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The Battered Husband Syndrome

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This article examines the phenomenon of husband battering utilizing some historical data, comic strips as a reflection of popular values and the data derived from several empirical studies.

Husband abuse is not uncommon, although many tend to ignore it, dismiss it or treat it with "selective inattention." The reasons why men do not report their victimization and why they stay in an abusive situation are examined in depth. Some of the myths commonly held about men's place in the family, their attachment to their offspring and their ability to easily move in and out of relationships are exploded.

The article ends with a plea for a more comprehensive approach to study and treat *family* violence seeing it not as an isolated phenomenon but as another manifestation of a basically violent society.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS AND COMIC STRIPS

While the horrors of wife-beating are paraded before the public, and crisis line and shelters are being established, the other side of the coin—husband-beating—is still hidden under a cloak of secrecy. But is husband battering *really* an unknown phenomenon, or is it simply another example of selective inattention? Some insights into a possible answer for this question can be gained by an examination of humor which exaggerates and brings into public view many aspects of life too personal to be discussed in a non-joking context. For example, the popularity of domestic-relation humor such as mother-in-law jokes; the wife's lack of cooking skills; the husband's incompetence as a fix-it man; and sexual incompatibilities—the staple of many stand-up comics' routines—suggests that these problematic areas of marriage are commonly shared yet tabooed problems.

The charivari, a post renaissance custom, was a noisy demonstration intended to shame and humiliate wayward individuals in public. The target was any behavior considered to be a threat to the patriarchal community social order. Thus in France, a husband who allowed his wife to beat him was made to wear an outlandish outfit, ride backwards around the village on a donkey while holding onto the tail. Beaten husbands among the Britons were strapped to carts and "paraded ignominiously through the booing populace." The husband beater was also punished by riding backwards on a donkey and being forced to drink wine and wipe her mouth with the animals tail. The fate of these men in 18th century Paris was to kiss a large set of ribboned horns (Shorter, 1975).

The subject matter of comic strips, specifically those revolving around a domestic theme, is also revealing. A common theme is a caricature of husbands and wives in which the husband deviates from the ideal image of strong, self-assertive, and intelligent, and assumes the character traits which have been culturally ascribed to be feminine. The wife in these comics is justified in playing the dominant role and in chastising her erring husband, since he has not fulfilled his culturally prescribed roles. A contemporary example of this phenomenon is provided by Gelles' (1974: 78-79) interview of a wife who explained how she retaliated against a drunken husband who slapped her for no apparent reason:

> I know I was stronger than him, when he was drunk that is, so I gave him a good shove and kick—whatever I could kick—I didn't aim. And then he'd end up on the floor and I'd beat the daylights out of him.

Saenger's (1963) study of 20 consecutive editions of all comic strips appearing in the nine leading New York City newspapers during October 1950 provides additional insights. He found that 48 percent of the females and only 10 percent of the males in comic strips revolving around domestic relations exhibited mastery of all situations, while 19 percent of the males but only 4 percent of the females were pictured as helpless. He also noted that while husbands were the victims of hostility and attack in 63 percent of all conflict situations, wives were victims in only 39 percent. Furthermore while 10 percent of the males and 7 percent of the females initiate physical aggression acts, only one percent of the females, but 14 percent of the males were recipients of domestic physical aggression. Further analysis revealed that in 73 percent of the domestic strips the wives were more aggressive; in ten percent husband and wife were equal; and in only 17 percent of the strips were the husbands portrayed as being more aggressive than their wives.

Barcus (1963) in a survey of every comic strip appearing in March for the years 1943, 1953, 1958 in the bound files of Puck: The Comic Weekly and three Boston Newspapers, a sample representing most of the major nationally syndicated Sundies, found that domestic relations was a theme in 41 percent of the comics examined. These domestic relations are presented as caricatures reflecting a stereotype of husbands as fatter, balder, less virile, and of wives as taller and bigger than their husbands (Barcus, 1963). This is most poignantly exhibited in the domestic comic strip "Bringing Up Father." This domestic comic which originated in 1913, revolves around a newly-rich Irish immigrant (Jiggs) who prefers his former life-style of corn beef and cabbage and billiards, and who endures the physically violent attacks by his wife (Maggie) who is unsuccessfully attempting to emulate upper-class life styles.

