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CHAPTER 4

Physical Assaults by Wives *A Major Social Problem*

Murray A. Straus

The first purpose of this chapter is to review research that shows that women initiate and carry out physical assaults on their partners as often as men do. A second purpose is to show that, despite the much lower probability of physical injury resulting from attacks by women, assaults by women are a serious social problem, just as it would be if men "only" slapped their wives or "only" slapped female fellow employees and produced no injury. One of the main reasons "minor" assaults by women are such an important problem is that they put women in danger of much more severe retaliation by men. They also help perpetuate the implicit cultural norms that make the marriage license a hitting license. It will be argued that, to end "wife beating," it is essential for women also to end the seemingly "harmless" pattern of slapping, kicking, or throwing things at male partners who persist in some outrageous behavior and "won't listen to reason."

The chapter focuses exclusively on physical assaults, even though they are not necessarily the most damaging type of abuse. One can hurt

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a partner deeply—even drive the person to suicide—without ever lifting a finger. Verbal aggression may be even more damaging than physical attacks (Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop, 1991). This chapter is concerned only with physical assaults because, with rare exception, the controversy has been about “violence,” that is, physical assaults, by wives.

Definition and Measurement of Assault

The National Crime Panel Report defines *assault* as “an unlawful physical attack by one person upon another” (U.S. Department of Justice, 1976). It is important to note that neither this definition nor the definition used for reporting assaults to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (1989) requires injury or bodily contact. Thus if a person is chased by someone attempting to hit the individual with a stick or to stab the person, and the victim escapes, the attack is still a felony-level crime—an “aggravated assault”—even though the victim was not touched. Nevertheless, in the real world, the occurrence of an injury makes a difference in what the police, prosecutors, and juries do. Consequently, injury will also be considered in this chapter.

Gender Differences in Spouse Assault and Homicide Rates

National Family Violence Surveys

The National Family Violence Surveys obtained data from nationally representative samples of 2,143 married and cohabiting couples in 1975 and 6,002 couples in 1985 (information on the sample and methodology is given in Gelles & Straus, 1988; Straus & Gelles, 1986, 1990). Previously published findings have shown that, in both surveys, the rate of wife-to-husband assault was about the same (actually slightly higher) than the husband-to-wife assault rate (Straus & Gelles, 1986, 1990). However, the seeming equality may occur because of a tendency by husbands to underreport their own assaults (Dutton, 1988; Edleson & Brygger, 1986; Jouriles & O’Leary, 1985; Stets & Straus, 1990; Szinovacz, 1983). To avoid the problem of male underreporting, the assault rates were recomputed for this chapter on the basis of information provided by the 2,994 women in the 1985 National Family Violence Survey. The resulting overall rate for assaults by wives is 124 per 1,000

couples, compared with 122 per 1,000 for assaults by husbands *as reported by wives*. This difference is not great enough to be statistically significant. Separate rates were also computed for minor and severe assaults. The rate of minor assaults by wives was 78 per 1,000 couples, and the rate of minor assaults by husbands was 72 per 1,000. The severe assault rate was 46 per 1,000 couples for assaults by wives and 50 per 1,000 for assaults by husbands. Neither difference is statistically significant. As these rates are based exclusively on information provided by women respondents, the near equality in assault rates cannot be attributed to a gender bias in reporting.

As pointed out elsewhere, female assault rates based on the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) can be misleading because the CTS does not measure the purpose of the violence, such as whether it is in self-defense, nor does it measure injuries resulting from assaults (Straus, 1977, 1980; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). That information must be obtained by additional questions, and the 1985 National Family Violence Survey included questions on who initiated violence and questions on injuries.

Injury adjusted rates. Stets and Straus (1990) and Brush (1990) provide data that can be used to adjust the rates to take into account whether the assault resulted in an injury. Stets and Straus found a rate of 3% for injury-producing assaults by men and 0.4% for injury-producing assaults by women. Somewhat lower injury rates were found by Brush for another large national sample—1.2% of injury-producing assaults by men and 0.2% for injury-producing assaults by women. An “injury adjusted” rate was computed using the higher of the two injury estimates. The resulting rate of injury-producing assaults by husbands is 3.7 per 1,000 ($122 \times .03 = 3.66$), and the rate of injury-producing assaults by wives is much lower—0.6 per 1,000 ($124 \times .004 = 0.49$). Thus the injury adjusted rate for assaults by men is six times greater than the rate of domestic assaults by women.

