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Wife Beating: Causes, Treatment, and Research Needs*

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I. Marital Violence in a Nationally Representative Sample

The assignment given to me when the Commission requested this paper was put as a paper on "wife abuse." I have taken the liberty of changing the assignment to the more narrow focus of *physical* abuse, and also to enlarge the scope somewhat by including the fact that all women—not just wives—risk violence in their relationships with men.

The reason I have narrowed the topic is a combination of scientific and practical factors. It is not meant to deny the importance of psychological and economic abuse. One can be unspeakably cruel to another person without lifting a finger. On the practical side is the need to keep the paper within a reasonable length and the fact that my own research has been primarily on physical abuse. More important are the scientific considerations. To be able to investigate something scientifically, there must be some way clearly to identify the phenomenon. But in the case of "psychological abuse," where is the line between "mental cruelty" and the inevitable arguments and disputes in marriage? In addition to not knowing what is to be included under the general term of wife abuse, there is the need to avoid lumping together quite different phenomena that happen to have some things in common. Thus, not much progress in medicine will be made by research on "chest pains" until one is able to identify pains that are due to problems with the heart, problems with the lungs, and problems with the muscles. They all hurt, as do all forms of wife abuse, but considering them all together could slow down progress on finding out the causes and cures. By restricting the focus to the use of physical force on a marital partner, some of this thicket is cleared away.

* The statistical data in this paper will be presented more fully in a forthcoming book, *Violence In the American Family* (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1979). This paper is part of a research program on intrafamily violence supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health (MH27557 and MH15161). A program bibliography and description of current projects is obtainable on request. Sections I and II of this paper are adapted from Straus, 1977b; Sections III and IV are adapted from Straus, 1977a. Consequently, none of these sections may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the copyright holders.

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What Is Wife Beating?

Even when the focus is limited to physical abuse, some of the same problems remain. One soon realizes that "wife beating" is a political rather than a scientific term. For most people, wife beating refers only to those instances in which severe damage is inflicted. Other violence is treated as normal or laughed off. For example, a joke I remember hearing as a child, and which I heard again on my car radio while driving across northern England, goes like this in the BBC version: One woman asks another why she feels her husband doesn't love her anymore. The answer: "He hasn't bashed me in a fortnight." Or take the following:

Concord, N.H. (AP) The New Hampshire Commission on the Status of Women has rejected a plan to help battered wives, saying that wife-beating is caused by the rise of feminism.

"Those women libbers irritate the hell out of their husbands," said Commissioner Gloria Belzil of Nashua.

At a meeting Monday, commission members, appointed by Gov. Meldrim Thomson, said any program to help battered wives would be "an invasion of privacy." (*Portsmouth Herald*, Sept. 13, 1977.)

This statement suggests that a certain amount of violence in the family is "normal violence" in the sense that it is deserved (for example, by "irritating the hell" out of one's spouse) and that, unlike violence outside the family, the state should not interfere.

But at what point does one exceed the bounds of "ordinary" or marital violence? When does it become "wife beating"? The solution to this problem, which Suzanne Steinmetz, Richard Gelles, and I took for our research, is to gather data on a continuum of violent acts, ranging from a push to using a knife or gun. This lets anyone draw the line at whatever place seems most appropriate for their purpose.

Measuring Wife Beating

But this "solution" can also be a means of avoiding the issue. So, in addition to data on each violent act, we also combined the most severe of these into what can be called a "severe violence index" or, for purposes of this paper, a "Wife Beating Index."

The Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) were used to gather this data (Straus, 1978). These scales provide data on how family members attempt to deal with conflicts between themselves. The Physical Violence Index of the CTS contains the following eight items:

- K. Throwing things at the spouse
- L. Pushing, shoving, or grabbing

- M. Slapping
- N. Kicking, biting, or hitting with the fist
- O. Hit or tried to hit with something
- P. Beat up
- Q. Threatened with a knife or gun
- R. Used a knife or gun

The overall Violence Index consists of the extent to which any of these acts were carried out during the previous 12 months. The Wife Beating Index consists of the extent to which acts *N* through *R* occurred.

The choice of acts *N* through *R* as the Wife Beating Index does not reflect our conception of what is permissible violence. I find none of these to be acceptable for relationships between any human beings, including parent and child, brother and sister, husband and wife, student and teacher, minister and parishoner, or colleagues in a department. In short, I follow the maxim coined by John Valusek: "People are not for hitting."

What then is the basis for selecting items *N* through *R* to make up the Wife Beating Index? It is simply the fact that these are all acts which carry with them a high risk of serious physical injury to the victim. With these considerations in mind, we can turn to the question of trying to estimate the extent of wife beating in the United States.

The Extent of Wife Beating

The procedures for measuring violence just described were used in a study of a nationally representative sample of American families, made possible by a grant from NIMH. A probability sample of 2,143 families was studied. In approximately half the cases the person providing the information about the family was a woman, and in half it was a man. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, the respondent had to be one member of a male-female couple, aged 18 to 70. The couple did not have to have children nor did they have to be legally married. So our sample contains couples with and without children, and married and also unmarried couples in about the same proportion as are found in the U.S. population.

Yearly Incidence. The most direct, but in some ways also a misleading, statistic emerging from the data on the 2,143 couples in our sample is that, for the 12-month period preceding the interview, 3.8 percent of the respondents reported one or more physical attacks that fall under our operational definition of wife beating. Applying this incidence rate to the approximately 47 million couples in the U.S.A. means that, in any one year, approximately 1.78 million wives are beaten by their husbands.

I mentioned that this can be a misleading figure. This is because there are two other things that must be considered: how often these beatings occur, and how they fit in with the overall pattern of violence in the family.

Yearly Frequency. Among those couples in which a beating occurred, it was typically not an isolated instance, as can be seen from the "Frequency In 1975" columns of table 1. However, the mean frequency of occurrence overstates the case because there are a few cases in which violence was almost a daily or weekly event. For this reason, the median gives a more realistic picture of the typical frequency of violence in the violent families. This is 2.4; i.e., the typical pattern is over two serious assaults per year. But of course there is great variation. For about a third of the couples who reported an act that falls in our wife beating category, it occurred only once during the year. At the other extreme, there were cases in which this occurred once a week or more often. In between are about 19 percent who reported two beatings during the year, 16 percent who reported 3 or 4 beatings, and a third of these 1.8 million who reported five or more during the year.

Duration of Marriage Rates. Another aspect of wife beating which must be considered is the proportion of families in which a beating has ever occurred. Unfortunately, our data for events before the year of the survey do not distinguish between who was the assailant and who was the victim. So all that can be reported is that 28 percent of the couples in the study experienced at least one violent incident and 5.3 percent experienced violence that falls within our set of severe violence indicators.

In some of these cases it was a single slap or a single beating. But there are several reasons why even a single beating is important. First, in my values, even one such event is intrinsically a debasement of human life. Second, there is the physical danger involved. Third is the fact that many, if not most, such beatings are part of a family power struggle. It often takes only one or two slaps to fix the balance of power in a family for many years—or perhaps for a lifetime.

Physical force is the ultimate resource on which most of us learn as children to rely if all else fails and the issue is crucial. As a husband in one of the families interviewed by LaRossa (1977) said when asked why he hit his wife during an argument:

. . . She more or less tried to run me and I said no, and she got hysterical and said, "I could kill you!" And I got rather angry and slapped her in the face three or four times and I said "Don't you ever say that to me again!" And we haven't had any problems since.

Later in the interview, the husband evaluated his use of physical force as follows:

You don't use it until you are forced to it. At that point I felt I had to do something physical to stop the bad progression of events. I took my chances with that and it worked. In those circumstances my judgement was correct and it worked.

Since superior strength and size give the advantage to men in such situations, the single beating may be an extremely important factor in maintaining male dominance in the family system.

Accuracy of Estimates. How much confidence can be placed in these figures? I am reasonably confident that the sample is representative of American couples generally. But that is only one aspect of the accuracy question. The other main aspect is whether our respondents "told all." Here I have doubts for the following reasons:

(1) Underreporting of domestic violence is likely to occur among two groups of people, but for opposite reasons. On the one hand, there is a large group for whom violence is so much a normal part of the family system that a slap, push, or shove (and sometimes even more severe acts) is simply not a noteworthy or dramatic enough event to be remembered. Such omissions are especially likely when we asked about things that had ever happened during the entire length of the marriage.

(2) Somewhat paradoxically, there is also underreporting at the other end of the violence continuum—those who experienced such severe violent acts as being bitten, hit with objects, beaten up, or attacked with a knife or gun. These are things that go beyond the "normal violence" of family life. There is reluctance to admit such acts because of the shame involved if one is the victim, or the guilt if one is the attacker.

(3) A final reason for regarding these figures as drastic underestimates lies in the nature of our sample. Since a major purpose of the study was to investigate the extent to which violence is related to other aspects of husband-wife interaction, we sampled only couples living together. Divorced persons were asked only about the current marriage (again because of interview time limits and recall accuracy problems). Since "excessive" violence is a major cause of divorce, and since our sample is limited to couples living together, these data probably omit many of the high violence cases.

These considerations, plus the higher rates in our pilot studies, and informal evidence (where some of the factors leading to underreporting were less) suggest that *the true incidence rate for any use of violence in a marriage is probably closer to 50 or 60 percent of all couples than it is*

to the 28 percent who were willing to describe violent acts in a mass interview survey.

Wife Beating is not Restricted to Wives

Although this paper is primarily concerned with wife beating, an adequate understanding of the phenomenon requires that we consider it in a wider context. It is important to recognize that one does not have to be married to be the victim of physical violence by a partner. Our national survey, a study by Hennon (1976) of students living together, and much informal evidence suggest that couples who are not married have rates of violence that are as high or higher than those married. In fact, one does not even have to live together. Once there is a step toward a marriage-like arrangement, as in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, and especially if regular sex is involved, the violence rate jumps dramatically. It can no longer be figured in rates per 100,000 characteristic of assaults in general. Instead, simple percentages—i.e., rates per 100 rather than per 100,000—make more sense. Why this happens is important by itself and also because it throws a great deal of light on the situation of wives, as I will try to show in sections II and III below.

Husband Beating

Just as it is important to consider violence between unmarried couples to gain a full understanding of wife beating, the same is true for violence by wives against their husbands. In fact, the data on this are even more surprising than the high incidence of violence among unmarried couples. Our national survey confirms what all of our pilot studies have shown: (Gelles, 1974; Steinmetz, 1977; Straus, 1974) that violence between husband and wife is far from a one-way street. The old cartoons of the wife chasing a husband with a rolling pin or throwing pots and pans are closer to reality than most of us (and especially those of us with feminist sympathies) realize. This can be seen from an inspection of the wife columns in table 1.

Violence Rates. The overall figures in the second row of table 1 show that, for all violent acts during the survey year, there is only a slightly higher incidence for husbands than for wives (12.1 percent versus 11.6 percent). In addition, those wives who were violent tended to engage in such acts somewhat more frequently than did the husbands in this sample median, 3.0 times in the year, compared to 2.5 times for the husbands. Moreover, the first row of table 1, which gives the data on severe violence, suggests that the wives were more violent even in this traditional sense of the word violence.

Specific Violent Acts. If we look at the specific types of violent acts sampled by the CTS, there is evidence for the pot-and-pan-throwing

TABLE 1
Violence Rates Per Hundred Marriages, 1975.

CRT Violence Item	Incidence rate for violence by:		Frequency*			
	H	W	Mean		Median	
Wife Beating and Husband Beating (N to R)	3.8	4.6	8.0	8.9	2.4	3.0
Overall Violence Index (K to R)	12.1	11.6	8.8	10.1	2.5	3.0
K. Threw something at spouse	2.8	5.2	5.5	4.5	2.2	2.0
L. Pushed, grabbed, shoved spouse	10.7	8.3	4.2	4.6	2.0	2.1
M. Slapped spouse	5.1	4.6	4.2	3.5	1.6	1.9
N. Kicked, bit, or hit with fist	2.4	3.1	4.8	4.6	1.9	2.3
O. Hit or tried to hit with something	2.2	3.0	4.5	7.4	2.0	3.8
P. Beat up spouse	1.1	0.6	5.5	3.9	1.7	1.4
Q. Threatened with a knife or gun	0.4	0.6	4.6	3.1	1.8	2.0
R. Used a knife or gun	0.3	0.2	5.3	1.8	1.5	1.5

* For those who engaged in each act; i.e., omits those with scores of zero.

stereotype, since the number of wives who threw things at their husband is almost twice as large as the number of husbands who threw things at their wife. For half of the violent acts, however, the rate is higher for the husband, and the frequency is higher for the husbands than for the wives for all but two of the items. The biggest discrepancy in favor of wives occurs in the kicking and hitting with objects. Such acts are less dependent on superior physical strength to be effective. This seems to be consistent with the view that a main difference between male and female domestic violence stems from the smaller size, weight, and muscle development of most women, rather than from any greater rejection of physical force on moral or normative grounds.

Policy Implications. Although these findings show high rates of violence by wives, this should not divert attention from the need to give primary attention to wives as victims as the immediate focus of social policy. There are a number of reasons for this:

(1) A validity study carried out in preparation for this research (Bulcroft and Straus, 1975) shows that underreporting of violence is greater for violence by husbands than it is for violence by wives. This is probably because the use of physical force is so much a part of the

male way of life that it is typically not the dramatic and often traumatic event that the same act of violence is for a woman. To be violent is not unmasculine. But to be physically violent *is* unfeminine according to contemporary American standards. Consequently, if it were possible to allow for this difference in reporting rates, it is likely that, even in simple numerical terms, wife beating would be the more severe problem.

(2) Even if one does not take into account this difference in underreporting, the data in table 1 show that husbands have higher rates for the most dangerous and injurious forms of violence (beating up and using a knife or gun).

(3) Table 1 also shows that when violent acts are committed by a husband, they are repeated more often than is the case for wives.

(4) These data do not tell us what proportion of the violent acts by wives were in response to blows initiated by husbands. Wolfgang's data on husband-wife homicides (1957) suggest that this is an important factor.

(5) The greater physical strength of men makes it more likely that a woman will be seriously injured when beaten up by her husband than the reverse.

(6) A disproportionately large number of attacks by husbands seem to occur when the wife is pregnant (Gelles, 1975), thus posing a danger to the as yet unborn child.

(7) Women are locked into marriage to a much greater extent than men. Because of a variety of economic and social constraints, they often have no alternative to putting up with beatings by their husband (Gelles, 1976; Martin, 1976; Straus, 1976a, 1977b).

In short, wives are victimized by violence in the family to a much greater extent than are husbands and should therefore be the focus of the most immediate remedial steps. However, these data also indicate that a fundamental solution to the problem of wife beating cannot be restricted to the immediate problem of assaulting husbands. Rather, violence is embedded in the very structure of the society and the family system itself (Straus, 1976a). The particularly brutal form of violence known as wife beating is only likely to end with a change in the cultural and social organizational factors underpinning parent-to-child, child-to-child, and wife-to-husband violence, as well as husband-to-wife violence.

II. The Cause of Wife Beating

A full understanding of the causes of wife beating is a vast undertaking, well beyond the scope of this paper. However, some perspective can be gained on the issue by dividing the multitude of causes into three broad groups of factors:

(1) Those that inhere within the individual husband, and that for convenience I will call "psychological factors." This group of causes include personality characteristics, such as aggressiveness, lack of self-control, low frustration tolerance, and of course mental illness, such as paranoia.