The impact of comics is impressive. In one study covering a 12 year period, over 56 percent of both male and female readers ranked the category, comic strips, as "most frequently" read (Swanson, as cited in Robinson and White, 1963). The second ranking category, war, was listed by 35 percent of the respondents. Since a large portion of this survey occurred during World War II, it is surprising that the category "war" was a poor second to the

comics. Therefore, the portrayal of family life in comics not only reflects life styles but also is in a position to influence or reinforce family related behavior.

It is true that comics tend to be based on a distortion of reality. However, the consistent appearance of battered husbands in early court and community records both in Europe and the United States; the persistence of battered husbands as a dominant theme in comics; and the stability of the findings that husbands equal wives as victims of marital homicide—the most severe form of violence —reinforces our belief that husband battering is not a new phenomenon.

EMPIRICAL DATA ON BATTERED HUSBANDS

An examination of empirical data on wives' use of physical violence on their husbands suggests that husband-beating constitutes a sizeable proportion of marital violence.

We know, for example, that over three percent of 600 husbands in mandatory conciliation interviews listed physical abuse by their wife as a reason for the divorce action (Levinger, 1966). While this is far lower than the nearly 37 percent of wives who mentioned physical abuse, several factors should be noted. First, Levinger's study showed that women had nearly twice the number of total complaints as men. Therefore, unless one assumes that it is always the husband's fault when a marriage fails, it appears that women might be more comfortable voicing their complaints. A second, related factor is that the traditional role of husbands in a divorce action is to take blame for the failure. Thus, even if the husband desires the divorce, etiquette demands that he allow his wife to initiate the action. During a conciliatory interview it is reasonable then to expect the husband to be less ready to expose his wife's faults. Some support is provided for this position by examining the types of complaints commonly made by husbands, i.e. sexual incompatibility, and in-laws, both traditionally accepted male-oriented complaints. Finally the male in our society is under pressure to maintain a dominant position over a female (Balswick and Peek, 1971; Steinmetz, 1974). Thus given the psychological stress of recognizing the wife's physical dominance, it is unlikely that many men would be willing to admit their physical weakness to a third party.

Based on police records and a random sample of families, it was estimated that 7 percent of the wives and .6 percent of the husbands would be victims of severe physical abuse by their spouse (Steinmetz, 1977c). Further evidence for the existence of battered husbands is provided by a comparison of physical violence used by husbands and wives to resolve marital conflicts in five studies (see Table I).

Using two United States populations—a broadbased non-representative group and a random sample in New Castle DE—and a Canadian sample of college students, Steinmetz (1977c and b) found only small differences in the percentage of husbands and wives who resorted to throwing things, pushing or shoving, hitting with the hand, or hitting with an object. In fact the total violence scores, for these three studies, were very similar.

The data from the nationally representative sample (Straus et al., 1977),

Table I. Comparison of Physical Violence used by Husbands and Wives in Percent

	N	THROWING THINGS		PUSHING SHOVING		HITTING SLAPPING		KICKING		HIT WITH SOMETHING		THREAT-ENED KNIFE OR GUN		USED KNIFE OR GUN		USE OF ANY VIOLENCE	
		H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W
Gelles* (1974)	80	22	11	18	1	32	20	25	9	3	5	5	0	—	—	47	33
Steinmetz* (1977a)	54	39	37	31	32	20	20	—	—	10	10	—	—	2	0	47	43
Steinmetz* (1977b) Canada	52	21	21	17	13	13	13	—	—	10	12	—	—	—	—	23	21
Steinmetz* (1977c)	94	31	25	22	18	17	12	—	—	12	14	—	—	—	—	32	28
Straus, Gelles and Stein-metz**	2,143	3	5	11	8	5	5	2	3	2	3	.4	.6	.3	.2	12	12

* Incidents occurring throughout the duration of the marriage.

** Incidents occurring during 1975.

based on reports of violence that occurred during 1975, found wives to be slightly higher in almost all categories except pushing and shoving. The total violence scores, however were identical.