Although the injury adjusted rates correspond more closely to police and National Crime Victimization Survey statistics (see below), there are several disadvantages to rates based on injury (Straus, 1990b, pp. 79-83), two of which will be mentioned. One of the disadvantages is that the criterion of injury contradicts the new domestic assault legislation and new police policies. These statutes and policies premise restraining orders and encourage arrest on the basis of attacks. They do not require observable injury.

Another disadvantage of using injury as a criterion for domestic assault is that injury-based rates omit the 97% of assaults by husbands

at do not result in injury but that are nonetheless a serious social problem. Without an adjustment for injury, the National Family Violence Survey produces an estimate of more than 6 million women assaulted by a male partner each year, of which 1.8 million are "severe" assaults (Straus & Gelles, 1990). If the injury adjusted rate is used, the estimate is reduced to 188,000 assaulted women per year. The figure of 3 million seriously assaulted women every year has been used in any legislative hearings and countless feminist publications to indicate the prevalence of the problem. If that estimate had to be replaced by 188,000, it would understate the extent of the problem and could impede efforts to educate the public and secure funding for shelters and other services. Fortunately, that is not necessary. Both estimates can be used, because they highlight different aspects of the problem.

Other Surveys of Married and Dating Couples

Married and cohabiting couples. Although there may be exceptions that I missed, every study among the more than 30 describing some type of sample that is not self-selective (such as community random samples and samples of college student dating couples) has found a rate of assault by women on male partners that is about the same as the rate of assault by men on female partners. The space available for this chapter does not permit me to describe each of those studies, but they include research by respected scholars such as Scanzoni (1978) and Tyree and Malone (1991) and large-scale studies such as the Los Angeles Epidemiology Catchment Area study (Sorenson and Telles, 1991), the National Survey of Households and Families (Brush, 1990), and the survey conducted for the Kentucky Commission on Women (Schulman, 1979).

The Kentucky study also brings out a troublesome question of scientific ethics, because it is one of several in which the data on assaults by women were intentionally suppressed. The existence of those data became known only because Hornung, McCullough, and Sugimoto (1981) obtained the computer tape and found that, among the violent couples, 38% were attacks by women on men who, as reported by the women themselves, had not attacked them. Some of the other studies that found approximately equal rates are cited in Straus and Gelles (1990, pp. 95-105).

Dating couples. Sugarman and Hotaling (1989) summarize the results of 21 studies that reported gender differences in assault. They found

that the average assault rate was 329 per 1,000 for men and 393 per 1,000 for women. Sugarman and Hotaling comment that a "surprising finding . . . is the *higher* proportion of females than males who self-report having expressed violence in a dating relationship" (p. 8; emphasis added). Moreover, other studies published since their review further confirm the high rate of assault by women in dating relationships (see, e.g., Pirog-Good & Stets, 1989; Stets & Straus, 1990).

Samples of "battered women." Studies of residents in shelters for battered women are sometimes cited to show that it is only their male partners who are violent. However, these studies rarely obtain or report information on assaults by women, and when they do, they ask only about self-defense. Pagelow's (1981) questionnaire, for example, presents respondents with a list of "factors responsible for causing the battering," but the list does not include an attack by the woman, therefore precluding finding information on female-initiated assaults. One of the few exceptions is in the work of Walker (1984), who found that one out of four women in battering relationships had answered affirmatively that they had "used physical force to get something [they] wanted" (p. 174). Another is the study by Giles-Sims (1983) that found that in the year prior to coming to a shelter, 50% of the women reported assaulting their partners, and in the six months after leaving the shelter, 41.7% reported an assault against a spouse. These assaults could all have been in self-defense, but Giles-Sims's case study data suggest that this is not likely.

