Substance Abuse as a Precipitant of Wife Abuse Victimizations*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the question of whether drug and alcohol use by victims constitutes a risk factor increasing the chances of their being assaulted by their partners. Data from a subsample of the 1985 National Family Violence Survey consisting of the 2,033 female respondents who were currently married or living in a male-female couple relationship are used as the basis of the analysis. The logistic analysis reveals that, of the ten variables in the model, the most important for distinguishing abused from nonabused women are husband’s drug use, a history of paternal violence in women’s family or origin, husband’s drunkenness, low income, and wife’s drunkenness. Women who abuse alcohol are more likely to be victims of minor marital violence, but female substance abuse of any type is not a significant factor in severe violence.

DRUG ALCOHOL VICTIMIZATION EFFECTS

A complementary perspective to that of intoxication-aggressor effects [1] is that people under the influence of alcohol and other drugs may bring

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about their own victimization. We will call this the intoxication-victimization effect. This effect is similar to the stereotype that wife abuse occurs because of victims' masochism, and even professional bodies maintain the existence of masochistic or self-defeating personality disorders [2]. The dangers of the latter views being applied to battered women should be obvious. Blaming the victim can serve as a justification for the abuser's violence and further endanger one of the involved parties.

It is not our intention to contribute to victim-blaming phenomena but to examine empirically the reality of intoxication-victimization myths. Therefore, the following questions will be addressed: 1) Are women who drink heavily or use drugs at greater risk for abuse by spouses? 2) Is husbands' drug and alcohol use a more important factor than wives' intoxicant use? 3) Is this a "spurious" relationship; for example, a relationship which simply reflects drug/alcohol use by the husband, or reflects confounding with other variables such as socioeconomic status? 4) Do these relationships differ for minor and severe violence?

Empirical Studies

Research on wife abuse rarely includes information on the victim's use of drugs other than alcohol. The study by Coleman and Straus [3] illustrates this omission. Coleman and Straus present separate data on drinking by husbands and wives, but their measure of family violence is for the couple, i.e., they do not provide information on drinking by women who have been assaulted. Another problem is illustrated by Walker's study [4] of 400 battered women. Walker found that approximately 20% of these women used alcohol and 8% used other drugs prior to violent episodes. The problem is that one cannot evaluate the meaning of this without knowing the extent of drug use in some comparable sample. For this reason we have selected for review here only research which utilizes some type of comparison group.

Hotaling and Sugarman [5] carried out a comprehensive review of research on factors associated with engaging in wife abuse or being a victim of wife abuse. They located 400 empirical studies, of which 97 met the comparison group criterion. Fourteen characteristics were found to be consistently associated with being an abuser, whereas only one factor was found to be consistently associated with being a victim of wife abuse, and that was the presence of violence in the wife's family of origin.
Five of the studies reviewed by Hotaling and Sugarman investigated drug use by victims, but the findings were inconsistent. Six of the studies included data on alcohol usage, but only one found an association with drinking by the victim. Hotaling and Sugarman conclude that characteristics associated with the husband or the couple are more useful in assessing victimization risks than victim characteristics, including victims’ use of alcohol or other drugs. Nevertheless, the fact that three of the five studies of drug use by wives did find an association with wife abuse suggests that drug use may indeed put women at higher risk of being a victim of spouse abuse. In respect to alcohol use, despite the fact that only one of the six studies of the wife’s alcohol use reviewed by Hotaling and Sugarman found a statistically significant association, other studies suggest that it may be premature to dismiss the idea that alcohol use by wives can precipitate assault by their husbands. Perhaps the best known of these other studies is the research which suggests that drinking precipitates rape, assault, and homicide [6–8]. However, neither of these studies establishes a causal link between alcohol and crime. Alcohol and other drugs may in fact be more a property of the social interaction than a direct cause of violent events [9–11].

