

**VIOLENCE IN COURTSHIP RELATIONS: A SOUTHERN SAMPLE**

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**INTRODUCTION**

"Cruel to be kind means I love you, baby..  
 You gotta be cruel to be kind."

The sentiment of this lyric in a recent popular song expresses the truth about a segment of society in the United States. The notion of abusing one's loved ones – both physically and emotionally – is distasteful if not horrifying to most people. But in many sectors of society it is closer to the norm than it is to deviance. Many skeletons have been found in the closet in the past twenty years, and important among these is family violence. Sociological research in the 1970's focused on the problem of spouse abuse and the factors surrounding it. Wife or husband beating moved from obscurity to recognition, and abuses of young children, and of aged parents were increasingly recognized.

Recent research indicates that the cruelty phenomenon may extend from the privacy of the family to the somewhat more public domain of dating relations (Makepeace 1981). The incidence of violent and abusive behavior in dating couples is comparable to the same types of aggression in marital relations. Laner (1981) lists the following characteristics which serious dating couples share with their married counterparts: "greater time at risk; greater presumed range of activities and interests; greater intensity of involvement; an implied right to influence one another; sex differences that potentiate conflicts; roles and responsibilities based on sex rather than on interests and competencies; greater privacy associated with low social control; exclusivity of organization; involvement of personal, social, and perhaps material commitment; stress due to developmental changes; and extensive knowledge of one another's social biographies which include vulnerability, fears, and other aspects of each other's lives that can be used for purposes of attack."

**EMERGENT AREA OF INVESTIGATION**

The Makepeace sample included 202 college students, predominantly freshmen and

sophomores, from rural and small town backgrounds, middle income Catholic and Protestant families. He examined both direct and indirect knowledge of courtship violence, asking his respondents to indicate both their own experience, and that of others about whose courtship violence they knew. He recognized seven levels of violence ranging from "threat" to "assault with a weapon." He found a fairly low degree of direct experience with violence, ranging from 14 percent for pushing and slapping, to 1 percent for assault with a weapon, and higher levels of indirect experience, with 49 percent for slapping to 7 percent for "choking" and 8 percent to assault with a weapon. Females were more likely to report themselves as victims, and males were more likely to perceive themselves as aggressors.

Laner questioned more than 500 college students concerning their experiences with violence in the context of the dating relation, and with violence as children. She found that violence was more likely in serious dating relations than in casual dating, and that childhood experiences of violence seem to be related to experiencing and inflicting abuse in the dating encounter. The expected inverse relation between socioeconomic status and violence was not found. Laner indicates the need for a theory of violence in intimate, voluntary, heterosexual relations, and the need for longitudinal studies to find the relation between premarital and postmarital violence.

These later studies have shown a much higher degree of violence in the dating relation than has been reported for the dating stage for marital abusers (Gelles 1972).

**THE RESEARCH SAMPLE**

We gave a short questionnaire to an opportunity sample of 195 high school and college students in a large southern city during the Spring of 1982. The sample included students from a small religiously affiliated university, a medium size private university, a private religious sponsored boys' high school and a large public high school. There was no

response from a private girls' school, due to administrative problems. Respondents indicated their experience both as inflictors and as victims of courthip violence in *casual* and *serious* dating relations. *Casual* was defined as a relation with a low degree of mutual commitment. *Serious* was defined as a relation in which those involved have a high degree of mutual commitment, and/or see themselves as "in love" in the relation. The items of abusive behavior were adapted from the *Conflict Tactics Scale* of Strauss and associates (1980 254). The respondents were predominantly Catholic, white, and middle income.

We expected: 1) that incidence of abusive behavior would be greater in serious dating relations; 2) that females would be more frequently abused than abusing; 3) that college level respondents would be more involved than high school level respondents in abusive behavior; 4) that the relation between violent behavior and socioeconomic status would be negative; and 5) that black respondents would report a higher incidence of abusive behavior than white respondents.

## FINDINGS

### General Profile.

Those in serious dating relations were consistently more likely to be abused and abusive than those in casual relations, as expected. The most frequently encountered behavior was pushing, grabbing, or shoving, followed by slapping, throwing something, kicking, biting, or hitting with a fist, and hitting or trying to hit with an object. This corresponds to the incidence of these behaviors in the Strauss study (1980 37).

**Gender Variations.** In the serious relation, in 7 of the 8 categories of abuse, females were more likely than males to be aggressors, as shown in Table 1. Females were involved in slapping their partners 3 times more than males, in kicking, biting, or hitting with the fist 7 times as often, and in hitting or trying to hit with an object almost 3 times more often than males. The difference is not quite so marked in casual relations, but females are more aggressive in 4 of the seven categories in casual dating relations. Twice as many males as females threw something at their partner, and males were more involved in the more serious categories of beating up and using weapons.

Except for the use of a weapon in this the only positive response, and it came from a female.