Government Crime Statistics

National Crime Victimization Survey. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is an annual study of approximately 60,000 households, conducted for the Department of Justice by the Bureau of the Census. Analysis of the NCVS for the period 1973-1975 by Gaquin (1977-1978) found an extremely low rate of marital violence—2.2 per 1,000 couples. By comparison, the 1985 National Family Violence Survey found a rate of 161 per 1,000, which is 73 times higher. The NCVS rate for assaults by husbands is 3.9 per 1,000; the rate is 0.3 for assaults by wives. Thus, according to the NCVS, the rate of domestic assaults by husbands is 13 times greater than the rate of assaults by wives.

The extremely low rates of assaults by both husbands and wives found by the NCVS may be accounted for by the fact that NCVS interviews were conducted with both partners present, and victims may have been reluctant to respond out of fear of further violence. Perhaps even more important, the NCVS is presented to respondents as a study of crime. The difficulty with a "crime survey" as the context for estimating rates of domestic assault is that most people think of being kicked by their partners as wrong, but not a "crime" in the legal sense. It takes relatively rare circumstances, such as an injury or an attack by a former spouse who "has no right to do that," for the attack to be perceived as a "crime" (Langan & Innes, 1986). This is probably why the NCVS produces such totally implausible statistics as a 75% injury rate (compared with an injury rate of less than 3% in the two surveys cited earlier) and more assaults by former partners than by current partners. This is because, in the context of a crime survey, people tend to report attacks only when they have been experienced as "real crimes," because they resulted in injury or were perpetrated by former partners.

Police calls. Data on calls for domestic assaults to the police are biased in ways that are similar to the bias of the National Crime Victimization Survey. As in the NCVS, at least 93% of the cases are missed (Kaufman Kantor & Straus, 1990), probably because there was no injury or threat of serious injury great enough to warrant calling the police. Because the cases for which police are called tend to involve injury or chronic severe assault, and because that tends to be a male pattern, assaults by women are rarely recorded by police. Another reason assaults by women are rare in police statistics is that many men are reluctant to admit that they cannot "handle" their wives. These artifacts produce a rate of assaults by men that is hugely greater than the rate of assaults by women. Dobash and Dobash (1979), for example, found that only 1% of intrafamily assault cases in two Scottish cities were assaults by wives.

Spouse Homicide Rates

Homicide rates published by the FBI show that only 14% of homicide offenders are women (calculated from Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1989, unnumbered table at bottom of p. 9). However, the percentages of female offenders vary tremendously according to the relationships between offenders and victims. Female-perpetrated homicides

of *strangers* occur at a rate that is less than a twentieth the male rate. The female share goes up somewhat for murders of *acquaintances*. As for murders of *family* members, women committed them at a rate that was almost half the rate of men in the period 1976-1979 and more than a third of the male rate during the period 1980-1984.

However, *family* includes all relatives, whereas the main focus of this chapter is couples. Two recent gender-specific estimates of the rates for partner homicide indicate that wives murder male partners at a rate that is 56% (Straus, 1986) and 62% (Browne & Williams, 1989) as great as the rate of partner homicides by husbands. This is far from equality, but it also indicates that, in partner relationships, even when the assaults are so extreme as to result in death, the rate for wives is extremely high, whereas, as noted above, for murders of strangers the female rate is only a twentieth of the male rate.

Self-Defense and Assaults by Wives

In previous work I have explained the high rate of attacks on spouses by wives as largely a *response* to or a defense against assault by the partner (Straus, 1977, 1980; Straus et al., 1980). However, new evidence raises questions about that interpretation.