Turning to research focusing directly on wife abuse, Eberle [12] did a discriminant analysis comparing abused wives whose husband used no alcohol with abused wives whose husbands were drinking at the time the abuse occurred. Eberle found the alcohol use by victims to be the most important variable distinguishing between two groups of batterers. Telch and Lindquist [13] found that both husbands’ and wives’ alcohol use discriminated between violent and nonviolent groups. A study of violent and nonviolent couples in therapy by Coleman et al., [14] found that the wives in the violent relationships differed significantly from the nonvictim wives in respect to the husband’s alcohol use, frequent verbal arguments, low education of the wife, and drug abuse by the wife.

Other researchers report the existence of both gender differences and different patterns regarding alcohol use and marital violence where the worst violence is linked to husbands’ drinking problems and aggression by women under the influence is rare [15]. On the other hand, Miller and Downs’ [16] study of a small sample of recovering alcoholic women reports more serious wife victimizations when both partners have drinking problems. A second study by Downs and associates [17] finds only a modest relationship present between alcoholic womens’ use of other drugs and their assaults by partners.
Our previous study [1] based on a nationally representative sample of 3,520 couples showed that although husbands’ excess drinking is associated with higher wife abuse rates, in the majority (75%) of families alcohol was not an immediate antecedent of violence. Of the remaining 25% of violent families, 14% were drinking husbands, both spouses were drinking in 8%, and wives were drinking alone prior to the onset of the violence in 2%. A multivariate analysis of the association between the husband’s occupational class, normative approval of violence, and drinking patterns suggested that although drinking is a significant factor, cultural approval of violence has the strongest association with wife abuse.

Capasso-Richardson and Campbell [18] found that attributions of blame for wife abuse may interact with the gender of the intoxicated person. Using a student population of 273, these researchers gave subjects two accounts of wife abuse, varying the sex of the drunken spouse. Their findings showed that women were blamed more than men when they were drunk; when husbands were drunk, situational factors were rated more important and less blame was attributed to men. The findings suggest different standards for men and women and a gender-specific deviance disavowal script. Battered women under the influence violate gender norms of appropriate behavior and may be viewed as meriting their own beatings. Ironically, when the husband is doing the drinking, attributions of blame are less likely. Both beliefs in alcohol’s disinhibiting powers and acceptance of excess drinking for men serve to legitimize and excuse their violent acts. Moreover, battered women themselves tend to use the husband’s drinking as an explanation for his violence [19, 20].

Overall, there seems to be considerable empirical evidence supporting a link between substance abuse and victimization. However, the studies reviewed have several methodological problems. They are largely limited to small samples without case controls. The relative importance of substance abuse by the aggressor and the victim is not clear. There is also little data on the association between drug use and severity of abuse. By contrast, the study to be reported here examines a nationally representative sample, takes into account both alcohol and other drug use, and differentiates between minor violence and severe assaults. In addition, the analysis includes several other factors reflecting the etiological complexity of women’s violent victimization. These include: normative approval of violence, witnessing paternal violence against mothers, employment, income, and pregnancy.
METHOD

Sample

The data for this study were collected in 1985 from a national probability sample of 6,002 households, obtained by telephone interview. Eligible households had to include adults 18 years of age or older who were: 1) presently married or 2) presently living as a male-female couple or 3) divorced or separated within the last 2 years or 4) single parent with a child under 18 living in a household. Random digit dialing sampling methods were employed. For a random half of the coupled households, the female partner was selected as the respondent, and the male partner in the other half. The analyses to be reported here are based on a subsample consisting of the 2,033 female respondents who were currently married or living in a male-female couple relationship. Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes. The response rate calculated as “completed portion of eligibles” was 84%. Further information on the sample is given in Straus and Gelles [21, 22] and Kaufman Kantor and Straus [1].

