

Deconstructing Self-Defense in Wife-to-Husband Violence

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Members of 68 families with allegedly violent wives were studied to explore the nature of women's violence at home and to ascertain whether wives assault their spouses in self-defense. Accounts of children and the wives' mothers were contrasted with husbands' and wives' accounts to ensure a high degree of accuracy of the assessment of the problem and to test the validity of the spouses' accounts. Qualitative analysis revealed that the credibility of the wives' accounts of violence was highly questionable and a justification of self-defense for female-to-male violence was unfounded in a majority of cases.

Keywords: wife-to-husband violence, women's violence, husband battering, self-defense

Over the years, community responses to wives' violence against their husbands have been diverse, although the overall general attitude has been one of both tolerance and dismissiveness. When alleged violence by wives was first reported, many critics dismissed such wife-initiated violence on the grounds that such violence did not (could not) exist. When evidence of such violence increased, its presence was acknowledged, but its nature and prevalence were not considered serious enough to constitute a problem or a type of domestic violence (DV).¹

This resistance to accept wives' violence against husbands as a problem continued even when irrefutable evidence from many parts of the world showed clearly

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that wives and husbands assault each other in what seems to be equal proportions (see, for example, Archer, 2000; Cook, 1997; Fiebert, 1998; Gelles & Cornell, 1990; Gelles & Straus, 1988; George, 1994; Sarantakos, 1996; 1997; 1998b; 1999; Scanzoni, 1978; Schulman, 1979; Sorenson & Telles, 1991; Straus, 1993; Tjaden & Toennes, 1997; Tyree & Malone, 1991). The response to this was that wives' aggression was a necessary and legitimate means of defending themselves against abusive husbands. It was also seen as a response to frustration, stress, oppression, and victimhood and a revolt against the manifestation of patriarchal values and the enforcement of male power and supremacy (see, for example, Adler, 1992, p. 269; Hopkins & McGregor, 1991; Kurz, 1993, p. 90; Lazarus & McCarthy, 1990; McGregor, 1990; OSW, 1991, p. 7; OSW, 1992, p. 5; Seth-Purdie, 1996).

When new evidence further weakened the validity of patriarchy as a cause of women-initiated DV (see, for example, Island & Letellier, 1991; Letellier, 1994; Lockhart, White, Causby, & Isaac, 1994; Schilit, Lie, & Montagne, 1990), self-defense became a dominant explanation of wife-to-husband aggression. Simply, some contended that women are neither violent nor abusive but retaliate (hit) in self-defense against the men who abuse them. Despite the lack of sound empirical evidence to support this proposition and the growing evidence supporting the opposite (see Carrado, George, Loxam, Jones, & Templar, 1996; McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987; Pearson, 1997a, b; Renzetti, 1992; Sarantakos, 1996; Sommer, 1994), the *defense of self-defense* in wife-to-husband violence is very popular, and has also been extensively used to defend successfully women who assaulted or even killed their husbands (for instance, Bradfield, 1998; Hubble, 1999; O'Connor & Ferrall, 1996). Research findings showing that wife-to-husband violence exists even when husbands were never violent in their home are dismissed on the grounds that their research ignores the context of violence, and hence such research can neither explain DV fully or adequately nor refute the validity of self-defense in wife-to-husband aggression.

This paper explores the adequacy of the claim of self-defense further. The guiding question here is whether the context of wives' violence, as others perceive and experience it, is *always* justified by the notion of the wives' self-defense. In other words, are claims of self-defense by aggressive wives *always* justified by reason of self-defense?

In addressing this issue, this paper will focus on (a) the presence/absence and nature of aggression by the husbands that allegedly force women to defend themselves; (b) the nature and type of violence employed in the wives' alleged self-defense; and (c) whether the respondents considered that conditions in the violent families in questions support the notion of self-defense.

METHOD

SAMPLE

The size and nature of the sample were influenced by the fact that (a) large-scale quantitative studies on wife-to-husband aggression have already been conducted; (b) the empirical validity of the results of large-scale studies were often questioned on

the ground that they fail to consider the construction of violence at the interpersonal level; (c) spouses' accounts of DV often are contradictory, making the identification of the real nature of DV impossible; and (d) the central focus of the research is on the *context* of DV. These factors suggest that an exploration of self-defense will best be served by employing a qualitative study including a sample that would be adequate and suitable to provide truthful, credible, and reliable qualitative data.

Working within these parameters, a sample was chosen that included 68 members of violent families, namely the husbands (i.e., alleged victims), the wives (i.e., alleged perpetrators), one of their children, and the wife's mother. Some advantages of this sample are that it offers first-hand information about the nature of DV in these families while permitting others' (besides the husband's) assessment of the credibility of the wives' accounts of self-defense and of DV in general.

