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TOLERANCE REVISITED: THE CASE OF SPOUSAL FORCE

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This work employs survey data to examine the specific social conditions that influence tolerance for the use of force against wives. The findings indicate that respondents have a very negative view of such force in all contexts but one: A husband's use of force is viewed as appropriate behavior when the wife's precipitating behavior poses a threat to the family. These results are contrasted with earlier work on parental force which documented a certain ambivalence regarding parents hitting children. The paper concludes by arguing that a distinction between perceptual and behavioral tolerance must be made in order to further advance the study of tolerance. The implications for relevant social policy are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades there has been a growing recognition of domestic violence as a major social problem in the United States. In the mid 1980s, a Presidential Task Force was established to study family violence. Conducting numerous public hearings, the Task Force heard testimony from hundreds of witnesses about the nature and extent of the problem of home violence. With the start of its latest term, Congress has renewed its commitment to devise federal legislation for combating domestic violence. And in January 1993, efforts to direct attention to domestic violence culminated in a nation-wide campaign to have a major television network supplement its coverage of the Super Bowl with public service announcements about the prevalence of domestic violence. Over the course of this decade, many recommendations for combatting domestic violence have been offered. But one — the reduction of current tolerance for domestic violence — continually emerges. The Presidential Task Force on Family Violence offered the following:

Overarching all of these specific steps is the one fundamental, indispensable step to deter and prevent family violence: The public must become aware of the nature of the problem and its obligations in combatting it . . . until there is a broad, clear signal that family violence is condemned by the community, abusers will continue to ignore the reality of their crimes and victims will continue to blame themselves. (Attorney General's Task Force Report 1984, p.7).

The Task Force's focus on tolerance is not surprising. Tolerance is thought by some to be the most common response of aggrieved people everywhere (Baumgartner 1984; Black 1987). In effect, the Task Force recognizes tolerance as a form of informal social control that, when present, hinders or impedes the use of formal social control mechanisms. Task Force policy recommendations imply that decreasing tolerance for

family violence will lead to an increase in reporting by the community at large as well as in arrests and convictions by the criminal justice system.

Treating tolerance as an important mediating variable for the social control of domestic violence seems logical. Yet, the Task Force's call for altering tolerance levels is premature. There is little empirical evidence to support the Task Force presumption of the pivotal role of tolerance in the formal control of domestic violence. Despite its *apparent* mediating role in the support of violence, tolerance has received only limited research attention within the domestic violence literature. Indeed, in identifying research priorities for the coming decade, Finkelhor, Hotaling and Yllo (1988) cited tolerance as an important issue in the family violence research agenda. Before making tolerance the focus of social policy, a better understanding of the dynamics of tolerance is needed. This present research was undertaken with such increased understanding as its goal.

ANALYZING TOLERANCE

Many of the studies of tolerance to date focus on the relationship between tolerance and the background characteristics of the social audience (Owens and Straus 1975; Garrett and Rossi 1978; Giovannoni and Becerra 1979; Greenblat 1985; Ruane 1992). For example Greenblat (1985) has found that gender, sex-role orientation and age are strongly associated with tolerance of a husband slapping and/or beating his wife (males, traditionalists and younger respondents were found to be more tolerant). Others have found that tolerance for parental force varies by the audience's race (Garrett and Rossi 1978), by their sex (Garrett and Rossi 1978; Finkelhor and Redfield 1982), or by the audience's professional training (Giovannoni and Becerra 1979). While this focus on audience attributes is important for offering a balance to the often actor-dominated labeling research, a full understanding of tolerance requires more than this. Tolerance decisions are not made in a vacuum. To achieve a more thorough understanding of tolerance, more attention must be directed at analyzing the social setting and circumstances that surround the tolerance decision. This work pursues just such a contextual analysis of tolerance. This strategy should help illuminate the kind of situational factors which influence audience tolerance decisions.

PERCEPTUAL AND BEHAVIORAL DEFINITIONS OF TOLERANCE

In general, two approaches to defining tolerance can be identified in the pertinent literature: perceptual and behavioral definitions. Perceptual definitions stress the *evaluative* dimension of tolerance: tolerance is the failure to recognize or label behaviors as wrong. Behavioral definitions stress the social reaction or response dimension of tolerance: tolerance is indicated by the failure to take action against a grievance (Baumgartner 1984; Black 1987).