Only one study (Gelles, 1974) found husbands exceeding wives in the use of all types of violence except "hitting with something," a mode which de-emphasized physical strength. In this study, 47 percent of husbands had used physical violence on their wives, while only 33 percent of the wives had used violence on their husbands. However, half of the respondents were selected from the police blotter because of reported domestic violence or by the social service agency which selected families because it was suspected that violence might be occurring. This may explain why more wives than husbands were victims of physical violence in Gelles' study, since it is wives who report domestic violence to the police and seek help from social services and agencies.

While these data represent the percentage of husbands and wives who have used physical violence against a spouse, it does not tell us the frequency with which these acts occur. Surprisingly, the data suggest that not only the percentage of wives having used physical violence often exceeds that of the husbands, but that wives also exceed husbands in the frequency with which these acts occur. The average violence score of wives as compared with husbands were all higher in the Steinmetz studies: 4.04 vs. 3.52 (Steinmetz, 1977a); 7.82 vs. 6.00 (Steinmetz, 1977b); and 7.00 vs. 6.60 (Steinmetz, 1977c). The Straus' study found that wives committed an average of 10.3 acts of violence against their husbands during 1975, while husbands averaged only 8.8 acts against their wives. Only Gelles (1974) found husbands to exceed their wives in use of physically violent modes. He found that 11 percent of the husbands and 5 percent of the wives engaged in marital violence between two and six times a year, and 14 percent of the husbands and 6 percent of the wives used violence between once a month and daily. Wives exceed husbands in one category, however: eleven percent of the husbands, but 14 percent of the wives noted that they "seldom" (defined as between two and five times during the marriage) used physical violence against their spouse.

IGNORING THE BATTERED HUSBAND PHENOMENON

Given the data provided above, why has this area been ignored? First, the stigma attached to this topic, which is embarrassing for beaten wives, is doubly so for beaten husbands. The patriarchal concept of the husband's right to chastise his wife with a whip or rattan no bigger than his thumb is embedded in ancient law and was upheld by a Mississippi court in 1824, "in case of great emergency" and with "salutary restraints" (Bradley v. State, Walker, 158, Miss., 1824). This idea has provided some legal and social understanding for the woman who has suffered because her husband has gone beyond permissible bounds. Since there is no recognition of the woman's right to chastise her husband, there is little likelihood that society will recognize that the wife may go beyond that which is permissible. As one respondent, who had been terrorized by a knife-wielding spouse and had gone to work with deep fingernail gashes on his face related, "I never took the fights outside, I didn't want anyone to know. I told the guys at work that the kids did it with a toy." This fear of stigma also affects the

official statistics collected on husband-wife violence. Curtis (1974) reported that while violence by men against women was responsible for about 27 percent of the assaults and 17.5 percent of the homicides, violence by women against men accounted for 9 percent of the assaults and 16.4 percent of the homicides in his study. Thus, while women commit only about one-third as many assaults against men as men commit against women, the number of cross-sex homicides committed by the two groups are nearly identical. Wilt and Bannon (1976: 20) warn that caution should be applied when interpreting the Curtis' findings. They note that "non-fatal violence committed by women against men is less likely to be reported to the police than is violence by men against women; thus, women assaulters who come to the attention of the police are likely to be those who have produced a fatal result."

Also helping to camouflage the existence of husband-beating is the terminology used to describe it. This can be illustrated by referring to Gelles' monograph The Violent Home (1974). An examination of the entries in the subject index shows that, while there is one page each devoted to "wife-to-husband" and "husband-to-wife" violence, seven pages under the heading "wife-beating," two under "battered wife," yet no corresponding listing can be found for "husband-beating." However, Gelles' data provides ample evidence that many wives do, in fact, beat their husbands. In addition to the data from Gelles' study summarized in Table I, many quotes from his respondents support this. For example, one respondent noted, "He would just yell and yell—not really yell, just talk loudly, and I couldn't say anything because he kept talking, so I'd swing." (Gelles, 1974: 80)

Even though Gelles reports that one respondent, a retired cook, was often verbally and physically attacked by his jealous wife, and quotes another as saying, "My wife is very violent. It's a miracle that I didn't go out because she really put a hell of a dent in my head," these are not labeled as husband-beatings. Thus, although Gelles readily acknowledges that men are physically victimized by their wives, he does not provide a discussion of this phenomenon as a distinct parallel to wife-beating.

