The "Drunken Bum" Theory of Wife Beating*

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We examine the belief that physical abuse of wives is strongly determined by drunkenness and socioeconomic status using interview data from a nationally representative sample of 5,159 families. Our findings show that excessive drinking is associated with higher wife abuse rates, but alcohol use is not an immediate antecedent of violence in the majority of families. The combination of blue-collar status, drinking, and approval of violence is significantly associated with the highest rate of wife abuse. Of the three factors, cultural approval of violence by men against women has the strongest association with wife abuse. Although our results provide support for the drunken bum theory of wife beating, they also demythologize the stereotype because they show that alcohol is far from being a necessary or sufficient cause of wife abuse.

The belief that male drunkenness is a major cause of wife beating has been part of American consciousness at least since the Temperance movement (Bordin, 1981; Pleck, 1987). American cultural images of the association between alcohol and violence are also evident in films depicting wild-west barroom brawls and in Tennessee Williams' notable characterization of the drunken, boorish Stanley Kowalski striking his pregnant wife, Stella. These images link alcohol and aggression, and suggest, first, that excess drinking is the principal cause of violence; and second, that drunkenness and wife beating are culturally-scripted masculine behaviors. A third part of this cultural script portrays wife beating as a phenomenon of the underclass. Together, these images identify the "drunken bum" as the prototypical wife beater.

In this analysis we consider both aspects of this folk theory of the causes of intra-family violence. First we examine alcohol and class explanations of intra-family violence, and their convergence in the "drunken bum" theory of violence. Then we use data from a nationally-representative sample of American families to test these ideas empirically. The three major questions we address are: (1) Do men who drink heavily have a higher rate of wife beating than others? (2) To what extent does drinking occur at the time of the violent incident? (3) Are such linkages between drinking and wife beating found primarily among working class men?

* This is a revised version of a paper presented at the National Alcoholism Forum conference on "Alcohol and The Family," San Francisco, CA, April 18, 1986. This research was made possible by funds provided by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institute of Mental Health (Grants RO1 MH40027 and MH 15161). We would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Lawrence Hamilton, Robin Room, and three anonymous reviewers, and to express our appreciation to the members of the Family Violence Research Program Seminar for their comments and criticisms. This research is part of the Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire. A program description and list of publications is available upon request. Correspondence to: Kaufman Kantor, Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS, Vol. 34, No. 3, June 1987
Explanations of the Drinking-Violence Relationship

Disinhibition Theory

Central to suppositions of a direct alcohol-violence linkage are centuries-old and widely-held beliefs that alcohol releases inhibitions and alters judgment. This belief has persisted for the greater part of this century as well. It has been bolstered by the medical, biological, and psychoanalytic opinion that alcohol’s effects on the central nervous system release inhibitions by depressing brain function or suppressing super-ego function thereby allowing the expression of rage. However, disinhibition theory has recently fallen into disrepute as researchers develop a growing awareness of the complexity of the alcohol-violence syndrome. Mayfield (1983:142) points out that the location of the inhibition center of the brain is unknown and “disinhibition is no more than a tautological expression for drunkenness.” Contemporary alcohol researchers now regard disinhibition as a complex process resulting from alcohol’s pharmacologically-induced “cognitive disruption” (Leonard, 1984:79) and mood-altering effects (Blum, 1981) interacting with varying individual expectancies about alcohol’s powers (Marlatt and Rohsenow, 1980; Sher, 1985).

Social Learning and Deviance Disavowal Theory

MacAndrew and Edgerton’s (1969) classic cross-cultural analysis provides an alternative explanation of the alcohol-violence linkage. These authors argue that drunken comportment is learned and may take the form of “time-out behavior” (1969:90). When individuals take time out by drinking, they are exempted from the usual behavioral constraints associated with sobriety. Similar doubts about disinhibition theory are expressed by other researchers (Coleman and Straus, 1983; Gelles, 1974; Gottheil et al., 1983; Pernanen, 1976; Taylor and Leonard, 1983). Coleman and Straus’s (1983) analysis of data for 2,143 families suggests that social learning and deviance disavowal theories provide a better accounting of the alcohol-violence relationship within families. They argue that people learn a “script” for violence by observing that individuals are excused and forgiven for violent behavior which occurs while drinking (“It was the booze made me do it”). Gelles’s study (1974) of 80 families led him to conclude that “individuals who wish to carry out a violent act become intoxicated in order to carry out the violent act” (1974:117). Moreover, McClelland and his associates (1972) found that men drink to heighten their sense of power—a finding consistent with the attributions of intentionality implicit in deviance disavowal views. Furthermore, Room (1980:8) argues that alcohol is “an instrument of intimate domination” used to excuse the exercise of illegitimate force against subordinates.

Integrated Theoretical Models

Pernanen’s comprehensive theoretical reviews (1976, 1981) demonstrate the complexity of the association between alcohol and violence. Pernanen notes, as do other researchers (Blum, 1981; Boyatzis, 1983; Brown et al., 1980; Levinson, 1983; Powers and Kutash, 1982) that many factors may intervene to determine alcohol-violence outcomes. These include, but are not limited to, the symbolic meaning attached to alcohol use and expectancies about alcohol’s effects; contextual factors present in the setting or the interaction of individuals; and perceptual and cognitive changes produced by alcohol. Disentangling these relationships can constitute a major difficulty for researchers.