Homicide

For lethal assaults by women, a number of studies suggest that a substantial proportion are self-defense, retaliation, or acts of desperation following years of brutal victimization (Browne, 1987; Browne & Williams, 1989; Jurik, 1989; Jurik & Gregware, 1989). However, Jurik (1989) and Jurik and Gregware's (1989) investigation of 24 cases in which women killed husbands or lovers found that the victim initiated use of physical force in 10 (40%) of the cases. Jurik and Gregware's Table 2 shows that only 5 out of the 24 homicides (21%) were in response to "prior abuse" or "threat of abuse/death." Mann's (1990) study of the circumstances surrounding partner homicides by wives shows that many women who murder their spouses are impulsive, violent, and have criminal records. Jurik (1989) and Jurik and Gregware (1989) also report that 60% of the women they studied had previous arrests. The widely cited study by Wolfgang (1958) refers to "victim-precipitated" homicides, but the case examples indicate that these homicides include cases of retaliation as well as self-defense.

Wife-only violence. Of the 495 couples in the 1985 National Family Violence Survey for whom one or more assaultive incidents were reported by a woman respondent, the husband was the only violent partner in 25.9% of the cases, the wife was the only one to be violent in 25.5% of the cases, and both were violent in 48.6% of the cases. Thus a minimum estimate of violence by wives that is *not* self-defense because the wife is the only one to have used violence in the past 12 months is 25%. Brush (1990) reports similar results for the couples in the National Survey of Families and Households.

Perhaps the real gender difference occurs in assaults that carry a greater risk of causing physical injury, such as punching, kicking, and attacks with weapons. This hypothesis was investigated using the 211 wives who reported one or more instances of a "severe" assault. The resulting proportions were similar: both, 35.2%; husband only, 35.2%; and wife only, 29.6%.

The findings just reported show that regardless of whether the analysis is based on all assaults or is focused on dangerous assaults, about as many women as men attacked spouses who had *not* hit them during the one-year referent period. This is inconsistent with the self-defense explanation for the high rate of domestic assault by women. However, it is possible that, among the couples where both assaulted, all the women were acting in self-defense. Even if that unlikely assumption were correct, it would still be true that 25-30% of violent marriages are violent solely because of attacks by the wife.

Initiation of attacks. The 1985 National Family Violence Survey asked respondents, "Let's talk about the last time you and your partner got into a physical fight and [the most severe act previously mentioned] happened. In that particular instance, who started the physical conflict, you or your partner?" According to the 446 wives involved in violent relationships, their partners struck the first blows in 42.3% of the cases, the women hit first in 53.1% of the cases, and the women could not remember or could not disentangle who hit first in the remaining 3.1% of the cases.

Similar results were obtained by five other studies. Bland and Orne's (1986) study of marital violence and psychiatric disorder in Canada found that wives initiated violence somewhat more often than did husbands. Gryl and Bird (1989) found that "respondents in violent dating relationships indicated that their partners initiated the violence 51% of the time; they initiated it 41% of the time; and both were equally

responsible 8% of the time." Saunders (1989) analyzed data on the sequence of events in the 1975 National Family Violence Survey and found that women respondents indicated that they struck the first blow in 40% of the cases. Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, and Christopher (1983) found that "in 48.7% . . . of the relationships, the respondent perceived that both partners were responsible for 'starting' the violence" (p. 472). A large-scale Canadian study found that women struck the first blow about as often as men. However, as in the case of the Kentucky survey mentioned earlier, the authors have not published the findings, perhaps because they are not "politically correct."

Is the High Rate of Assault by Wives Explainable as Self-Defense?

It is remarkable that every study that has investigated who initiates violence using methods that do not preclude the possibility of a wife beating, found that wives initiate violence in a large proportion of cases. However, caution is needed in interpreting these findings, for several reasons.

First, some respondents may have answered the question in terms of who began *the argument*, not who began *hitting*. Interviewers were instructed to rephrase the question in such cases. However, there may have been instances in which the misunderstanding of the question went unnoticed.

Second, if the wife hit first, that could still be in self-defense if her attack was in response to a situation that she defined as posing a threat of grave harm from which she could not otherwise escape (Browne, 1987; Jurik, 1989; Jurik & Gregware, 1989).