(2) A second group of causal factors is to be found within the rules of behavior characteristic of our society, and that will therefore be called "cultural factors." This includes such things as the idealization of masculine toughness and a widely shared (even though not widely recognized) rule that gives family members the right to hit other family members if there is a serious transgression and provided no physical damage occurs. In relation to husbands and wives, this rule takes the form of an implicit clause in marriage that makes the marriage license a hitting license.

(3) The third group of factors is to be found in the way the society is organized. For example, the fact that American families are overwhelmingly organized as separate, "nuclear" households of couples living alone or with children, or an individual parent with children, affects the rate of violence because such nuclear households lack the presence of other adults who can help adjudicate conflicts or intervene to prevent violence.

Each of these three types of factors are interrelated and cannot be understood in isolation. This means that wife beating also cannot be understood if one seeks the explanation in either psychological, cultural, or social organizational factors by themselves. Demonstrating this, even in principle, is a vast undertaking. All that can be done in this paper is to give the general flavor of the argument by showing the interrelation of seven causal factors, some of which are "psychological," some "cultural," and some "social organizational." An overview of these factors and some of their interrelationships is given in figure 1.

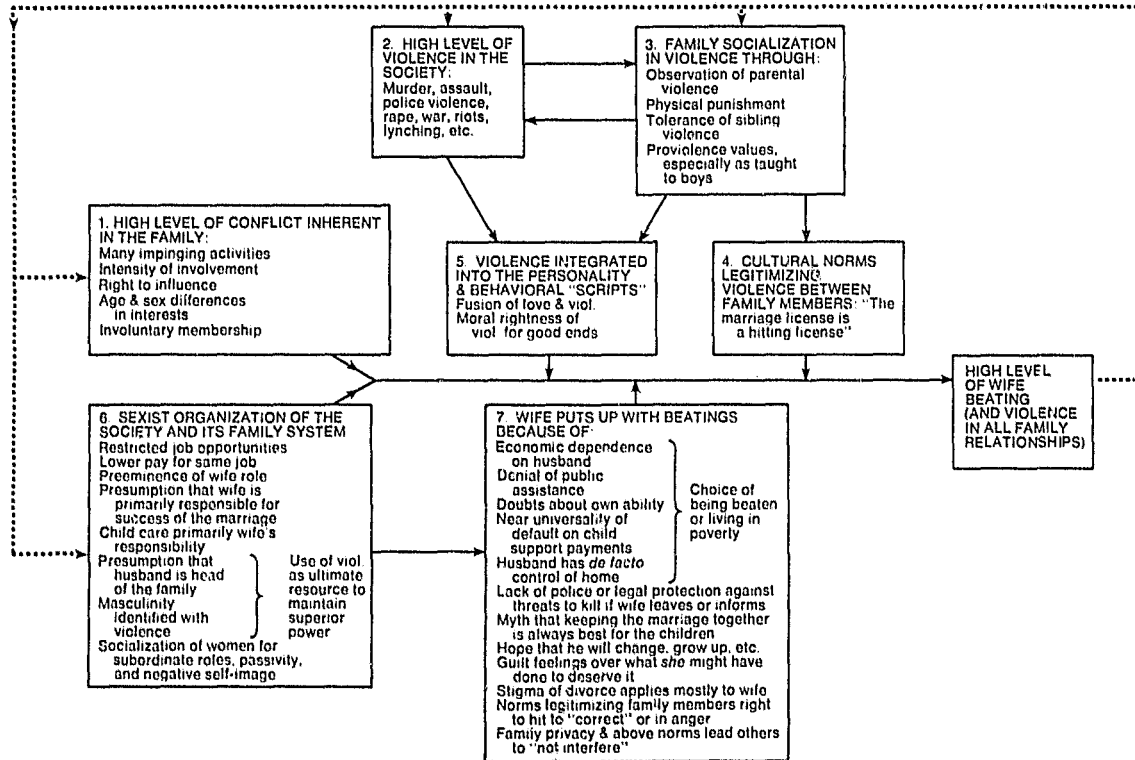
It is the combination of these factors, as shown in figure 1 (plus others not diagrammed for lack of space), that makes the family the most violent of all civilian institutions and that accounts for that aspect of family violence which we call wife beating. Let us look at the first three of these factors in a little more detail, starting with the question of what makes conflict so much part of family life.

High Level of Family Conflict

1. *Time at Risk.* The most elementary family characteristic accounting for the high incidence of conflict and violence in the family is the fact that so many hours of the day are spent interacting with other family members. Although this is an important factor, the ratio of intrafamily violence to violence experienced outside the family far exceeds the ratio of time spent in the family to time spent outside the

FIGURE 1

Flow Chart Illustrating Some of the Factors Accounting for High Incidence of Wife Beating (solid lines) And Positive Feedback Loops Maintaining the System (dashed lines).



family. A moment spent comparing the family with other groups in which large amounts of time are spent, such as work groups, provides a concrete way of grasping the fact that far more is involved than just "time at risk."

2. *Broad Range of Activities and Interests.* Most nonfamily social interactions are focused on a specific purpose. But the primary-group nature of the family makes family interactions cover a vast range of activities. This means that there are more "events" over which a dispute or a failure to meet expectations can occur.

3. *Intensity of Involvement.* Not only is there a wider range of events over which a dispute or dissatisfaction can occur, but in addition, the degree of injury felt in such instances is likely to be much greater than if the same issue were to arise in relation to someone outside the family. The failure of a work colleague to spell or to eat properly may be mildly annoying (or more likely just a subject for derision). But if the bad spelling or table manners are those of one's child or spouse, the pain experienced is often excruciating.

4. *Impinging Activities.* Many family activities have a "zero sum" aspect. Conflict is structured into such things as whether Bach or rock will be played on the family stereo, whether to go to a movie or bowling, or a line up for use of the bathroom. Less obvious, but equally important, is the impinging on one's personal space or self-image brought about the lifestyle and habits of others in the family, such as those who leave things around versus those who put everything away, or those who eat quickly and those who like leisurely meals.

5. *Right to Influence.* Membership in a family carries with it an implicit right to influence the behavior of others. Consequently, the dissatisfaction over undersirable or impinging activities of others is further exacerbated by attempts to change the behavior of the other.

6. *Age and Sex Discrepancies.* The fact that the family is composed of people of different sexes and ages (especially during the childrearing years), coupled with the existence of generational and sex differences in culture and outlook on life, makes the family an arena of culture conflict. This is epitomized in such phases as "battle of the sexes" and "generational conflict."

7. *Ascribed Roles.* Compounding the problem of age and sex differences is the fact that family statuses and roles are, to a very considerable extent, assigned on the bases of these biological characteristics rather than on the basis of interest and competence. An aspect of this that has traditionally been a focus of contention is socially structured sexual inequality, or in contemporary language, the sexist organization of the family. A sexist structure has especially high conflict potential built in when such a structure exists in the context of

a society with equalitarian ideology. But even without such an ideological inconsistency, the conflict potential is high because it is inevitable that not all husbands have the competence needed to fulfill the culturally prescribed leadership role (Kolb and Straus, 1974; Allen and Straus, 1975).

8. *Family Privacy.* In many societies the normative, kinship, and household structure insulates the family from both social controls and assistance in coping with intrafamily conflict. This characteristic is most typical of the conjugal family system of urban-industrial societies (Laslett, 1973).

9. *Involuntary Membership.* Birth relationships are obviously involuntary, and under-age children cannot themselves terminate such relationships. In addition, Sprey (1969) shows that the conjugal relationship also has nonvoluntary aspects. There is first the social expectation of marriage as a long-term commitment, as expressed in the phrase "until death do us part." In addition, there are emotional, material, and legal rewards and constraints that frequently make membership in the family group inescapable, socially, physically, or legally. So, when conflicts and dissatisfactions arise, the alternative of resolving them by leaving often does not, in practice, exist—at least in the perception of what is practical or possible.

10. *High Level of Stress.* Paradoxically, in the light of the previous paragraph, nuclear family relationships are unstable. This comes about because of a number of circumstances, starting with the general tendency for all dyadic relationships to be unstable (Simmel, 1955:118–44). In addition, the nuclear family continuously undergoes major changes in structure as a result of processes inherent in the family life cycle: events such as the birth of children, maturation of children, aging, and retirement. The crisis-like nature of these changes has long been recognized (LeMasters, 1957).

High Level of Violence in the Society

These 10 characteristics of the family, combined with the huge emotional investment that is typical of family relationships, means that the family is likely to be the locus of more, and more serious, conflicts than other groups. But conflict and violence are not the same. Violence is only one means of dealing with conflict. What accounts for the use of violence to deal with conflicts within the family? One fundamental starting place is the fact that we are talking about families which are part of a violent society. There is a carryover from one sphere of life to another, as I have tried to show in a paper comparing levels of family violence to different societies (Straus, 1977a). However, even granting the carryover principle, this is by no means sufficient. Conflict is also high, for example, in academic departments.

But there has never been an incident of physical violence in any of the six departments I have taught in during the past 25 years. In fact, I have only heard of one such incident occurring anywhere. Clearly, other factors must also be present.

Family Socialization in Violence

One of the most fundamental of these other factors is the fact that the family is the setting in which most people first experience physical violence, and also the setting that establishes the emotional context and meaning of violence.

Learning about violence starts with physical punishment, which is nearly universal (Steinmetz and Straus, 1974). When physical punishment is used, several things can be expected to occur. First, and most obviously, is learning to do or not do whatever the punishment is intended to teach. Less obvious, but equally or more important, are three other lessons that are so deeply learned that they become an integral part of one's personality and world view.

The first of these unintended consequences is the association of love with violence. Physical punishment typically begins in infancy with slaps to correct and teach. Mommy and daddy are the first and usually the only ones to hit an infant. And for most children this continues throughout childhood. The child, therefore, learns that those who love him or her the most are also those who hit.

Second, since physical punishment is used to train the child or to teach about dangerous things to avoided, it establishes the moral rightness of hitting other family members.

The third unintended consequences is the lesson that, when something is really important, it justifies the use of physical force.

These indirect lessons are not confined to providing a model for latter treatment of one's own children. Rather, they become such a fundamental part of the individual's personality and world view that they are generalized to other social relationships, and especially to the relationship which is closest to that of parent and child: that of husband and wife.

All of the above suggest that early experiences with physical punishment lay the groundwork for the normative legitimacy of all types of violence, but especially intrafamily violence. It provides a role model—indeed a specific “script” (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Huggins and Straus, 1975)—for such actions. In addition, for many children, there is not even the need to generalize this socially scripted pattern of behavior from the parent-child nexus in which it was learned to other family relationships. This is because, if our estimates are correct, millions of children can directly observe and role model physical

violence between husbands and wives (see also Owens and Straus, 1975).

Cultural Norms Legitimizing Family Violence

The preceding discussion has focused on the way in which violence becomes built into the behavioral repertory of individual husbands and wives. Important as that is, it would not be sufficient to account for the high level of family violence if it were not also supported by cultural norms legitimizing such violent predispositions. Since most of us tend to think of norms that call for love and gentleness within the family, it is difficult to perceive that there are *also* both *de jure* and *de facto* cultural norms legitimizing the use of violence between family members. Once one is sensitized to the possibility that such rules exist, examples pop up all over. These rules are sometimes explicit or even mandatory—as in the case of the right and obligation of parents to use a “necessary” and appropriate level of physical force to adequately protect, train, and control a child. In fact, parents are permitted or expect to use a level of physical force for these purposes that is denied even prison authorities in relation to training and controlling inmates.

In the case of husband-wife relations, similar norms are present and powerful, but they are largely implicit and taken for granted and therefore also largely unrecognized. But the fact is that, just as parenthood gives the right to hit, the marriage license is also a hitting license. The evidence can be found, for instance in everyday expressions and jokes, as the ditty:

A woman, a horse, and a hickory tree

The more you beat'em the better they be.

or the joke mentioned earlier in this paper. Many of the men and women interviewed by Gelles (1974:58) expressed similar attitudes, as represented by such phrases as “I asked for it,” or “She needed to be brought to her senses.”

But the marriage license as a “hitting license” is not just a matter of the folk culture. More important, it also remains embedded in the legal system despite many legal reforms favoring women. In most jurisdictions, for example, a woman still cannot sue her husband for damages resulting from his assaults, because, in the words of a California Supreme Court judgment (*Self v. Self*, 1962), this “would destroy the peace and harmony of the home, and thus would be contrary to the policy of the law.”¹

Of course, criminal actions can be brought against an assaulting husband, but here too there is an almost equally effective bar, inherent in the way the criminal justice system actually operates. Many

policemen personally believe that husbands *do* have a legal right to hit their wives, provided it does not produce an injury requiring hospitalization—the so-called “stitch rule” found in some cities. If a wife wants to press charges she is discouraged from it by every step in the judicial process, beginning with police officers (often the first on the scene) who will not make arrests and going on to prosecuting attorneys who will not bring the case to court, and by judges who block convictions in the minuscule fraction of cases that do reach the court (Field and Field, 1973).¹

Finally, there is evidence from surveys and experiments also pointing to the implicit license to hit conferred by marriage. Perhaps the most direct of this type of evidence is to be found in the survey conducted for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (Stark and McEvoy, 1970). This study found that about one out of four of those interviewed agreed with the proposition that it is sometimes permissible for a husband to hit his wife. Equally cogent are the results of an unpublished experiment by Churchill and Straus. This showed that, when presented with identical descriptions of an assault by a man on a woman, those who were told that the couple is married recommended much less severe punishment. A second experiment compared couples who were identified as strangers, dating couples, engaged, and married. The subjects who were told that the couples were going together (either dating or engaged) treated the assault *less* severely than did the subjects who read the same vignette but thought the couple had just met. This supports the hypothesis that male-female intimacy carries an implicit right to hit. However, for reasons that are not clear, in the second experiment the assault by the husband was treated as severely as the assault by the stranger.

There is a great deal of other evidence supporting the existence of the “marriage license as a hitting license” norm (Straus, 1976). What was just presented may at least make the case plausible and allow us to move on to a consideration of one other causal factor.

Sexual Inequality and the Violent Society

The last causal factor to be considered can be summarized in the proposition that the sexist organization of the society and its family system is one of the most fundamental factors accounting for the high level of wife beating. Demonstrating this proposition is such a large undertaking that it would require an entire paper in itself. Fortunately,

¹ These comments should not be taken to be an argument for arresting, fining, and jailing assaulting husbands as *the* solution to the problem of wife beating. Such actions, although necessary as an ultimate sanction, are more often self-defeating and ineffective—just as they are with most types of crime. Rather, the failure of the criminal justice system to act in the case of assaulting husbands (and wives) is stated as part of the evidence for the existence of an implicit cultural norm that, as I said, makes the marriage license a hitting license.

much of the evidence has already been well documented (Dobash and Dobash, 1974; Martin, 1976; Straus, 1976a, 1977a, b). A summary of the main elements of sexism that lead to wife beating is presented in boxes 6 and 7 of figure 1. A more detailed exposition is in section III, below.

Perhaps devoting an inappropriately small part of this section of the paper to one of the most important of the causal factors can serve to dramatize the fact that, important as is sexism in understanding wife beating, it is only one part of a complex causal matrix. This can be seen from the fact that, even though men are dominant, their dominance does not protect them from violence by other men.