Why is so much attention given to wife-beating and so little to husband-beating? The answer partially is the relative lack of empirical data on the topic, the selective inattention both by the media and researchers, the greater severity of physical damage to women making their victimization more visible, and the reluctance of men to acknowledge abuse at the hand of women.

Why is there this difference in degree of physical damage—a difference which has tended to overshadow less violent attacks on women and most attacks on men? Popular culture has provided three different explanations. First, because of socialization, women are taught better impulse control and they stop aggressive behavior before any danger occurs. A second rationale suggests that women are more verbal than men, and therefore men resort more readily to physical means to support their dominant position. A third explanation focuses on the superior physical strength of men and their greater capability of causing more physical damage to their spouses than wives are capable of doing to their husbands.

In reality, the contention that woman are socialized for greater impulse controls appears to have little support, at least as far as marital fights are

concerned. The data provided in Table I, plus insights gained from the in-depth interviews, suggest that women are as likely to select physical violence to resolve marital conflicts as are men. Furthermore, child abusers are more likely to be women, and women throughout history have been the prime perpetrators of infanticide (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1973). While it is recognized that women spend more time with children and are usually the parent in a single parent home (which makes them prone to stress and strains resulting in child abuse); and that fathers in similar situations might abuse their children more severely, these findings indicate that women have the potential to commit acts of violence and that under certain circumstances they do carry out these acts.

Wolfgang (1958), in an investigation of homicides occurring between 1948 and 1952, found that spouses accounted for 18 percent of the incidents and that there were virtually no differences between the percent of husbands or wives who were offenders. According to FBI statistics, 15 percent of the homicides in 1975 were between husband and wife. In 7.8 percent of the cases the husbands were victims, while in 8.0 percent of the cases the victims were wives (Vital Statistics Reports, 1976).

The second point is also questionable. Although the myth of the verbally abusing, nagging woman is perpetuated in the media—mainly in comic form—the data do not support this myth. There appeared to be small random differences in the use of verbal violence in the families studied. Furthermore, Levinger (1966) in his study of divorce applicants found that wives were three times more likely to complain of verbal abuse than their husbands.

It appears that the last reason is more plausible. The data reported suggest that at least the intention of both men and women towards using physical violence in marital conflicts is equal. Identical percentages of men and women reported hitting or hitting with an object. Furthermore, data on homicide between spouses suggest that an almost equal number of wives kill their husbands as husbands kill wives (Wolfgang, 1958). Thus it appears that men and women might have equal potential towards violent marital interaction; initiate similar acts of violence; and, when differences of physical strength are equalized by weapons, commit similar amounts of spousal homicide. The major difference appears to be the male's ability to do more physical damage during nonhomicidal marital physical fights. When the wife slaps her husband, her lack of physical strength plus his ability to restrain her reduce the physical damage to a minimum. When the husband slaps his wife however, his strength plus her inability to restrain him result in considerably more damage.

An apt illustration is provided by a newspaper article describing the beating a physically weaker husband had received from his wife. This article noted that a wealthy, elderly New York banker had won a separation from his second wife who was 31 years his junior. During the 14-year marriage the husband had been bullied, according to the judge, by: "Hysteria, screaming tantrums, and ... various physical violence practiced on a man ... ill-equipped for fist-fights with a shrieking woman." The judge noted that the husband wore constant scars and bruises. Once his wife shredded his ear with her teeth; another time she blackened both his eyes; and on another

occasion, injured one of his eyes so badly that doctors feared it might be lost (Wilmington Evening Journal, April 21, 1976: 2).

WHY DO HUSBANDS STAY?

Gelles (1975: 659), asks the question, "Why would a woman who has been physically abused by her husband remain with him?" His analysis suggests that there are three major factors influencing wives' decision to leave abusing husbands. The less severe and the less frequent the violence; the more the wife experienced violence as a child; and the fewer the resources and power the wife has, the more likely she is to stay with her husband. These three factors were also found to influence the husbands' decision to stay.