A third reason for caution is the limited data available in the National Family Violence Survey on the context of the assaults. Who initiates an assault and who is injured are important aspects of the contextual information needed for a full understanding of the gendered aspects of intrafamily assault, but they are not sufficient. For example, there may have been an escalation of assaults throughout the relationship, with the original attacks by the man. The fact that the most recent incident happened to be initiated by the female partner ignores the history and the context producing that act, which may be one of utter terror. This scenario is common in cases of women who kill abusive male partners. A battered woman may kill her partner when he is not attacking her, and thus may appear not to be acting in self-defense. As Browne (1987), Jurik (1989), and Jurik and Gregware (1989) show, the traditional criteria for self-defense use assumptions based on male

characteristics that ignore physical size and strength differences between men and women and ignore the economic dependency that locks some women into relationships in which they have legitimate grounds for fearing for their lives.

The scenario described above is often recounted by clients of shelters for battered women. However, it is hazardous to extrapolate from the situation of women in those extreme situations to the pattern of assaults that characterizes couples in the general population as represented in the National Family Violence Survey. This issue is discussed more fully later in this chapter, in the section on the representative sample fallacy. For the moment, let us assume that many of the assaults initiated by wives are in response to fear derived from a long prior history of victimization. Even if that is the case, it is a response that tends to elicit further assaults by the male partner (Bowker, 1983; Feld & Straus, 1989; Gelles & Straus, 1988, chap. 7; Straus, 1974).

In the light of these qualifications and cautions, the self-defense explanation of the near equality between husbands and wives in domestic assaults cannot be rejected. However, one can conclude that the research on who hit first does not support the hypothesis that assaults by wives are primarily acts of self-defense or retaliation.

Gender and Chronicity of Assault

Although the prevalence rate of assaults by wives is about the same as that for husbands, husbands may engage in more *repeated* attacks. This hypothesis was investigated by computing the mean number of assaults among couples for which at least one assault was reported by a female respondent. According to these 495 women, their partners averaged 7.2 assaults during the year, and they themselves averaged six assaults. Although the frequency of assault by husbands is greater than the frequency of assault by wives, the difference is just short of being statistically significant. If the analysis is restricted to the 165 cases of severe assault, the husbands averaged 6.1 and the wives 4.28 assaults, which is a 42% greater frequency of assault by husbands and is also just short of being statistically significant. If one disregards the tests of statistical significance, these comparisons support the hypothesized greater chronicity of violence by husbands. At the same time, the fact that the average number of assaults by husbands is higher should not obscure the fact that the violent *wives* carried out an average of six minor and five severe assaults per year, indicating a repetitive pattern by wives as well as by husbands.

The Clinical Fallacy and the Representative Sample Fallacy

The discrepancy between the findings from surveys of family problems and findings based on criminal justice system data or the experiences of women in shelters for battered women does not indicate that one set of statistics is correct and the other not. Both are correct. However, they apply to different groups of people and reflect different aspects of domestic assault. Most of the violence that is revealed by surveys of family problems is relatively minor and relatively infrequent, whereas most of the violence in official statistics is chronic and severe and involves injuries that need medical attention. These two types of violence probably have different etiologies and probably require different types of intervention. It is important not to use findings based on cases known to the police or shelters for battered women as the basis for deciding how to deal with the relatively minor and infrequent violence found in the population in general. That type of unwarranted generalization is often made; it is known as the clinical fallacy.

Representative community sample studies have the opposite problem, which can be called the representative sample fallacy (Straus, 1990b; see also Gelles, 1991). Community samples contain very few cases involving severe assaults every week or more often and injury. Men tend to be the predominant aggressors in this type of case, but representative sample studies cannot reveal that, because they include few if any such cases. Ironically, the types of cases that are not covered by community surveys are the most horrible cases and the ones that everyone wants to do something about. However, community surveys can tell us little about what to do about these extreme cases because the samples contain too few to analyze separately.

The controversy over assaults by women largely stems from survey researchers' assumptions that their findings on rates of spouse assault by men and women apply to cases known to the police and to shelters, and the similar unwarranted assumption by clinical researchers that the predominance of assaults by men applies to the population at large.