Theoretical understanding is also hampered by narrow empirical tests of single cause-effect relationships and by implying that association equals causality. Instead of reflecting a causal relationship, the link between alcohol abuse and family violence may be “spurious” in the sense that both the drinking and the violence may reflect an underlying third factor or
factors. The underlying factors may be at the individual, structural, or cultural level. At the structural level, the high degree of conflict inherent in American family structure may lead to marital discord and violence (Hotaling and Straus, 1980) as well as to alcohol abuse as a response to this stress (Linsky et al., 1985). This would produce a correlation between alcohol abuse and violence even though there is no causal relationship. At the cultural level, norms that legitimate violence as a masculine form of power assertion may co-exist with norms regarding the husband as the "head" of the household and excess drinking as acceptable masculine behavior.

Finally, these and other factors may interact with family socioeconomic status. First, while there has been considerable debate over the existence of a subculture of violence (Baron and Straus, 1987; Loftin and Hill, 1974), there do seem to be regional and social class differences in actual violence (Straus et al., 1980). Second, there is some consensus that alcohol abuse problems are most prevalent among lower-class men (Cahalan, 1970; Cahalan et al., 1969). Third, Brown and her associates (1980) found that heavy drinkers are more likely than others to believe that drinking increases sexual and aggressive behavior. In addition, some researchers (Cahalan, 1970, Cahalan and Room, 1974) have found that lower-class men more often express aggressive feelings while drinking. Fourth, lower blue-collar families have been described as the last bastion of patriarchy (Komarovsky, 1967) where wife beating, although infrequent, occurs more often than within higher socioeconomic status families (Allen and Straus, 1980; Straus et al., 1980). These presumed characteristics of low socioeconomic status individuals and families seem to provide the basis for the drunken bum theory.

Empirical Research on Alcohol Abuse and Intra-Family Violence

A substantial body of literature exists on alcohol and violent interpersonal crimes. However, there are many methodological problems with this research (see Greenberg, 1981; Permanen, 1976, 1981). The major criticisms include sample biases, nonuniform measures of alcohol use and crime, and failure to specify antecedent conditions under which alcohol use and crimes occur. There are a number of general reviews of the relationship between alcohol abuse and family violence (Critchlow, 1983; Klein, 1981; Morgan, 1982, 1983; Room and Collins, 1983). Therefore, we limit our review of the literature to the link between alcohol and spouse abuse which is our empirical focus.

Association of Alcohol With Intra-Family Violence

To a great extent, there is little consensus in the literature even on the elementary question of whether there is a correlation between drinking and intra-family violence. Take for example two of the most frequently cited works. Bard and Zacker's study (1974) of domestic assaults reported to police found little association between alcohol and family violence; whereas Wolfgang (1958) found that victims of family violence were frequently drinking. One difference between these studies is that Wolfgang studied the most extreme end of the family violence continuum—spousal homicide—while Bard and Zacker focused on assault.

Our systematic examination of 15 empirical studies produced a wide range of estimates of alcohol involvement in spousal violence—from 6 to 85 percent. However, this is not surprising given the limitations of these studies. Most used descriptive or bivariate statistics and

2. These 15 studies are: Bard and Zacker (1974); Byles (1978); Caesar (1985); Coleman and Straus (1983); Dobash and Dobash (1979); Eberle (1980); Gelles (1974); Labell (1977); Nisemoff and Bitman (1979); Okun (1986); Rosenbaum and O'Leary (1981); Roy (1977); Van Hasselt, Morrison and Bellock (1985); and Walker (1979, 1984).
therefore lack controls for confounding variables. Some are based on clinical samples and others on more-or-less representative community samples. Some use self-reports, whereas others use the report of the spouse, and still others use the report of a police officer. Finally, the 15 studies employed a variety of measures of both alcohol use and wife abuse.

Six of the 15 studies (Byles, 1978; Caesar, 1985; Coleman and Straus, 1983; Gelles, 1974; Rosenbaum and O'Leary, 1981; Van Hasselt et al., 1985) used a violent vs. non-violent research design, and two (Coleman and Straus, 1983; Eberle, 1980) compared drinking with non-drinking couples. All seven of these comparative design studies found an association between drinking and marital violence. This is consistent with Hotaling and Sugarman's (1986) comprehensive analysis of case-controlled studies of husband-to-wife violence. They found that alcohol abuse was one of the risk factors which met their criteria for consistency across two-thirds or more of the studies they reviewed. Thus, alcohol seems to be an important correlate of wife abuse.

Even if one grants that the evidence supports a correlation between alcohol use and wife abuse, there are many inconsistencies and shortcomings in existing studies. For example, only one study (Van Hasselt et al., 1985) used a Quantity-Frequency Index to measure alcohol consumption, but the study was limited to a clinical population. Moreover, because the previous research is almost entirely descriptive or bivariate, it does not provide information appropriate to testing the complex interrelation of factors specified by the theories we reviewed earlier. In our analysis below, we use a modified Quantity-Frequency Index measure of alcohol use for a large, representative sample of American families. We also use multivariate techniques that allow us to take into account the complex factors which figure prominently in existing theories—alcohol, occupational status, and norms concerning violence.

