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## A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF MARITAL ABUSE

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### ABSTRACT

A brief history of marital violence and statistics from recent studies are presented. Marital abuse data from six societies: United States; Canada; Finland; Israel, with city and Kibbutz sub-samples; Puerto Rico; and Belize (British Honduras) with sub-samples of Spanish speaking, Creoles and Caribs are compared. In general, similarities were found between political/civil profiles of violence and marital violence score within each society. The percentage of husbands and wives using abuse was also similar for each society. The major exception was Puerto Rico, where almost twice as many husbands were reported to have been violent. The percentage of husbands and wives who used violence did not necessarily predict the frequency of violence. Finland, with the highest percentage of violent spouses, had the lowest scores for severity and frequency. Israel, with the lowest percentage of husbands and wives using violence, produced the highest severity and frequency scores for those couples who were violent. This analysis is preliminary and questions for future examination are raised.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Early Accounts of Family Violence

Although marital violence has been portrayed as a major concern in the media, it is important to note that as an area for academic research, it has only been since the early 1960's that interest has been shown in this topic. This does not mean, however, that family violence is a recent phenomenon - a product of contemporary society. In fact, examination of some of the first written laws suggests that not only did violence between family members exist, but it was an institutionalized, acceptable way for those in a dominant or superior position to control those in a weaker, subordinate position. For example, some of the first written laws dating to approximately 2500 B.C. decreed that a woman who was verbally abusive to her husband was to have her name engraved in a brick which would then be used to knock her teeth out. In Greek literature, Euripides argued that "women should be silent, not argue with men, and should not speak first." Roman law justified the killing of a wife by her husband for reasons such as adultery, drinking wine or other inappropriate behavior.

In our own country, colonial law seemed to anticipate the need to protect women from batterings by their spouse. For example, an early Massachusetts law decreed that men and women must cohabit "peacefully." It was recognized that at this early period of settlement, women represented a very valuable resource that must be protected.

However, examples from diaries and courtroom records suggest that all spouses were not loving. One man in Plymouth colony was punished for abusing his wife by "Kiking her off from a stoole into the fier." And another man for "drawing his wife in a uncivil manner in the snow." Joan Miller was charged with "Beating and reviling her husband and egg-ing her children to healp her, bidding them to knock him in the head and wishing his victuals might choke him." (Demos, 1970)

By the 1800's our attitudes towards violence changed. For example, in 1824 a Mississippi court upheld the right of the husband to chastise his wife "in case of great emergency" and with "salutory restraints" (Bradley v. State, Walter, 158, Miss., 1824). This law was based on the ancient law which gave the husband the right to chastise his wife with a whip or rattan no bigger than his thumb. A North Carolina court in 1874 ruled that the husband had no right to chastise his wife under any circumstances; however, "if no permanent injury has been inflicted nor malice, cruelty or dangerous violence shown by the husband, it is better to draw the curtains, shut out the public gaze, and leave the parties to forget and forgive" (State v. Oliver, 70, NC, 60, 61, 1874).

Shortly thereafter, in 1885, the economic costs of incarcerating the wife beater and providing services to his wife and family, was a concern of the members of the Pennsylvania legislators. Following the lead set by the state of Maryland, they suggested that public whippings be used as alternative punishment (Steinmetz and Straus, 1974:45).

History has shown us that it was not only women who have endured abuse. 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. 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 assaultive wife was also punished by being made to ride backwards on a donkey and forced to drink and wipe her mouth with the animal's tail. The fate of these men in eighteenth century Paris was to kiss a large set of ribboned horns (Shorter, 1974).

Domestic relations was a theme in comics which presented caricatures of husbands as fat, bald, not very virile, and of wives as taller and bigger than their husbands. This is most vividly exhibited in the domestic strip "Bringing Up Father," which originated in 1913. The theme revolves around a nouveau-riche Irish immigrant (Jiggs), who prefers his former life style of corned beef, cabbage and billiards. When his behavior embarrasses his wife, Maggie, who is unsuccessfully attempting to emulate upper-class life styles, he is punished by physically violent attacks.