Both community sample data and clinical sample data are needed. Community sample data are essential for informing programs directed at the larger community, especially programs intended to prevent such cases in the first place or to prevent them from developing into "clinical cases." Conversely, it is essential to have research on clinical samples, such as those involved with the police or shelters for battered women, in order to have data that do apply to such cases and that therefore

provide a realistic basis for programs designed to aid the victims and to end the most serious type of domestic violence.

Context and Meaning

The number of assaults by itself, however, ignores the contexts, meanings, and consequences of these assaults. The fact that assaults by women produce far less injury is a critical difference. There are probably other important differences between men and women in assaults on partners. For example, a man may typically hit or threaten to hit to force some specific behavior on pain of injury, whereas a woman may typically slap a partner or pound on his chest as an expression of outrage or in frustration because of his having turned a deaf ear to repeated attempts to discuss some critical issue (Greenblat, 1983). Despite this presumed difference, both are uses of physical violence for coercion.

A meta-analysis of research on gender differences in aggression by Eagly and Steffen (1986) brings out a related difference in context and meaning. These researchers found no *overall* difference in aggression by men and women, but less aggression by women if the act would produce harm to the target. These and other differences in context, meaning, and motivation are important for understanding violence by women against partners, but they do not indicate the absence of assault by women. Nor do differences between men and women in the histories, meanings, objectives, and consequences of assaults refute the hypothesis discussed below: that assaults by wives help legitimate male violence. Only empirical research can resolve that issue.

Violence by Wives Increases the Probability of Wife Beating

There seems to be an implicit cultural norm permitting or encouraging minor assaults by wives in certain circumstances. Stark and McEvoy (1970) found about equal support for a wife hitting a husband as for a husband hitting a wife. Greenblat (1983) found that both men and women are more accepting of wives hitting husbands than of husbands hitting wives. Data from the National Family Violence Survey also show more public acceptance of a wife slapping a husband than of a husband slapping a wife. Greenblat suggests that this is because "female aggressors are far less likely to do physical harm"

(p. 247). These norms tolerating low-level violence by women are transmitted and learned in many ways. For example, even casual observation of the mass media suggests that just about every day, there are scenes depicting a man who makes an insulting or outrageous statement and an indignant woman who responds by "slapping the cad," thus presenting an implicit model of assault as a morally correct behavior to millions of women.

Let us assume that most of the assaults by wives fall into the "slap the cad" genre and are not intended to, and only rarely, cause physical injury. The danger to women is shown by studies that find that minor violence by wives increases the probability of severe assaults by husbands (Bowker, 1983; Feld & Straus, 1989; Gelles & Straus, 1988, pp. 146-156). Sometimes this is immediate and severe retaliation. Regardless of whether that occurs, however, a more indirect and probably more important effect may be that such morally correct slapping acts out and reinforces the traditional tolerance of assault in marriage. The moral justification of assault implicit when a woman slaps or throws something at a partner for doing something outrageous reinforces his moral justification for slapping her when she is doing something outrageous, or when she is obstinate, nasty, or "not listening to reason" as he sees it. To the extent that this is correct, one of the many steps needed in primary prevention of assaults on wives is for women to forsake even "harmless" physical attacks on male partners and children. Women must insist on nonviolence from their sisters, just as they rightfully insist on it from men.

It is painful to have to recognize the high rate of domestic assaults by women. Moreover, the statistics are likely to be used by misogynists and apologists for male violence. The problem is similar to that noted by Barbara Hart (1986) in the introduction to a book on lesbian battering: "[It] is painful. It challenges our dream of a lesbian utopia. It contradicts our belief in the inherent nonviolence of women. And the disclosure of violence by lesbians . . . may enhance the arsenal of homophobes. . . . Yet, if we are to free ourselves, we must free our sisters" (p. 10). My view of recognizing violence by wives is parallel to Hart's view on lesbian battering. It is painful, but to do otherwise obstructs a potentially important means of reducing assaults by husbands—raising the consciousness of women about the implicit norms that are reinforced by a ritualized slap for outrageous behavior on the part of their partners.