Drunkenness and Drug Abuse Measures

The measure of alcohol/other drug abuse was based on several survey questions. The first asked “In the past year, how often would you guess you got drunk?” The second question repeated this for “got high on marijuana or some other drug.” Both questions were asked first of women about their own use of drugs, and then the same questions were asked about their partner’s usage. The terms “substance abuse,” “drug abuse,” or “drug use” are used interchangeably in this paper and do not reflect any diagnostic differentiation. Instead, they are used to reflect any use of illicit drugs or reports of any episodes of drunkenness.

One limitation to the measure of drug abuse is that marijuana is the only drug specified. The lack of specific probes for other drugs may result in underreporting. On the other hand, because marijuana has become an increasingly normative drug [23] (more so than other illicit substances), people may be more willing to admit to illicit drug usage when marijuana alone is mentioned. Additionally, there is reason to believe that people who use one illicit drug may also use another illicit drug or alcohol or both. Miller and Cisin [23] estimate that this occurs about half the time for illicit drug
users. However, individuals using physician-prescribed psychotropic drugs, more relevant to women [24]) and to middle and upper-class sectors [25], may be less likely to identify these drug-use occasions as "times they got high." Underreporting of drunkenness by women is also plausible given gender norms disapproving of this behavior for women.

The use of wives' reports of husband's drunkenness has been validated by other researchers [26] as have self-reports of drug use, particularly for drug-dependent treatment populations [27–29]. Validity of family members' reports on illicit drug use has not been as carefully documented. These may be subject to frequency underestimates more than prevalence underestimates according to O'Malley et al. [30]. However, these authors studied an adolescent population, a group that is more likely to use drugs away from the scrutiny of family members. Because adult couple's drug use is often highly interdependent [31], we anticipate less bias in frequency estimates. A separate analysis of these current survey data showed high correlations for both partners' drug use \( (r = .69) \) and their drunkenness \( (r = .50) \). This suggests that people married to or living with a drug or alcohol user tend also to use alcohol or other drugs.

Five percent of the wives reported one or more instances of drug use during the year of the survey, and a somewhat larger percentage of the husbands, 7%, were reported to have been high on a drug one or more times during the year.

**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" (see Gelles and Straus [32] for an explication of this definition and an analysis of alternative definitions). The Violence Scale of the "Conflict Tactics Scales" (CTS) was used to measure the incidence of violence [33]. The CTS has been used and refined in a number of studies of intrafamily violence [21, 22, 34–39]. This paper uses the 1985 revision of the CTS [21]. The forms of violence which are used in this paper include:

*Minor Violence.* The violent acts included in this index include throwing an object at another, pushing, grabbing, or slapping.

*Severe Violence.* The violent acts included in this index include kicking, hit, hit with fist, hit with object, beat-up, choked, threatened with knife or gun, used knife or gun.
Approval of Violence Measure

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?" [40, 41].

RESULTS

We first compared the percentages of cases in each of the three violence types who were characterized by each independent variable (Table 1). Reading across the rows of part A shows that the percentages of lowest among nonviolent couples and increase with the severity of violence. For example, the first row shows that 4% of the nonvictim wives reported having been high on drugs during the year of this survey, compared to 14% of the women who were victims of minor violence, and 24% of the severe violence victims. Thus, women who were severely assaulted by their partner had a six times greater rate of drug use than did nonvictim women. A similar pattern is shown for drug use by husbands. At the same time, it is also important to note that, even though the substance abuse rate is six times higher, 76% of the severely assaulted women reported no use of drugs during the year of their victimization. Similarly, 69% of the men who severely assaulted their wife did not use drugs.