Sample selection began with the husband, and then the other members were chosen. The first husbands were chosen from a larger sample of self-defined abused husbands, identified and studied in the 1980s and early 1990s as a part of research on unmarried cohabitation and family violence (see Sarantakos, 1984, 1992). Additional husbands were identified through snowballing, referrals of friends and relatives of the husbands, and self-reports of husbands responding to publications and media presentations of the author's findings. All husbands were considered whose spouses and other relatives (i.e., children and maternal mother-in-law) were available *and* willing to be interviewed.

At the time of the interview, the respondents resided in rural and urban areas, mainly of New South Wales and Victoria (Australia). All spouses of the sample were once married, but at the time of the interview all were divorced. The average duration of the relationship was nine years, and the average time elapsed from divorce to the survey was six years. The respondents' social status is described as low to middle class with occupations covering a wide spectrum, from laborers to army officers, journalists, teachers, and public servants. Equally diverse was the spouses' educational status. Overall, the difference in education between husbands and wives was not significant.

Table 1
Marital Status of the Participants at the Time of the Interview

| Marital status | Males | | Females | |
|----------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|
| | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % |
| Remarried (once) | 52 | 76.5 | 19 | 28.0 |
| Remarried (more than once) | — | — | 22 | 32.0 |
| Cohabiting | 5 | 7.0 | 9* | 13.0 |
| Living alone | 11 | 16.0 | 18** | 26.0 |

* Five women lived in more than one cohabiting relationships before joining this unit.

** Eleven women lived in more than one cohabiting relationships before joining this unit.

At the time of divorce, the wives' average age was 39 years, the youngest being 33 and the oldest 45. The husbands' average age was 43, the youngest being 37 and the oldest 48. The marital status of the respondents at the time of the interview is shown in Table 1.

At the time of the survey, the children's ages ranged between 16 and 32; 58 percent were female and 42 percent male. All young children lived with the mother. The wives' mothers were chosen because they were found to be more familiar with their daughters' personal lives than the wives' fathers or the husbands' parents.

DATA COLLECTION

All respondents were interviewed, beginning with the husband, then the couple's child, the wife's mother, and finally the wife. Standard ethical procedures were employed during the study regarding informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. Parental consent from both parents was obtained to include children in the study. Permission was obtained to cross-reference information obtained in the interviews.

In this study, "self-defense" is defined as "the use of equal force or the least amount of force necessary to repel danger when the person reasonably perceives that she or he is in imminent danger of serious bodily damage or death" (Walker, 1993, p. 208, cited in Heider, 1995, p. 331; see also Walker, 1990). Following this, the central theme of the questioning employed in the study was related to the context of violence and addressed by considering:

- the presence or absence of the husbands' alleged aggression, its nature and type;
- the nature and type of the wives' alleged aggression; and
- the respondents' (children's and wives' mothers') overall perception of the wives' alleged self-defense.

Given the size and mode of selection of the sample, as well as the nature of the study, no claim of representativeness is made. Hence, only analytical (qualitative) generalizations are permitted (Sarantakos, 1998a).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study produced a complex data set that addresses the questions posed at the outset. In this paper a summary of the findings relating only to the nature of self-defense and of male "aggression" against his wife/partner in general, and the response to the direct question of whether the wife hits in self-defense will be presented. Other findings of the study (e.g., regarding power structures in violent families) will be presented elsewhere.

ALLEGED AGGRESSION BY HUSBANDS

The central theme of the findings presented in this section is about the husband's actions that allegedly force his wife to assault him in order to defend herself. The

central question here is “Do husbands act in a manner that puts wives in danger and that compels them (wives) to employ violence in self-defense?” What do wives report? What do other relatives report? Whose accounts of DV seem more truthful? In summary, the answers to these questions show that, while the vast majority of the wives argued strongly that the husband was violent enough to justify her action, the wives’ mothers thought otherwise. More specifically,

- 64 percent of the husbands’ mothers-in-law argued that the husband was not violent against his wife;
- 24 percent of the husbands’ mothers-in-law argued that the husband used “minor aggression” against his wife;
- 12 percent of the husbands’ mothers-in-law argued that the husband showed violence, that was considered by the respondents to be serious.

The views of the children were almost identical to those of their grandmothers. The three group responses to the central question of this section are described below.