If we imagine that true equality between the sexes were somehow to be achieved tomorrow, all forms of family violence (including wife beating) would still continue to exist—perhaps at a somewhat lower incidence rate—unless steps are taken to also alter the factors identified in boxes 2, 3, 4, and 5 of figure 1. This means steps to lower the level of *nonfamily* violence and steps to end the training in violence that is part of growing up in a typical American family. Violence is truly built into the very fabric of American society and into the personality, beliefs, values, and into behavioral scripts of most of our population. Elimination of wife beating depends not only on eliminating sexual inequality, but also on altering the system of violence on which so much of American society depends.

III. A Sociological Perspective on the Prevention of Wife Beating

The preventive steps to be outlined in this section are limited to those suggested by a sociological perspective on wife beating; i.e., a perspective that shows the extent to which wife beating has social causes. This does not deny the importance of other factors, and particularly psychological factors. With this in mind, we can proceed with a further examination of the ways in which wife beating is produced by the very nature of our society and its family system, and at the same time attempt to formulate the specific policies that could be followed in order to reduce the level of husband-wife violence. Since this will be a long and complicated section, table 2 may be helpful in giving an overview.

Cultural Norms Permitting Wife Beating

A fundamental aspect of American social structure that must be understood and confronted if there is any hope of dealing with marital violence is the existence of the cultural norm that, as previously noted, makes the marriage license also a hitting license. This is so much a taken-for-granted, unperceived, unverbilized norm, and is so contrary

TABLE 2**Summary of Policy Implications for Prevention Derived from Analysis of Six Social Structural Causal Factors****Factor I. Cultural Norms Permit And Legitimize Wife Beating**

1. Make the public aware of this largely unperceived norm.
2. Redefine the marital relationship as one in which *any* use of physical force is as unacceptable as it is between those one works with or with whom one goes bowling, or plays tennis.

Factor II. Wife Beating Reflects Societal Violence

3. Reduce the use of physical force as an instrument of government to the maximum extent possible.
4. Limit violence in the mass media to the maximum possible consistent with preserving freedom of expression and artistic integrity.
5. Enact stringent gun control legislation, particularly directed at restricting hand guns, but also requiring that all guns be kept locked and unloaded.

Factor III. The Family Is The Primary Setting In Which Violence Is Learned

6. Gradually eliminate physical punishment as a mode of childrearing.
7. Encourage parents to control acts of physical force between their children and to avoid explicitly or implicitly defining such acts as permissible.
8. Provide parents and children with techniques for coping with and resolving the inevitable conflicts of family life by means other than force and coercion.
9. Sponsor research to determine the social and psychological conditions that lead some parents to be cold and distant rather than warm and loving, and translate results into programs to assist such parents.

Factor IV. The Inevitability Of Conflict In The Family

10. Reduce the impact of government programs and regulations that, directly or indirectly, encourage geographic mobility or reduce ties to the extended family.
11. Recognize the inevitability of conflict within the family rather than consider conflict an abnormal deviation.

Factor V. Sexually Stereotyped Roles And Sexism In The Family And The Society

12. Eliminate the husband as "head of the family" from its continuing presence in the law, in religion, in administrative procedure, and as a taken-for-granted aspect of family life.
13. Eliminate the pervasive system of sex-typed occupations in which "women's occupations" tend to be poorly paid, and the equally pervasive difference between the pay of men and women in the same occupation.
14. Reduce or eliminate the sex-typed pattern of family role responsibilities.
15. Establish or subsidize a comprehensive and high quality system of day-care centers for preschool children.
16. Full sexual equality is essential for prevention of wife beating.

17. As the society eliminates fixed sex roles, alternative sources of stability and security in self-definition will be needed.
18. Parent-child interaction, parental expectations, and all other aspects of socialization should not be differentiated according to the sex of the child.
19. Eliminate from the criminal justice system the implicit toleration of wife beating that comes about through (a) statutory and common law; (b) the attitudes of the police, prosecutors, and judges; and (c) through cumbersome and ineffective procedures that make even the available legal remedies and protection ineffective.

Factor VI. Frustrations Built Into The Economic System

20. Full employment for all men and women in the labor force at wage levels consistent with the standards of the society, and a guaranteed income for those unable to work.
21. Reduce the extent to which society evaluates people on the basis of their economic achievements and the occupational and economic competition that this entails.

to the way most of us view marriage, that many readers will want to consult the more complete documentation in Gelles (1974) and Straus (1974, 1976), and Steinmetz and Straus (1974).

What then are the implications for prevention that follow from existence of this norm? There seem to be at least two parallel "policy implications."

PI-1. Make the public aware of this largely unperceived norm.

There is a paradoxical quality to this policy implication, but its efficacy is based on the assumption that awareness can contribute to the demise of the hitting license norm because such a norm is so contrary to other norms and values about the family. If so, it will pave the way toward a second policy implication, focused more on individual husbands and wives, but especially the latter.

PI-2. Redefine the marital relationship as one in which any use of physical force is as unacceptable as it is between those one works with or with whom one goes bowling or plays tennis.

For the individual wife, this means making clear to her husband that physical force simply will not be tolerated. In an unknown, but perhaps not insignificant proportion of cases, this alone could serve to alter the situation because the "hitting license" aspect of marriage is so much an unperceived, "taken-for-granted" norm, and is so contrary to other widely acknowledged and valued norms concerning the marriage relationship.

Despite the above, by themselves such attempts at redefining the marital relationship to render violence illegitimate are unlikely to be sufficient. In the first place, normative rules are only one of the structural determinants of behavior, and often a minor determinant. In the second place, such rules do not arise out of thin air. Rather they reflect, and tend to be integrated with, a network of other cultural elements. Perhaps even more, they reflect the realities of daily living. Consequently, a truly fundamental approach to the problem of wife beating must address these more fundamental causes. Each of these things is so closely interwoven with the others that it is almost as difficult to discuss them separately as it will be to change them. However, they can at least be grouped into somewhat meaningful patterns.

Wife Beating As A Reflection of Societal Violence

Governmental Violence. Even if one assumes that nation-states ultimately depend on at least the possibility of using physical force to uphold the law, this does not mean that the present level of physical force is either desirable or necessary (Goode, 1971). The necessity for and efficacy of much governmental violence is highly questionable, as illustrated by the controversy over the efficacy of the death penalty, of

police toughness (to say nothing of police brutality), and of the still widespread practice of physical punishment in the schools (Maurer, 1974; Mercurio, 1972). It is sobering to remember that the U.S. Supreme Court recently upheld both physical punishment and the death penalty. Finally, there is the fact that our Government maintains a worldwide military establishment.

These examples of governmental violence provide powerful models for the behavior of individual citizens. They form an important part of an even more general normative system which holds that violence can and should be used to attain socially desirable ends (Blumenthal *et al.*, 1972, 1975). Of course, it is extremely difficult to prove that governmental violence provides a role model for individual violence, but an example of one type of evidence supporting this conclusion is to be found in the work of Huggins and Straus (1978) and Archer and Gartner (1976).

Huggins and Straus (1978) studied a sample of English-language children's books covering the period 1850 to 1970. The original purpose was to see if the level of interpersonal violence depicted in these books showed an upward or downward trend over this 120-year period. The results showed no trend of this type. However, even though there were no "war stories" in the sample of books, during and immediately following each major war the frequency of interpersonal violence rose dramatically. Similarly, Archer and Gartner (1976) found postwar increases in homicide rates for a large sample of nations. They concluded that the increase in murder rates was due to a carryover of the wartime-authorized or sanctioned killing. Therefore:

PI-3. Reduce to the maximum extent possible the use of physical force as an instrument of government.

Media violence. Violence in the mass media both reflects the existing high level of aggression and violence in American society and helps perpetuate that pattern. The typical citizen watches "prime time" TV in which more than half of all characters are involved in some violence, including 1 out of 10 in killing (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). The amount of gratuitous violence in current motion pictures is also extremely high. The significance of these facts has been demonstrated by intensive research during the past 10 years, including a number of excellent longitudinal and experimental studies. These studies have led almost all scientific reviewers of the accumulated evidence to conclude that violence in the media is part of a societal pattern that keeps America a high-violence society (Surgeon General, 1972).

The message of the mass media is clearly that physical force can and should be used to secure socially desirable ends, not just in the "wild west" but in almost all aspects of contemporary life. Although it is rare for the media to depict husbands using physical force on wives, the

more general message is easily transferred to the marital relationship. Thus, even though I know of no direct evidence that the implicit high value placed on both instrumental and expressive violence in the mass media is transferred to the marital relationship, this possibility seems so likely in view of the extensive evidence of the phenomenon which psychologists call "transfer of training" that the following policy implication seems warranted:

PI-4. Limit violence in the mass media to the maximum possible consistent with preserving freedom of expression and artistic integrity.

Essentially, PI-4 means that reduction in the extent to which TV and other fiction and nonfiction works "exploit" violence; i.e., make extensive use of violence for the purpose of capturing as large an audience as possible.

Domestic Disarmament. It is by now commonly accepted that America is a violent society. But this acceptance does not automatically bring with it a realization that for the typical citizen the problem is not violence in the streets, but violence in the home. For example, the largest single category of murderer-victim relationship is that of members of the same family. There are complex reasons why this is so (Gelles and Straus, 1977), some of which will become clear later in this paper. However, for the moment I would like to focus on the "gun-toting" aspect of American violence. One reason that domestic murders are so common is that more than half of all American households contain a gun, most of which are "handguns" rather than "sporting guns." Consequently:

PI-5. Enact stringent gun control legislation, particularly directed at restricting handguns, but also requiring that all guns be kept locked and unloaded.

PI-5 has been aptly termed "domestic disarmament" by Amatai Etzioni. It can go a long way toward reducing the most extreme aspect of domestic violence: murder. Of course, domestic disarmament will not reduce violence *per se*, since one can still punch, kick, choke, or knife. But an attack with a gun is much more likely to be fatal than other modes of attack.

The Family As Training Ground For Violence

What has been said so far emphasizes the extent to which violence in the family reflects the level of violence in the society. But the other side of the coin is at least equally important: the level of violence in all aspects of the society, including the family itself, reflects what is learned and generalized from what goes on inside the family, starting at infancy.

Physical Punishment. The implicit models for behavior provided by actions of the government and depicted in mass media form two legs

of the stool supporting American violence. The third leg is the family itself. In fact, the family may play the most crucial role. This is because the family is the setting in which most people first experience physical violence and because of the emotional context accompanying this experience. Specifically, at least 90 percent of parents use physical punishment in early childhood. Moreover, for about half of all children, this continues through the end of high school—essentially until the child leaves home (Bachman, 1967; Steinmetz, 1974; Straus, 1971).

The importance of physical punishment in training the next generation of violent citizens was described in section II above. In the forthcoming book giving the results of our national survey of violence in families (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1978), one chapter gives detailed evidence supporting this relationship. We found that the more physical punishment experienced as a child, the more violence within the marriage years later. This correlation is present for "ordinary" physical punishment, but it is particularly strong when there is heavy use of physical punishment. Physical punishment, then, lays the groundwork for the normative legitimacy of intrafamily violence. It provides a role-model—indeed a specific "script" (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Huggins and Straus, 1975)—for both the perpetrators *and the victims* of such actions. Gelles (1976), for example, found that one of the three main factors that is related to a wife's tolerating abuse from her husband is the extent to which she was hit by her parents as a child (see also Lefkowitz *et al.*, 1976). It should be almost self-evident, then, that an important policy implication of what has just been presented is:

PI-6. Gradually eliminate physical punishment as a mode of child rearing.

I have used the term "gradually" in formulating this policy implication even though my own values favor immediate cessation of physical punishment. Many practical difficulties stand in the way of an immediate cessation that, if disregarded, can have serious consequences. Specifically, we cannot expect to eliminate physical punishment until it is possible to provide parents with a proven alternative technology for controlling the behavior of children to protect them from danger and to teach the practical skills and ethical values for which society holds parents responsible. The fact that a few parents do manage to bring up children without the use of physical punishment is by no means the same as saying that most parents can do so. That remains to be proven before we risk undermining the vital tasks of socialization carried out by parents. Fortunately, such techniques are beginning to emerge (see references following PI-8).

Sibling Violence. Almost as universal as physical punishment is physical fighting between children in the family. Perhaps such fighting

is inevitable in early childhood. But it is not inevitable that attacks by brothers and sisters on each other be regarded as much less reprehensible than attacks on or by unrelated children. This difference in the way identical acts of violence are evaluated and dealt with symbolizes and reinforces the legitimacy of violence between family members. As a result, such violence continues long after it has practically disappeared from the child's relations with their unrelated peers. For example, among the sample studied by Straus (1974), almost two-thirds had hit or been hit by a brother or sister during the year they were *seniors* in high school, compared to one-third of this sample reported having hit or being hit by someone outside the family that year. Thus, right up through high school, many young people experience a second aspect of intrafamily violence which implies that there is nothing terribly reprehensible about the use of physical force between members of the same family. To the extent that this if it is correct, then:

PI-7. Encourage parents to control acts of physical force between their children and to avoid explicitly or implicitly defining such acts as permissible.

As in the case of physical punishment, implementing PI-7 is not merely a matter of ceasing to do something. One of the things that the sociological perspective highlights is the fact that any element of social structure is likely to be interwoven with other elements, and therefore cannot be dealt with in isolation. In this case, we must ask: "What is there about the situation of children in a family that gives rise to such a high level of violence?" and "How can children resolve their disagreements without physical fights?" Until children are equipped with the skills to do that, it is just as unrealistic for parents to implore "don't fight" as it is for family-life educators to implore parents not to spank. Consequently:

PI-8. Provide parents and children with techniques for coping with and resolving the inevitable conflicts of family life by means other than force and coercion.

There are many obstacles in the way of implementing PI-8, one of the most important of which will be discussed below: the failure to recognize the inevitability of intrafamily conflict and hence to take steps for coping with conflict nonviolently. But even if that were not a factor, what techniques are available? Although still a matter of research and controversy, the last few years have seen the development of methods that appear promising for resolving parent-child and sibling-sibling conflict (Blechman, *et al.*, 1976a, b; Brown, 1976; O'Dell, 1974; Patterson, Reid, Jones and Conger, 1976).

"Somato-Sensory" Deprivation. Harry Harlow once epitomized the results of his classic experiments with monkeys reared in isolation by

saying that monkeys deprived of warm social contact in infancy ". . . would rather fight than love." The same idea has surfaced in a number of different ways in the history of social science, for example, in the work on the authoritarian personality of Adorno *et al.* (1950). Part of what Adorno's "F scale" measures is the propensity to use physical violence for socially desirable ends. People who get high "F scale" scores, for example, tend to favor the death penalty and to feel that sex criminals should both be imprisoned and ". . . publicly whipped, or worse." Adorno *et al.* found that these same people also tended to have received relatively less love and affection from their parents than did those low on the "F scale."

Most recently, Prescott (1975) has pointed to both neurophysiological and cross-cultural evidence showing that the more a person is deprived of "somato-sensory gratification" such as intimate physical contact, love, and affection, the greater the level of aggression, including physical aggression. For example, a tabulation of data for 49 societies revealed that the societies which do not provide much physical affection to their children also tend to be those in which there is a high level of violence between adults. Since a loving and affectionate childhood tends to inoculate persons and societies against violence, it seems likely that this would be particularly true for violence in the family.