This work employs a perceptual definition of tolerance and it does so for a very basic reason. Behavioral definitions presuppose that the audience *recognizes* forceful behaviors as deviant but chooses not to act. This is a problematic assumption, especially in the area of family violence. Based on the testimony gathered by the Attorney General's Task Force, much of the non-reaction to family violence is due to the fact that victims, witnesses and legal notables alike often do not *view* the force as suffi-

ciently wrong or criminal to merit formal social control. It is premature, then, to study the behavioral dimensions of tolerance without first investigating the stigmatization aspects of tolerance; that is, the process by which behaviors are perceived or defined as wrong, deviant, or criminal. In this work, then, tolerance is defined as a failure to recognize or label instances of domestic force as wrong. This definition allows tolerance to be investigated at its most preliminary stage, the stigmatization stage.

METHOD

The respondents, 313 undergraduate students enrolled at four northeastern colleges, were administered questionnaires in their introductory level social science classes. The limitation of a college sample is acknowledged; perhaps the most crucial weakness is the respondents' lack of critical life experiences. Given their age and life course placement, college students are more likely to identify with spousal violence via the role of third party observers rather than perpetrators. Lack of marriage experiences may result in naive tolerance decisions. Still, despite these limitations, the sample may nonetheless be sufficient for an analysis of the stigmatization process. First, if analysts of socialization are correct in asserting that children model adult practices (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980; Myers 1987), college students' tolerance decisions may not be all that different from those of an older, more experienced group. Furthermore, while only a few of our respondents were married, it would be foolish to think that the respondents lacked any first hand experience with "coupling" behaviors or with interpersonal violence. There is a growing recognition of the violent nature of much adolescent and young adult interaction (Hills 1980; Barlow 1987; Gelles 1990). If we consider the various demographic profiles of abusive individuals offered in the literature (Livingston 1992), young adults make a very relevant sample for tolerance research.

The behavioral referent for this research concerns the use of force by husbands against wives. (For a comparable analysis of the use of force by parents against children, see Ruane 1993.) The level of force selected for analysis was slapping (slapping was selected in order to focus attention on a typical form of physical violence). The social context of tolerance is explored using 25 different scenarios where a wife's behavior is met with force by her husband. The circumstances are informed by the domestic violence literature which identifies such incidents as characteristic of violent interactions (Levy and Langley 1977; Pizzey 1977; Straus et al. 1980; Kadushin and Martin 1981; Walker 1984). The scenarios reflect various degrees of force-provoking behaviors. In some instances, the provocations were deliberate (the wife threatens to break the husband's TV). In other instances the provocations were accidental (the wife is careless and breaks the husband's camera). Some provocations were severe (the wife threatens the husband with a knife); others were mild (the wife spends two hours dressing for a party). And, in some instances, the use of force was the result of the wife's loss of control (the wife is screaming hysterically). In other instances the force resulted from the husband's loss of control (the husband comes home drunk). For each circumstance, respondents were asked to judge the wrongness of the use of force using a scale from 0 to 10 (with 0 indicating force as "not at all wrong" and 10 indicating force as "extremely wrong"). A full listing of all provocative scenarios is found in Table 1.

TABLE 1

PROVOCATIVE SCENARIOS AND THEIR AVERAGE WRONGNESS RATINGS

How wrong is it for a husband to slap his wife when:
(0= not at all wrong; 10= extremely wrong)

	Average Wrongness Rating:	Percent saying "extremely wrong"	Percent saying "not at all wrong"
1. she is threatening him with a knife	2.17	7	52
2. he catches her in bed with another man	4.11	18	36
3. she is beating their child	4.41	16	16
4. she is screaming hysterically	5.23	18	15
5. he learns she has been having an affair with another man	5.28	23	21
6. in an argument, she hits him first	6.05	26	11
7. she spends an entire evening at a party flirting with other men	6.60	39	12
8. in an argument, she refers to his mother as an "old bitch"	7.16	42	7
9. she comes home drunk	7.51	50	6
10. in anger, she deliberately breaks his camera	7.62	46	3
11. she insults him in public	7.97	54	4
12. in frustration, she deliberately destroys the birthday present he gave her	8.01	53	2
13. she's run up a huge bill buying things they don't need	8.38	61	3
14. she threatens to break the TV to stop him from watching sports	8.57	61	2
15. she's a nag and has been nagging him all day	8.65	65	1
16. she won't listen to reason	8.72	61	1
17. she goes out with a friend when he's told her not to	8.80	66	2
18. she hasn't cleaned the house all month	9.01	72	2
19. she won't pay attention to what he's saying	9.16	71	.6
20. she doesn't have dinner ready when he comes home from work, though she's been home all day	9.31	78	.6
21. he's furious at her and wants to show how angry he is	9.32	79	.3
22. she has broken his camera by being careless	9.42	84	.6
23. he comes home drunk	9.56	90	1
24. he has great problems at work and is very frustrated	9.59	87	1
25. she has taken 2 hours getting dressed for a party, making them late	9.62	87	.3