Drunkenness

The absolute rates for drunkenness are much higher than for use of other drugs: 16% of the wives reported at least one episode of drunkenness. The rate for the husbands was twice that of wives—32%. The third and fourth rows of Table 1 show that the difference between the non-victim and victimized wives in the rate of drunkenness are large, but less than was found for drug use. Thus, 16% of the nonvictim wives were drunk one or more times during the year of this study, compared to 46% of the severely assaulted women, i.e., almost three times the rate. A similar pattern is shown in the last row of Part A for alcohol abuse by husbands. It is again important to note that although heavy drinking by the wife is associated
Table 1. Percentage Reporting Each Predictor Variable by Victim Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variable</th>
<th>Wife Victim of</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No violence</td>
<td>Minor violence</td>
<td>Severe violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>((N = 1860))</td>
<td>((N = 167))</td>
<td>((N = 160))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Substance Abuse</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife high on drugs ((1 = high))</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband high on drugs ((1 = high))</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband drunk ((1 = drunk))</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife drunk ((1 = drunk))</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Other Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low family income ((1 = low))</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father hit mother ((1 = yes))</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife ((1 = housewife))</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man's unemployment ((1 = unemployed))</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant ((1 = yes))</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence norms ((1 = approve))</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

with victimization, the majority of victims of wife abuse reported no instance of being drunk during the year of their victimization.

Other Factors

Although the primary focus on this paper is on substance abuse, we included other variables in the analysis, either in order to control for the possibility of their being confounded with substance abuse or because previous research suggested their inclusion. These variables are listed in Table 1, Part B.

*Low Family Income.* The first row of Part B shows that 6% of the No Violence couples were classified as low income (total family income less than $10,000), compared to 9% of the Minor Violence cases, and 15% of the Severe Violence Cases. Thus, wife abuse is associated with low income.
Violence by Victim’s Parents. The row labeled “Father hit mother” shows that “only” 9% of nonassaulted women grew up in a violent home compared to 19% of abused women, i.e., double the rate.

Housewives. A previous study [42] found that housewives were at greater risk of abuse than women in the paid labor force. However, the row labeled “Housewife” in Table 1 shows that this is not the case among the present sample.

Husband’s Unemployment. Previous studies [20, 42-45] suggest that abusing husbands have a higher unemployment rate than other husbands. The row labeled “Man’s Unemployment” shows that this is the case for husbands who severely assaulted their spouse (whose unemployment rate is over three times greater), but not for husbands whose abuse was restricted to minor violence.

Pregnancy. Gelles’s finding that pregnancy seemed to increase the risk of being assaulted [20] has been confirmed by Stark et al. [46] and by informal data. The pregnancy rates shown in the row labeled “Pregnant” provide additional confirmation. They show that, compared to nonabused women, the pregnancy rate is a third higher among victims of minor violence, and 2.3 times higher among victims of severe violence.

Violence Norms. The next to the last row of Table 1 gives the proportion of women who say that there are situations in which they would approve of a husband slapping a wife. Victims of minor violence have almost double the approval rate expressed by non-abused wives (20 versus 11%). However, approval of this type of violence drops off sharply (to 16%) for women who were victims of severe violence. This drop off is quite plausible since experiencing a severe assault (which includes life-threatening attacks with knives, guns, and other objects) is likely to change ones view of violence by a spouse. The finding also provides one more refutation of masochistic stereotypes of battered women.

FACTORS DIFFERENTIATING WIFE ABUSE VICTIMS

Table 2 presents the results of a logistic multiple regression analysis* used to examine the relative importance of several victim and aggressor

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*We used the SAS mainframe computer procedure LOGIST for this analysis.
### Table 2. Logistic Regression Results for Minor Violence by Wife and Husband Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Beta(^a) (standard errors)</th>
<th>M.L.E. chi square(^b)</th>
<th>(p) Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husband high on drugs (1 = high)</td>
<td>0.998 (.308)</td>
<td>10.46</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife high on drugs (1 = high)</td>
<td>−0.024 (.366)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife drunk (1 = drunk)</td>
<td>0.558 (.210)</td>
<td>7.09</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband drunk (1 = drunk)</td>
<td>0.444 (.190)</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low family income (1 = low)</td>
<td>0.665 (.267)</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife's employment (1 = housewife)</td>
<td>−0.220 (.187)</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband's unemployment (1 = unemployment)</td>
<td>−0.518 (.500)</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father hits mother (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.740 (.211)</td>
<td>12.28</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant (1 = yes)</td>
<td>−0.217 (.452)</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence norms (1 = approve)</td>
<td>0.496 (.217)</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>0.022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Each Beta coefficient equals the increase in the natural logarithm of the odds ratio of being a victim of husband's violence. For example, husband's use of drugs increases the log of the odds of wives minor victimization by .998.

