Physically Violent Husbands of the 1890s and Their Resources

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This article applies Goode's Resource Theory of wife beating to Lane County, Oregon from 1891 to 1900. The sample population consists of 56 women who appeared in divorce suits and claimed that their husbands had physically abused them. The study's findings largely support Resource Theory, although biases in the sample population make it more suggestive than conclusive. Wife beaters of the 1890s tended to be relatively low in economic and social resources, particularly when compared to their wives. The violent husbands' resources appear particularly slight when their psychological resources are considered. The article closes by suggesting that Resource Theory is not necessarily at odds with feminist interpretations of wife battering. Social scientists who assert that husbands' physical violence is more likely when their dominance is pronounced rather than fragile need to define more carefully and detect the actual level of power and resources that particular husbands enjoy.

KEY WORDS: male batterers; Resource Theory; domestic violence history.

INTRODUCTION

Goode's (1971) Resource Theory is one of the most influential explanations of spouse abuse in scholarly literature (Allen and Straus, 1980; Gordon, 1988; Hanmer, 1978; Hotaling and Straus, 1980; Rodman, 1972). According to Goode, physical force is but one of several resources that husbands employ to exercise influence in the family; money, prestige, and likability are also key marital resources. Goode argues that husbands prefer these less blatant means of coercion, since naked physical force can cost a man respect and affection.

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Much research on wife abusers supports Resource Theory. Several studies indicate that such men tend to lack money, education, or other forms of status, and that male unemployment in particular predicts male marital violence (Carlson, 1977; Gelles and Straus, 1988; Hornung et al., 1981; Howell and Pugliesi, 1988; Lewis, 1987; Parker and Schumacher, 1977; Petersen, 1980; Roberts, 1987; Steinmetz, 1980; Straus et al., 1980; Schulman, 1979). Several studies also suggest that husbands are more likely to batter if they are married to women whose resources exceed their own (Brown, 1980; Hofeller, 1982; O'Brien, 1971; Okun, 1986; Rounsaville, 1978; Teichman and Teichman, 1989; Walker, 1984). Despite serious methodological flaws due to the hidden nature of wife abuse, particularly in the middle class (Okun, 1986; Walker, 1986), these studies add up to an impressive amount of empirical evidence. They lend support to Goode's assertion that husbands are most likely to be physically violent when other traditional male advantages have been reduced or eliminated.

Yet, several studies indicate that husband-dominated marriages are more violent than egalitarian ones. Sociologists find that violence toward wives is most likely to occur when the husbands have traditional sex-role preferences (Gelles and Straus, 1988; Gentemann, 1984; Star et al., 1979; Straus et al., 1980; Telch and Lindquist, 1984; Walker, 1984; Yllo, 1983, 1984) and when the husbands have more power than their wives (Adler, 1981; Coleman and Straus, 1986). Anthropologists also suggest a positive correlation between women's inferior status and wife beating (Lester, 1980; Levinson, 1989). These studies hardly seem to mesh with the theory that husbands are most apt to use physical force when traditional male prerogative have eroded.

An historical description of violent husbands may help to dissolve this paradox. If violence toward wives in the contemporary United States is simply a function of traditional male dominance, then, almost by definition, the same pattern should have existed a century ago. Resource Theory, on the other hand, suggests that the relationship between traditional values and wife beating is more complex. It argues that physical violence is and has been the recourse of husbands whose dominance over their wives has been more tenuous than complete.

**METHOD**

The 56 physically abused women in this study are drawn from a population of 232 petitions for dissolution of marriage in Lane County, Oregon filed by wives and husbands between January 1, 1891, and December 31, 1900. [For the purposes of this paper, physical violence or