Methods

Sample

The data for this study come from a national probability sample of 6,002 households, obtained by telephone interviews in 1985.³ Eligible households had to include an adult 18 years of age or older who was: (1) presently married, or (2) presently living as a male-female couple; or (3) divorced or separated within the last two years; or (4) single parent with a child under 18 and living in the household. When more than one eligible adult was in the household, a random procedure was used to select one respondent according to gender and marital status. Thus, one member of each household, either the husband or the wife, was interviewed.⁴ The interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes. The response rate, calculated as "completed portion of eligibles," was 84 percent. The spouse abuse data are based on the 5,159 households containing a currently married or cohabiting couple. For more information on the sample, see Straus and Gelles (1986).

³ Experience with studies of family problems, including spouse abuse, rape, and parental kidnapping (Gelles, 1983) shows that telephone interviewing produces higher response rates than face-to-face interviews on sensitive family topics. Not only does the flexibility and anonymity of the telephone lead to a higher response rate, but there is reason to believe that these attributes also yield data which are equivalent in reliability and validity to those gathered by face-to-face interviews. For example, Bradburn et al. (1979) found statistically indistinguishable differences in admitting to a conviction for drunken driving among persons who had in fact been convicted of that offense between face-to-face and phone surveys.

⁴ For convenience and economy, we use terms such as "marital," and "spouse," and "wife," and "husband" to refer to the respondents, regardless of whether they were married or a non-married cohabiting couple. For an analysis of differences and similarities between married and cohabiting couples with respect to violence and other characteristics, see Yllo (1978), and Yllo and Straus (1981).
Alcohol Abuse Measures

Drinking Index. The first of our two measures of alcohol abuse is the Drinking Index. It combines data from two survey questions:

(1) In general, how often do you consume alcoholic beverages—that is, beer, wine or liquor? never, less than 1 day a month, 1–3 days a month, 1–2 days a week, 3–4 days a week, 5–6 days a week, daily? (The median frequency of drinking was 1–3 times a month.)
(2) On a day when you do drink alcoholic beverages, on the average, how many drinks do you have? By a “drink” we mean a drink with a shot of 1½ ounces of hard liquor, 12 ounces of beer, or 5 ounces of wine. (The median number of drinks per day was two.)

We used the frequency and amount data from these questions to develop six categories of drinking:

0 = Abstinent: Never drinks (30.6 percent).
1 = Low: Drinks on infrequent occasions, ranging from less than once a month up to 1–2 times a week; never more than 1 drink at a time. Drinks less than once a month and no more than 2 drinks at a time (26.8 percent).
2 = Low Moderate: Drinks from 1 to 3 times a month up to daily; never more than 2 drinks (22.1 percent).
3 = High Moderate: Drinks less than once a month up to 1 to 2 times a week; 3–4 drinks a day (10.5 percent).
4 = High: Drinks 3–4 times a week up to daily; 3 or more drinks a day (4.9 percent).
5 = Binge: Drinks on infrequent occasions—once a month up to 1 to 2 times a week; 5 or more drinks a day (4.6 percent).

The distribution for the drinking index reveals that over half the sample were abstinent or low drinkers, and for the individuals who did drink, moderate patterns predominated. Significant sex differences in drinking patterns were also present. Two thirds of women were abstinent or infrequent drinkers, and less than 5 percent of women were high or binge drinkers. These findings are comparable to previous national surveys that investigate drinking patterns (ADAMHA, 1980; Cahalan, 1970; Gallup 1978).

Although the distribution of drinking types is roughly consistent with previous drinking survey data, there are some possible limitations of this measure. First, it measures the average drinking pattern of each respondent and does not provide information on days when an individual departs from his/her typical drinking pattern. Thus the index may miss those who are normally moderate drinkers but binge on occasion. Second, the Drinking Index differs from the traditional Quantity-Frequency measure developed by Cahalan and associates (1969) because it does not estimate absolute alcohol content. However, this measure is comparable to those used by other researchers (e.g., Neff and Husaini, 1985) and does differentiate patterns and levels of drinking. The drinking index is also sensitive to binge patterns of drinking, a pattern important for our analysis, but not identified by typical quantity-frequency indexes.

Drinking at Time of Violence Measure (DTV). For purposes of this study, the most serious limitation of the Drinking Index is that it does not provide information about whether drinking was one of the immediate antecedents of violence. Therefore, we included a third question in the survey to provide a “Drinking At the Time Of Violence“ (DTV) measure. We asked this question of all respondents who reported incidents of physical violence. The most recent and most severe act of violence (see below) was used as the reference, and the respondents were asked (in reference to the most recent and most violent act): “Were either or both of you drinking right before the conflict started?” However, this measure does not indicate the amount of alcohol consumed at that time. Although this measure may be further limited by its reliance on self and spousal reports of drinking at the time of violence, a substantial literature exists validating both self and spousal reports of drunkenness (e.g., Hesselbrock et al.,
Approval Of Violence

To measure norms tolerating wife abuse, we replicated the measure first employed in a 1968 survey conducted for the President's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence: "Are there situations that you can imagine in which you would approve of a husband slapping his wife?" (Owens and Straus, 1975; Stark and McEvoy, 1970).