The policy implication that follows from this is not that parents should be warm and affectionate because by now that has become part of the standard American childrearing ideology (as compared to the "school of hard knocks" and the "don't spoil the child" conceptions). Rather, the policy implication revolves around the fact that, despite the warmth and affection ideology, millions of children are in fact deprived of just that (Adorno, *et al.*, 1950; Henry, 1963; Lewis, 1971). Consequently:

PI-9. Sponsor research to determine the social and psychological conditions that lead some parents to be cold and distant rather than warm and loving, and translate the results into programs to assist such parents.

The Inevitability of Conflict in Families

Conflict, in the sense of differences in objectives or "interests" between persons and between groups, is an inevitable part of all human association (Coser, 1956; Dharendorf, 1959; Simmel, 1908). Some types of groups tend to be characterized by more conflict than others. Somewhat paradoxically, the more intimate the ties between members of a group, the higher the average level of conflict (Coser, 1956:67). Since the family is one of the most intimate types of groups, the level of conflict is particularly high within the family. In section II above, I

outlined some of the characteristics of the family that give rise to its typically high level of conflict.

The 10 characteristics of the family just listed above are by no means a complete account of the factors that produce conflict within the family. However, they should be sufficient to indicate that the family is typically the locus of a high level of conflict at the same time that it is also the locus of a high level of interpersonal support and love. The problem is that the nature of modern society does not provide adequate mechanisms for nonviolent resolution of these conflicts. First, the privacy and the separation from close ties with neighbors and relatives characteristic of the modern family cuts it off from the assistance in resolving conflicts that such groups can provide. There is no one to turn to for help. Second, this same privacy and isolation from kin and neighbors also means that there are few or no intimate and accepted outsiders who can serve as agents of social control to block the use of physical force. Consequently:

PI-10. Reduce the impact of government programs and regulations that, directly or indirectly, encourage geographic mobility or reduce ties to the extended family.

This will be an even more difficult policy to implement than many of the others suggested in this paper for a number of reasons. First, the art and science of "family impact analysis" is only now beginning to be explored (Minnesota Family Study Center, 1976). Aside from a few obvious things (such as policies that give more encouragement to building new neighborhoods than to preserving the quality of existing neighborhoods), simply identifying the relevant programs and government regulations will be a slow and uncertain process. Second, those programs that are located will typically be found to be serving some important purpose. Consequently, it is not merely a matter of ending something, but even more a matter of finding alternatives that do not encourage mobility and the reduction of extended family ties. Finally, the aid and support provided by an intimate community and kin are not unmixed blessing. They can be stifling at the same time as they are helpful.

Returning to the high level of conflict within families, it has already been suggested that our unwillingness to recognize this fact is itself a source of violence. This is because, as long as conflict within the family is viewed as wrong, abnormal, or illegitimate, there will be reluctance to learn techniques engaging in conflict nonviolently. Therefore:

PI-11. Recognize the inevitability and legitimacy of conflict within the family rather than consider conflict an abnormal deviation.

Once the inevitability and legitimacy of conflict within families is recognized, the way is open to learn efficient and constructive ways of

resolving conflicts. Many of the methods cited in the references following PI-8, and those described below are designed to do just that. One of the most important aspects of these methods is that they are intended for normal families. They make no assumptions about psychopathology. Instead, these methods assume that the family members need to learn more efficient methods of solving interpersonal problems and proceed to teach these methods by novel and nonmoralistic behavioral methods. They focus on teaching people *how* to solve problems, not on *what* the solution to the problem is.

Sex Role, Sexism, and Wife Beating

Perhaps the most fundamental set of factors bringing about wife beating are those connected with the sexist structure of the family and society. In fact, to a considerable extent, the cultural norms and values permitting and sometimes encouraging husband-to-wife violence reflect the hierarchical and male-dominant type of society that characterizes the Western world. The right to use force exists, as Goode (1971) concludes, to provide the ultimate support for the existing power structure of the family, if those low in the hierarchy refuse to accept their place and roles. Nine of the specific ways in which the male-dominant structure of the society and of the family create and maintain a high level of marital violence are described in this section.

1. Defense of Male Authority

In the context of an individualistic urban-industrial society, the presumption of superior authority for husbands is a potent force producing physical attacks on wives. This is because, in such a society, male-superiority norms are not clearly understood and are in the process of transition, and because the presumption of male superiority must be validated by superiority in "resources," such as valued personal traits and material goods and services (Rodman, 1972).

If every man were, in fact, superior to his wife in such resources as intelligence, knowledge, occupational prestige, and income, there would be a concordance between the ascribed authority and the individual achievements that are implicitly expected to accompany that authority in individual, achievement-oriented societies. Clearly, that is often not the case, despite the fact that society gives men tremendous advantages in access to these traits and resources. Consequently, many men must fall back on the "ultimate resource" of physical force to maintain their superiority (Allen and Straus, 1975; Goode, 1971; LaRossa, 1975; Straus, 1974b:66-67).

Even if one were to argue that the physical and economic circumstances of past human history made male superiority necessary or reasonable, that is clearly no longer the case. Consequently, we

need no longer be burdened with the violence necessary to maintain such a system, and it follows that:

PI-12. Eliminate the husband as "head of the family" from its continuing presence in the law, in religion, in administrative procedure, and as a taken-for-granted aspect of family life.

Although progress is being made in respect to the achievement of husband-wife equality, the idea of the husband as head of the family remains firmly rooted in American culture (See the survey reported in *Parade*, 1971; also Kolb and Straus, 1974). In U.S. Government statistics, the only way a woman can be classified as the head of a household is if there is no husband physically present. There is no provision for listing joint heads of household. It will only be through the continued active pursuit of the goals of the feminist movement that significant change is likely to occur. Moreover, the importance of the feminist movement goes well beyond husband-wife equality because it will be impossible finally to eliminate sexism in the family until it is also eliminated in the society at large.

Although the elimination of sexism in the family is a historical change of vast magnitude, there are aspects within the immediate control of individuals. For example, both for her own protection and as a contribution to the overall policy objective, no woman should enter marriage without its being firmly and *explicitly* understood that the husband is not the head of the family. Unless stated otherwise, the implicit marriage contract includes the "standard" clause about male leadership. Changing this contract after marriage is not only difficult, but gives rise to feelings of having been misled or cheated.

Although there may be objections to introducing these ideas in junior and senior high school classes dealing with the family (as indicated by recent congressional pressure on the National Science Foundation that resulted in ending support for curriculum projects in anthropology and psychology), many local school districts will find such content appropriate. In addition, the women's movement can continue to challenge the implicit support of male-dominant family relations in magazines for young women such as *Seventeen*, *Bride*, and *Glamour*.

2. Economic Constraints and Discrimination

The sexist economic and occupational structure of society allows women few alternatives. The traditional women's occupations tend to be low in pay and low in status. Despite antidiscrimination legislation, women continue to earn about 40 percent less than men. Without access to good jobs, women are dependent on their husbands. If there is a divorce, almost all husbands default on support payments after a short time, assuming they could afford them in the first place. Consequently, many women continue to endure physical attacks from

their husbands because the alternative of divorce means living in poverty. Lack of economic alternatives to depending on the husband is one of the three main factors that Gelles (1976) found associated with beaten wives remaining with their husbands. It follows that, for women to be in a position in which they can refuse to tolerate physical coercion by their husbands, it is absolutely essential that there be occupational and economic equality. Consequently, one of the most fundamental policy implications is:

PI-13. Eliminate the pervasive system of sex-typed occupations in which "women's occupations" tend to be poorly paid and the equally pervasive difference between the pay of men and women in the same occupation.

3. Burdens of Child Care

The sexually based division of labor in society assigns childrearing responsibility to the wife. This keeps the wife in the dependent, less powerful position as long as there are small children in the family. If the marriage ends, she has responsibility for rearing the children. But at the same time society does not provide either economic provision for her doing so or child care centers that can take over part of the burden so that she can earn enough to support her children. The combination of occupational discrimination, lack of child-care facilities, inadequate child support from either the government or the father—all coerce women into remaining married even though the victims of violence.

The most fundamental policy implication of the above has to do with the sexual stereotyping of parental responsibilities. Under the present system, a husband does not need to fear that if he beats his wife and the wife leaves, *he* will be responsible for both the care of the child and the need to earn sufficient income. So, a husband can hit (and otherwise oppress) his wife with relative impunity from this possibility. He can be reasonably confident that if she does leave, he will not have the children unless *he* insists on it. Courts are reluctant to award children to fathers in any circumstances. It is no shame for a father to claim that the child will be best off with the mother, but for a mother to assert this is not only shameful, but in many cases will cause the child to be institutionalized or placed in a foster home. Therefore:

PI-14. Reduce or eliminate the sex-typed pattern of family role responsibilities.

As in the case of sexual stereotyping in the paid labor force, interest and ability rather than sex need to be the primary criteria for who does what. Moreover, this is a policy implication which, like that in respect to paid employment, is desirable irrespective of its effect on wifebeating. Just as many (but not all) women will find greater fulfillment through equal participation in the paid labor force, many

(but again not all) men will find greater fulfillment than they now experience in equal participation in the household labor force. That possibility is now denied to men because of the shame attached to household work and child care as a major interest for men.

PI-14 is a very long-range type of social change, and we need not wait for that to come about. In the meantime, the entrapment of women in a violent marriage by expecting them to assume responsibility for the care of a child if the marriage breaks up can be addressed by other steps, and particularly:

PI-15. Establish or subsidize a comprehensive and high quality system of day-care centers for preschool children.

Again, this is a policy that is long overdue in its own right, and not just for its potential in preventing wife beating. Such facilities are needed by millions of women who enjoy fully satisfactory marriages.

4. *Myth of the Single-Parent Household*

Another of the cultural norms that helps to maintain the subordination of women is the idea that children cannot be adequately brought up by one parent. Thus, if a woman is to have children, she must also have a man. To the limited extent that research evidence supports this view, it comes about because of the confounding of poverty and social ostracism with single parenthood.

It seems likely that if social pressure and constraints were removed, most women would want to live with a man and vice versa. Still, there is an important minority for whom this is not the case and who, in effect, live in a state of forced cohabitation "for the sake of the children." Thus, the fact that innumerable and (under present conditions) unnecessary social and economic constraints prevent the single-parent family from being a viable social unit forces many women into accepting or continuing with a subordinate and violent relationship.

5. *Preeminence of Wife Role for Women*

Under the present system, being a wife and mother is the most important single role for a woman. Indeed, American cultural norms are such that one cannot be a full woman unless married. A man, on the other hand, has the option of investing much or little of himself in the husband-father role depending on his interest, ability, and circumstances. In short, the stigma of being a divorced man is tiny compared to that of being a divorced woman—to which a special term with somewhat immoral overtones has in the past been attached: divorcee. This forced dependence on the wife role as the basis for a respected position in society makes it difficult for women to refuse to tolerate male violence by ending the marriage.

The policy implications of the single-parent household myth, and the dominance of the role of wife in establishing the human worth of

women, are difficult to put in specific steps because they call for a broad reorientation of the roles of men and women in our society. One cannot simply attempt to change *these two* aspects of the role of women, important as that is. Change in these two roles, if it is going to occur, is only likely to happen as one part of the process of ending the subordinate and restricted status to which women are still relegated. These two aspects of sexually stereotyped roles are part of an overall configuration that, as will be noted below, tends to define women as children.

6. *Women as Children*

The conception of women as the property of men is no longer part of the legal system of industrial countries. However, elements of this outlook linger on in the folk culture. They also survive in certain aspects of the law, such as the statutes that declare the husband the head of the household and give him various rights over his wife, like the right to choose the place of abode, to which the wife must conform.² In addition, there is the related conception of women as "childlike." In combination, these aspects of the sexist organization of society give husbands a covert moral right to use physical force on their wives analogous to the overt legal right of parents to use physical force on their children (see Gelles, 1974:58).

The implications for wife beating of these three aspects of the sexist structure of the society and the family (plus others that cannot be included here for lack of space) suggest that the most fundamental policy implication of all those put forth in this paper is that:

PI-16. Full sexual equality is essential for prevention of wife beating.

At this point it is necessary to make clear an important limitation to much of what has been said. Sexual equality by itself is almost certainly *not* going to end conflict and violence between husbands and wives. It will reduce or eliminate *certain types* of conflict, but at the same time create new types of conflict. Issues that are *not* now the subject of disagreement in millions of families—such as who will work for wages and who will be in the household labor force, or more specific issues such as who will do the laundry—can no longer be determined by subscribing to the pattern of family roles that has been worked out over the centuries. Rather, they become open questions over which severe conflict can arise. It is by no means inconceivable that *neither* partner will want to be in the paid labor force and that *neither* will want to do the laundry. Consequently, a reduction in the level of violence also depends on couples having the interpersonal and conflict-management skills necessary to cope with and realize the

² It is pertinent that even in a State known for its social and familial experimentation, as recently as in 1971, the California State Bar Association voted *not* to repeal this legislation (Truninger, 1971:276).

benefits of a less rigid type of family system. Millions of people lack these skills and almost all of us can improve them.

In addition, it will be shortsighted and dangerous to overlook the fact that freedom too has its costs. Freedom and flexibility in family patterns and sex roles remove some of the most important points of stability and security in life. These are costs that not everyone finds worth the benefits. Erich Fromm's classic book *Escape from Freedom* (1941) was concerned with far more than issues of why fascism had such wide support. At the other end of the continuum, the opposition of millions of women to the equal rights amendment and the feminist movement reflects the anxiety that many women feel over the possible loss of familiar and stable guides to life. Therefore:

PI-17. As the society eliminates fixed sex roles, alternative sources of stability and security in self-definition will be needed.

Part of these needed social anchoring points will come from occupational identification that, in the past, was difficult or impossible for women. This difficulty was not only because so few women were in socially valued occupational roles, but also because for a woman to be highly identified with an occupation raised doubts about her familial commitment, her love for her husband and children, and her femininity. But occupation as a source of identity and self-esteem has its limits. There are vast numbers of occupations that are unlikely to be valued as a means of establishing a personal identity—either by men or by women. Fortunately, there are other roles and identities that can give life to the needed structure and social integration—particularly roles in relation to the community, special purpose groups, and the larger kin group. These will be discussed later. But before doing that, two final aspects of sex roles need to be considered.

7. *Compulsive Masculinity*

Talcott Parsons (1947) suggested that in modern industrial societies the separation of the male occupational role from the family and the predominance of the mother in childrearing creates a fundamental difficulty for males in respect to achieving a masculine sexual identity:

The boy has a tendency to form a direct feminine identification since his mother is the model most readily available and significant to him. But he is not destined to become an adult woman. Moreover, he soon discovers that in certain vital respects women are considered inferior to men, that it would hence be shameful for him to grow up to be like a woman. Hence when boys emerge into what Freudians call the "latency period," their behavior tends to be marked by a kind of *compulsive masculinity*. Aggression toward women who "after all are to blame," is an essential concomitant (Parson, 1947:305).