\(^b\)Chi squares are Maximum Likelihood Estimates (M.L.E.) which test the joint association of each variable with the dependent variable (minor violence).

characteristics to wife abuse. The data in Table 2 show that the most important factors in the equation tested and which also increase the log of the odds of minor wife assaults are husband's drug use and "father hit mother" (violence in the victim's family or origin). Less important, but still significant, are wives' drunkenness, male drunkenness, poverty, and wives' normative approval of male violence. These findings are fairly consistent with the results presented for the percentages. However, wives' drug use is nonsignificant and contributes little to the regression equation. This may be related to the low frequency of women's reported drug use and the limited dispersion of this variable.

The results of the logistic regression analysis for severe violence presented in Table 3 are similar to those presented for minor violence. Husbands' drug use continues to have the largest regression coefficient, increasing the log odds of severe wife assaults. The regression coefficients for both violence in the victim's family of origin and husband's drunkenness are almost as large as the coefficient for husbands' drug use. Family poverty
Table 3. Logistic Regression Results for Severe Violence by Wife and Husband Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Beta^a (standard errors)</th>
<th>M.L.E. chi square^b</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husband high on drugs (1 = high)</td>
<td>0.890 (.330)</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife high on drugs (1 = high)</td>
<td>0.400 (.385)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife drunk (1 = drunk)</td>
<td>0.144 (.251)</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband drunk (1 = drunk)</td>
<td>0.841 (.231)</td>
<td>13.28</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low family income (1 = low)</td>
<td>0.937 (.268)</td>
<td>12.25</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife’s employment (1 = housewife)</td>
<td>0.259 (.215)</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0.227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s unemployment (1 = unemployment)</td>
<td>0.588 (.391)</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>0.132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father hits mother (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.882 (.236)</td>
<td>13.92</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.252 (.437)</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence norms (1 = approve)</td>
<td>0.476 (.257)</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>0.068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^a Each Beta coefficient equals the increase in the natural logarithm of the odds ratio of being a victim of husband’s violence. For example, husband’s use of drugs increases the log of the odds of wives minor victimization by .890.

^b Chi squares are Maximum Likelihood Estimates (M.L.E.) which test the joint association of each variable with the dependent variable (severe violence).

also significantly increases the odds of wife assaults. However, normative approval is no longer significant (p > .05). This is consistent with our examination of the percentages in Table 1, and we noted the reasons for this in our discussion above. Drug use and drunkenness by wives are not significant factors in their severe victimizations. Housewife status, husband’s unemployment, and pregnancy do not emerge as important factors in either equation.

CONCLUSIONS

Interview survey data based on a nationally representative sample of 2,033 couples were used to examine four questions: 1) Are women who drink heavily or use drugs at greater risk for abuse by spouses? 2) Is husbands’ drug and alcohol use a more important factor than wife’s intoxicant use? 3) Is this a
"spurious" relationship; for example, a relationship which simply reflects drug/alcohol use by the husband, or reflects confounding with other variables such as socioeconomic status? 4) Do these relationships differ for minor and severe violence?

Causal Processes

A number of different causal processes which may underlie these findings need to be considered.

Direct Pharmacological Effects. Certainly the pharmacological effects of drug and alcohol use by victims could potentially increase their chances of being assaulted. This might occur due to cognitive alterations such as impaired judgment, memory, or misinterpretation of the partner's comments or behavior. It is also possible that an intoxicated victim may be less able to defend herself or elude her aggressor in a conflict situation.