Violence Measure

The definition of violence used here is "an act carried out with the intention or perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person."5 We used the "Conflict Tactics Scale" (CTS) to measure the incidence of violence (Straus, 1979). The CTS has been used and refined in a number of studies of intra-family violence (Allen and Straus, 1980; Giles-Sims, 1983; Hornung et al., 1981; Jorgensen, 1977; Straus, 1979; Straus and Gelles, 1986; Steinmetz, 1977). We use the 1985 revision of the CTS (Straus and Gelles, 1986) in this analysis, and specifically the following acts of physical violence: threw an object at the spouse; pushed, grabbed, or shoved spouse; slapped spouse; kicked; punched; hit with object; beat-up; choked; threatened with knife or gun; used knife or gun.

While we consider both husband-to-wife and wife-to-husband violence to be important, we believe that they cannot be equated. Assaults on women are a far more serious problem given men’s greater size and strength. Men, in fact, may laugh at their wife’s attempts to slap or punch them, and much of the violence by wives is in self-defense (Saunders, 1986; Straus, 1980). Consistent with this, our data on the effects of violence show that women are three times more likely to require medical care for injuries sustained in family assaults. Therefore, we chose to focus this paper on husband-to-wife acts of physical violence. For brevity and convenience, this will be referred to as "wife abuse" for the balance of the paper. Wife abuse existed if the husband engaged in one or more of the violent acts listed above during the one year referent period of the survey.

Occupational Status Measure

Each respondent was asked: What kind of work do you do? What kind of work does your spouse/partner do? This information was coded using the Bureau of Labor Statistics revised Occupational Classification System. Then, each Bureau of Labor Statistics occupation code was classified as either “blue-collar” or “white-collar” using the list of occupations falling into these categories by Rice (see Robinson et al., 1969).

Drinking Patterns and Wife Abuse

As a first approach to the question of the link between drinking and family violence, we computed the wife abuse rates for each of the six types of drinkers identified by the Drinking Index. The results in Figure 1 provide strong evidence of a linear association between drinking and wife abuse. The percentage of violent husbands rises monotonically from 6.8 percent for abstainers to a three times higher rate of violence (19.2 percent) for the binge drinkers. It appears that the more potentially problematic the drinking level, the higher the rate of vio-

5. See Gelles and Straus (1979) for an explication of this definition and an analysis of alternative definitions.
Figure 1 • *Husband-to-Wife Violence Rate by Drinking Index*

violence between spouses. However, it is extremely important not to overlook the substantial amount of wife abuse by abstainers and moderate drinkers.

**Drinking at the Time of the Violent Incident**

As indicated earlier, an important limitation of the Drinking Index is that it refers to the respondents' usual pattern of drinking, and does not provide information on whether there was drinking at the time of the violence. However, the DTV (Drinking at Time of Violence) measure provides this information and permits us to test the hypothesis that drinking is one of the immediate antecedents of family violence. Our data clearly demonstrate that alcohol was not used immediately prior to the conflict in the majority (76 percent) of cases. On the other hand, it is also important that in a substantial number of couples (24 percent) one or both partners were drinking at the time of the violent incident. In 14 percent of these couples only the male was drinking, in 2 percent only the female was drinking, while in 8 percent both were drinking.

We also investigated whether there is a link between the respondent's usual pattern of drinking and the drinking that occurred at the time of the violence by cross tabulating the
DTV measure by the Drinking Index. One might expect that the more one usually drinks, the greater the likelihood that drinking will be involved in a specific incident of wife abuse. This expectation finds strong support in these data (chi-square = 77.65, p < .001). The percent drinking at the time of violence increased from 19.4 percent for the low drinking categories, to 20.8 percent for the high moderates, 47.5 percent for the highs, and 48.4 percent for the binge drinkers. Thus, there is little or no difference between the abstainers, low drinkers, low moderate drinkers, and high moderate drinkers with respect to the percentage of couples in which one or both of the spouses was drinking at the time of the violence. However, for high drinkers and bingers, the percent with alcohol involvement at the time of the violence more than doubles, to about half of all such couples.

**Socioeconomic Status and Violence Norms**

The thesis that there is a lower-class "culture of violence" (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967) is widely disputed by both criminologists and sociologists who study social stratification. Steinmetz and Straus (1974) and Ball-Rokeach (1973) are among many who question this theory. Instead they argue that class differences in violence are a product of lower resources and higher economic and occupational frustration, and they note there are large differences in approval of violence *within* classes. Nevertheless, as we pointed out earlier, the belief persists that wife beating is perpetrated largely by drunken, lower-class men. To test this theory, we simultaneously considered three of its key elements—occupational status, norms concerning violence, and alcohol abuse. However, before examining the joint effects, Table 1 permits us to look at all three elements of the "drunken bum theory" one-by-one.

**Occupational Status Differences in Drinking, Approval of Violence, and Wife Abuse**

The results in Table 1 are consistent with those of other national surveys that show greater levels of both abstinence and high consumption patterns for working-class males (Cahalan, 1970). Binge and weekend drinking among the lower classes and conflict with spouses when drinking have been more frequently identified in lower socioeconomic groups (Cahalan, 1970; Cahalan and Room, 1974).