NO AGGRESSION BY HUSBANDS

The study shows that in 64 percent of cases studied, prior to the wives’ aggression, there was no aggression on the part of the husbands. In these cases, what triggered the aggression by the wife was violation of household rules or of personal expectations or demands of the wives on his part, such as disregard of the wife’s wishes or instructions regarding child responsibilities, insulting one of her close friends, staying out longer than expected, gambling household money, forgetting to make the monthly mortgage payments, or being found to have had an affair with another woman sometime in the past.

The following comments from members of the same family are typical examples:

Son: Most fights I remember happened around the table, in the lounge, or in the car. In most cases the slap, kick, or punch came out of the blue, out of nowhere, almost without a reason. I remember Dad reacting always by complaining, “What have I done to deserve this!”, “Why did you do that,” or “What have I done, again?” ... Mom’s usual reaction was: “Don’t worry, he’ll get over it soon.”

Daughter: I remember driving down the highway with Mom behind the steering wheel and Dad next to her keeping an eye on the highway exits; she had instructed him to remind her when to leave the highway. Then I heard a splash and Dad shouting in despair “What have I done now?” and his glasses flying up, hitting the ceiling of the car and landing on my lap. With blood running down his nose, he was still asking for an explanation. He had just missed the exit.

Wife's Mother: ... [W]hen she felt she did not get what she deserved, she got angry and out of herself, and did not know what she was doing. Mathew was a passive guy and, you know, he was at the receiving end all the time.... He didn't want her to take her frustration onto the child; he never hit back.

Wife: I did what every other woman in my place would have done. I was strict, and I am proud of it and acted like any other responsible wife and mother. Rules are rules, and we had—all of us, mind you!—had to go by the rules. I was strict but I did not hurt anyone. Discipline is discipline, but I did not enjoy what I did; it hurt me as much as everyone else, but I didn't do anything to be ashamed of. I don't know what he is complaining about. If there was one to complain, that would be me. I was the battered wife, remember? Ask the police, and the social worker; they will tell you. I was the battered wife, not him.

In summary, the findings presented here suggest that, at the time the wife assaulted the husband, (a) there was no male aggression against the wife that was threatening or destructive; (b) there was no impending danger of any kind for the wife, because by the time she assaulted him his "offence" was already completed; (c) there was no evidence that, in the past, the wife was subjected to violence that could have made her feel threatened, fearful, or intimidated; (d) the wife was in control of the relationship; and (e) many wives asserting earlier to have been the victims of violence were themselves described by their mothers and children to have been the perpetrators.

Most characteristic is first the high degree of consistency of responses of children and their grandmothers and second the strong discrepancy in the way in which wives and all other family members described DV. The wives' mothers and their children were almost without exception supportive of the husbands' accounts; not those of the wives. In conclusion, in this sample, the defense of self-defense found no empirical support. The husband posed no threat to the wife that could justify assault in self-defense.

MINOR AGGRESSION BY HUSBANDS

In less than one quarter (24 percent) of the families, the children and their grandmothers described the husbands' behavior that preceded the wife's violence as minor in nature or simply as "minor aggression." The following story is typical of how violence can evolve in families with abusive wives. The wife was expecting the husband to come for lunch, and since he failed to come as arranged, she went straight to the gathering where he was invited earlier that day, argued with him, finally slapped him on the face, and returned home. The husband followed her, and both began arguing angrily with the husband slapping her on the face. Following this, she stabbed him on the leg and chest, and when he fell on the floor, she kicked him several times and left. Her mother comments as follows:

She was not in any danger, but still she was bothered by two things, problems, whatever, you know what I mean ... things that bothered her a lot. He went to the gathering without asking her.... She expected that her husband should have refused to go, since his wife was not invited. Anyway, she was also hurt that they left her out because the new woman was there, and they needed a man and not a woman, and this made her suspicious.... And then it was his ... daring attack. To slap her, well ... this was the end of it. He should have known better.... Anyway, this [her attack] did not surprise me, and it shouldn't have surprised him either; it wasn't the first time she reacted this way. As a matter of fact, other times she was even more aggressive ... ask him, he'll tell you.... He saw it coming and should have thought more seriously about it!

In summary, in the cases reported here, the behavior of the husband was, according to the wives' relatives, (a) neither serious nor threatening; (b) in most cases completed when the wife assaulted him; and (c) was seen as a response to the wife's attacks. In these cases, the wife was in control of the relationship; the responses of children and their grandmothers confirmed the husband's claim that the wife made the most important decisions in the family, was "the boss" and the disciplinarian, and "had the last word" when conflicts arose. The obvious reason for her attack was not to prevent or repel danger but to settle a conflict or to punish him for violating family rules or agreements. Last but not least, the wives' descriptions of violence in their home were proven, in most cases, at least, to be false.

