The Myth of the "Battered Husband Syndrome"

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The Myth of the "Battered Husband Syndrome

By Jack C. Straton, Ph.D.

The most recurrent backlash against women's safety is the myth that men are battered as often as women. Suzanne Steinmetz [1] created this myth with her 1977 study of 57 couples, in which four wives were seriously beaten but no husbands were beaten. By a convoluted thought process [2] she concluded that her finding of zero battered husbands implied that men just don't report abuse and therefore 250,000 American husbands [3] are battered each year by their wives[4], a figure that exploded to 12million in the subsequent media feeding frenzy [5].

Men have never before been shy in making their needs known, so it is peculiar that in 17 years, this supposedly huge contingent of "battered men" has never revealed itself in the flesh. Could it be that it simply does not exist? Indeed, a careful analysis of domestic violence, using everything from common experience to medical studies to U.S. National Crime Survey data, shows that only three [6]to four [7] percent of inter-spousal violence involves attacks on men by their female partners.

In the myth's latest incarnation, Katherine Dunn (The New Republic, 8/1/94) is unable to counter these hard scientific data so she turns to disputed sociological studies by Murray Straus and Richard Gelles [8,9] for "proof" that violence rates are almost equal. She first implies that these studies are unassailable by calling the authors "two of the most respected researchers in the field of domestic violence." Then she cynically attempts to undercut Straus' critics by labeling them as" advocacy groups." In fact Straus' critics are unimpeachable scientists of both genders, such as Emerson and Russell Dobash [10,11] and Edward Gondolf [12], who say his studies are bad science, with findings and conclusions that are contradictory, inconsistent, and unwarranted [13,14,15].

There are three major flaws in Straus' work. The first is that he used a set of questions that cannot discriminate between intent and effect [16]. This so-called Conflict Tactics Scale (or CTS) equates a woman pushing a man in self-defense to a man pushing a woman down the stairs [17]. It labels a mother as violent if she defends her daughter from the father's sexual molestation. It combines categories such as "hitting" and "trying to hit" despite the important difference between them [18].
Because it looks at only one year, this study equates a single slap by a woman to a man's 15 year history of domestic terrorism. Even Steinmetz herself says the CTS studies ignore the difference between a slap that stings and a punch that causes permanent injury [19]. Indeed, after analyzing the results of the U.S. National Crime Surveys, sociologist Martin Schwartz concluded that 92% of those seeking medical care from a private physician for injuries received in a spousal assault are women [20]. The NCS study shows that one man is hospitalized for injuries received in a spousal assault for every 46 women hospitalized [21].

Even if we ignore all of the previously mentioned flaws in Straus' CTS studies, they are bad science on a second set of grounds. Straus interviewed only one partner, but other studies [22,23] that independently interviewed both partners found that their accounts of the violence did not match. Also a study by Richard Gelles and John Harrop [24] using the CTS failed to find any difference in self-reporting of violence against children by step-parents versus birth-parents in vivid contrast to the actual findings that a step-parent is up to 100 times more likely to assault a small child than is a birth parent [25,26]. Any research technique that contains a 10,000 percent systematic error is totally unreliable.

In fact a third independent case can be made against Straus' study. It excluded incidents of violence that occur after separation and divorce, yet these account for 75.9 percent of spouse-on-spouse assaults, with a male perpetrator 93.3 percent of the time, according to the U.S. Department of Justice [27]. The Straus study relied on self-reports of violence by one member of each household, yet men who batter typically under-report their violence by 50 percent [28]. Finally, the CTS does not include sexual assault as a category although more women are raped by their husbands than beaten only [29]. Adjusting Straus' own statistics to include this reality makes the ratio of male to female spousal violence more than 16 to one.

Police and court records persistently indicate that women are 90 to 95 percent of the victims of reported assaults [30]. Promoters of the idea that women are just as abusive as men suggest that these results may be biased because the victims were self-reporting. But Schwartz's analysis of the 1973-1982 U.S. National Crime Surveys shows that men who are assaulted by their spouses actually call the police more often than women who were assaulted by their spouses [31].

In any case, criminal victimization surveys using random national samples are free of any reporting bias. They give similar results:

- The 1973-81 U.S. National Crime Survey, including over a million interviews, found that only 3 to 4 percent of marital assaults involved attacks on men by their female partners [32,33].

- The 1981 and 1987 Canadian surveys [34,35] found that the number of assaults of males was too low to provide reliable estimates.

- The 1982 and 1984 British surveys found that women accounted for all of the victims of marital assaults [36].

This is not to say that men are not harmed in our society, but most often men are harmed by other men. Eighty-seven percent of men murdered in the U.S. are killed by other men [37]. Those doing the killing in every major and minor war in this and previous centuries have mostly been men! Instead of attempting to undercut services for the enormous number of
women who are terrorized by their mates, those who claim to care for men had better address our real enemies; ourselves.

Of course we must have compassion for those relative few men who are harmed by their wives and partners, but it makes logical sense to focus our attention and work on the vast problem of male violence (96 percent of domestic violence) and not get side-tracked by the relatively tiny (4 percent) problem of male victimization. The biggest concern, though, is not the wasted effort on a false issue, it is the fact that batterers, like O.J. Simpson, who think they are the abused spouses are very dangerous during separation and divorce. In one study of spousal homicide, over half of the male defendants were separated from their victims [38]. Arming these men with warped statistics to fuel their already warped world view is unethical, irresponsible, and quite simply lethal.

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