Table 1 also shows that tolerance of wife abuse is more prevalent among blue-collar males (18.5 percent) than among white-collar males (14.4 percent). However, the great majority of men express disapproval of wife slapping regardless of their occupational status. Finally, the last row of Table 1 shows that blue-collar men are more likely to abuse their wives than are white-collar men.

The results of the bivariate analyses presented in Table 1 are consistent with previous research on status differences in alcohol abuse and wife abuse, and they provide some support for the "drunken bum theory." However, while all the predicted differences are statistically significant, none are very large.

**The Drunken Bum Theory**

We used a hierarchical log-linear analysis to examine the adequacy of the drunken bum model and to determine the relative importance of drinking, occupational status, and norms. This is a more appropriate test of the "drunken bum theory" because, unlike the tests in Table 1, the log-linear analysis enables us to look at the interaction of the three key elements of the theory: drinking patterns, violence norms, and occupational status.

We used a backward elimination procedure (Benedetti and Brown, 1978) to select the
The "Drunken Bum" and Wife Beating

Table 1 • Occupational Class Differences in Drinking Patterns, Approval Of Violence, and Wife Abuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Blue Collar</th>
<th>White Collar</th>
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<tr>
<td>Husband’s Drinking Pattern</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstinent</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>24.1</td>
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<td>Low Moderate</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binge</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1089</td>
<td>1266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>98.85</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Husband’s Approval of Slapping a wife</th>
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<td>N</td>
<td>1079</td>
<td>1253</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>6.74</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
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<table>
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<th>Violent Husbands</th>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2462</td>
<td>2568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>11.17</td>
<td>p &lt; .004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
a. The N’s for Husband’s Drinking Pattern and Husband’s Approval of Slapping are the number of husbands in the sample, whereas the N for the Wife Abuse Rate is the number of couples.

Reading across Figure 2 shows that within all four of the sub-groups, the husbands’ drinking pattern is related to the probability of wife abuse. Even for the group whose violence seems to be least affected by alcohol—white-collar men who do not approve of violence—the percent violent among binge drinkers is more than double the percent for abstainers.

6. We used the SPSSX program, HILOGLINEAR for these analyses. The cell frequencies used to compute the percentages in Figure 2 are from the observed cell frequencies included in the log-linear analysis output.

7. Figure 2 also shows that there is considerable fluctuation around each of the four trend lines. This can be interpreted as indicating that the relationship between drinking and wife abuse is not simply "the more drinking, the higher the rate of wife abuse." For example, among white-collar men who express approval of slapping a wife, the proportion violent is greatest at the "High Moderate" level of drinking, declines for the "High" category, and rises again for "Binge" drinkers, though not to the same level as among the "High Moderate" drinkers. This is consistent with Coleman and Straus (1983) who also found a similar drop in violence for those with the most serious alcohol abuse. However, as is almost always the case for a multi-dimensional cross-tabulation, there are a number of cells with relatively few cases. In such instances, a shift of one or two cases from the non-violent to the violent category can produce a large change in the percent violent. Consequently, it is best to concentrate on the two main findings shown in Figure 2: the general upward trend in violence as drinking increases, and the higher actual rate of wife abuse among men who
Figure 2 • Violence Rate as a Function of Drinking Type, Occupational Status and Violence Norms

Figure 2 also shows that men who believe that there are circumstances under which they “would approve of a husband slapping his wife” have higher percentages of violence than men who disagreed with this statement. The differences between the two groups are large and consistent: 11 of the 12 comparisons possible in Figure 2 show that those who agreed with this traditional view had a higher rate of wife abuse than did those who disagreed.

The top two lines of Figure 2 show that among men who approve of wife slapping, blue-collar men have a substantially higher rate of wife abuse. The lower two lines of Figure 2 show that the blue-collar rate of wife abuse is also higher than the white-collar rate among men who disapprove of wife slapping, but the differences are small. In general, Figure 2 demonstrates that blue-collar men have a higher rate of wife abuse, even after controlling for
norms approving violence and drinking. However, normative effects appear to outweigh those of occupational status.

As a further test of the theoretical model, we computed the partial chi-square values to determine which variables exert the strongest net effects. Table 2 shows that there is a significant three-way interaction between drinking type, approval of violence, and occupational status. All of the two-way interactions are also significant. Most marked of all the effects are the main effects for drinking types and norms. However, it is clear from the very large Likelihood-ratio chi-square that the most pronounced relationship is between norms regarding violence and wife abuse. 8

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Effects</th>
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<th>df</th>
<th>$p$ Value</th>
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<td>D.T. * by Occ. by Norms</td>
<td>13.46</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.019</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>.003</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.047</td>
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<td>D.T. by Occ.</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>1103.61</td>
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<td>.000</td>
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Note:  
a. D.T. = drinking type

Summary and Conclusions

In this study, we used survey data based on a nationally representative sample of 5,159 couples to examine three questions: (1) Do men who drink heavily have a higher probability of wife beating than others? (2) To what extent does drinking occur at the time of the violent incident? (3) Are such linkages between drinking and wife beating found primarily among working-class men?