SERIOUS AGGRESSION BY HUSBANDS

In a smaller number of families (12 percent), the type of male behavior that preceded the wife's attack was reported to be generally serious and threatening. The following is a typical example:

When I got in the house [early in the morning], he was flat on the couch sleeping. I walked softly through the lounge toward the bedroom, but before I reached the door he woke up. He stood up on his feet, grabbed the cricket bat from the side of the sofa, and he began to swing it around a couple of times shouting loud at me, "Where have you been the whole night, you bloody whore?" He obviously had had a few drinks; the whisky bottle was empty next to the couch, and this alarmed me a bit, but I did not lose my nerves. I turned around and asked him to calm down. He continued swinging that thing, smashing glasses and vases in its way, coming closer and closer to me. He grabbed a heavy vase from the table and smashed it against the wall. Then he grabbed my shoulder, shook me hard, and forced me on the couch.... I was pissed off and tired and wanted desperately to get some sleep. I grabbed a long piece of glass that was lying on the floor and hit, just hit...; it

SARANTAKOS

got him just under the ear. Then I must have hit him several times more on the arms and upper leg and chest, I can't remember.... I must have had a few more drinks than I should; I was fucked up.... (Wife)

The role of the husband in these relationships is slightly different from those discussed previously. In these cases, the husband behaved dangerously, and could have harmed his wife. In these cases, the allegations of the wives regarding DV and self-defense were legitimate.

PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE

The notion of a pre-emptive strike was checked in this study through direct and indirect questioning. The reports of the children and their grandmothers offered clear evidence showing that there was no violence on the part of the husband against the wife during the one year and three years prior to the wife's assault.

HUSBANDS' AGGRESSION

The findings presented in this section show that, in the present study, the nature of the alleged aggression by the husbands that allegedly forced wives to assault them does not support the notion that *all* violent wives assault their husbands in self-defense. On the contrary, they demonstrate that wives assaulted the vast majority of husbands without the husbands having been violent against their wives at any time. Apart from this, in the majority of cases, wives assaulted their husbands long after their aggravating behavior was completed, that is, when there was no impending danger. Of importance is also the finding that, in a considerable number of cases, the wives' statements on DV presented at the various levels of the study and to the authorities are questionable, constituting a clear case of false allegations.

ALLEGED AGGRESSION BY WIVES

Nature of alleged aggression by wives. The presence of assaults by wives has not been questioned by the respondents. Even the wives acknowledged assaulting their husbands, although some refused to call it "violence" (I just hit him!) or argued that it was his fault anyway ("He made me do it," or "He deserved it"), and although they often presented themselves as victims hitting in self-defense. Overall, such violence included physical assaults but also emotional abuse, verbal assault, restriction of movement, and sexual abuse. With regard to physical violence, in 78 percent of the cases, wives' violence was reported to be moderate to severe. In about 38 percent, the husband was reported to have been in need of medical attention with some requiring hospitalization. Use (or threat of use) of household implements (rolling pin, frying pans, broomstick, jugs, hot water/oil, scissors and knives) was also reported. Below are a few examples of the ways in which our respondents described their memories on this topic, reported by members of the same family:

Husband: I could not leave her despite all this.... I often relied on her support, sometimes even for the food I ate and the house I lived in. This is when I was unemployed, but most of the time I earned enough to support my family. But my most serious concern was the children.... Well, a kick and a punch and a bruised eye ... so what, I can handle this, I thought then. I thought at least I was close to my kids who need me, and that was enough for me!

Wife: He drank a lot and used to spend my money, the hard-earned money to drink with his friends.... Not much, but enough to make me angry. Well, I was not violent against him; I just pushed him around a bit, that is true, but he made me really angry and I had to do something about it, and I had to protect myself, because he beat me badly several times, and I had to go to the hospital, ... and I had to go to the police several times ... I had to stop him from doing this to me.

Son: He was a pussycat; that's how his friends used to call him! He never stood up for himself, and he had to take it the hard way.... A slap and a kick would have been a blessing. The only teeth he lost all his life were those punched out by Mom.... Things were rough those days, and all of us suffered, most of all Dad.... He had to be hospitalized twice; that's what I know of, at least.... I remember Mom stressing when we went to the hospital that if we were to be asked about dad's injuries we had to say he fell down the stairs....

Mother: He was a bit of a nuisance, sometimes, not violent but irritating! Annoying, yes, but not dangerous. [laughs] I had him often in my house after he had a "bang" [fight] with Lalitha. He used to come to me because he didn't want to worry his parents and because the first place for her to look for him would have been his parents. He was hurt a lot, the poor guy, and they [abused husbands] have nowhere to go, do they...?