Similarly, Parson's analysis also suggests that the origins of *female* aggressiveness to be partly found in the particular structure of the family in industrial society and why much of this aggressiveness is focused against men—especially husbands—as the agents of women's repressed position in society.³ The climate of mutual antagonism between the sexes that is partly an outgrowth of the factors described by Parsons provides a context that is not only conducive to attacks by husbands on wives but probably also underlies a number of other related phenomena, such as the growing evidence that in many instances "rape is a power trip, not a passion trip" (Bart, 1975:40; Brownmiller, 1975; Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974). Moreover, as in the typical homosexual rape in prisons (Davis, 1970), the degradation and humiliation of the victim is often a major motivating force.

The female side of the pattern epitomized by the phrase "compulsive masculinity" can be called "compulsive femininity." Part of compulsive femininity is represented in the *Total Woman* (Morgan, 1973), but also, and probably far more typically, it is the internalization of the "women as children" social definition in the form of negative self-image.

8. *Negative Self-Image*

Under the present social structure, women tend to develop negative self-images, especially in relation to the crucial trait of achievement (Horner, 1972). As a consequence, they may also develop feelings of guilt and masochism that encourage toleration of male aggression and violence and, in some extreme cases, to seek it. Full sexual equality would eliminate this as a sexually structured pattern of behavior, even though it may remain on an individual-to-individual basis.

Since compulsive masculinity and its associated violence, and compulsive femininity and its associated negative self-image, are patterns growing out of the experiences of men and women from early childhood on—and particularly the differences in the way boys and girls are socialized for their respective sex roles—it follows that:

PI-18. Parent-child interaction, parental expectations, and all other aspects of socialization should not be differentiated according to the sex of the child.

9. *Male Orientation of the Criminal Justice System*

Not only is much male violence against wives attributable to the sexist organization of society, but the crowning blow is that the male-oriented organization of the criminal justice system virtually guarantees that few women will be able to secure legal relief. There is often

³ See the discussion of the sex myth in Steinmetz and Straus (1974: 10–13) for other ways in which the pattern of male-female relationships built into the society helps to create antagonism between the sexes and hence the association between sexuality and violence.

difficulty getting even basic physical protection, as is graphically shown in the following instance (*New York Times*, June 14, 1976):

It was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon when a call came into the 103rd Precinct station house in Jamaica, Queens, from a woman who said her husband had beaten her, that her face was bleeding and bruised. She thought some of her ribs had been broken.

"Can you help me?" she pleaded to the police officer who answered the phone. "My husband's gone now, but he said he would come back and kill me." She was also frightened, she said, that he would start beating the children when he returned.

"It's not a Police Department thing," the officer told her. "It's really a family thing. You'll have to go to Family Court tomorrow. There's nothing that I can do."

But even if the women were to go to family court, unless she has unusual understanding of and ability to manipulate the system, there will often be a 3-week delay before her request for a "peace bond" or an "order of protection" comes before the judge. Such orders are, therefore, of no greater help than the police officer just cited in securing immediate protection from another assault. Even without these delays, many women cannot attend court because of the absence of child-care arrangements during the long hours of waiting for a case to come up and the frequent repetition of these days when the case is rescheduled.

Among the many other impediments to securing legal protection against assault by a husband are (a) immunity from suit by one's spouse; (b) the requirement that, even though there is abundant physical evidence, the police officer must witness the attack before an arrest can be made; (c) the frequent failure of police to arrest even when they do witness an assault; (d) the "cooling out" by police, prosecuting attorneys, and judges of wives who attempt to bring complaints; and (e) the refusal to make an award by public compensation review boards (even in cases of permanent disability) if the injury was inflicted by the husband (Straus, 1976).

PI-19. Eliminate from the criminal justice system the implicit toleration of wife beating that comes about through statutory and common law; attitudes of the police, prosecutors, and judges; and through cumbersome and ineffective procedures that make even the available legal remedies and protection ineffective.

Some movement in the direction of PI-18 is now taking place, but it is far from a general trend. Change in the legal system tends to take place where it is taken up as a priority activity by well-organized feminist groups, as in the "NOW Wife Assault Program" in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Fotjik, 1976; Resnik, 1976), or in the occasional

enlightened police department that recognizes the need to reorient its mode of coping with "family disturbance" calls (Bard, 1975).

Economic Frustration and Violence

American society, like most societies, is one in which, from early childhood on, people learn to respond to frustration and stress by aggression. This is not an inevitable biological fact, since there are a few societies in which people learn to, and typically do, respond to frustration in other ways. Nevertheless, that is how things are in this society. That is also the way they are likely to remain in the foreseeable future. For this reason, and also because it is a desirable national objective in its own right, social policy should give high priority to enabling as many as possible to avoid situations of extreme frustration of important life goals. This is by no means the same as attempting to create a life without frustration. Such a life, even if it were possible, would be empty. It would probably also be a source of violence in itself (see the discussion of the "Clockwork Orange" theory of violence in Gelles and Straus, 1977). However, a major blockage of a critical life goal is quite another thing.

There are many critical life goals that are (or perhaps should be) beyond the realm of social policy to facilitate. But a goal on which there is high consensus, as well as a high possibility of achieving change, is the provision of a meaningful occupational role and an adequate level of income for all families.

In industrial societies the husband's position of leadership is based on the prestige and earning power of his occupation. Consequently, if the husband is unemployed or does not earn an amount consistent with other men in the family's network of associates, his leadership position is undermined. Data from a study by O'Brien (1971) show that when this happens, husbands tend to try to maintain their superior position through the use of physical force. Data from my study of the parents of university students show that the percentage of husbands who struck their wives in the last year ranges from a low of 4 and 7 percent for those whose wives are almost completely or completely satisfied with their family income up to 16 and 18 percent for those whose wives are slightly satisfied or not at all satisfied. There is also evidence that assaults on wives go up with unemployment (*Parade*, 1971:13; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1978).

In discussing the roots of wife beating in the sexist organization of the family, it was pointed out that, if husbands no longer had the burden of being the "head of the family" and the main "breadwinner," they would not need to call on the ultimate resource of violence to maintain that position in situations where the wife is more competent, earns more, or has a more prestigious occupation. The same reasoning

applies, and perhaps even more strongly, when the husband is unemployed. Clearly, the most fundamental change needed is male liberation from the bounds of traditional sex roles. But at the same time, we can also pursue a policy that, aside from its intrinsic worth, is also likely to reduce wife beating. It is stark in its simplicity and powerful in its effect on human welfare.

PI-20. Full employment for all men and women in the labor force at wage levels consistent with the standards of the society, and a guaranteed income for those unable to work.

Aside from its impact on wife beating through avoiding one of the most severe frustrations that a person can experience in an industrial society, and through bypassing issues of power within the family, full employment can also exert a powerful effect through its consequences for self-esteem. Kaplan (1975) has shown that the lower an adolescent's self-esteem, the greater the likelihood of his being violent. His data further suggest that this is because boys low in self-esteem seek to achieve recognition from others through violence. This, of course, is tied in with the tendency to equate masculinity with aggressiveness. Consequently, when there is lack of recognition through achievement in school, in sports, or in an occupation, males can and do tend to demonstrate their "manhood" through violence. Again, the more fundamental policy objective is to change the definition of masculinity. But as long as that definition continues to be a part of our culture, full employment can help avoid invoking this aspect of "manhood" by providing meaningful employment as a basis for self-esteem.

A more radical approach to this aspect of the relation between economic frustration and wife beating focuses on what critics of American society see as the inhuman occupational and economic system itself. Such critics are not opposed to full employment. What they oppose is an economic and social system that hinges human worth on earnings and competitive occupational achievement. As long as such a system prevails, the vast bulk of the population is denied the possibility of securing an adequate level of self-esteem because, by definition, only a minority can be at the top in occupational prestige and income. In addition, the striving to get to the top pushes more human values to subordinate positions. Ties of friendship, kin, and community, for example, are regularly sacrificed on the altar of moving to get a better job or to accept a promotion. Consequently:

PI-21. Reduce the extent to which society evaluates people on the basis of their economic achievements and the occupational and economic competition that this entails.

The implication of PI-21 is not the end to all competition. Competition can be pleasurable *if* one can choose the arena of competition and if there is a reasonable chance of winning. Rather, it

suggests the need to end the forced and (for most of the population) no-win competition that now characterizes our occupational-economic system.

IV. Immediate Treatment Steps

The emphasis in this paper has been on prevention rather than on what a specific woman can do when she has been beaten. Most of the preventative steps are relatively long term and also beyond the resources of a single person. I have stressed these seemingly impractical things because of a belief that they *are* practical. In fact, preventative approaches that do not include the types of actions outlined in this paper are not getting at the fundamental causes—they are a Band-Aid approach.

But a focus on changing the fundamental structural causes does not mean that we should ignore the desperate and immediate situation in which millions of women find themselves. Their need is urgent. Consequently, this section is devoted to steps that are applicable to specific individuals. A summary of these steps is given in table 3. Some of these steps parallel or complement the preventative policies covered up to this point, except that they are things that an individual woman may have within her power to carry out. Others are steps that can be taken by communities and local groups. Although the steps that an individual wife needs to take are in this section, and the steps that groups and communities need to take are in the section that follows, this is merely for convenience in presenting things. In actuality, the two sets of steps are closely connected and one depends on the other. In fact, there are some grounds for misgivings over implications of the title of this section, since in a large proportion of cases there does not seem to be anything a beaten wife can accomplish unaided.⁴

⁴ The "Catch 22" situation that a beaten wife faces is well illustrated in Martin (1976) and by the following section of a letter from Katherine G. Lynch, director of the Victims Advocate Program, Dade County, Florida (written as a commentary on a preliminary version of this paper):

I am sure you are well aware of the obstacles facing the woman who tries to follow your suggestion on "What can a Battered Wife do." At present in Dade County her frustration and conviction that she has no viable alternatives would be strongly reinforced 95% of the time. Friends, neighbors and nearby relatives will often only help one or two times, if then: they frequently blame the woman for not "making" the marriage work and are afraid the husband/boyfriend will turn on them if they "interfere." (It's a realistic fear: they occasionally get pretty threatening with our staff.) Legal Services here cannot even do intake on domestic cases for two months, because of funding problems. Legal Aid—as you stated—declares all women with working husbands ineligible because of their husband's income. A restraining order is very difficult to get, and usually does not permit incarceration for violation, but rather necessitates another court hearing several weeks away. So far in our experience very few cases have gotten past the preliminary level: in those few the defendant was acquitted or placed on "misdemeanor probation," for which in Florida there is no staff assigned. The woman who tries to get a job is often beaten by her mates for so doing, either at home or on the job, or he otherwise harasses her at work until she loses the job. The whole situation is so frustrating and volatile that it's no wonder most of the "professional helpers" try to turn their backs on it.

I appreciate your efforts to help the battered woman find her way through the maze, but

TABLE 3**Summary of Actions that Can Be Taken to Deal with Specific Cases of Wife Beating****I. What A Battered Wife Can Do**

1. Get help
2. Cancel the hitting license
3. Be prepared to leave
4. Get a job
5. Don't wait
6. Problem-focused assertiveness
7. Leave or take legal action

II. What Other Persons And Groups Can Do

1. Task force on wife abuse
2. Hotlines and support groups
3. Safe houses
4. Legal aid
5. Public assistance
6. The police and wife beating
7. Therapeutic intervention

What Can A Battered Wife Do?**1. *Get Help***

The odds are strongly against any woman who tries to cope with wife beating on her own. The husband holds most of the cards: the house, for all practical purposes, is his; psychologically, he typically holds the upper hand because women are conditioned to regard the success of the marriage as their responsibility; morally, the status of women as semichildren implies the right of husbands to punish errant wives, so that almost all women who have been hit by their husband ask the irrelevant question "What did I do wrong?"

Since wife beating is primarily a social problem—i.e., a socially patterned type of behavior—the best source of help is from persons or groups committed to change the sexist structure of the family and society. Therefore, a feminist group, even if it is not explicitly concerned with wife beating, is likely to be immensely important in helping the beaten wife to regain the psychological and moral

am concerned she will blame herself when fails—and reinforce her own poor self-image both in her own eyes and in those of the public—instead of working with others to try and change the larger patterns. . . .

initiative necessary to change things. If one is lucky enough to live in a community with a "refuge," "shelter," or "safe house" for battered wives, that is obviously the place to go for information and psychological support, even if there is no immediate plan to use the physical facilities. "Hotlines" are being set up in a growing number of communities by women's groups, some of them specifically focused on wife beating. In New York, Abused Women's Aid In Crisis (AWAIC) operates such a service and serves as a national clearinghouse for information and referrals (AWAIC, 1976).

There are also a number of other possible sources of assistance such as a local branch of the Family Service Association of America; a private psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker—provided they are trained in marriage counseling (as indicated, for example, by membership in the American Association of Marriage and Family Counselors); a minister, priest, or rabbi, or a church-affiliated social service organization. However, considerable caution is needed in respect to all of these traditional human service agencies because, besides being traditional sources of help in the sense of being long established, they also tend to be traditional in the sense of an explicit or implicit commitment to a patriarchal family system.

Finally, in addition to such formal sources of help, it is important to get advice, assistance, and hopefully also moral support from friends, neighbors, and relatives. Avoiding the involvement of such people is part of the husband's psychological advantage because it insulates him from shame and from criticism of his behavior. Sooner or later they are going to find out in any case. In the meantime, the beaten wife has lost the psychological and moral support that they might provide and also their assistance in the form of specific suggestions, help in settling disputes, and often a place to go for physical safety. Even if the advice is worthless, and the moral support not forthcoming, just the act of getting the issue into the open can help to create the psychological readiness to take the initiative for whatever steps are necessary.

2. Cancel the Hitting License

A beaten wife cannot wait for the norms of the society to change so as to redefine marriage as not including the unstated right to hit. Nor can she do it unaided. Assistance in bringing about this redefinition is one of the most important reasons for involving others. Having brought the issue into the open, and hopefully with their support, she can make clear that the use of physical force by a husband (or wife) is *never* justified and will not be tolerated.

Part of this is the need to keep clear the difference between a conflict and how one settles conflicts, and between being wrong about something and how one changes the behavior of the person who does something wrong. Even if the classic complaints of being a "nagging

wife" or a "lousy housekeeper" are correct in a particular case, that no more justifies a beating than being a "griper" or a "slacker" at work. In this connection, it is important to realize that friends, neighbors, relatives, and *therapists* often start by trying to find out who or what is wrong. A beaten wife must reject that approach, even though these issues must ultimately be faced. Whatever else is wrong, all parties must acknowledge that hitting is wrong. So an essential first step is to make clear that, irrespective of who is at fault, the use of violence is unacceptable.

3. *Be Prepared to Leave*

The redefinition called for above is unlikely to come about unless the wife also makes clear that she can and will leave if the new definition of marriage is violated. Leaving, rather than violence, must become the ultimate sanction for both parties to a marriage. But this should never be done as a bluff.

One has to accept the fact that, if it comes to that, it is better to live in poverty, or live with whatever other burdens the end of the marriage brings, than to be beaten. Consequently, an essential part of the process of ending wife beating is to plan ahead for this eventuality. Without such plans—that is, without a specific place to go—the threat of leaving is basically a bluff and one that will be so perceived by most husbands and therefore ignored, with a consequent worsening of the situation.

