general population and alcoholics in treatment samples, between those who attempt suicide and those who actually commit suicide, and between depression identified in the general population and in
clinical samples. As in the case of assaulted women, the population classified as "alcoholic" or "depressed" in the surveys is much greater than the population being treated for these problems. Moreover, many of the social and psychological characteristics of persons in treatment for alcoholism and depression are quite different than the characteristics of the populations identified as alcoholic or depressed in community surveys (Room, 1980). For example, alcoholics in the general population tend to be young whereas alcoholics in treatment tend to be middle-aged or older.

Appropriate Generalization from Clinical and Representative Samples

This analysis does not mean that one type of sample is superior to another. It also does not necessarily mean that findings from a clinical sample are not applicable to a community sample or vice versa. Rather, it means that without a specific investigation, there is no way of knowing if the experiences of a representative sample of battered women apply to a police call sample or a treatment population of battering cases.

In the absence of such cross-validation, the appropriateness of a sample depends on the purpose for which information from it is used. On the one hand, findings based on a random sample of assaulted women may be misleading if the goal is to uncover relationships that can be the basis for counseling battered women in shelters. This requires knowledge based on the experiences of the population being assisted, regardless of whether their experience is representative of the total population. The experience of other populations may or may not be relevant.

On the other hand, findings based on a "treatment sample" do not necessarily apply to the community at large. The experience of women who have sought assistance from battered women's shelters may not be relevant for designing intervention in the larger community to prevent marital violence because, unless the program is based on information obtained from the experiences of a representative sample of the community, one cannot know if it fits their life circumstances. Community survey samples, such as the two National Family Violence Surveys, provide information about that population. This information indicates that there are a large number of women who are being battered but not to the point that drives a woman to a shelter. However, while their needs may be less acute, they are real. The assaulted women in the 1985 National Survey, for example, were attacked an average of 6 times during the year. Six assaults a year is only 1/11 of the 68 assaults per year experienced by women in shelters; but it indicates an urgent need for policies to end these assaults. Moreover, the fact that a representative sample was studied enables us to estimate that there are
over 6 million such women in the United States. This makes the magnitude of the task clear.

NOTES

1 Eighteen thousand calls were recorded during the first nine months of the law. The estimate was obtained by multiplying this by 1.33 to obtain an annual figure of 23,940. Since there were an estimated 1,551,772 couples in New Jersey that year, this results in a rate of 1.54 percent (23,940/1,551,772 * 1 = 1.54. This rate was then multiplied by the 48,497,903 "spouse present" couples in the United States (.0154 * 48,497,903 = 748,202). The final step was to multiply by .86 to allow for the fact that 14 percent of the calls were instances of assaults by women on their spouses (.14 * 748,202 = 643,453).

2 Several other factors affect estimates of the incidence of wife assault but, within the scope of this chapter, only three can be noted. (1) Gender of the respondent: estimates based on interviews with male and female respondents are virtually identical for "minor violence" but, for severe violence, more women than men report committing such violence against their partners and being the victims of such violence. (2) The number of items in the instrument used to measure the assault rate: the longer the list of assaultive acts used in the interview, the higher the rate (Straus, 1989). (3) Injury: if a physical injury is used as the criterion, the rates are much lower.

3 Straus and Gelles (1986) also document many other social changes during this decade that could have reduced the rate of child abuse and spouse abuse.

4 Although these figures are useful for comparing groups, they cannot be taken as literal descriptions of the actual number of assaults. It is unlikely that any of the assaulted spouses kept records such as a diary which would be needed for descriptively accurate statistics.

REFERENCES


Conceptionalization and Measurement of Battering


