Physical Violence Among White, African American, and Hispanic Couples: Ethnic Differences in Initiation, Persistence, and Cessation[1]

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Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the author and do not represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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More than 20 years of research, together with media attention, has created an image of intimate violence against women as a single pattern of violence escalation and persistence that is stopped only by the termination of the relationship or some outside intervention (Pagelow, 1981; Walker, 1984). More recent research, however, suggests that this is only one of several patterns of violence against women (Aldarondo, 1996; Aldarondo and Kaufman Kantor, 1997; Aldarondo and Sugarman, 1996). Although more and more researchers are beginning to focus on the possibility and importance of different patterns of intimate partner violence, the literature in this area is still lacking. Of the studies that have considered patterns of persistence and cessation, relatively few have used large samples (Wofford, Mihalic, and Menard, 1994). In fact, many of what can be considered landmark studies in this area have relied on very small samples (Aldarondo and Sugarman, 1996; Feld and Straus, 1989; Kaufman Kantor and Aldarondo, 1997). Moreover, previous research has relied on information from only one of the individuals in the intimate relationship. A growing body of research suggests that more reliable data can be obtained when information on violent behavior comes from both individuals (Bohannon, Dosser, and Lindley, 1995; Szinovacz, 1983; Szinovacz and Egley, 1995). Existing research on patterns of intimate partner violence has also all but ignored the issue of race/ethnicity. This neglect results, in part, from the small sample sizes in many studies that would make analyses by racial or ethnic group impossible. By using a larger sample and information from both members of the couple, the current study addresses many of these limitations and asks two questions: Are there racial/ethnic differences in patterns of male violence against women? And, do these differences remain when other theoretically relevant variables are introduced into the model?

Data

The data used for this study come from the first and second wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), conducted by members of the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call, 1988; Sweet and Bumpass, 1996). NSFH was designed to cover a broad range of family structures, processes, and relationships with a large enough sample to permit subgroup analysis (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call, 1988; Sweet and Bumpass, 1996). The first wave of NSFH (NSFH1) was conducted in 1988 and included a national probability sample of 13,017 respondents. Interviews were conducted with a cross-sectional sample of households and an oversample of blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and recently married persons. One adult in each household was randomly selected as the primary respondent. Five years after the original interview, the first wave sample was reinterviewed. The second wave consisted of face-to-face interviews with surviving members of the original sample and a personal interview with the current spouse or partner. The sample used for the current study consisted of all couples who were either married or cohabiting at the time of the first wave and who were still together at the time of the second wave (n = 3,584).

Measurement of Key Variables

Violence. NSFH uses several questions to assess intimate partner violence. Responses to the following two questions were used to create a violence variable:

There are various ways that married (cohabiting) couples deal with serious disagreements.

1. When you have a serious disagreement with your husband/wife (partner), how often do you end up hitting or throwing things at each other?

2. Sometimes arguments between partners become physical. During the past year has this happened in arguments between you and your husband/wife (partner)? During the past year, how many fights with your husband/wife (partner) resulted in YOU hitting, shoving, or throwing things at him/her?

If either the male or female partner or both indicated that the male partner had used physical force, the violence variable was coded as violent. Violent behavior consisted of hitting or throwing things and/or physical arguments by the male partner against the female partner. Answers to these questions at both survey administrations made it possible to create a violence typology that included four categories: persistently violent, newly violent, violence cessation, and nonviolent.

Race. Race/Ethnicity was a self-identification measure assessed with the following question: "Which of the groups on this card best describes you?" The response choices were black; white, not of Hispanic origin; Mexican American; Chicano; Mexican; Puerto Rican; Cuban; other Hispanic; American Indian; Asian; or other. For this study, only those individuals that self-identified as either black, white but not Hispanic, or as one of the Hispanic national origin groups were included. The race of the male partner was used because only a very small percentage (3.6 percent) of the couples were mixed race.

Findings

Ethnic Differences in Sample Characteristics

Exhibit 1 presents the results of analyses that look at ethnic differences in selected sample characteristics and illustrates the necessity of considering race and ethnicity in any analysis. Caucasian individuals in this sample were least likely to be cohabiting with a partner compared with African-American and Hispanic/Latino individuals. Consistent with Census data, Hispanic men were younger than either white or African-American men. Although no significant ethnic differences in total couple income were evident at either wave 1 or wave 2, there was a significant relationship between ethnicity and income change. Specifically, Hispanic couples were the only ones to experience a significant increase in income between the first survey and the followup survey.