#### Current Statistics on Marital Abuse

A review of recent studies of marital abuse suggests several generalizations.

(1). Between one-half and three-fourths of all women have probably experienced physical violence from their partner at some time. Several studies have reported that between 50 to 60 percent of the couples experienced physical violence from a partner some time during the marriage or relationship (Gelles, 1974; Straus, Gelles, Steinmetz, 1980; Steinmetz 1977a). Based on a random sample of families living in New Castle County, Delaware, 60 percent experienced marital violence at some time during their marriage, and in 20 percent of the families, violence was a regular occurrence (Steinmetz 1977a). Straus (1974), in a sample of college students, found that 16 percent of the college freshmen saw their parents engage in marital violence. Gelles' (1974) in-depth

study of 80 families found that 55 percent of them experienced marital violence and 21 percent beat their spouses regularly. Data from a national study (Straus, et al., 1980), revealed that during a one-year period, one out of six couples had a violent episode. Furthermore, 5 percent experienced severe physical abuse and 4 percent, or four out of one hundred couples, faced a gun or knife wielded by a spouse.

However, most of these studies surveyed intact couples and confined their questions to interaction with the current mate. Currently approximately 20/1000 married men and women divorce each year and about 2/3 (65.5) of these divorced individuals eventually remarry (Carter and Glick, 1976). If the one-third of the women seeking a divorce in Levinger's (1966) sample who cited physical abuse as the reason for dissolving the relationship are representative of divorcees, then studies that ignore marital interaction with a previous spouse greatly underestimate the total amount of violence between spouses.

In a five-study comparison of husband and wife marital violence (Steinmetz, 1977-78), 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 exceeded 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.

(2). However, when the most severe levels of domestic violence were studied, it becomes clear that women are the most critically victimized. Data based on police records and a random sample of families provide estimates that 7 percent of the wives, about 3 1/2 million women, and 0.6 percent of the husbands, over 1/4 million men, are the victims of severe physical abuse by their spouses (Steinmetz, 1977-78).

(3). For a large number of women, about 1 out of 5, the abuse is not an isolated incident, but occurs repeatedly (Straus, et al., 1980; Walker, 1979); and for 1 out of 15 to 20 women, severe physical battering occurs (Gelles, 1974; Kentucky, 1979; Steinmetz, 1980b). For about 1,700 women each year, the violence results in death (Steinmetz, 1978). Furthermore, these patterns of abuse continue throughout the relationship (Straus, et al., 1980; Steinmetz, 1977a).

(4). Data show abuse is not limited by geographic area, racial, ethnic, or religious background or income levels, though there are differences in its frequency (Straus, et al., 1980; Steinmetz, 1978; 1980a). Based on a volunteer sample of 400 battered women, Walker(1979) found that about one third of the women were professional women.

Recent reports from women in shelters suggests that the higher the woman's social class the more difficult is the decision to leave the marriage. Counselors in battered-women shelters often remark that for the welfare mother, it may only mean sending the welfare check to another address.

With increasingly higher social status, with the fringe benefits of greater income, status, community recognition, etc., the decision to leave becomes much more difficult. Therefore, even if the battered wife should have her own resources, e.g., job, savings, and close-kin network, to enable her to leave the marriage, the middle or upper-class women still show tremendous resistance to leaving (Walker, 1979). The resource theory which postulates less tolerance of violence when the women possess greater resources and therefore greater options, ignores the overpowering effect of psychological dependency and fear of social consequences, which trap women in violent homes (Steinmetz, 1979; 1980b).

## A CROSS-CULTURAL EXAMINATION OF MARITAL ABUSE

If the media are accurately portraying society, one would have to admit that we live in a society filled with violence. Violence in the streets is increasing, violence in our schools is increasing, and violence in the family appears to be increasing. One cannot help but wonder if the methods family members use to resolve family conflict are somehow reflecting the general attitudes of the society towards the use of physical aggression to resolve other social problems.