It follows from the above that efforts to prevent assaults by husbands must include attention to assaults by wives. Although this may seem like "victim blaming," there is an important difference. Recognizing

that assaults by wives are one of the many causes of wife beating does not justify such assaults. It is the responsibility of husbands as well as wives to refrain from physical attacks (including retaliation), at home as elsewhere, no matter what the provocation.

Conclusions

Ending assaults by wives needs to be added to efforts to prevent assaults on wives for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most fundamental reason is the intrinsic moral wrong of assaulting a spouse, as expressed in the fact that such assaults are criminal acts, even when no injury occurs. A second reason is the unintended validation of the traditional cultural norms tolerating a certain level of violence between spouses. A third reason is the danger of escalation when wives engage in "harmless" minor violence. Feld and Straus (1989) found that if the female partner also engaged in an assault, it increased the probability that assaults would persist or escalate in severity over the one-year period of their study, whereas if only one partner engaged in physical attacks, the probability of cessation increased. Finally, assault of a spouse "models" violence for children. This effect is as strong for assaults by wives as it is for assaults by husbands (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Straus, 1983, 1992a; Straus et al., 1980).

It should be emphasized that the preventive effect of reducing minor assaults by wives has not been proven by the evidence in this chapter. It is a plausible inference and a hypothesis for further research. Especially needed are studies to test the hypothesis that "harmless" assaults by wives strengthen the implicit moral justification for assaults by husbands. If the research confirms that hypothesis, it would indicate the need to add reduction of assaults by wives to efforts to end wife beating, including public service announcements, police arrest policy, and treatment programs for batterers. Such changes must be made with extreme care for a number of reasons, not the least of which is to avoid implying that violence by women justifies or excuses violence by their partners. Moreover, although women may assault their partners at approximately the same rate as men assault theirs, because of the greater physical, financial, and emotional injury suffered, women are the predominant victims (Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus et al., 1980). Consequently, first priority in services for victims and in prevention and control must continue to be directed toward assaults by husbands.

Response to Demie Kurz's Chapter

Chapter 5 of this volume, by Demie Kurz, is representative of a number of allegedly feminist criticisms of the research showing roughly equal rates of assault by wives and husbands. These critics argue that the family violence approach and the feminist approach are irreconcilable. On the contrary, what is irreconcilable are these critics' erroneous depiction of family violence research as ignoring gender and power and their narrow and erroneous depiction of feminism as a single causal factor theory. This response therefore applies to that literature as well as to the immediate example of Kurz's chapter. This literature misrepresents both family violence and feminist approaches. It also contains many factual errors.

How can so many errors occur and be repeated so often? Elsewhere, I discuss several possibilities, including the possibility that the errors are deliberate distortions intended to discredit the scientific findings by discrediting the researchers whose studies revealed the equal rates of assault (Straus, 1992b). In this response, I will show that the literature represented by Kurz's chapter also seems to be operating on the principle that an erroneous assertion becomes true if it is repeated often enough. Following are some examples.

Kurz is one of many who state or imply that family violence researchers ignore the fact that male violence results in more injury than does female violence. This is truly incredible, because that very point has been emphasized in every one of my books and papers on this issue since the 1970s.

Kurz implies that family violence researchers want to give priority to violence by women, whereas my publications over many years (some of which she cites) have consistently stated the opposite. To take the most recent example, my closing words in this chapter are that "first priority in services for victims and in prevention and control must continue to be directed toward assaults by husbands."

A truly amazing statement by Kurz is that I "misrepresent the nature of marriage as a partnership of equals." In fact, a central focus of my research since the early 1970s has been studies showing male dominance and its pernicious effects, including violence against women (Coleman & Straus, 1986; Kolb & Straus, 1974; Straus, 1973, 1976, 1994; Straus et al., 1980; Yllö & Straus, 1990).