Our findings revealed a strong link between alcohol use and physical abuse of wives. We found that the usual pattern of drinking of the respondent (as measured by a Drinking Index with six categories ranging from abstainers to binge drinkers) was directly related to the percent of wife abuse. Moreover, our analyses of drinking as an immediate antecedent of the

8. Given the relatively high rates of husband-to-wife violence that Straus et al. (1980:129) found for unemployed and part-time workers, and the relevance for the drunken bum stereotype, we examined the relationship between unemployment and wife abuse. Consistent with the previous study, we found that a larger percentage of unemployed men assaulted their wives during the year of the survey. When unemployment was added to the log-linear model, it continued to be significant, but the overall model did not meet the goodness-of-fit criterion as well as the model presented in this section. To the extent that the drunken bum stereotype includes unemployment, we think it refers to the chronically unemployed, whereas most of the unemployed husbands in this sample are probably not chronically unemployed. We infer this from the fact that most unemployment is transitory. Therefore, if our sample is representative of adult males, most of the unemployed in the sample are also temporarily unemployed.
violence revealed that alcohol was involved in about one out of four instances of wife abuse. When alcohol was an immediate antecedent, it was drinking by the husband alone, or by both the husband and the wife, and only rarely drinking by the wife alone that preceded the violent incident.

On the other hand, it is important not to overstate the extent of the link between alcohol use and wife abuse. For example, although Figure 1 shows that men who were classified as high or binge drinkers had a two-to-three times greater rate of assaulting their wives than did husbands who abstained, we should stress that about 80 percent of the men in both the high and binge drinking groups did not hit their wives at all during the year of this survey. Similarly, while we found that alcohol was often an immediate antecedent of wife abuse, most instances of such abuse took place when neither the husband nor the wife had been drinking. Thus, it is evident that alcohol use at the time of violence is far from a necessary or sufficient cause for wife abuse despite the stereotype that all drunks hit their wives or all wife hitting involves drunks.

Although blue-collar husbands tended to have a higher rate of wife abuse than white-collar husbands, Figure 2 shows that the combination of blue-collar occupational status, drinking, and approval of violence is associated with the highest likelihood of wife abuse. Men with these characteristics have a rate of wife abuse which is 7.8 times greater than the wife-abuse rate of white-collar men who do little drinking and do not approve of slapping a wife under any circumstances. These findings clearly fit the "drunken bum" theory. However, because these are cross-sectional data, the causal order of violence approval is unknown. For some men, normative approval of violence may be an antecedent condition, while for others it may be a rationalization of past wife beating.

Finally, even though we found that the rate of wife abuse is seven times greater among binge-drinking blue-collar men who approve of violence, two-thirds of men with these characteristics did not assault their wives during the year of the study. Thus, although the results of this study show that there is more than a "kernel of truth" in the drunken bum theory of wife beating, the findings also provide the basis for demythologizing this stereotype.

**Toward an Integrated Theory of the Alcohol-Violence Link**

Because some of the results of this study replicate those of a previous study using a large, representative sample (Coleman and Straus, 1983), there are grounds to believe that alcohol use is associated with an increased probability of wife abuse. However, the processes which produce this linkage have yet to be examined empirically, despite a large literature on the subject. For example, Kaufman (1985:79) holds, as do others (Flanzer, 1982; Gelles, 1974), that:

Many arguments are triggered by drinking and drunkenness. Fights start over how much alcohol has been consumed and whether the spouse is drunk or not, and may escalate over related sensitive matters. The ensuing verbal fights are intense and use ammunition from a wide range of issues in the relationship.

Although this is a plausible scenario, experimental studies of marital conflict during drinking (Billings et al., 1979; Frankenstein et al., 1985; Gorad, 1971; Leonard, 1984; Steinglass et al., 1977) have yielded conflicting results on the effect of intoxication on verbal aggression, and also varying theoretical interpretations. Similar ambiguities exist in survey research findings. For example, Coleman and Straus (1983) argue that their findings demonstrate a link between drinking and marital violence, and reflect processes of social learning and deviance disavowal, but they present no empirical evidence to back up this interpretation.

The evidence is somewhat stronger, but hardly definitive, for certain other causal processes and etiological factors. For example, the motivation or purpose of drinking may account for part of the drinking-marital violence relationship. Several researchers have found
an association between power motivation and drinking (Brown et al., 1980; Cahalan, 1970; McClelland et al., 1972; Room, 1980). Thus, heavy drinking may be a means of asserting power and control in the marital relationship. Men who are concerned about demonstrating their masculinity may try to accomplish this symbolically by drunkenness, by dominance over women, and by the exertion of physical force on others.

The results reported here suggest that, whatever other factors may be operating, norms concerning violence in combination with low socioeconomic status are important. This is most clearly indicated by the finding that when neither of these factors are present—i.e., among white-collar men who reject the legitimacy of hitting a wife—there is a limited relationship between alcohol abuse and wife abuse. Among other men, alcohol abuse may be only the most visible correlate of family violence, or it may be an important facilitating factor.

The facilitating process can be illustrated by considering men who reject the traditional norm permitting a man to slap his wife. For these men, we found that alcohol is associated with wife abuse. The process underlying this association may well involve a combination of the factors we discussed above. At the individual level, it probably includes acting on a belief in the disinhibiting power of alcohol—i.e., that drinking enables one to engage in activities that one would otherwise hesitate to engage in, such as extramarital sex, telling off the boss, or slapping the spouse. At the societal level, the underlying process probably includes norms which excuse “drunken comportment,” especially in the form of binge drinking (see MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969). This socially-accepted “time out” from normal rules permits men who reject the legitimacy of hitting their wives to disavow responsibility for their otherwise reprehensible behavior.