DATA AND DISCUSSION

Column 1 of Table 1 lists the wrongness ratings for the use of force in each of the 25 scenarios. In reviewing these ratings, the overall negative evaluation of husband force is clear. While the average wrongness ratings range from a low score of 2.17 to a high score of 9.62, in most instances respondents were harsh in their reactions to husbands slapping wives ($\bar{X} = 7.61$). Indeed, for fifteen of the 25 scenarios, a majority of the respondents gave the highest wrongness rating possible (a score of ten) to husband's use of force. There was only one instance where a slight majority of respondents were willing to suspend their negative judgments about husband force: 52% of respondents thought it was not at all wrong for a husband to slap a wife when she was threatening him with a knife (see column three of Table 1).

In contrast to previous work on parental force (Ruane 1993), responses to wife abuse are definitive rather than ambivalent. For husband force, equivocal reactions are more the exception than the rule: fully 18 of the 25 scenarios had average wrongness scores above a 7.0 rating, 14 were above 8.0 and 8 scenarios had wrongness ratings above 9.0. Clearly, the respondents condemned husbands slapping wives under most of the scenarios offered.

VARIATIONS IN UNDERSTANDING FORCE

The following five scenarios produced the lowest disapproval ratings ($\bar{X} = 4.2$). Respondents' tolerance for husband force was greatest when:

- the wife is threatening the husband with a knife
- the husband catches her in bed with another man
- the wife is beating their child
- the wife is screaming hysterically
- the husband learns she has been having an affair

These scenarios provide some insight into the kinds of conditions where husband force is likely to be understood or legitimated. They indicate that a husband's use of force is judged less harshly if it counteracts behaviors that pose a threat to either the marriage itself or to family members. Yet, even when dealing with such drastic circumstances, it is noteworthy that an understanding stance was not true for all respondents: for most of these items, close to one-fifth of the respondents were willing to call such force extremely wrong (see column 2 of Table 1).

In contrast to these legitimating circumstances, consider the following five scenarios:

- the wife has broken his camera by being careless
- the wife has taken two hours to dress for a party
- the husband is furious and wants to show his anger
- the husband comes home drunk
- the husband is frustrated by problems at work

These five items produced the highest disapproval ratings ($\bar{X} = 9.5$). As such, they provide some insight into those instances where use of force is seen as totally inappropriate. While two of the scenarios focus on annoying but non-culpable traits of the wife, three scenarios focus on shortcomings of the husband, specifically the husband's diminished capacity. The diminished capacity argument is a popular explanation of violent behavior (McCaghy 1968; Hills 1980). According to the argument, the use of force is regarded as extraordinary in day-to-day interactions. In order to resort to force, then, the individual must create a temporary "time out" from routine social expectations. Fits of anger or states of drunkenness provide such "time outs." Presumably, these temporary lapses not only permit the use of violence but they also make the violent individual less culpable in the eyes of the beholder (MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969). While the present findings cannot address the role of the diminished capacity argument with regard to the *causes* of violent behavior, they do indicate that diminished capacity does not necessarily reduce perceived culpability. Respondents were unwilling to accept anger, frustration, or drunkenness as legitimations for a husband slapping his wife.

The remaining 15 forceful scenarios also produce relatively high wrongness ratings ($\bar{X} = 8.10$). The findings reinforce a trend noted earlier: aside from behaviors that threaten family members or the marriage itself, respondents found no other provocations that legitimated a husband slapping his wife. Respondents did not justify or legitimate husband force when the wife violated gender norms (items 9, 11, 18, 19, 20), engaged in angry outbursts (items 8 and 10), or engaged in reckless behaviors (items 13 and 14).

CONTEXT BY GENDER AND RACE

The present contextual analysis adds a new dimension to previous findings linking tolerance to audience attributes (Garret and Rossi 1978; Greenblat 1985; Ruane 1992). For instance, consider the present results when examined by gender and race.

Gender

An analysis of the provocative scenarios by gender revealed no significant gender differences in six of the 25 scenarios. Men and women were not significantly different in their assessment of husband force when the force was prompted by the wife beating their child, the wife threatening the husband with a knife, the wife neglecting household chores, the wife screaming hysterically, the wife taking a long time to dress for a party and when the husband comes home drunk.