This becomes a "chicken and the egg" problem. Does society influence individual behavior, or is the individual the constructor of society? Although the starting point might be a psychological perspective which sees man's natural aggression as a determinant of his ability to survive (Tiger, 1969), the perspective of this researcher leans towards the social-cultural influences, i.e., the influence of the social setting on the learning of aggressive behavior.

Violence has characterized American society from the beginning; was instrumental in westward expansion; and has been used consistently for controlling even peaceful dissenters (Hofstader and Wallace, 1970). There has been no period in the history of the United States in which some segment of the population—ethnic or geographic—has not experienced severe conflict and associated violence (Steinmetz, 1973). The use of physical force to suppress conflict and the general societal sanctioning of these acts can be seen in more recent events such as the Kent State shooting, the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention and the recent Busing programs aimed at desegregating public schools. It is not surprising that the United States ranks among the highest of all Western countries in violent crime (Gurr and Bishop, 1974; See also Table I).

Given the relatively high levels of aggression within the family and the social sanctioning of physical force to resolve conflicts, it is understandable that family members compose the single largest group of homicide victims (Wolfgang, 1958). In the United States, the use of physical force has a long tradition. Early 17th century laws gave the father the right to put to death unruly children. The Great Law of Chester, 1682, modified in 1700 provided that a disrespectful child over 16 was to publicly receive 31 lashes well laid on and be imprisoned, while a servant received only imprisonment. Furthermore, until recently, some states (e.g., Texas) considered a man who discovered his wife in a compromising situation to be justified in killing her.

Although most individuals would not approve of killing one's spouse, between one-fourth and one-fifth of a large representative sample surveyed did approve of slapping a spouse under certain conditions (Stark and McEvoy, 1970).

Aggressive family interaction in the United States appears to be quite different from that which is found in a country such as Japan, where physical punishment is not sanctioned, and child abuse seems to be relatively uncommon (Goode, 1971), or in Sweden which recently passed laws prohibiting the spanking of children. If there are social/cultural factors which influence levels of aggression, then it would appear that one could change these factors and effect a reduction of aggression. For example, a change in ideology could effect such a change. In pre-liberation China, physical abuse between husband and wife; mother-in-law and daughter; parents and child; and the landlord and peasant was common. Oppression of the weak and less powerful had a long tradition in Chinese culture, and this oppression fostered physical abuse. However, the equalitarian ideology of the People's Republic of China does not support the use of physical force to resolve interpersonal conflict; and as a result, physical punishment is rare and child abuse and wife beating is unheard of (Sidel, 1972).

Although caution must be expressed in the linking of societal levels of aggression to interpersonal and familial levels of aggression, there is both theoretical and empirical support for this position. Langman (1973) found that the child rearing methods parents used and the amount of interpersonal aggression considered tolerable was related to the societal level of aggression considered appropriate in the culture, an observation which has been supported in the anthropological literature (e.g., Whiting, 1965; Mead, 1935).

In a study of playground behavior, Bellak and Antell (1974) found that the aggressive treatment of a child by his parents was correlated with the aggressiveness displayed by the child. The authors found that levels of both parent and child aggression was considerably higher in Frankfurt, Germany than in Florence, Italy or Copenhagen, Denmark. The rates for suicide, and homicide, considered by Bellak and Antell to be additional indications of personal aggression, were also much higher in Germany. DeMause (1974:42) reported that 80% of German parents admit to beating their children and 35% do so with canes. A recent German poll showed that up to 60% of the parents interviewed believed in beating (not slapping or spanking) their children (Torgerson, 1973 as cited by Bellak and Antell, 1974).

Studies based on the data in the Human Relations Area files are also revealing. The incidence of wife-beating in 71 primitive societies was positively correlated with invidious displays of wealth, pursuit of military glory, bellicosity, institutionalized boasting, exhibitionistic dancing, and sensitivity to insults (Slater and Slater, 1965). These descriptions sound curiously similar to the macho male's attempts to dominate which are often linked to wife abuse in the United States.

Lester (1980), also studying primitive cultures, found that wife-beating was more common in societies characterized by high divorce rates and societies in which women were rated as inferior. Societies which experienced not only high rates of drunkenness, but also high rates of alcohol related aggression also had higher rates of wife beating.