These speculations suggest some of the interrelationships among the various theories purporting to explain the alcohol-violence link. These different theories are not necessarily at odds, but may be complementary. Much work needs to be accomplished before a logically-integrated and empirically-verified theory can be produced. However, the results of our study call into question the use of alcohol treatment programs as a means of combating wife abuse. As desirable as alcohol treatment programs may be on other grounds, most intra-family violence occurs in the absence of alcohol. Moreover, reducing alcohol abuse does not deal with what are probably the basic factors underlying the high rate of wife abuse in the United States. To the extent that this is the case, steps to reduce wife abuse should focus on these underlying factors—especially the high rate of poverty and economic inequality, and the cultural tradition which glorifies violence, assumes male dominance, and tolerates violence by men against women.

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Review of literature which had to be cut from the published Drunken Bum Theory of Wife-Beating" (Social Problems Vol 34

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON ALCOHOL ABUSE AND INTRA-FAMILY VIOLENCE

A substantial body of literature exists on alcohol and violent interpersonal crimes (see for example: Amir, 1971; Collins, 1981; Greenberg, 1981, Rada, 1978; Roizen, 1981; Roizen and Schneberk, 1977; Shupe, 1954; Wolfgang, 1958). However, there are many methodological problems with this research (see Greenberg, 1981; Pernanen, 1976; 1981). The major criticisms include sample biases, nonuniform measures of alcohol use and crime, and failure to specify antecedent conditions under which alcohol use and crimes occur. Because there are a number of general reviews, and because this paper focuses on the link between alcohol and spouse abuse, our review of the literature will be specific to this area.

Association of Alcohol With Intra-family Violence

To a great extent, the literature has lacked consensus on even the elementary question of whether there is a correlation between drinking and intra-family violence. This can be illustrated by considering two of the most frequently cited works. Bard and Zacher's study (1974) of domestic assaults reported to police found little association between alcohol and family violence; whereas a study by Wolfgang (1958) found that victims were frequently drinking. Perhaps the difference is because Wolfgang studied the most extreme end of the family violence continuum -- spousal homicide.

(Table 1 about here)

Table 1 permits a more systematic examination of previous research because it summarizes the findings of 15 empirical studies. The main conclusion to be drawn from the column headed "Violent Couples" is that these studies produced a wide range of estimates of alcohol's presence in spousal violence -- from 6 to 85 percent. However, this is not surprising given the limitations of the studies summarized in Table 1. Most used descriptive or bivariate statistics and therefore lack controls for confounding variables. Some are based on clinical samples and others on more or less representative community samples. Some use self-reports, whereas others use the report of the spouse, and still others use the report of a police officer. Finally, the 15 studies employed a variety of measures of both alcohol use and wife abuse.

A Rashomon like effect (perceptions of the event vary according to the role and identity of the actor) may account for the discrepancies shown in Table 1 between the reports of police, victims, and offenders. Police, for example, may be more likely to arrest drunken men if they are assaultive towards police as well as their spouses and less likely to arrest if both parties have been drinking. On the other hand, battered women have commented on their intoxicated spouses' ability to appear sober when police arrive (Reed et al, 1983). Men may use drunkenness to justify violent behavior yet be capable of sober behavior when this serves their needs. Additionally, women may need to attribute the batter's violence to alcohol as a way of comprehending the irrational, predicting the unpredictable and excusing the violence (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Galles, 1974). Further, some researchers find that alcohol is used inconsistently in separate violent episodes (Eberle, 1980; Walker, 1984).
Clinical Vs. Survey Samples

Table 1 shows higher rates of alcohol abuse among clinical samples such as shelter populations or batterers in therapy (Caesar, 1985; Eberle, 1980; Lefeb, 1977; Okun, 1986; Roy, 1977; Walker, 1979; 1984) than in random survey groups (Nelson and Bittan, 1979; Coleman and Straus, 1983) and in police samples (Bard and Zacker, 1974; Dobash and Dobash, 1979).

Comparative Studies

Research which compares a measure of drinking among violent couples with the same measure applied to a comparison group provides a way of controlling for many of the discrepancies identified in the previous section. Three studies (Caesar, 1985; Rosenbaum and O'Leary, 1981; Van Hasselt, Morrison & Bellock, 1985) utilize the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (MAST). This is a widely used, standardized test assessing alcohol associated problems (Selzer, 1971). All of these studies found significantly higher MAST scores for violent men versus non-violent.

A standard measure of alcohol consumption is the QFI or Quantity Frequency Index (Caahan, Cisin and Crossley, 1969; Straus and Bacon, 1953). However, only Van Hasselt and associates (1985) used this measure. Interestingly, these researchers found no significant differences in QFI scores for violent men compared to non-violent men in maritally discordant families or compared to non-violent men in satisfactory marriages. While the authors argue that the non-significant differences are due to the nature of the treatment population, other interpretations are possible. One is that individuals may underreport excess drinking and a second is that levels of alcohol consumption are not necessarily consistent with problem behaviors (Linsky, Colby and Straus, 1986).