The nature of injuries inflicted on the husbands of this study are similar to those reported by studies in other countries (Flynn, 1990; George, 1992; Goldberg & Tomlanovich, 1984; Harrison, 1986; McLeod, 1984; Struckman-Johnson, 1988; Thomas, 1993). Interestingly, when medical attention was required, almost without exception, both wife and husband explained the husbands' injuries to the medical personnel as having been the result of accidents. The authorities accepted these explanations without question.

Emotional abuse and the resulting emotional trauma were evident in all cases and were stressed equally by children and mothers of the abusive wives as well as by the victims. This confirms relevant reports in the literature (e.g., George, 1992; Gregorash, 1993; Stitt & Macklin, 1995). In several cases, emotional abuse was

reported to be as damaging as—and in certain cases even more damaging than—physical violence. The intimidation on the part of wives who threatened to report them to the police for assaults they have never committed made the situation extremely oppressive and strengthened their feelings of fear and powerlessness.

Sexual abuse (which is generally thought to be impossible in such cases) was also reported. Belittling the husband's sexual performance, humiliating him in front of friends by criticizing his sexuality, refusing sex when requested, initiating sex and then pushing him away just before he achieved orgasm, using sex aids (medical or mechanical) to force him to have sex even when he was against it, demanding sex when he was unwilling or unable (tired, asleep, angry, disappointed, etc.), or forcing him to have oral or other forms of sex without his consent and against his will, are a few examples.

The following example is about a husband who had been subjected to violence of many kinds. Here he describes an incident of sexual abuse by his wife, who, apart from everything else, thought he was having an affair with another woman. In this particular incident, she demanded sex around four o'clock in the morning, after he returned from factory work, although he stated that he was physically unable to perform sexually. He reports:

So I told her bluntly that sex was out of the question and she had to go to sleep; that was the end of the story. Not so easy, she said, and, naked as she was, she turned around, put one knee over my belly, riding practically on me, and moved up towards my head, riding on my chest.... She was short and exceedingly fat, pounding on my chest, and I could hardly breathe. Then she demanded that I have oral sex with her, squatting over my face bringing her vagina to touch my mouth. There is nothing to it, she was saying, do it now! I couldn't make it.... I had never done it in my life, and my situation, my attitude, her attitude, the awful smell, and the sweat or fluids—I don't know—running into my mouth and I couldn't breathe. I tried to free myself but it was impossible. She demanded it, and she wanted to have it....

Well, she realized that it wasn't going to happen and that infuriated her. When I vomited, spitting up the contents of my stomach on her, that was the end of it.... She started talking about me feeling disgust towards her, ... to make me vomit when I was close to her, ... and started abusing me. She slapped me several times on the face; she grabbed my testicles and was pulling me around, hit me on my buttocks, and punched me on the stomach.

Overall, assaults by wives seems to be diverse and to cover the whole range of DV: from humiliating the husband in front of friends or the children, to abusing him verbally and/or emotionally for his "irritating behavior," to forcing him to have unwanted sex, and to hitting the husband hard enough to break three ribs and to require hospitalization because he gave permission to the daughter to attend a school excursion without her approval or because he threw one of her close friends out of

their house. In comparison, according to the children and the wives' mothers, the action of the husbands did not justify the violence by their wives.

HIT AND RUN?

Most relevant to the discussion of the defense of self-defense is whether wives' aggression followed a "hit and run" or a "hit and stay" practice (see Flynn 1990; George, 1999; McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987). Simply, hit and run implies fear and may reflect the presence of assault in self-defense. Hit and stay, on the other hand, reflects control of the situation, lack of fear, and hence no need for self-defense. It is therefore important to establish how the wife behaved after she assaulted the husband. In the present study, the husbands, wives' mothers, and children have reported that the wife hit the husband when he was in full possession of his faculties (not when off guard, drunk, or asleep) and that she stayed near the husband after the assault. Only 10 percent of the wives reported to have used a shelter, and 38 percent either reported or threatened to go to the police.

Most interesting is the finding regarding the practice of women running to the police after hitting the husband, although they hit him without a reason. Even threatening to go to the police was often taken very seriously by the husbands—not without reason. The positive and supportive attitude of the police and authorities to women's position was reported to have encouraged many wives to take advantage of this and to become even more aggressive at home. Even when they had severely assaulted the husband, their statement that they had been assaulted and abused by him at that time or previously was sufficient for the police to treat them as innocent victims. Chris, who was abused by his wife for more than 10 years and who spent several nights in jail for violent behavior despite the fact that he never assaulted her (relatives testified on this), was very critical of police practices. He stated:

Women run the police more than the police officers. What they [police officers] do is not what is just and right but what wives tell them to do. Police support turns out to encourage women to assault their husbands and get away with it. They encourage them; they tell them how to do it and get away with it and protect or hide them in shelters. In so doing they become accessories to the crime. They are equally culpable of assault and battery as much as the women they protect.