For the remaining 18 scenarios, female respondents gave higher wrongness ratings to husband force than did their male counterparts (differences were significant at .05 level or higher). In most of these 18 scenarios, however, the rating differences between males and females were not sizeable — i.e. differences were less than one point on the rating scale. Only items two, five, seven, nine, ten and eleven produced substantively as well as statistically significant differences in wrongness rating by male and female respondents. In reviewing these scenarios, gender script discrepancies emerge as a viable explanation of the rating differences. Men were more forgiving of husband force used to counteract female behaviors that challenge traditional views of

proper behaviors for wives: i.e. the wife insults the husband in public, the wife comes home drunk, the wife flirts with other men or the wife is having an affair. In contrast, the higher wrongness ratings of husband force under these conditions offered by the female respondents suggests that these women were not willing to see violations of traditional gender scripts as legitimizing circumstances for husband force. While our interpretation of these gender differences must remain at the speculative level, our findings do indicate that knowing the context of gender differences can add to our understanding of variation in tolerance for domestic violence.

Race

Analysis of each item by race revealed significant differences in eight of the 25 scenarios. As with gender, the relevance of race for tolerance of domestic force depends on the social context of the force. White respondents were more tolerant of husband force than non-white respondents when the wife is beating the couple's child and when the wife is threatening the husband with a knife. In contrast, whites were less tolerant of husband force when the force was prompted by the wife being found in bed with another man, the wife flirting with other men, the wife calling her mother-in-law an old bitch, the wife insulting the husband in public, the wife threatening to break the television set, and the wife failing to clean the house all month. While a full analysis of these racial differences is beyond the intended scope of this paper, it is nonetheless clear that racial differences in tolerance levels are not independent of context. Indeed, both the gender and race analyses presented here help to reinforce the point that social context matters in our tolerance decisions.

SPOUSAL AND PARENTAL FORCE COMPARED

These findings about husband force can be compared with those from an earlier work which offers a contextual analysis of tolerance of parental force (Ruane 1993). As with the present analysis, the research on parental force utilized college undergraduates at four northeastern colleges (N = 305). (Respondents for both studies were drawn from the same target population. The condition of the spouse or parental force survey was randomly assigned.) The findings from the parental force study indicate that respondents had ambivalent reactions to most instances of parental force; they were unable to unequivocally approve or condemn it. The findings also revealed that tolerance for parental force is tied to the *function* of that force. Parental force used to counteract disrespectful behaviors was judged less wrong than parental force used to counteract childish misbehaviors.

The findings from the parental force study also indicate that the respondents distinguished between what Gelles (1984) has identified as normal and illegitimate violence. Normal violence is violence that is accepted, approved and even mandated in family interaction; it is legitimate violence. From the user's viewpoint, normal violence is instrumental in achieving or accomplishing some important, even noble goal. On the other hand, illegitimate violence is explosive or "volcanic" violence. This kind of violence occurs when the user has lost control; it is regarded as expressive rather than instrumental and is far less likely to be legitimated by the victim or the social audience. The parental force data indicate that when parents hit their children to counter-

act disrespectful behaviors, the force is regarded as normal. Higher tolerance for such force is indicative of a belief that force can teach a valuable lesson. The lower reported tolerance for parents hitting children for acting like children indicates that such force constitutes illegitimate force (Ruane 1993).

The present data on husband force suggest that the distinction between normal and illegitimate violence is relevant for assessing spousal violence as well, although to a lesser degree. Husband violence used to counteract provocations that put the family at risk elicited lower wrongness ratings and presumably was recognized as more legitimate than other forms of husband force. Conversely, violence that resulted from the husband's loss of control (e.g. via anger or alcohol) received the highest disapproval ratings and may provide a specific example of illegitimate violence. Still the point must be made that in comparison to earlier work on parental violence, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence appears not to be a particularly salient issue for evaluating spousal force. The relatively high wrongness ratings for nearly all instances of husband force would indicate a general inclination to judge all such force as illegitimate.