4. *Get a Job*

Plans to leave, should the need arise, do not just involve a physical location. A critical element is some means of support. Public assistance is the right of a woman who has been driven from her home by her husband's violence and one must be prepared to use this method of support. But it is better to provide for oneself. In fact, getting a job, even if this is at the expense of other things that are highly valued, is probably as important a step as can be taken. It serves to further validate the threat to leave if violence occurs. It serves to bolster the resolve of the wife so that she is more likely to take other needed steps which could prevent having to actually leave. It avoids the choice between two undesirable states of dependency: the husband or the state.

But what about the wife who has no marketable skills or has young children? This question points up precisely the reason why threats to leave are typically ineffective. If that is the case now, will it be any different after the next beating? Obviously not. So the issue must be faced immediately. It is better to start any needed job training at the very beginning, or to get started with what jobs there are at the very beginning, or to set up child-care arrangements at the beginning. All

will be more difficult later, and in the meantime lack of a job undercuts other steps.

5. *Don't Wait*

It is important that the situation be faced immediately—at the very first slap. If the first slap or beating has occurred, don't wait until the next one, especially in the hope that there will not be a next time. There will be a next time. All the available evidence shows that the frequency of hitting and beating does not decrease with age. So the attacks are most likely to continue—or increase—unless steps are taken to alter the pattern. Recognizing this simple statistical fact is, by itself, an important part of the overall process of ending wife beating because so many women endure their situation in the false belief that he will grow out of it.

6. *Problem-Focused Assertiveness Versus Catharsis*

A dangerous aspect of one wing of the "encounter group" movement, which has its parallel among a number of marriage counselors and writers of marital advice books, is represented in Bach and Wyden's *The Intimate Enemy* (1968). Bach and Wyden urge their readers to drop "outmoded notions of etiquette" and ventilate their anger. During one group session he urged the women participants: "Don't be afraid to be a real shrew, a real bitch! Get rid of your pent-up hostilities! Tell them where you're really at! Let it be total, vicious, exaggerated, hyperbole." (Howard, 1970:54).

Although Bach and Wyden's book has disclaimers to the contrary, the overall message of the book as I read it urges wives to do just what the quotation suggests. This advice is based on a "catharsis" or "ventilation" theory of aggression control. That theory starts with the assumption that all of us have built into our nature a greater or lesser tendency toward aggression that somehow must find expression. If we attempt to repress this deep, biologically based motivation, it will only result in a more destructive explosion of the innate aggression drive at some later time.

Unfortunately for those who have acted on such advice, almost no empirical research with any pretense of scientific rigor supports the theory, and much of it shows the reverse: that opportunities to observe or to be aggressive tend to produce *greater* subsequent levels of aggression and violence (Berkowitz, 1973, Hokanson, 1970, Steinmetz and Straus, 1974, Straus, 1974). In general, aggression against another (either verbal or physical) tends to (a) produce counter aggression; (b) impede getting to the real problem; and (c) if it does succeed in squelching the other person, reinforce the use of aggression as a mode of interaction.

There is, however, a kernel of truth underlying the "let it all hang out" and "ventilation" approaches to marriage. It hinges on the

difference between assertion (standing up for one's interests) and aggression (acts carried out with the intention of hurting the other). Assertiveness is essential. But one can be assertive without being aggressive (although always with the risk of aggression being imputed). For example, the critical first steps of "getting help," "cancelling the hitting license," and "making clear that one is prepared to leave" are all highly assertive, but nonaggressive acts. Second, assertiveness is vital if there is to be any hope of correcting the problem over which the violence occurs. If it is conflict over the children, sex, money, or how the household is run, then these issues must be faced.

Procedures for rational conflict resolution of the type just outlined, often combined with systems for rewarding occurrences of desired behavior, are the focus of much of the recent "marriage encounter" movement (Koch and Koch, 1976, Mace and Mace, 1974) and of "behavioral" therapists such as Blechman *et al.*, (1976a, b), Patterson (1975), and a number of others who are represented in the chapters of an important new book on *Treating Relationships* (Olson, 1976; see also Jacobson and Martin, 1976). One can say that a focus of these approaches to "treating relationships" is the improvement of interpersonal skills, including assertiveness, so that the legitimate interests of all parties can be optimized. This type of therapy may also have the advantage of being less threatening and more attractive to husbands. In accordance with prevailing masculine role models, men are more reluctant than women to have their childhood or present emotions and psychological status hashed over, as in the traditional "insight" therapy. They prefer to deal with actions and results more than history and personality, and these are precisely the foci of the new marriage encounter, marriage enrichment, and marriage counseling approaches.

7. *Leave or Take Legal Action*

In an unknown, but certainly not small, number of instances the type of steps just outlined will be ineffective. In that case a woman probably has only three choices: either leave, take legal action, or some combination of the two. All of these are extremely complex and uncertain. The seeming simplicity of leaving overlooks vast differences in how that act is defined and perceived. If it is an impulsive running out of the house to some highly tenuous alternative, husbands will realize that their position is not at all jeopardized. Then, with the typical return home, the beatings resume, though perhaps not immediately. Almost all of the 100 women studied by Gayford (1975), for example, had left at least once, many repeatedly. When a wife returns under such circumstances, it probably strengthens the husband's hand because he now realizes more than ever that she truly has no long-term alternative.

Even a departure that is *intended* to be temporary must be defined in this way in advance, along with an indication that the wife's return will be *her* choice—her decision to give him another chance. Such a definition of the situation will only be believable if it is truly within the wife's power not to return, and the husband knows this. This is part of the reason for the emphasis a few paragraphs back on making specific plans to leave at the very beginning. Any putting off or any concealment of such plans is likely to so seriously undercut a wife's position that other things may be irrelevant.

As for legal steps, a number are available, but all are difficult and uncertain because the judicial system is focused on "preserving the family" rather than protecting wives from physical injury. In fact, at a number of crucial places, the law gives priority to the former (Straus, 1976). Moreover, even when legal actions are initiated, so many are dropped by the complainant that this provides a ready excuse for the police, prosecuting attorney, and judges to follow their "natural" inclinations of treating wife beatings as "domestic disturbances" (i.e., not really a crime) rather than as assaults. This in turn sets up a vicious circle. Since the cases are defined as not really crimes, or as crimes not likely to be successfully prosecuted, women are discouraged from filing charges and encounter footdragging when they attempt to pursue such charges. As a result, many who would bring charges if not dissuaded, or who would follow through if obstacles and footdragging did not occur, do not. Even attorneys employed by beaten wives tend to follow this pattern. Consequently, for legal steps, as for almost everything else, the assistance of a feminist group, and if possible a feminist-oriented lawyer (male or female), may be critical. Assuming that such assistance can be found (or for a woman with sufficient determination, without it), the main legal steps have been well summarized by Clasen (1976):

Criminal Charges. She may choose (in some States) to prosecute the assailant under the criminal laws of the State. Once a complaint has been filed, it is very important to follow through with all the court proceedings. There will usually be a court appearance to authorize a warrant for a criminal charge, arraignment in the District Court, a preliminary hearing and the trial. In felony cases there will also be an arraignment in Circuit Court and a trial.

Not following through on a court case is an invitation for further abuse. Following through the verdict establishes to the assailant and to the world that further violence will not be tolerated.

Civil Suit. She may choose a divorce or legal separation. The help of a private attorney or Legal Aid must be enlisted. When papers are filed for divorce, a restraining order can be included to order

the assailant to "desist and refrain from beating, annoying, molesting, physically abusing, or otherwise interfering with the personal liberty of the other" during the divorce proceedings, usually six to eighteen months. If the assailant disobeys this restraining order, the police can pick him up and put him in jail.

Civil Commitment. The possibility of a mental illness commitment may be pursued if the assailant is mentally ill and dangerous to himself or others. If this is the client's chosen route, she must familiarize herself with Community Mental Health Services and the Probate Court commitment procedures. NOW will assist in making contact with Community Mental Health to arrange for psychiatric assessment and help from Court Services.

A wife assault victim may use all the resources available to her. She may, in fact, do "all of the above" in an effort to end violence perpetrated against her, or she may decide to do one or two of these.

What Can Others Do?

Just about every step suggested for women who have been beaten has a counterpart in steps that are needed by feminist groups, the legal profession, and human service agencies, and individual practitioners if real progress is to be made. To leave it to a lone woman to buck what amounts to the institutionalization of family violence by an entire society is both cruel and unrealistic, despite occasional successes. Each of the groups just listed, plus every individual citizen, needs to push for the type of policies outlined earlier in this paper. But in this section I will discuss only those steps that are intended to assist specific wives, rather than the longer range changes needed for a truly preventative approach.

1. *Task Force on Wife Abuse*

Generalities that are stated as the result of social science research have little meaning for the average citizen. They are not impressed by a rate of so and so per 1,000 of the U.S. population. They are impressed when *X* or *Y* number of cases are uncovered in their own community. So a first job for such a task force is to start building public awareness and raising public consciousness through a local survey such as those recently done in Flint, Michigan (Flynn, 1975), or Saint Paul, Minnesota (Zagaria, 1976). These need not be elaborate, nor do they have to fit the criteria of scientific sampling. They simply need to demonstrate that there are lots of women being beaten and possibly right next door.

A second job of such a task force is to use this information to mobilize existing human service agencies in so far as this is possible. It can provide a basis for establishing a policy that public assistance will be given to women who leave home because of violence, rather than

forcing an individual woman to make the general case as well as her specific case. It can encourage the police to explore inservice training for more effective and realistic handling of wife beating cases. It can sensitize social service agencies to the need for dealing with the problem. Finally, it can help muster the public support needed to set up new channels for dealing with wife beating.

2. *Hotlines and Support Groups*

The difficulty, and often the impossibility, of a woman's coping with a violent husband without psychological and moral support has been stressed at so many places in this paper that no further elaboration is necessary here. Information on the nearest hotline or support group can be obtained from AWAIC (1976) or National Organization of Women (NOW, 1976).

3. *Safe Houses*

If all women had the understanding of the general situation and of the steps outlined in the previous section, emergency shelters or safe houses might only rarely be needed. But the situation is just the reverse. Consequently, in my opinion, the most important single step that a community group can take is the establishment of such a house. This provides the only realistic way out for large numbers of women. Moreover, it can also serve an important educational and consciousness raising function. The fact that there is a whole house full of women and children whose own homes are not safe to live in is dramatic. It can help pave the way for public support of other immediate steps as well as the longer range preventative steps. In this connection, even if it is decided to keep the address of the house confidential as a security measure, the activities of the house should be given maximum publicity. Every untoward event should be reported to the media, including the difficulties created by zoning rules and by antagonistic or footdragging public officials. In fact, one might almost wish for a certain amount of legal and bureaucratic troubles, or even a threatening husband, as occasions for statements before a city council and articles in the newspaper and on TV.

4. *Legal Aid*

The term legal aid usually means legal services for people who lack the money to employ a lawyer. That certainly applies to large numbers of abused women. Ironically, legal aid is often denied such women because, in most areas, a woman is not eligible if *her husband* has a regular income, even though she has no way of getting a share of that income without legal aid. There is also a need to create a more sympathetic understanding and sufficient commitment to the issue by lawyers so that they will persist despite unsympathetic prosecuting attorneys, judges, and juries and to a considerable extent, a legal system that is stacked against providing protection or relief for beaten

wives. Despite these impediments, the legal system can be an effective tool. So there is need for a legal counseling, at least as a supplement to private lawyers and to the usual legal aid lawyer.

A momentous step toward providing women with legal protection against assault by their husbands began as this paper was written. A group of 12 repeatedly beaten women in New York City initiated a class action to require that the police, court officers, and judges comply with the provisions of existing statutes that have so long been flouted (*New York Times*, Dec. 8, 1972:2; Dec. 12, 1976:73). The suit charges that the police not only refuse to arrest abusive husbands in most cases, but also that they do not tell the wives that they are entitled to make a citizen's arrest with the aid of the police. The police also decline, according to the suit, to give the women medical assistance and protection by removing abusive husbands from the house. State laws mandate all of these. The suit also states that battered wives are frequently told incorrectly by Family Court personnel that they must take advantage of the court's family counseling services before seeking legal help.

5. *Public Assistance*

Since a major reason why battered wives remain with their husbands is their financial dependence on them, the availability of public assistance as an alternative to being beaten must be established in the mind of both public assistance officials and the general public. Often it seems as though a beaten wife is not eligible because eligibility depends on having already established a separate residence. But this is a matter of administrative procedure, not law. Homeless *male* vagrants are given food and shelter, and the same can be done for women who are homeless because of being driven out to protect physical safety. Moreover, this assistance needs to be available immediately, rather than at the end of administrative and investigative procedures that often take 3 to 6 months.

6. *The Police and Wife Beating*

The work of Morton Bard of the City University of New York with the New York City and other police departments has shown that it is possible to change the typical role of the police in wife beating cases (Bard and Zacker, 1976). The typical role is to intervene to control the immediate physical conflict, to avoid arrest, and, perhaps unintentionally, to give implicit legal approval to the wife beater. The implicit approval occurs partly because many policemen think that a husband does have a right to hit his wife, provided the injury does not require hospitalization. This manifests itself in many subtle ways. Among the less subtle of these are focusing almost entirely on quelling the disturbance and almost never mentioning the fact that assault is a crime. It also manifests itself in the difference in what the police offer

to do for the husband and for the wife. After the "disturbance" has been stopped, if the wife is concerned with her safety, they do not offer to help the husband leave. It is assumed to be *his* house. Consequently, even though it is the wife who has been attacked, they offer to help *her* pack and leave. To top it off, there are instances in which wives who fled to a neighbor's house being refused police protection to reenter the house to obtain their belongings because the officer felt he had no right to enter "*his*" house.⁵ They rarely attempt to mediate or help resolve the conflict or make referrals to human service agencies, and even more rarely offer to assist the wife in pressing charges. In fact, as previously noted, the police usually try to argue a wife out of pressing charges.

Bard's program focuses on training police officers to do more than just separate the couple. Officers are given an understanding of why conflict and violence in the family are so common, how to help a couple address the underlying problem, and also to make referrals to appropriate human service agencies. It is essentially a crisis intervention training program. Experience with the program to date suggests that it has helped the families involved since: "In the 22 months of operation of the Family Unit. . .there has not been a homicide in any family previously known to the unit. While family homicides in the precinct increased overall, in each case there had been no prior police intervention." (Bard, 1971). Moreover, the 18-man family unit, although exposed far more to the dangers inherent in family disturbance calls, sustained only one minor injury.

Bard has prepared a comprehensive training guide (1975), including materials for role-play training of police officers, performance evaluation forms, etc. This is supplied on request to the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. So the program is available to be implemented by other departments.

7. *Therapeutic Intervention*

Just as wife beating was ignored by academic researchers in psychology and sociology until quite recently, there has been a similar gap in clinical practice. Actually, it is worse than a gap because under the influence of Freudian theory, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and social workers have tended to focus attention on such things as presumed aggressive "drives," acting-out of impulsive "needs," and female masochism. In short, to the minor extent that wife beating has been dealt with clinically, it has been through attempting to diagnose and treat sick persons rather than sick *relationships*. As previously

⁵ Even in those jurisdictions that do not vest property in the name of the husbands, and do not give husband the legal right to determine the domicile of the family, the fact that the law does not protect a woman from the use of force by the husband (unless a weapon has been used or the wife needs hospitalization) effectively gives him these rights.

noted, recent developments have moved the field of marriages counseling to just such a focus on relationship. Nevertheless, as of this writing, little has been published on the specific marriage counseling methods to be used for husband-wife violence. But a start has been made. Several family service agency conferences were held in 1976 (for example, by the Family Service of Detroit and by the Jewish Family Service of New York) and one paper detailing specifics is in press (Saunders).