Exhibit 1. Sample characteristics

	Caucasian (*n* = 3,473)	African American (*n* = 235)	Hispanic/Latino (*n* = 240)
Working fewer weeks at wave 2	13.6	14.8	19.2
Working more weeks at wave 2	12.5	12.3	15.2
Cohabiting	3.2	6.8	7.1***
Male partner age wave 2	51.6	49.6	46.6***
Income wave 1 (in dollars)	62,399	45,049	30,688
Income wave 2 (in dollars)	56,209	42,002	38,070
Income change (in dollars)	-5,152	-1,904	4,673*

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Demographic Differences in Violence Patterns

The data presented in the top section of Exhibit 2 show the results of separate chi-square tests evaluating the relationship between each violence category and several demographic characteristics. Several variables were significantly associated with each violence category.

Cohabiting individuals were significantly more likely than married individuals to persist in using violence and to have initiated violence between the first and second wave. Compared with men who had worked the same amount or more hours in wave 2 than in wave 1, male partners who worked fewer hours at wave 2 were significantly more likely to become violent. Males who were working more hours at wave 2 were significantly more likely to cease violent behavior by the second survey administration.

Race/ethnicity was also significantly associated with the violence category. Specifically, black men were more likely to have stopped violent behavior, but Hispanic men were significantly more likely to have started. Consistent with existing violence research, men in all three violence categories were significantly younger than nonviolent men (Aldarondo and Sugarman, 1996; Kaufman Kantor and Aldarondo, 1997). Income was significantly associated with one violence type only. Couples with lower incomes were significantly more likely to have stopped the violence compared with couples in which no violence was reported at either wave 1 or wave 2.

Exhibit 2. Associations between selected demographic variables and violence category

	Violence Category		
	Persistently Violent	Violence Cessation	Newly Violent
Male partner working less	2.9	8.6	8.3
Other	3.3	6.9	4.3
Male partner working more	4.9	10.1*	4.2
Other	3.0	6.7	4.8
Married	2.8**	6.4	3.9***
Cohabiting	8.3	8.3	13.2
White	2.8	6.2*	3.8**
Black	3.9	11.0	5.8
Hispanic	4.1	7.3	9.7

	Persistently Violent		Violence Cessation		Newly Violent	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Male partner age (years)	36.4	45.3***	40.2	45.3***	36.7	45.3***
Wave 1 income (in dollars)	50,613	62,226	51,865	62,226***	57,817	62,226
Wave 2 income (in dollars)	52,724	57,539	54,808	57,539	56,443	57,539

Note: The omitted group is the nonviolent group. The top half of the exhibit represents chi-square analyses. The bottom half of the exhibit represents tests of differences in means.
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Multivariate Analyses

Multinomial logistic regression was used to examine which risk factors were significantly associated with a particular violence category (see exhibit 3). In contrast to the bivariate results (see exhibit 2), ethnicity was not a significant predictor of all of the violence categories. Black men were more likely to have ceased violent behavior between wave 1 and wave 2. At the same time, they were at a greater risk of initiating violence. The age of the male partner was negatively related to all violence categories. In other words, younger men were at an increased risk of being persistently violent, stopping violent behavior, or initiating violence compared with the likelihood of being in the nonviolent group. Employment status was significantly associated with starting and stopping violence. Men who were employed fewer weeks at wave 2 were at more than twice the risk of first engaging in violent behavior between wave 1 and wave 2, but they also had greater odds of stopping their violence compared with men who worked the same or greater number of weeks.

Exhibit 3. Multinomial logistic regression predicting male partner violence category (*n* = 2,409)

Violence Category	Relative Risk Ratio	Standard Error	*p* Value
Persistently violent			
Male Hispanic	1.65	.68	.22
Male black	.99	.47	.99
Male employed less	1.11	.43	.79
Male employed more	1.40	.42	.27
Income difference	1.00	.00	.58
Male age W2	.95	.01	.00
Cohabiting	1.10	.49	.82
Violence cessation			
Male Hispanic	.76	.31	.50
Male black	1.76	.45	.03
Male employed less	1.84	.42	.01
Male employed more	1.47	.32	.08
Income difference	1.00	.00	.65
Male age W2	.97	.001	.00
Cohabiting	1.12	.35	.71
Newly violent			
Male Hispanic	1.30	.48	.48
Male black	1.78	.52	.05
Male employed less	2.15	.52	.00
Male employed more	.82	.24	.49
Income difference	1.00	.00	.81
Male age W2	.95	.01	.00
Cohabiting	1.62	.49	.11
Likelihood ratio $chi^2(df, 21) = 85.29$			
Prob > $chi^2 = 0.0000$			
Log likelihood = -1404.80			

Note: Nonviolent is the comparison group.
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Discussion

Previous research considering patterns of persistence and cessation of intimate partner violence has not been able to distinguish any consistent risk markers for a particular type of behavior. However, this research has also been limited by small sample sizes and a reliance on information from one person in the couple (Aldarondo and Sugarman, 1996; Wofford, Mihalic, and Menard, 1994). The current study used the National Sample of Families and Households (Sweet,

Bumpass, and Call, 1988; Sweet and Bumpass, 1996) to examine ethnic differences in the types of violent behavior. At the multivariate level, youth was significantly associated with all violence categories. This suggests several different ways in which age and violence intersect. Those men who stopped their violent behavior between wave 1 and wave 2 may have, in fact, aged out of such behavior. Analyses of the age of men in each of the violence categories indicated that men in the persistently violent and newly violent categories were, on average, the youngest; men who were never violent were the oldest. Men who had ceased violent behavior between the first and second waves of the survey were on average 5 years younger than those who were never violent and 4 years younger than both those who were continually violent and those who initiated violence during the same time.