Women are reported here to use agencies such as police and shelters as accomplices in their crimes against their husbands, a finding reported also elsewhere (e.g., Shupe, Stacey, & Hazzlewood, 1987).

A wife's visit to the police was reported to frighten the husband, even when there was no clear evidence of violence on his part. Ben, a self-defined abused husband, explains this as follows:

... his [the husband's] word isn't worth a penny. He can show evidence, he can bring the heaven on earth; no one believes him. A

tear in her eye, a pitiful face, and a soft cry is taken more seriously than a bump on his forehead or a broken arm. As a matter of fact, the more injured the husband, the more guilty [sic] they think he is.... For them this shows how bad he is to make his wife do that to him!

This attitude is confirmed by the statement of Ben's mother-in-law when, talking about her daughter, she noted:

She had him tied down double strength on a pole. Any time he tried to fight back, she would shout at him, "You make another sound, and I'll get you; I will go to the police, I will; and you know who they'll believe, don't you? So stop playing the bloody hero with me." They are sympathetic to frightened women down at the station, you know.

HIT ONCE?

The present study shows that when the wife hit, she did so not once or twice but repeatedly over a long period of time. Hence, either the wife's behavior was routine and intentional violence and intimidation, or she was put in danger repeatedly. However, our respondents did not support the latter. Beyond this, it is difficult to explain how an allegedly weak, terrorized, severely abused, and powerless woman can beat day after day a "strong and violent" husband without triggering retaliation on his part.

LEAVING MARRIAGE

The research shows that, in all cases studied, the men and not the women left the relationship. In almost all cases, the wife made a concerted effort to convince the husband to return home. In 38 cases, the wife used physical force to bring the husband back home; in 12 cases this included severe violence. This shows clearly not only that she held the reins of the family but also that it was the husband, and not the wife, who suffered in the relationship, and hence that she was not hitting in self-defense.

FIRST BLOW

The present study revealed that 72 percent of the wives usually administered the first strike; 76 percent of the husbands thought the same way. These proportions are relatively higher than those reported on general domestic violence (Stets & Straus, 1990), perhaps because our sample includes only cases of violence against the husband. Even larger is the proportion of wives who acknowledge striking the last blow. This is obvious, given that, as reported by the wife's mothers and their children, most abused husbands did not strike back.

Striking the first blow is not always an indicator of being the violent and abusive partner. Wives may strike first because if they do not they may be beaten badly. However, combined with the fact that—as shown above—(a) husbands' alleged

aggression is not of the kind that causes danger to the family, (b) husbands and not wives leave the relationship, (c) wives strike repeatedly, and (d) that wives do not run away after the violent incident, striking the first blow can be an indicator of being the violent spouse.

WIFE'S AGGRESSION AND THE CHILDREN

This study found further that female aggression was directed not only against the husbands but also against the children. In a number of cases children were hurt while trying to protect the father who was being assaulted by the mother, for instance, by throwing themselves between the father and the mother to stop further beating, or by trying to warn or otherwise protect the father. In one particular case, reported by a young respondent, the daughter had to be taken to the hospital with bad injuries on her face, arms, and legs as a result of her mother's violence. Apparently the six-year-old girl had run to the window and warned the unsuspected father who was about to enter their house, shouting "*Dad don't come into the house; Mom is waiting behind the door with an axe.*"

On several occasions, the abusive wife was reported to have made it clear to the husband that if he were to defy her wishes in any way, or to fight back or to run away, "the kids will suffer". This was one of the reasons that forced many husbands to stay in the relationship and tolerate violence.

WIVES' VIOLENCE

The nature and severity of women's violence against their husbands is reported here to be either not related to a particular threat coming from the husband or, when it does, to exceed the amount of force necessary to repel danger imposed by the husband's action that allegedly forced women to become violent. For instance, wives cannot be seen as defending themselves when they force the husband to have oral sex against his will or when they bash him for ordinary mistakes. Similarly, they cannot be seen as defending themselves when they inflict violence long after the husband's action was completed and when they still remain in the place of assault after their violent act. Hence, the findings of the present study presented in this section do not support the notion of self-defense.