Marriage counseling is undergoing a tremendous growth. It may be the fastest-growing type of clinical service in this country. Considering the large population now served and the prospects for an even larger clientele in the immediate future—most of whom will have been involved in at least some violent incidents—the scope for a meaningful contribution to the elimination of wife beating is evident. However, this potential contribution is not likely to take place unless therapists come to see wife beating as primarily a problem of social relationships (especially power) rather than of mental illness. Marital therapy to deal with wife beating must focus on treating the relationship. Of course, psychological problems such as damage to the wife's self-esteem and sense of adequacy, do often accompany wife beating, and the counselor can provide valuable assistance to these women.

The importance of therapy focused on reorganizing the pattern of husband-wife relationships is stressed because, as previously noted, marriage counseling still seems to be dominated by psychoanalytic and other "insight"-type therapies focused on the presumed deep psychological problems of the partners. At best such treatments are likely to be ineffective. More usually, they divert attention from the here-and-now issues that must be resolved. At worst, traditional therapy tends to reinforce the society's penchant for blaming the victim—the wife—rather than the husband or the relationship. This is most apparent in the use of such concepts as "female masochism," and in a subtle and usually unintended (but nonetheless powerful) encouragement of women to follow traditional, passive-accepting female roles (Chesler, 1972). Perhaps the direction in which treatment of wife abuse cases needs to go can be best illustrated by comparison with the treatment of the closely related problem of child abuse.

The still predominant method of treating child abuse is insight-type psychotherapy and, if this fails or is not available, removing the child and punishing the parents by fine or jail. This approach is slowly being replaced by programs that, instead of trying to reorganize the personality of the abusing father or mother, teach parents how to "parent" and thus to avoid the kind of situation that leads to child abuse. The same shift in emphasis is called of less extreme husband-wife and wife-husband violence of which wife-beating is the most

dramatic manifestation. That is, the treatment steps must continue to include psychotherapy or psychological support and must continue to include the wife's removing herself, as well as prison for ultimate mode of coping with the child abusing parent. But the more fundamental solution lies in changing the five aspects of the social structure discussed in this paper and the interpersonal skills that will enable them to negotiate the inevitable differences and frictions that arise in marriage, and hence to avoid the escalating sequence of events that leads to physical violence.

Changing a phenomenon as deeply embedded in the social system as wife beating is a vast undertaking. So many things are needed that one almost does not know where to start. In fact, a realistic approach recognizes that there is no one place to start. Rather, a broad public awareness and commitment to change is necessary so that individuals and groups in all spheres of life can attend to changes in each of these spheres. For example, change in the legal and law enforcement system will not by itself end wife beating. But the police, lawyers, judges, and legislators can act to remove some of the many barriers that now prevent women from receiving legal protection from beatings. Thus, in most States, unless the assailant uses a weapon, the police cannot make an arrest, even if the wife is obviously injured and the husband makes no attempt to deny her charges. (She can, however, make a "citizen arrest" and insist that the police help her—provided she has sufficient presence of mind, self-confidence, and determination, and some place to hide when the husband is released from jail an hour or two later! The law concerning the evidence needed to make an arrest for wife beating can be changed, just as laws regarding the evidence needed for a rape conviction have recently changed. Similarly, the fact that putting a husband in jail deprives the wife of her means of support is often pointed out to women and is one reason so few severely beaten wives press charges. But this need not be the case in those States where a prisoner can be released for employment during working hours, and in other States such laws could be enacted—if the society were truly determined to end wife beating.

V. Research Needs

Until recently wife beating has been the victim of "selective inattention" on the part of both the general public and the research community. Thus, almost any aspect needs investigation. Even those few aspects that have been studied remain in doubt because of the inevitable limitations of any one investigation, especially since this is a new field of research that lacks a background of well-proven methods and theoretical approaches to the problem. For example, earlier in this paper I provided statistics on the frequency of wife beating based on

the first large and representative sample of couples. But it will be recalled that a number of limitations to that data had to be pointed out. One of the most important of those limitations is that, despite the astoundingly high rates of wife beating uncovered in the survey, these are likely to be underestimates. I suggested that the true rates are actually double those that are reported in this paper. So even the most elementary facts about the incidence of wife beating are far from established.

On the other hand, important as it is to establish just how much wife beating there is in the United States, it is even more important to answer questions about the causes of wife beating. This is not just a matter of scientific curiosity. Knowledge of the causes of wife beating obviously influence (or should influence) steps to prevent it. If wife beaters are thought to be mentally ill, then psychotherapy is clearly needed. If husbands hit their wives because of the excessive strains that a modern society puts on the nuclear family, then some reorganization of the family system or some change in how the families relate to the rest of society is needed. If one of the factors leading to wife beating is society's expectation that families be headed by husbands, with the husband as the main source of income, then changes in sex-linked obligations and expectations are needed. The list could go on and on. Indeed, it must go on and on because these and many other similar questions need to be answered to provide a scientific underpinning for attempts to deal with the problem of wife beating.

Despite the above, realism suggests that there is little chance that the massive research efforts needed to answer these questions will take place within the immediate future. Even if this turns out to be wrong and scientifically valid answers are produced in the course of the next few years, we need not and should not wait those few years before taking remedial steps. A few years may be almost no time at all in the history of science, but it is a long, long time in the life of victims of marital violence. In previous sections of this paper, many steps were outlined which can be taken *now* to reduce marital violence. Some of these steps are based on little or no hard evidence. A few are based on fairly solid evidence. However, for a number of the suggested steps, the question of whether there is proof of a relationship to violence is almost irrelevant because they are steps that are socially desirable in their own right. For example, a reduction in economic insecurity was suggested as a means of reducing the frustrations and tensions of modern life that seem to be related to marital violence. We do not know how much reducing the level of economic insecurity and unemployment will reduce assaults on wives. Optimistically, this one step by itself might produce a 3 or 4 percent reduction (and, of course, more when in combination with other factors). The violence-reduction

potential of reduced economic insecurity might even be counteracted by other changes set in motion by the effort to reduce economic insecurity. But since full employment and a basic minimum income are social goods in their own right, the society will have gained, even if they turn out to have no effect on the level of marital violence.

Theoretical and Methodological Orientation

Before listing and describing specific research issues, two other general considerations need to be set forth. One is a very general theoretical perspective, and the other is a general methodological perspective.

Violence as a System of Social Relations. I suggest that an understanding of the particular aspect of violence which is the concern of this consultation is not likely to be achieved unless it is studied within a framework that views family violence as a whole and that views family violence as one aspect of violence as a system of social relations characterizing the society in general.

The significance of focusing on the interrelation of violence in one family role with violence in other family roles, and with violence and other characteristics of American society, is more than a matter of covering a wider range of topics (i.e., both child abuse and wife abuse). Much more important is the theoretical stance that guides what will be investigated when dealing with any one aspect of violence: the assumption that violence in any one family role or situation must be understood in the context of the level of violence in other spheres of family life. For example, wife beating has been found to be correlated with other family violence, including physical punishment. A realistic understanding of each depends on knowing their interrelation and the reasons for the relationships. Equal emphasis, therefore, needs to be placed on studying such things as physical punishment, the level of violence portrayed in stories written for children, and the extent to which physical punishment, "ordinary" marital fights, and wife beating are influenced by historical circumstances, by social norms and values, by the life circumstances in which parents find themselves, etc. In short, research focused exclusively on wife beating is too narrow an approach to produce a basic understanding of the processes that bring about wife beating.

The importance of studying all aspects of violence in the family in order to achieve an understanding of any one aspect is further illustrated by the research that Suzanne Steinmetz, Richard Gelles, and I have done on wife beating. Rather than study only families in which the husband has attacked the wife, we have studied cross-sectional samples of families in general. This permits comparison of the wife beater with the nonviolent, and with the husband beaters. The

fact that our research shows violence *by wives* against husbands to be almost as frequent an occurrence as violence by husbands is of great importance for both scientific understanding of violence in the family and for efforts to reduce the level of violence. It suggests, as stated earlier, that elimination of wife beating depends not only on eliminating sexual inequality, but also on altering the system of violence on which so much of American society depends.

Multimethod Triangulation. The general methodological principle that I would like to recommend for any program of research on wife beating is what Donald Campbell calls "triangulation." This means the use of a wide variety of research methods, but not simply because different issues require different methods, important as that is. Equally important is the assumption that each method has its own set of limitations as well as advantages. Therefore, multimethod triangulation is needed to achieve confidence in the findings on any one issue.

The Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire, for example, has deliberately employed the following widely different research methods: Indepth unstructured interviews with a small sample of families, classroom questionnaires, mail questionnaires, local interview survey, national sample survey, content analysis of literature from 1850 to 1970, person-computer game simulation of marriage, and secondary analysis of national survey data. Studies planned for the future include computer simulation using mathematical models, observational studies of violence by children, secondary analysis of national crime panel data, laboratory experiments, cross-national comparative studies, and a longitudinal or "panel" study.

Need for Longitudinal Studies. Of the types of research to be carried out in the future, the most important is a longitudinal study. By this I mean a followup or "prospective" study starting out with information about social background and personality, and about experience with violence up to that point. Such a sample should be resurveyed every 2 or 3 years, for at least the next 10 years. The advantage of such a "prospective" study, as contrasted with the "cross-sectional" research on which we now depend, is that it can help settle issues of which is cause and which is effect. For example, unemployed husbands in our national sample of couples have much higher rates of wife beating. We think it is the unemployment that causes the wife beating, but it could well be that violent men tend both to lose their jobs and beat their wives. Which causes which has profound implications for national policy concerning methods of reducing marital violence, and it will take a longitudinal study even to come close to a clear answer.

A Sampling Of Research Questions

As pointed out in the beginning of this section, so little empirical research has been done on family violence that almost any aspect needs investigation. In addition, analysis of the human family—and especially violence in family relationships—involves deeply held values and widely differing scientific fields and theories. Consequently, almost everything about violence in the family is controversial and hotly disputed. Out of this almost limitless number of controversial issues I have singled out 12 for illustrative purposes. I would not want to say that these are the 12 most important issues, only that each is important.

1. *Wife Beating Is Increasing.* The available evidence suggests that parents use physical punishment *less* frequently now (Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Miller and Swanson, 1958). However, there is no reliable evidence on fighting between siblings or between spouses. On the one hand, the change from the harsh conditions of life characteristic of agricultural and early industrial society to the physically less stressful conditions of an affluent industrial society, the changes in the legal status of women, and the growth of family advice literature stressing the importance of love and respect in family relationships would all suggest a reduction in these aspects of intrafamily violence. On the other hand, a modern industrial society is widely felt to pose greater social and psychological stresses and to promote feelings of alienation and frustration than was true earlier—all of which can spur higher levels of violence. In addition, the extreme intimacy and closeness of the modern nuclear family, with its pressures for psychological conformity, may create greater stress and frustration within the family, and which ultimately lead to physical violence.

It may be possible to use police and court records of family disturbance cases to get at least some leverage on this issue, as has been done in historical studies of mental illness rates (Eaton, 1955). However, differences in intervention and arrest practices and differences in the kind of offenses thought serious enough to bring to trial may invalidate comparisons over time. Another possible approach is through the content analysis of popular literature, both fiction (Gecas, 1972) and nonfiction (Straus and Houghton, 1960). One such content analysis (Huggins, and Straus, 1975) found no secular trend in the level of intrafamily violence in children's books over the period 1850–1970. However, that study found that the number of violent acts per page increased sharply during each major war in which the United States was involved.

2. *Wife Beating Does Not Occur in "Normal" Families.* From this viewpoint, only disorganized and pathological couples engage in physical violence; i.e., couples with problems such as unemployment,

poverty, divorce or desertion, minority status, etc. If our estimates of the frequency of marital violence are correct, either this assertion must be wrong or the majority of American families are abnormal. Of course, if one follows the practice followed in studies of child abuse and takes as an indication of abnormality the fact that a husband has hit his wife or vice versa, then the statement is obviously correct. But this type of circular reasoning is of little value in furthering understanding of family violence. Despite our skepticism on this point, the available evidence does suggest that family disorganization is associated with violence, especially husband-wife violence. It remains to be determined empirically just how close this relationship is.

3. *Wife Beaters Are Mentally Ill or Excessively Aggressive.* The basis for such a view seems to be the type of circular reasoning described above. What little empirical evidence there is comes from studies of child abuse. Examination of these studies by Gelles (1973) and Gil (1971:642) suggests that ". . . in most incidents of child abuse the caretakers involved are 'normal' individuals exercising their prerogative of disciplining a child whose behavior they find in need of correction." I know of no study comparing the mental health or personality of husbands and wives who use force on each other to a nonviolent sample, but the results would probably be similar. The research on homicide (of which spouse murder is the largest single category) shows no larger incidence of mental illness than in the population at large. However, at least a plausible case can be made for the idea that spouses who use physical force tend to be aggressive personality types. This is a question that can be settled through a relatively straightforward research design. Such is not the case with the controversy over the role of alcohol in causing family violence, which is discussed below.

4. *Alcohol Use Causes Family Violence.* There is reasonably good evidence that alcohol is associated with violence in the family. But what is not clear is whether people act violently because they are drunk or whether they get drunk in order to have implicit social permission to act violently. Empirical research on this issue will be extremely difficult because the actors themselves are committed to a definition of the situation in which violent acts are attributed to temporary loss of control due to alcohol.

5. *The Lower the Socioeconomic Status of the Family, the More Violence.* The evidence in support of such a proposition is mixed. In relation to the use of physical punishment, there does seem to be a correlation, but it is low (Erlanger, 1974). In relation to husband-wife violence, our national survey shows that blue-collar husbands are more violent, but that education and income by themselves make little difference (Straus, 1977). Official statistics on assault, of which a

substantial proportion are between spouses, show higher rates in the poorest areas of a city. However, officially recorded rates are by no means the same as incidence rates, as had been clearly shown in studies of juvenile offenses (Nye, Short, and Olson, 1958). The apparent class difference could be entirely a function of differences in public visibility and differences in willingness to call in the police to deal with family disputes. Class differences can also be a function of the willingness of agents of social control to label or classify certain behaviors as deviant. Gelles (1975) has argued that this is particularly likely, since what is called "child abuse" is the result of a social labeling process.

6. *Husbands and Fathers Are More Violent Than Wives and Mothers.* If we compare the sexes in terms of violence in the *parental* role, the evidence is clear that women are more violent than men. They outnumber men as child abusers (Gelles, 1973) and within the normal range are more often the parent who administers almost all types of physical punishment (Gelles, 1974). It is also noteworthy that from Greek and Roman times on it was women who were responsible for the often high rate of infanticide (Radbill, 1974).

The section on "husband beating" earlier in this paper indicated that there is little difference in the *frequency* with which husbands and wives used violence. However, that study shows women to be more frequent users of physical aids in their assaults; i.e., throwing things, hitting with an object, etc. Similar results were obtained by Gelles, 1974; Steinmetz, 1977; and Straus, 1974a. On the other hand, there is a considerable body of evidence indicating that in nonfamily situations, women are much less aggressive and violent than men. Clearly, research is needed to clarify this issue.