Six of the 15 studies in Table 1 used a violent vs. non-violent design, and two (Coleman and Straus, 1983; Eberle, 1980) compared drinking with non-drinking couples. All seven of these comparative design studies found an association between drinking and marital violence. This is consistent with Hotaling and Sugerman's (1986) comprehensive analysis of case-controlled studies of husband-to-wife violence. Alcohol abuse was one of the risk factors which met their criteria for consistency across two-thirds or more of the studies they reviewed. Thus, alcohol seems to be an important correlate of wife abuse.

Even if one grants that the evidence supports a correlation between alcohol use and wife abuse, there are many inconsistencies and shortcomings in the research to date, such as the fact that only one study used a Quantity-Frequency Index measure of alcohol consumption, and that study described a clinical population. The research described in this paper provides modified Quantity-Frequency Index data for a large and representative sample of American families. Moreover, because the previous research is almost entirely descriptive or bivariate, it does not provide information which is appropriate to testing the complex interrelation of factors specified by the theories reviewed in a previous section. By contrast, the methods used in the research to be presented below reflects some of the theoretical complexity. It uses a multivariate analysis taking into account all the factors which figure prominently in these theories:
# TABLE 1

Incidence of Alcohol Associated with Wife Abuse. (Con’t)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Percent Drinking Among:</th>
<th>Alcohol Measure</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Violent Group</td>
<td>Comparison Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nisonoff &amp; Bitman, 1979</td>
<td>Random phone survey sample of Suffolk County, NY N=297</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>Not asked</td>
<td>&quot;Is alcohol a factor when you hit your husband/wife?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okun, 1986</td>
<td>Battered women in shelter, N=278 Batterers in counseling, N=110</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>27.3*</td>
<td>Self reports, women's reports; counselor reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosenbaum &amp; O'Leary, 1981</td>
<td>52 abuse couples (abused wives) (nonviolent discord)</td>
<td>MASTx=12.97</td>
<td>x=4.30</td>
<td>MAST scores of husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(abusive couples) (marital satisfaction)</td>
<td>MASTx=4.55</td>
<td>x=.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 Satisfactorily married couples</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 Non-violent but maritally discordant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy, 1977</td>
<td>Battered women N=150</td>
<td>85% (alcohol or or drugs)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Women's reports of abuser's alcohol or drug use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Hasselt, Morrison &amp; Bellock, 1985</td>
<td>Couples in treatment: 26 violent 26 non-violent with marital discord.</td>
<td>x=17.02</td>
<td>Marital discord x=3.54</td>
<td>MAST QFI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x QFI=.95</td>
<td>Satisfactory couple x=4.6</td>
<td>QFI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 Satisfactorily married</td>
<td></td>
<td>M.D.=.61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walker, 1979</td>
<td>120 battered women</td>
<td>&quot;Over half&quot; of battered women reported a relationship between drinking &amp; violence</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Women's reports of spouse's drinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walker, 1984</td>
<td>401 battered women. Comparison with their prior non-battering relationships N=401</td>
<td>67% frequent use</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>Women's reports</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Estimated incidence of male problem drinking in county studied.
### TABLE 1
Incidence of Alcohol Associated with Wife Abuse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Percent Drinking Among:</th>
<th>Alcohol Measure</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bard &amp; Zacker, 1984</td>
<td>Police reports of family disputes</td>
<td>6% (victim accounts)</td>
<td>Police/Victim reports of drunkenness</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=1388</td>
<td>21% (police accounts)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byles, 1978</td>
<td>Family court sample</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>Alcohol reported as &quot;a problem in the marriage&quot;</td>
<td>Chi Square p&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=139</td>
<td>27% (No violence but attending</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>family court)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesar, 1985</td>
<td>Men in therapy</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (MAST)</td>
<td>Chi Square p&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26 batterers</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18 non-batterers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleman &amp; Strauss, 1983</td>
<td>National probability sample</td>
<td>Violence rates by frequency of drunkenness:</td>
<td>Alcohol reports by frequency of drunkenness</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=2,143 American couples</td>
<td>Never drunk = 2.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Drunk very often = 30.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Almost always drunk = 17.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dobash &amp; Dobash, 1979</td>
<td>Police reports in Scotland N=3,020</td>
<td>Police report 30%</td>
<td>Police report intoxication</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with battered women</td>
<td>Women report 25%</td>
<td>Women report abusers drunk at time of violence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=109</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eberle, 1980</td>
<td>Battered women</td>
<td>Differences between two groups of batterers: Those using alcohol to exceed &amp; those not using for 4 incidents</td>
<td>Women's reports of abuser's alcohol use during violence</td>
<td>Discriminant 83% correctly classified (none vs. excessivity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=390</td>
<td></td>
<td>16% abused alcohol</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19% none</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>65% used inconsistently</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelles, 1974</td>
<td>N=44 social case work families</td>
<td>48% of violent families</td>
<td>Spouse reports of drinking related violence</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=36 neighborhood comparison group</td>
<td>Not asked</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labell, 1977</td>
<td>Battered women in shelter</td>
<td>72% of men</td>
<td>Self reports &amp; reports of mates' drinking problem</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=512</td>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>