More commonly researchers have focused on the pharmacology of aggression, with some suggesting that multiple drug abuse leads to heightened aggressiveness [43]. A detailed examination of this explanation in a previous paper [3] led to the conclusion that the physiological effect of alcohol depends on the meanings and scripts which alcohol users have learned to associate with intoxication. This is a plausible conclusion for the effects of alcohol, which has central nervous system depressant properties. On the other hand, use of hallucinogenic drugs, central nervous system stimulants, or combinations of drugs may more often lead to aggression [47], but all drug responses vary according to individual's mental states and the context of usage [48-50].

Conflict over Substance Abuse. Another possibility is that drug and alcohol problems produce an increase in family conflict, thus indirectly increasing wife abuse. Research on narcotic-dependent women [31, 51] found many women physically abused by their addict partners. In relationships of this type the drug bond shared by the couple can dominate the relationship as a source of both succorance and conflict.

Violation of Norms Concerning Gender Roles. We believe that different norms exist concerning the appropriateness of drinking and drunkenness by women compared to men [52-54]. Drinking, and to a certain extent
drunkenness, are macho, whereas the same behavior on the part of women raise questions about their “character.” When women violate these gender norms of drinking behavior, they may be considered fair game for rape and/or deserving a beating. Sandmaier provides a case example of such an instance:

“Once the drinking started getting bad, my husband started to beat me for it. If he smelled one drink—pow! Black eyes and the whole bit. . . .” [53, p. 114].

Another aspect of gender role norm violation which increases the risk of wife abuse is suggested by Sandmaier’s data showing that when some women drink, they may become more verbally aggressive. This is no different than the behavior of some men who have been drinking. However, such behavior on the part of men is not a violation of gender role norms, whereas for women it violates the passive and subservient model of female behavior. Having violated the norms of appropriate female behavior, they lose the protection afforded by other traditional gender role norms, such as “never hit a woman” (see Young et al. [55] for an experimental demonstration of this process), and a physically violent response to “provocation” is therefore legitimated. These mechanisms can also apply to drug use other than alcohol.

Substance Abuse as a Consequence of Physical Abuse. Finally, there may also be differences in the causal ordering of substance abuse. That is, women’s substance abuse may be a result of the violence rather than a precipitant. Analysis of hospital records finds much greater problem drug use for battered women treated for injuries than for nonbattered women [46].

The Larger Context

The results of this study indicate that substance abuse is an important dimension in understanding wife abuse, but it is far from the whole story. A number of other factors need to be considered.

A caveat is needed because we measured use of alcohol and drugs during the 12 months preceding the interview. We do not know if these substances were used at the time of the violent incident or incidents. However, a companion study which did use a measure of drinking at the time of violence
analysis [1] obtained similar findings to those reported in this paper, i.e., although there is a strong link between husband’s drinking and wife abuse, in 75% of the violent incidents alcohol was not an immediate antecedent of violence.

A second consideration needed in evaluating the link between alcohol/drug use and victimization is that many other factors also contribute to wife abuse. Some of these were examined in this study. We found that families characterized by low income and a wife raised in a family where there was violence between the parents are associated with a higher risk of victimization. These findings are consistent with the results of a previous national survey [42].

Returning to the three main questions which formed the focus of this study, we conclude that: Substance abuse by the husband and intergenerational violence in women’s families are the most important factors differentiating abused wives from other women. However, women who drink heavily have a higher risk of minor assaults by their partner than other women. Other factors—especially low income and attitudes which tolerate violence—were also found to be important. At the same time, the findings of this study show that no one of these factors by itself explains wife abuse. The limited effects of any one variable alone also applies to substance abuse. Thus, although women who drink heavily or use drugs, or whose partner drinks heavily or uses drugs, are more likely to be victimized, most physical abuse of wives occurs in the absence of alcohol or other drugs by the victim.

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