Many of the issues for which Kurz and others contrast the "family violence" approach with the "feminist approach" are issues we agree are important contributions of the feminist approach. What is wrong

is presenting them as contradicting the approach of family violence researchers. Quite the opposite. A paper I presented in 1973 was the sociological work that first introduced most of the feminist approaches to assaults on women that Kurz presents (see Straus, 1976). Almost every time Kurz uses the phrase "feminists argue," it can be replaced by citations to publications in which "Straus argues." These feminist issues include institutionalized male power, cultural norms legitimating male violence against women, and economic inequality between men and women that locks women into violent marriages. These contributions were widely cited until I published "politically incorrect" data on violence by women and was therefore excommunicated from feminist ranks. However, I remain one of the faithful, and have never accepted the excommunication.

The only evidence in Kurz's chapter that seems to refute the 30 or more studies showing that women assault partners at about the same rate as men is from police records and the National Crime Victimization Survey. However, for the reasons I have described in this chapter, police and NCVS statistics are not valid as measures of the extent to which women assault their partners. The inappropriateness of using NCVS and police statistics for this purpose has been acknowledged by the Department of Justice (Langan & Innes, 1986), which is currently trying to redesign the NCVS to correct the problem.

As for the Conflict Tactics Scales, ostensibly feminist critiques of this instrument contain so many factual errors that the authors could not have examined the CTS firsthand. To take just three examples from errors in many of these "critiques": First, the CTS is said to measure only violence used to settle a conflict. On the contrary, the introductory instructions ask respondents to describe what happens "when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person, or just have spats or fights because they're in a bad mood or tired or for some other reason." Second, the results are questionable because men may underreport their own violence, but the statistics in this chapter are based on interviews with wives. Third, Kurz says the CTS ignores verbal abuse, but Verbal Aggression is one of the three scales in the CTS.

In addition to factual errors, there are conceptual errors. For example, it is claimed that the CTS is invalid "because the continuum of violence in the scales is so broad that it fails to discriminate among the different kinds of violence." Rather, it is the broad continuum that enables one to identify cases on the basis of the severity of the violence. Perhaps the most important conceptual error is the belief that the CTS is deficient because it does not measure the consequences of physical assault (such as physical and emotional injury) or the causes (such as

a desire to dominate). This is akin to thinking that a spelling test is inadequate because it does not measure why a child spells badly, or does not measure possible consequences of poor spelling, such as low self-esteem or low evaluations by employers. The concentration of the CTS on acts of physical assault is deliberate and is one of its strengths. Only by having separate measures of assaults, injuries, and context can one, for example, show that acts of violence by men result in more injury than when the same acts are committed by women (Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus, 1990a, 1990b).

The attacks on the CTS are examples of blaming the messenger for the bad news. Moreover, no matter what one thinks of the CTS, at least four studies that did *not* use the CTS also found roughly equal rates of violence by women.

Like all tests and scales, the CTS is not perfect. Nevertheless, numerous reviews by scholars who are not interested in blaming the messenger agree that the CTS is the best available instrument (see, e.g., reviews by Grotevant & Carlson, 1989; Hertzberger, 1991). Its use in many studies since 1973 has established its validity and reliability. No other scale meets this standard. New evidence on validity and reliability is published almost monthly by research scholars who are using the CTS in many countries. My own use of the CTS has produced strong support for several aspects of feminist theory. It is time for other feminist scholars to take advantage of this instrument to do likewise.

It is almost beyond belief that Kurz and certain other allegedly feminist critics can ignore or dismiss the many studies that have data on samples that are representative of the general public (compared with clinical samples) and that, without exception, find nearly equal rates of violence by women.

Perhaps even more serious is the implied excusing of assaults by women because they result from frustration and anger at being dominated. This is parallel to the excuses men give to justify hitting their wives, such as a woman's being unfaithful. Kurz also excuses the "slap the cad" type of violence by women as defensive behavior, even though the example in my chapter to which she refers does not imply a physical attack, or threat of such an attack, by a male partner.

In my opinion, major parts of Kurz's chapter and other similar critiques are not feminist critiques, but justifications of violence by women in the guise of feminism. This is a betrayal of the feminist ideal of a nonviolent world. In addition, excusing violence by women and denying overwhelming research evidence may have serious side effects. It may undermine the credibility of feminist scholarship and

contribute to a backlash that can also undermine progress toward the goal of equality between men and women.

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