As noted earlier, caution must be applied in attempting to relate measures of societal violence, especially measures based on data collected during earlier time periods. However, four such measures are presented because of the similarity to the rankings of marital abuse within the six countries (see Table I).

## METHODOLOGY

A brief structured questionnaire was administered to students in the six countries. The United States sample (N=94) collected in 1972, is a broad based, non-random sample collected by students at a mid atlantic university, as part of a course activity. The sample is predominantly a university student sample.

The Canadian sample (N=52) was administered by a colleague to students at a large urban English-speaking Canadian university in 1974.

The Belize sample (N=231) was obtained by a student at Lincoln University when she returned home to Belize during Christmas vacation. She administered the questionnaire to students in the 6th form from several ethnic groups: Spanish speaking Maya and native Indians; Creoles of African-European descent; and Caribs, African-Carib Indians brought in as laborers and viewed as lower class.

The above questionnaires were administered in English to an English speaking population. The questionnaire used in Finland was translated by a Finnish graduate student and administered to university students by a colleague. The open-ended responses were then translated into English by an American Field Service student from Finland who was spending a year in Delaware.

TABLE I

Comparison of Political Violence Profiles with Marital Violence Scores

		HIBBS (1956-67)		FEIRERABEND et al (1948-65)		GURR (1961-65)		GURR & BISHOP (1950-1960)		MARITAL VIOLENCE**	
		Internal Mar		Score		Rank		Rank		Rank	
Collective	Score	Finland	1.61	Finland	0	Finland	98	Canada	68	Finland	1
Protest	Score	Puerto Rico	2.64	Israel	8	Puerto Rico	93	Finland	67	Puerto Rico	2
	Score	Canada	3.74	Israel	10	Canada	80	Puerto Rico	49	Belize	3
	Score	Israel	4.26	Canada	97	U.S.	41	U.S.	24	U.S.	4
	Score	U.S.	7.12	U.S.	109	Israel	21	Israel	17	Canada	5
	Score	U.S.	6.45				20			Israel	6

scores ranged from low of 0 (nine countries) to a high of U.S. with a score 7.12

score ranged from a low of 0 (15 countries) to S. Vietnam, which scores 11.17

scores range from a low of 0 to a high of 190 ranking of most violent = 1 to least violent = 114

a low number represents level of violence ranks based on structural violence and physical violence measures  
1 = lowest violence score; 6 = highest violence score

\*Data not available for Belize  
Data available for Guatemala, which shows numerous similarities and continued boundary disputes is noted by an asterisk to give some idea where British Honduras might fall.  
\*\* Rankings are based on the average of husbands' and wives' mean frequency scores.

The Puerto Rican University sample was obtained by a University of Delaware graduate student doing advanced work in bilingual Education at the University of Puerto Rico in 1978. The translation was checked by Spanish speaking colleagues both at the University of Delaware and Puerto Rico to assure accuracy of translation and equivalency of concepts.

The Israeli data was provided by the Szold Institute. They translated the questionnaire, selected the sample, administered the questionnaire and supplied the IBM cards and code book. Conceptual equivalency was a problem when translating the questionnaire into Hebrew. It was necessary to utilize six response categories for frequency instead of the five categories (never, almost never, sometimes, almost always, always) used in the other samples. These responses were then recoded to reflect the five categories used in the other samples.

## RESULTS

While these data must be considered preliminary, several factors of interest need to be noted. First, the percentage of husbands and wives who use violence apparently does not predict the severity and frequency of the violent acts (see Table II). Finland, in which over 60% of husbands and wives were reported to have used violence, had the lowest mean frequency scores. On the other hand, the Kibbutz sample from the Israeli data had the fewest number of husbands and wives using violence, but those who did use violence were extremely violent.

In each society, the percentage of husbands who used violence was similar to the percentage of violent wives. The major exception was Puerto Rico, in which twice as many husbands used physical violence to resolve marital conflicts as did the wives.