Being employed fewer weeks at the time of the second wave was also significantly associated with two of the violence categories: violence cessation and initiation. A curvilinear relationship may exist between level of employment and violence. For example, working overtime may be a source of stress (Hochschild, 1997) that increases the risk for violence. Once that stress is relieved (by working less), the risk for violence may decrease. On the other hand, working fewer weeks directly affects income, which may also increase stress levels and result in an increased risk for violence (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Different types of stressor mechanisms may influence different individuals in a variety of ways. The relationship between race/ethnicity was also somewhat complex. African-American men were more likely than white men to stop their violent behavior. However, African-American men were also more likely to have engaged in violence for the first time between the first and second waves. Because of the complex interpretations of the impact of both employment level and race/ethnicity on violence category, separate analyses were conducted for each racial/ethnic group.

What emerged from these analyses were slightly different patterns of risk markers for each group. Among Hispanic couples, cohabitation and being employed more hours at wave 2 were both significantly associated with persistent violent behavior, while being employed fewer weeks at the time of the second wave was associated with greater risk of violence initiation. Among African-American couples, youth was associated with both persistent violence and the initiation of violence, while being employed fewer weeks at wave 2 was associated with both violence cessation and initiation. Finally, among white couples, younger men were at a greater risk of being in all three of the violence categories than with being in the nonviolent group. White men who were employed fewer weeks by the time of the second wave were also at a greater risk of initiating violent behavior. These results should be interpreted with some caution, however, because of the relatively small Hispanic and African-American samples.

Although this study improves on existing research, it has limitations. Specifically, because the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1990a; Straus, 1990b) were not the violence measure used, comparison with research that uses this measure is difficult. In addition, although the sample could be broken down by racial and ethnic groupings, the African-American and Hispanic samples were very small relative to the Caucasian sample. Furthermore, the cell sizes were too small to consider Hispanic national origin groups, the importance of which has been demonstrated by prior research (Kaufman Kantor, Jasinski, and Aldarondo, 1994). Finally, information is available about only two points in time separated by 5 years. Although behaviors

may have changed from the first to the second wave, not enough is known about what happened during that 5-year period to understand the factors that may have influenced a change in behavior.

Implications for Research

Despite these limitations, the current study addresses the multidimensional nature of violent behavior and suggests that, not only do batterers differ in type, but that different mechanisms may lead to particular types of behaviors. Future research should continue to examine the changing dynamics of intimate partner violence. In addition, researchers should consider using larger sample sizes or targeted samples that make it possible to consider racial and ethnic differences, something that has been addressed in a limited manner in other research of this type. Finally, the ability to use information obtained from both members of a couple may be of vital importance for more reliable and valid research on male violence against women.

Implications for Practice

The impact of research that demonstrates both different patterns of violent behavior and different risk markers for each violence type can provide a more focused approach for prevention and intervention efforts. Acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach is not sufficient has implications for how practitioners deal with intimate partner violence. The results from this study, for example, suggest that level of employment is related in different ways to different patterns of violence for different racial/ethnic groups. Individuals who design and implement prevention and intervention efforts should be aware of these differences and respond accordingly. This may entail stress reduction programs offered through employers for individuals working overtime, or perhaps lobbying for better-paying jobs or more full-time employment for individuals who are underemployed.

What is important for one pattern of violence against women may not be relevant for another pattern. This point is especially important for the enhancement of treatment programs and better targeting of intervention efforts. In this study, social structural characteristics were not significantly related to persistent violence; however, they were important risk markers for violence initiation. Regardless of the specific prevention or intervention effort, the results from the current study suggest that the same factors that might increase the initial risk for violent behavior may not affect whether or not this behavior continues. Therefore, it may be most important to target intervention and prevention efforts specifically toward those factors that are most applicable to the behavior that is being addressed.

Note

[1] A version of this paper was originally published as Jasinski, J.L. (2001). “Physical Violence Among Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic Couples: Ethnic Differences in Persistence and Cessation.” *Violence and Victims* 16(5), 1–12, and it is reproduced, in part, with permission of Springer Publishing Company, New York.

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