Finally, it is worth noting that, here as above, the accounts of violence presented by mothers and children of the wives were consistent with those of the husbands and not of the wives. This shows that in these cases husbands were more truthful and more credible about DV than their wives. This strengthens concerns regarding false accusations of wives highlighted by many researchers of DV. Beyond this it questions the adequacy and legitimacy of policy practices, which tend to describe and judge DV on the basis of women's accounts only.

DO WIVES HIT IN SELF-DEFENSE?

Direct questions as to whether the wife assaulted her husband to defend herself directed to all respondents showed that none of the husbands, 12 percent ($N = 8$) of

the mothers, and 5 percent ($N = 3$) of the children gave positive answers (see Table 2). The findings relating to the position of the wives on self-defense is most surprising and revealing. Relevant questioning revealed that initially all women saw themselves as victims hitting in self-defense, a notion they expressed when dealing with community organizations such as women's agencies, courts, or other institutions. Yet, when asked within this study to explain their aggression, only 47 percent (32 wives) gave self-defense as a reason. This may be explained by the fact that these wives anticipated that their statements would be contrasted to those of other family members and felt therefore compelled to be careful with their statements.

Table 2
Do Wives Hit in Self-Defense?

| | Husbands | Children | Mothers-in-Law | Wives |
|-----|----------|----------|----------------|-------|
| Yes | — | 5 | 12 | 47 |
| No | 100 | 95 | 88 | 53 |

However, this was not the wives' final response to the question on self-defense. After informing these wives of the accounts of the other family members, showing that in their view the wives had not acted in self-defense, most wives revised their initial statement, rationalizing in some way their violent behavior. Only nine (13 percent) of the 68 abusive wives argued to the end that there were times when they had to apply force to defend themselves and/or their children. The following extracts from interviews illustrate, among other things, not only how members of the family explained their views to the wife's violence as self-defense but also how triangulation helped to establish evidence in areas as sensitive and as controversial as self-defense.

Wife [First statement]: It wasn't that bad; I mean, I did not hit him that bad, not as bad as he did anyway, and, you know, when you get angry and you start, you know, you start hitting each other and you don't know what will happen next and you have to defend yourself, you don't think how hard you hit.... And he is a grown-up man and can hurt you when he gets angry. He was unpredictable, you know, and I had to protect myself, and my children, I might add.

Following this she was made familiar with her husband's views on this matter, summarized in the following statement, which was read to her by the interviewer.

Husband: It was just awful; I am not proud of myself, I would say. But shit happens, and there is little you can do about it.... What bothered me most was not only that she was hurting me badly but

also that she managed to convince everybody that she was the victim, and everyone believed her, even the police. I mean, I am saying, I never laid a hand on her, and how could I, ... look at me, how could I? I never did it, but no one takes notice of me, and when I shout at them, they do not hear my voice. What else can I do?

The reaction of the wife to this was rather strong and critical to say the least. The following extract is characteristic of her position on this issue:

Wife [Second statement]: That's a lie; this is his view ... what can I say? And what can any woman say in this instance, you know what I mean, men are men and women are women, and we have different things to say. You would not expect him to admit guilt, would you? I told my story to the police and they believe me, and he told them his and they didn't believe him. They are not stupid, you know, and they know who is lying and who is telling the truth. He is trying to protect himself and to make me feel bad about it, and ... who knows what else he said.... I wouldn't believe a word he said....

Following this, the wife was given the opportunity to hear what the daughter and her mother had to say on this. The following extracts were read to her from the researcher's notes:

Mother: ... The guy had no chance whatsoever. He could not scare a crow, even if he wanted to. He could not frighten a baby. I suppose it was his personality, not to mention his crook arm, he could hardly use it.... No, he never hurt her, and she had no reason to be scared of him. Now this self-defense thing, [pause] I don't see how this could work under these circumstances,

Daughter: ... No one could stand in her way. When she was angry she was ... angry, and no one could stand in her way. When she started shouting everyone would freeze, including Dad. Everyone knew what was going to happen if we resisted. She was protective and commanding, and Dad could do nothing, maybe because of his handicap, who knows, you know his arm and his low self-esteem, and he wouldn't raise his voice against mother, let alone his hand.... Who could be afraid of him?

After the interviews with the family members were completed and the discrepancies in their accounts were established, the wife was reminded of her statement made above and was made aware of the way her child and mother described violence in her home. To this she responded as follows:

Wife [Third statement]: Well, it all depends on what you call self-defense, and Jill has a different view of what danger is and of what self-defense is, and Mom doesn't really know what it was like living with Dave. And there are times when you have to take responsibility and do, well, ... [brief silence] do the right thing, I suppose, [speaking faster and louder] and my right thing is mine, isn't it, and kids are kids. [Stopped for a moment] Literally speaking, maybe you can't call it self-defense, literally speaking, but it could get ugly, couldn't it.... He is a man, and things can get out of hand, you know. But this does not mean that I was wrong.