Lower levels of violence were not likely to be considered a major concern. Only when the violence appeared to be affecting the children, rather than affecting the husband's physical safety, did the husband consider leaving. The background of violent wives is often characterized by violence and trauma. One violent wife, as a child, witnessed her own father force her mother, who was in the last stages of pregnancy, to walk home in the snow carrying bags of groceries. The father drove behind his wife in a car, bumping her with the car to keep her moving and beating her when she stopped or stumbled. Another wife felt responsible for her father's suicide which occurred when she was ten. Still another wife as a teenager slept with weapons under her pillows and lived in constant fear of brutal beatings from her alcoholic father.

The perceived availability of resources also affects the man's decision to leave. According to most studies (as well as popular knowledge), women remain because they feel that the children will be worse off if they leave. Not only does the wife often lack the economic resources to provide adequately for the children, but she feels that separation will have a more harmful effect on the children than would remaining with her abusive spouse. It is always assumed that the husband's greater economic resources could allow him to more easily leave a disruptive marital situation. Not only do men tend to have jobs which provide them with an adequate income, but they have greater access to credit and are not tied to the home because of the children. This perspective rests on erroneous sexist assumptions. Although males, as a group, have considerably more economic security, if the husband leaves the family, he is still responsible for a certain amount of economic support of the family in addition to the cost of a separate residence for himself. Thus the loss in standard of living is certainly a consideration for any husband who is contemplating a separation. Furthermore, it is assumed that because wives are "tied to their homes," they would be the ones who would most likely regret it if they moved. Until recently, custody was almost always awarded to mothers, thus mother remained in the family home while father sought a new residence. Interviews with abused men suggest that leaving the family home means leaving many hours of home improvements, family rooms, dens, workshops, in other words the comfortable and familiar, that which is not likely to be reconstructed in a small apartment.

Probably the most erroneous assumption, however, is that husbands decisions to leave would not be influenced by concerns over the children. Often the husband becomes the victim when he steps in to protect the children and becomes the target of abuse. These men are afraid to leave for fear that further violence would be directed towards the children. Recognizing that men are not likely to receive custody of the children, even in an era of increased recognition of their ability to care for them, they feel that by staying they are providing some protection for them. These men also express the idea that keeping the family together at all costs is best for the children. Another man, who lived in terror for two years and did not know when his wife would attack him with knives and other objects, an almost daily occurrence, remained because as an orphan, he knew what it was like to be without a father. Also he considered his wife to be attractive, personable, a good housekeeper and mother and, except for her violent attacks, a good wife. The wife, however, was insecure, dissatisfied with herself, had low self-esteem, and was uncomfortable with her low position as a secretary, and with a paycheck which was smaller than her husband's. She wanted a career and to be the economically dominant partner.

Why then, do these husbands not protect themselves? Several reasons evolve. The first, based on chivalry, considers any man who would stoop to hit a woman to be a bully. The second, usually based on experience, is a recognition of the severe damage which a man could do to a woman. In fact, several men expressed the fear that if they ever lost control, they could easily kill their wives. One husband noted that he hit his wife only once, "in retaliation with hands and fists, and smacked her in the mouth. She went flying across the room into the chest." Because he realized how badly he could hurt his wife, he continued to take the physical abuse. He noted, with hindsight, that probably she continued her abuse because she knew she could get away with it.

A final reason expressed by these beaten men is perhaps a self-serving one. The combination of crying out in pain during the beating and having the wife see the injuries, which often take several weeks to heal, raise the wife's levels of guilt which the husbands consider to be a form of punishment.

CONCLUSION

Although the data discussed do not represent, for the most part, a systematic investigation of representative samples of battered husbands, it is important to understand husband-beating because of the implications for social policies to help resolve the more global problem of family violence.

This paper is not intended to de-emphasize the importance of providing services to beaten wives, but to increase our awareness of the pervasiveness of all forms of family violence.

When the focus remains on the battered wife, the remedies often suggested revolve around support groups, crisis lines, and shelters for the woman and her children. This stance overlooks a basic condition of violence between spouses—a society which glorifies violence if done for the "right reasons:" the good of society, or that of one's own family. It is critical to shift at least some of the blame from individual family members to basic

socio-cultural conditions so that more resources will become available to help families and a greater emphasis will be placed on changing the attitudes and values of society.

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