Wives who used violence, however, tended to use greater amounts. For example, although twice as many husbands in Puerto Rico used violence than did the wives, the frequency scores of wives were greater ( $X = 5.8$  vs  $6.60$ ). In the Kibbutz sample, almost equal percentages of husbands and wives used each type of violence. However, those wives who resorted to violence used considerably more than did the husbands ( $X = 12.56$  vs  $9.91$ ).

The data suggest other interesting questions. Whiting and Whiting (1953) found less wife beating in societies which lived in extended family forms; thus, the levels of violence in the Kibbutz sample as compared with nuclear family (city) sample were surprising. However, Demos (1970) notes that to survive the cramped living quarters, early colonists went to great length to avoid family conflict. They apparently vented their hostilities on neighbors, since conflicts between neighbors were extremely high. Is it possible that preserving the community tranquility is of extreme importance and therefore, a Kibbutz family keeps the conflicts within the family in order to preserve the more important communal tranquility?

We know that when economic conditions deteriorate domestic violence increases. Could the rapid inflation being experienced during the last decade, as well as increased Middle East tension and border conflicts in Israel, explain their relatively high levels of marital violence, which is not entirely consistent with their profile of societal violence?

The United States has the highest levels of societal violence of the societies studied; yet the marital violence scores place U. S. families in the middle of the group. The numbers of families reported to have used violence, as well as the mean frequency scores are considerably lower for this sample than others (Gelles, 1974; Steinmetz, 1977a; Straus, et al, 1980). In these studies nearly sixty percent of the families reported using physical



Table II

## Cross Cultural Comparisons of Marital Violence

COUNTRY	N	THROWING THINGS		PUSHING SHOWING		HITTING SLAPPING		HIT WITH SOMETHING		USE OF ANY VIOLENCE		MEAN FREQUENCY	
		H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W
Finland	44	20	23	18	14	16	14	9	9	61	64	2.19	2.18
Puerto Rico	82	28	16	22	11	25	11	22	11	49	25	5.78	6.60
British Honduras	231*	24	21	25	23	23	22	19	18	39	38	6.83	6.38
Spanish Speaking	103	23	22	27	26	25	20	20	19	40	39	5.85	5.73
Creole	79	24	21	19	17	22	18	15	15	34	29	7.78	7.17
Carib.	37	31	30	30	27	24	27	22	19	51	54	7.37	6.20
U.S.A.	94	31	25	22	18	17	12	12	14	32	28	6.60	7.00
Canada	52	21	21	17	13	13	13	10	12	23	21	6.00	7.80
Israel	127	14	14	13	12	15	14	13	13	22	20	8.42	8.65
Kibbutz	63	16	14	16	14	17	16	14	14	21	16	9.91	12.56
City	64	13	13	11	9	13	13	13	11	22	20	7.59	7.38

\*Contains 12 cases additional which were mixed families

violence and one, (Straus, et al 1980) also reported mean violence scores of 8.8 for husbands and 10.3 for wives. However, these data were collected from husbands and wives, not their children. Is it possible that U. S. children are less aware of their parents violent interaction than children in other countries, or could we expect the levels for other societies to be even higher if their parents had reported the information?

The final point to be noted is the very consistently low ranking on all measures of societal violence assigned to Finland, yet the high percentage of both husbands and wives (over 60%) who used marital violence. Of further interest is the extremely low frequency of violence used by each of these couples. Is the use of low levels of violence more acceptable in Finland, or is there less of an attempt to shield negative family interaction from children?

### CONCLUSION

This paper raises more questions than it answers. The goal, however, is to provide a preliminary analysis of comparative data from a number of societies (North America, Latin America, Caribbean, Scandinavian, Middle Eastern) to see if the phenomenon of marital abuse is prevalent in different geocultural societies representing different levels of industrial development, and different political philosophies. We also need to posit whether the same variables, economic conditions, substance abuse, unwanted/unplanned pregnancies, a history of violence, and inadequate education have the same effects on marital violence in these other cultures as they do in the United States. These answers will have to await further analysis.

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