Interactive and Unique Risk Factors for Husbands’ Emotional and Physical Abuse of Their Wives

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Predisposing risk factors of husband to wife physical and emotional abusiveness were assessed in 175 community volunteer couples. Negative life events, marital dissatisfaction, attitudes regarding aggression, and employment status accounted for unique variance in the prediction of husbands’ total abusiveness. Alcohol impairment, while not in itself a significant predictor, moderated the effects of life stress and marital dissatisfaction. Men reporting alcohol impairment, combined with high negative life events or with high marital dissatisfaction, exhibited greater abusiveness than predicted by the additive effects of these individual risk factors. Men exhibiting emotional abuse, compared to those without emotional abuse, scored higher on hostility and attitudes condoning aggression, whereas men exhibiting severe physical aggression, compared to those without severe physical aggression, reported more negative life events, more marital dissatisfaction, more hostility, and more exposure to abuse in their family of origin. The present data highlight the importance of variables that fluctuate over time, as well as the co-occurrence of such variables in understanding husband to wife abusiveness.

KEY WORDS: risk factors; emotional abusiveness; physical abuse; husbands.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women by husbands and other intimate partners has garnered attention as a topic of public interest (Igrassia and Beck, 1994;
Smolowe, 1994), as a critical health issue (Council on Scientific Affairs, American Medical Association, 1992), and as a subject to be addressed on the level of national policy and legislation (Biden, 1993). Considerable attention has been paid to data documenting incidence and prevalence of physical attacks on women by an intimate partner (e.g., Frieze and Browne, 1989; Straus and Gelles, 1990), as well as to the psychological and physical traumatization resulting from such attacks (Dutton, 1992; Walker, 1984).

In contrast, less is known about what leads some men to use physical aggression in intimate relationships (Browne, 1993). Such data are essential to the continued refinement of intervention strategies for violent men and the development of prevention programs that might ultimately reduce the amount of violence toward women. This paper examines factors associated with husbands’ abuse of their wives. In addition to exploring the unique contributions of specific factors, the goal here is to explore contributions of various combinations of factors. Furthermore, in addition to examining overall abusiveness, this paper distinguishes emotional abuse and severe physical abuse by husbands to determine whether different risk factors are associated with these two types of abuse.

Efforts to understand husband-to-wife aggression have translated primarily into identification of risk markers of violence: that is, attributes or characteristics that are empirically associated with an increased probability of husband-to-wife violence (Hotaling and Sugarman, 1986; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997). Characteristics frequently associated with husband-to-wife aggression include: (a) a family background of victimization or witnessing abuse (Aldarondo and Sugarman, 1996; Hotaling and Sugarman, 1986; Kalmuss, 1984; Lewis, 1987; O’Leary et al., 1994; Owens and Straus, 1975); (b) substance abuse (Barnett and Fagan, 1993; Fagan et al., 1983; Heyman et al., 1995; Kaufman Kantor and Straus, 1987; Leonard et al., 1985; Leonard and Blane, 1992; Neff et al., 1995; Pan et al., 1994; Telch and Linquist, 1984; Van Hasselt et al., 1985); (c) attitudes related to violence (Greenblatt, 1985; Ptacek, 1988; Stith and Farley, 1993; Straus et al., 1980; Sugarman and Frankel, 1996); (d) personality factors, such as hostility and aggressiveness (Barnett et al., 1991; Dutton et al., 1996; Hastings and Hamberger, 1988; Maiuro et al., 1988), (e) stressful life events (Barling and Rosenbaum, 1986; Cascardi and Vivian, 1995; Neff et al., 1995; Straus, et al., 1980); and (f) quality of the relationship (Julian and McKenry, 1993; Lloyd, 1990; Margolin et al., 1989; Murphy and O’Leary, 1989; O’Leary et al., 1994; Pan et al., 1994). Whereas no one of these variables emerges as a necessary or sufficient condition of husband-to-wife abuse, findings suggest that these variables, to greater and lesser degrees, contribute to the probability of wife abuse.