TOLERANCE AND THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

With these findings in mind, we can now reconsider the Task Force position that tolerance is the key to controlling domestic violence. If tolerance of violence creates an environment conducive to the use of violence, then the negative evaluation of husband force against wives should be encouraging to those interested in stopping spousal violence. The general condemnation of husband force suggests that the present social environment is hostile toward at least one form of domestic violence — violence by husbands against wives. Since tolerance for this kind of violence is already low, formal social control of wife abuse should be quite effective. Yet such a conclusion is clearly at odds with data from our criminal justice system. Violence against wives is thought by some to be one of the most prevalent yet least reported and least sanctioned crimes in the U.S. (Pagelow 1984; Kuhl and Saltzman 1985; Livingston 1992). Given this anomaly, is the Task Force correct in identifying tolerance as the critical link to waging an effective campaign against domestic violence?

This apparent inconsistency can be traced to a failure to distinguish social attitudes from behaviors. A simple link between low tolerance and formal social control ignores a point raised earlier — i.e. tolerance has both a perceptual and behavioral dimension. The *perceptually* tolerant person is one who fails to condemn or label some behavior as wrong. The *behaviorally* tolerant person is one who fails to take action against some behavior. The relationship between the perceptual and behavioral aspects of tolerance cannot be taken for granted. Emulating the typology set forth by Merton (1949), it is possible to outline four types of tolerance, reflecting different combinations of perceptual and behavioral stances:

FIGURE 1

TOLERANCE TYPOLOGY FOR DOMESTIC FORCE

		Perceptually Tolerant of Domestic Force	
		Yes	No
Behaviorally Tolerant of Domestic Force	Yes	1. Thoroughly Tolerant	2. Timid Condemner
	No	3. Timid Enforcer	4. Thoroughly Intolerant

Cells one and four contain totally consistent individuals — i.e., their behaviors match their attitudes. Individuals falling in these cells are either totally tolerant of domestic force (cell one) or totally intolerant of domestic force (cell four). Cells two and three contain inconsistent individuals, those whose behaviors are at odds with their attitudes. Cell two contains the perceptually intolerant: individuals who define domestic violence as wrong but fail to follow through with appropriate behavioral sanctions. Cell three contains the behaviorally intolerant. Like Merton's timid bigot, the individuals in cell three will act in accordance with the law, but their hearts won't support their actions.

Cell two of Figure 1 takes us to the crux of the dilemma of targeting tolerance as the key to successfully combating domestic violence. Cell two indicates that it is possible for individuals to condemn the use of force and yet fail to take any actions against those who use force. The *perceptually* intolerant person may nonetheless remain *behaviorally* tolerant and fail to counteract the use of force by themselves or others. The present data on perceptual tolerance for spousal force combined with data from our criminal justice system, suggests that many, perhaps even most, Americans fall into cell two. While respondents reported low perceptual tolerance for force against wives, data from our criminal justice system would indicate that perceptual intolerance does not necessarily translate into behavioral intolerance.

While the primary focus of this study was perceptual tolerance, some information that is relevant to behavioral tolerance was also obtained.¹ Respondents were asked about their preferences for the sanctioning of violence against wives and were presented with several social control options (options ranged from a low social control condition of "doing nothing" to a high social control condition of calling police to make an arrest). A comparison of respondents' overall perceptual tolerance scores with their social control preferences, revealed a near negligible association between the two variables ($r = .12$). While this finding is only suggestive, it would seem to indicate that the link between perceptual and behavioral tolerance is problematic. Knowing something about people's perceptual tolerance does not necessarily inform us of their behavioral tolerance.

Launching a general campaign against tolerance, then, may not be enough. While the present findings indicate a certain willingness of participants to recognize husband force as wrong, such intolerance appears to be insufficient for the successful control of domestic violence. Ferraro's work (1989) indicates that even with pro-arrest policies in place, arrest for domestic violence is still a discretionary call for the police; fewer than twenty percent of domestic violence calls result in an arrest. Unless attitudinal intolerance is translated into behavioral intolerance, the kinds of active social control mechanisms needed to fight domestic violence will not be called into play.

Before assertions can be made about the relevance of tolerance for combatting domestic violence, then, more attention must be given to the relationship between perceptual and behavioral tolerance. What must occur in order for the perceptually intolerant to become behaviorally intolerant as well? Conversely, what is it that keeps so many people from being behaviorally consistent with their attitudes?

The link between domestic violence attitudes and social control behaviors remains to be empirically investigated. Once this research issue has been addressed, then policy makers will be in a better position to design and mobilize the kinds of social control campaigns best suited for combating the problem of domestic violence.

NOTE

1. It is readily acknowledged that the information obtained regarding social control preferences is an inadequate measure of what respondents would actually do when faced with an instance of domestic violence. Consequently, the information on social control preferences must be regarded as suggestive rather than definitive.

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