Although the statements of family members and particularly the wives varied in extent and strength of expression, the message conveyed was clear and supports the main trend identified in the overall response to the issue. The examples above present most clearly the message conveyed by most of the respondents, as depicted in the table above.

In summary, three major findings are most relevant here. The first is that, as reported elsewhere (Carrado et al., 1996; Pearson, 1997a&b; Renzetti, 1992; Sommer, 1994), the proportion of wives hitting in self-defense is quite small, with the majority of them assaulting their husband *not* in self-defense. The second is that even aggressive wives admit that they do not hit their husband in self-defense; more than half of the wives (53 percent) stated that they did not hit their husband in self-defense; this proportion was later increased to 87 percent. This, apart from demonstrating that the notion of self-defense is not based on realistic grounds, sheds serious doubts as to the credibility of the accounts of violent women, many of whom were found to make false allegations.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The central focus of the study was to explain whether, in its sample, aggression by women against their husbands is assault in self-defense or a genuine form of violence or abuse. This was addressed by examining the nature and structure of DV by wives as described by the spouses, their children, and maternal mothers-in-law.

The results of the study revealed that neither the nature of the behavior of the spouses nor the structure of the family context of violence, nor the answers to direct questions support the defense of self-defense. In most cases, wives assault their husbands physically and otherwise not to defend themselves but to achieve other goals, for example, to settle a conflict or to punish their husbands. Simply, (a) wives assault their husbands when there is no "impending danger" for them or the children; (b) they hit husbands who have not been violent against them in the past; (c) they cause husbands to live in fear of their lives and of the lives of their children; (d) not wives but husbands leave the relationship, with the wives attempting to force husbands to return home; and (e) the majority of abusive wives admit that they did not hit their husbands in self-defense.

Equally important is the finding that women's allegations of DV were proven to be false. In most cases, the initial allegations of DV were modified considerably by

them during the course of the study, particularly when they were faced with the accounts of their children and mothers, admitting in the end that they were neither victims of violence nor acting in self-defense. It is worth noting that these allegations were used—and are still used—by the authorities to construct DV and to act upon it.

Certainly, the qualitative nature of the study and the small sample size allow no claims of representativeness or generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the study offers sufficient substance and evidence to allow analytic or naturalistic generalizations (Blakie, 2000). Such generalizations are based on the conceptual power of the findings derived from the fittingness and comparability of the cases studied (Firestone, 1993; Schofield, 1993). Here it refers to the degree of fit between the cases studied and those belonging to the same category (other families with abused husbands). It relates also to the degree of relevance of the findings to other similar cases. This suggests that, given that there may be many cases of families with aggressive wives that fit the model identified in the present study, the findings of this study can speak also for possibly many similar cases of violence by wives.

Hence, it is legitimate to suggest on the basis of this study that (a) there are contexts in which the majority of aggressive wives do not hit their husband in self-defense; (b) there are cases where women use all forms of violence against their spouse and where their aggression constitutes a genuine form of DV, that is, *husband abuse*; (c) wives' violence against their husbands is not always a corollary of or a precondition to wife abuse but a form of DV that exists independently and deserves to be seen as such; and (d) many aggressive wives make false allegations of being the victims of DV; the fact that such allegations are taken by the authorities on their face value, without scrutiny, makes this problem even more serious.

Within the boundaries of the study, the findings presented above have serious implications for social policy. The popular practice by many organizations to see aggressive wives as defending victims of violence is highly questionable. Equally questionable is the taken-for-granted notion of men as the natural perpetrators of violence and of women as the victims of DV and the practice of using women's accounts as the only credible source of information about DV that informs social policies. In all accounts, current policies seem to be biased toward one form of DV, which supplies the lens used to view and explain every other form of wrongdoings in families. No wonder that, after so many reforms, intervention programs, and years of efforts, the extent of the problem of DV remains unchanged.

Certainly this study does not provide the solution to the problem of aggression by wives. Nonetheless, it raises questions as to the nature of wife-to-husband violence, and the issues that require more attention and re-examination. It points also to possible deficiencies in theory and policy that require re-definition and reconsideration. Hopefully, this qualitative study will encourage further research, which will eventually enhance our knowledge about violence by wives, bringing our perception of DV closer to the truth.

NOTE

1. The concepts “husband abuse” and “abused husbands” are used in general terms to describe men suffering assaults, violence, and/or abuse by wives, as the counterparts of “wife abuse” and “abused wives,” and refer to males in dyadic relationships.

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