7. *Sexual Equality and New Family Forms Will Reduce Wife Beating.* A great deal of the physical violence between husband and wife is related to conflicts over power in the family (Allen and Straus, 1975; Straus, 1973b), and specifically to attempts by men to maintain their superior power position. One might, therefore, expect that, as families become more equalitarian, violence between husband and wife will decrease. However this will be the case only to the extent that men voluntarily give up their privileges. To the extent that sexual equality comes about by women demanding equal rights, the movement toward equality could well see a temporary increase in violence rather than a decrease (Kolb and Straus, 1974). Aside from struggles over changing the rules of the marriage game, there is nothing inherent in an equal relationship that precludes conflict and violence over substantive issues. In fact, in the past, to the extent that women *accepted* a subordinate position, much overt conflict may have been avoided by not contesting the husband's view of an issue.

As the boundaries between the sexes diminish, there might also be other reasons for an increase in family violence. Under the present sex-role definitions, women are expected to be less aggressive and violent than men. This aspect of sex-role stereotyping is already changing to a limited degree. For example, the crime rates for women have begun to converge on those for men, especially for violent crime (Simon, 1975); there was a television show with an aggressive James Bond type of woman "hero" ("Mod Squad"), and a movie "Super Chick." Huggings and Straus' study of children's books from 1850 to 1970 found an increase in the proportion of aggressive acts initiated by women, especially in the most recent years.

Turning to radical changes in the structure of the family, there is a widespread belief that such "alternative family forms" will be less violent. In part, this belief is based on the view that, in rejecting the "middle class family," there will be a movement away from middle class striving and aggressiveness. In part, it is based on the idea that a larger social group will provide more outlets and alternatives and less frustrations. But on both theoretical grounds as well as the meager empirical evidence that is now available, the opposite might well be the case. The alternative "multilateral" family forms may provide more opportunities for sexual and other jealousy, even though they are set up with the opposite intent. To the extent that such families constitute large households, they will require more rigid rules than a nuclear family in order to accomplish the ordinary physical maintenance activities. In addition, many such groups seem to be imbedded with an agrarian romantic ideology glorifying a sharp division of labor between men and women. Finally, several studies show that the larger the size (whether measured by number of children or by comparing nuclear with joint households), the greater the use of physical punishment (Straus, 1976).

8. *Materialism and Striving Are Associated With Violence.* The alienation generated by modern mass society had led many to reject not only the mass society, but the types of achievement orientation and striving behavior that are assumed to have produced modern technological societies. All of the ills of the society, including violence, tend to be attributed to the excessive achievement striving. However, it would be difficult to document a case showing that the high level of violence and the many other grave problems of contemporary American society would be alleviated if Americans became less achievement oriented. Rather, we think that the solution to these problems must be found in changes in social organization rather than changes in the typical personality structure.

Although these are broad sociohistorical questions on which there may never be a conclusive answer, we can at least investigate certain

aspects, and some limited studies have already been carried out. For example, Miller and Swanson's historical survey and, to a certain extent their contemporary data, show that entrepreneurially oriented parents tend to train their children in the "school of hard knocks" (Miller and Swanson, 1958). On the other hand, the studies of Kohn (1969) show that middle class parents (who presumably best represent the striving ethic) are less punitive than are working class parents. There is also evidence from the longitudinal study of Eron and his colleagues (1973) showing that high achievement orientation is associated with *low* levels of aggression, and Straus' study of the fathers and mothers of 550 college students finds the same relationship.

Despite these findings, there could well be a relationship between a high level of achievement orientation in a society and violence. This could come about because, although almost everyone can internalize the *desire* for high accomplishment, not everyone can actually satisfy such desires. A generation ago Merton called our attention to the deviance-producing potential of such a discrepancy between culturally prescribed ends and the means actually available to reach such ends (Merton, 1938). Within the family, empirical studies such as those of O'Brien (1971) and the theoretical analysis of Goode (1971) suggest that violence is likely to occur when a husband lacks the occupational and economic accomplishments that he and his spouse expect husbands to attain. Allen and Straus (1975) tested this hypothesis and found strong support, but only among working class families.

9. *Violence in the Family Has Positive Functions.* Most people's view of the good society is one with a minimum or zero level of violence—in the family or elsewhere. But conflict theorists such as Coser (1966) point out that conflict, sometimes violent conflict, is a fundamental and often constructive part of social organization. It is a primary engine for social change and development and for the underdog to gain greater rights. Thus, nonviolence is only one of the characteristics of a good society; another is that it must be open to change and to correcting inequities. There are occasions in which the value of nonviolence and the value of equity and openness to change conflict. It is in these situations that violence can have important positive contributions to human welfare.

Of the three positive contributions of violence discussed by Coser, two seem to apply to the family. These are "violence as a danger signal" and "violence as a catalyst." Thus, within the family, violent acts by a member can serve as a means of communication when other modes of communication fail to signal that there are serious problems; and violent acts can be a catalyst in bringing about needed changes when all else fails. In principle, there should never be a situation in which all else fails. But conflict theorists argue such situations do exist

because alternative modes of resolving conflicts and inequities are either unknown to the persons involved, unavailable to them, or unavailable until some violent act serves as a catalyst to bring nonviolent methods into operation. Therefore, unless we are prepared to live with inequity and injustice, and in a static society, it is almost inevitable that violence will remain a part of human social organization, including the family.

We have stated the case for the conflict theory of the positive functions of violence in as strong terms as possible, perhaps in part to compensate for our own misgivings about the validity of these propositions. At the minimum we feel that, rather than accept the inevitability of violence in family relationships, we should focus research on the development of modes of social relationship and institutional patterns that will make violence unnecessary to achieve equity, freedom, and openness to change. Realism, however, compels us to fear that a truly nonviolent society will be a long time in the making. The conflict theorists may even be correct in their view that it is impossible except in a static society. At the same time "realism" has its dangers. It can be a self-fulfilling prophecy or a subtle defense of the status quo—in this case of the present high level of violence between family members.

10. *Excessive Restraints on "Normal" Aggression Lead to Even Greater Stresses and Outbursts of Truly Destructive Violence.* This issue is discussed as "the catharsis myth" in Steinmetz and Straus (1973, 1974). An important aspect is the idea that *verbal* aggression is a substitute for physical violence: it is claimed that permitting one tends to avoid the other (Bach and Wyden, 1968). Contrary to this widely accepted theory, Straus' analysis (1974a) of data for a large sample of couples shows that high levels of verbal aggression are associated with high levels of physical aggression. However, the issue is far from settled, in part because the Straus data is cross-sectional.

11. *Violence in the Family Reflects the Prevalence of Violence in the Society at Large*: both a national "culture of violence" and a more intense form of this in certain subcultures (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967). It should follow that societies having low levels of violence outside the family also have low levels of intrafamily violence. Although Straus' review of the anthropological and other cross-cultural data roughly support this proposition, there are many exceptions. For example, England has one of the lowest homicide and assault rates of any industrial nation, yet there is considerable evidence that rates of child abuse and wife beating are quite high.

12. *Physical Punishment Trains Children in Violence and Lays the Groundwork for Wife Beating.* Results of our national survey show clear support for this proposition and, therefore, suggest that physical

punishment be completely eliminated as a child-management technique. However, the national survey data are cross-sectional, and the results might not be supported by a longitudinal study. Moreover, the average tendency covers up the fact that many who experienced high levels of physical punishment are not violent toward their spouse, and many who were rarely hit are violent. Clearly, more is involved than just physical punishment or the amount and severity of such punishment. Research is urgently needed to find out just what these other factors are. Only in this way are we likely to break the cycle of violence.

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Response of Elaine Hilberman*

The task of summarizing the state of the art in the areas of causes and treatment of spouse abuse is awesome. Murray Straus has made an invaluable contribution to our knowledge by focusing on societal determinants and attitudes that legitimize the use of savage aggression by men against women with whom they are intimate. Violent coercion has become a norm by which men control whoever or whatever is perceived as a threat.

I am quite troubled, however, by the Straus data which suggest that women abuse their husbands almost as often as men abuse their wives. These data are strikingly inconsistent with a host of studies by other social scientists (Pleck *et al.*, 1978), as well as with the experiences of clinicians who both evaluate violent individuals and treat victims of violent assaults. In a study of divorce applicants, 37 percent of wives,

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compared with 3 percent of husbands, cited physical abuse by spouse as a reason for the divorce action (Levinger, 1966). Nearly the same disparity was noted in a study by O'Brien (1971).

The Straus study was conducted by asking whether the respondent had hit his or her spouse during the previous year. The researchers failed to ask whether this behavior was invoked to initiate a fight or whether it was used in self-defense. In my clinical work with battered women (Hilberman, 1977; Hilberman and Munson, 1977 and 1978) only a minority of women fought, and when they did so, their use of violence was invariably related to a direct threat to life, and even then usually after years of savage abuse against the women and their children. This was in contrast to the pattern of violence by the husbands, who would beat their wives in any situation in which they did not immediately get what they wanted, some even beating their wives while the women were asleep.

This defensive pattern of violence in women was confirmed in the report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1969). Although husbands and wives kill each other with equal frequency, the Commission found that, among those who murder their spouses, wives were seven times more likely than husbands to have murdered in self-defense. Some of Straus' own data support the thesis that women fight back to defend themselves; for example, he reports that more women than men "kicked, bit, or tried to hit with fist." One does not initiate a fight by kicking or biting. It is likely that women kick or bite when they are physically overpowered and rendered helpless and in danger by an assailant.

Even were we to assume that women assault their husbands as often as husbands assault their wives, we must remember that most men are bigger and stronger than most women. Men have also had more training and experience in physical combat, so that, in a fight between a man and a woman, the woman is in greater danger of serious injury. This is supported by Boston City Hospital statistics, where 70 percent of the assault victims seen in the emergency room are women who have been attacked in the home (Center for Women Policy Studies, 1977). If men were sustaining serious injuries by their spouses, this would certainly be reflected in the medical trauma statistics.

As a psychiatrist and a clinician, I regularly provide services to individuals who are either perpetrators of violent crimes (rape, incest, wife beating) or victims of these violent acts. My evaluation of the theoretical constructs of social scientists takes place in the context of clinical work with anguished individuals. Any general theory about how people behave is viable only when, in large measure, it accurately describes the actual behavior of individuals; that is, the theory must "fit" with what we know about people.

Clinical experiences of mental health professionals support the views of social scientists that men in large numbers abuse their wives. Clinical experiences do not, however, support the conclusion that women are as likely to beat their husbands. The same paralyzing fear and passivity that keep women from leaving violent homes also prevent their striking out against their husbands.

If the battered woman's response to violence is passivity and silence, if only 4 out of 60 women acknowledge the violence against them even after years of treatment, if women are likely to describe accurately their own loss of control while saying nothing about the behavior of their spouses, and if the men we have evaluated consistently lie about their own behavior, then it is difficult to imagine that Dr. Straus' survey is an accurate reflection of what really occurs behind closed doors. Statistics and theories are not people. I should like to tell you about people:

A colleague and I evaluated and treated 60 battered women who were referred by the medical staff of a small rural health clinic (Hilberman and Munson, 1977 and 1978). The history of marital violence was known to the referring clinician in only 4 of the 60 cases, despite the fact that most of these women and their children had received ongoing medical care at the clinic. Battered women, like rape victims, are silent victims.

The psychological consequences of violent abuse were devastating for the victims. There was evidence of severe psychological dysfunction for more than half of the women, with depression, manic-depressive illness, schizophrenia, personality disorders, and alcoholism all represented. Thirteen of the women had been hospitalized, some repeatedly, with violent and psychotic behavior often the precipitant for hospitalization. Almost the entire sample made frequent visits to local physicians and emergency rooms for somatic complaints, anxiety, insomnia, or suicidal behavior, usually by drug overdose. Most had been treated, usually inappropriately, with sedative-hypnotics, tranquilizers, and antidepressants. Although there were multiple contacts with clinicians over the years, neither the psychiatrists nor the nonpsychiatrist physicians were told of the violence.

Despite the variety of presenting complaints and diagnoses, there was a uniform psychological response to the violence that was identical for the entire sample. The women were in a study in paralyzing terror that is reminiscent of the rape trauma syndrome (Burgess and Homstrom, 1974), except that the stress was unending and the threat of the next assault was ever present.

Agitation and anxiety bordering on panic were almost always present: "I feel like screaming and hollering, but I hold it in." "I feel like a pressure cooker ready to explode." They talked about being

tense and nervous, by which they meant "going to pieces" at any unexpected noise, voice, or happening. Events even remotely connected with violence, whether sirens, thunder, people arguing, or a door slamming, elicited intense fear. There was chronic apprehension of imminent doom, of something terrible always about to happen. Any symbolic or actual sign of potential danger resulted in increased activity, agitation, pacing, screaming, and crying. They remained vigilant, unable to relax or to sleep. Sleep, when it came, brought no relief. Nightmares were universal, with undisguised themes of violence and danger: "My husband was chasing me up the stairs. . .I was trying to escape but I kept falling backwards." "There was a man in the house. . .trying to kill me." "Snakes were after me. . .in my bed."

In contrast to dreams in which they attempted to protect themselves or to fight back or to escape, their waking lives were characterized by overwhelming passivity and inability to act on their own behalf. They were drained, fatigued, and numb, often without energy to do more than minimal household chores and child care. There was a pervasive sense of helplessness and despair about themselves and their lives. They saw themselves as incompetent and unworthy and were ridden with guilt and shame. They felt they got what they deserved, had no vision that there was another way to live, and were powerless to make changes.

Like rape victims, battered women rarely experience their anger directly, although their stories elicited despair and outrage in the listener. Aggression was most consistently directed against themselves, with suicidal behavior, depression, grotesque self-imagery, alcoholism in a few, and self-induced scratches and scars. Passivity and denial of anger do not imply that the battered woman is adjusted to or likes her situation. It is the last desperate defense against homicidal rage.

The women control their aggression and deny their rage by means of a complex mythology about wife beating:

1. The violence is perceived as a norm; this is most likely when the victim comes from a violent family of origin.
2. The violence is rationalized; he is not responsible because he is sick, mentally ill, alcoholic, unemployed, or under stress.
3. The violence is justified; she deserves it because she is bad, provocative, or challenging.
4. The violence is controllable; if only she is good, quiet, and compliant, he will not abuse her.

The victim utilizes this group of beliefs to "explain" the brutality. This reinforces her tenuous denial and protects her husband and her marriage, at the expense of her self-esteem and autonomy, and possibly, her life. It allows her to remain totally enslaved while believing that she is in control.

These same women who are beaten, raped, imprisoned, and terrorized by their husbands grew up in homes where they were physically and sexually abused by their parents and raped by their brothers and their boyfriends. Women who have spent their lives as victims of brutality suffer profound psychological consequences, which include passivity, lack of assertiveness, low self-esteem, emotional isolation, and mistrust. The need for shelters in which women and their children can live in a safe and caring environment without fear is urgently needed. But love is not enough. Although most mental health professionals have not been advocates for women, there are growing numbers of competent, responsible, and feminist professionals whose services are a necessity to help reverse the dire effects of victimization.

Violence occurring in the privacy of one's home has not been considered a public issue. One victim commented: "My husband would do anything to get me down to where I would not go out in the world." Surely this must be one of the most profound abridgments of one's civil rights.

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