In the serious dating relation, more males than females reported being victimized in 5 of the 8 categories of abuse. Almost 5 times as many males as females reported that the partner "threw something at me." More than twice as many males as females reported being slapped, and kicked, bitten, and hit with a fist. In casual relations, more males than females reported that they had received abuse in 7 of the 8 categories of violence. This higher incidence of female abusive behavior also agrees roughly with the findings of the Strauss study where wives were more likely than husbands to be involved as aggressor in 4 of the 8 categories.

**High School vs College Differences** Table 2 shows that a higher percentage of high school age respondents were involved in 6 of the 8 categories of violence as aggressors in serious relations. They were also more involved in 5 of the 8 categories in casual relations. A larger percentage of high school respondents were victims in 4 categories of violence for serious relations, and in 6 of the 8 categories in casual relations.

**Race Differences** The focus, as shown in Table 3, is on the black versus white respondent. There were only 8 cases of Hispanic descent, of which only one reported any dating relation violence. In serious relations, a higher proportion of black respondents were involved as aggressors in all 8 categories of violence. They reported "threw something at my partner" 3 times more often than white respondents, and were involved 2 times more frequently in pushing, grabbing, or shoving, and more than 2 times more often reported slapping, kicking, biting, or hitting with the fist. All positive responses in the three most extreme categories were from black respondents.

As victims in serious relations, a higher percentage of blacks were found in four categories. Except for kicking, biting, or hitting with the fist, where more than 2 times more blacks than whites reported such experience, the differences by race of respondent was not very great. In casual relations, blacks were more often victims in 6 of the 8 categories. Almost 2 times as often, blacks appeared as victims in the pushing, grabbing, or shoving, and the slapping category. Blacks

**TABLE 1: COURTSHIP VIOLENCE BY TYPE, ROLE & GENDER**  
(Roles: Aggressor, A; Victim, V; percents.)

Violent Acts	Type:	Serious				Casual			
	Gender:	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Role:	A	V	A	V	A	V	A	V
Throw object		8	24	11	5	11	16	5	5
Push, grab		29	28	27	18	23	25	18	14
Slap		9	24	26	9	7	18	12	4
Kick, bite, punch		2	13	15	5	3	11	7	0
Hit with object		4	10	12	3	4	7	8	1
Beat up		0	2	4	4	1	3	0	1
Weapon threat		1	1	1	1	2	1	1	0
Weapon use		1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
<i>N</i>		<i>90</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>79</i>	<i>78</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>79</i>	<i>78</i>

Note: Column totals may exceed 100 due to multiple violent acts.

**TABLE 2: COURTSHIP VIOLENCE BY TYPE, ROLE, & AGE**  
(Roles: Aggressor, A; Victim, V; Percents.)

Violent Acts	Type:	Serious				Casual			
	Age:	H.S.		College		H.S.		College	
	Role:	A	V	A	V	A	V	A	V
Throw object		14	21	7	13	14	22	6	7
Push, grab		33	33	26	20	30	30	16	15
Slap		15	28	17	13	10	25	9	6
Kick, bite, punch		8	11	8	9	2	16	6	2
Hit with object		8	7	7	7	6	4	6	4
Beat up		4	2	1	3	4	4	1	2
Weapon threat		4	0	0	2	0	2	1	0
Weapon use		2	0	1	0	6	0	0	0
<i>N</i>		<i>50</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>119</i>	<i>119</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>119</i>	<i>118</i>

**TABLE 3: COURTSHIP VIOLENCE BY TYPE, ROLE, & RACE**  
(Roles: Aggressor, A; Victim, V; percents.)

Violent Acts	Type:	Serious				Casual			
	Race:	Black		White		Black		White	
	Role:	A	V	A	V	A	V	A	V
Throw object		15	13	7	17	20	12	6	12
Push, grab		41	25	24	24	45	32	14	17
Slap		29	14	12	19	17	18	6	10
Kick, bite, punch		13	24	6	10	3	18	6	3
Hit with object		16	6	5	8	14	6	4	4
Beat up		5	5	0	3	3	9	0	1
Weapon threat		5	3	0	0	8	3	0	0
Weapon use		5	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
<i>N</i>		<i>38</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>120</i>	<i>120</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>125</i>

**TABLE 4: COURTSHIP VIOLENCE BY TYPE, ROLE & INCOME LEVEL**  
(Roles: Aggressor, A; Victim, V; Percents.)

Violent Acts	Type:	Serious						Casual					
	Income:	Lower		Middle		Upper		Lower		Middle		Upper	
	Role:	A	V	A	V	A	V	A	V	A	V	A	V
Throw object		21	29	11	10	7	23	24	24	8	5	5	17
Push, grab		35	29	23	16	32	36	33	31	23	16	12	21
Slap		41	29	13	11	16	20	31	31	10	11	4	5
Kick bite punch		26	24	4	7	5	11	19	25	4	2	2	4
Hit with object		11	6	5	5	9	11	22	13	6	2	0	5
Beat up		12	6	0	4	0	2	6	6	0	4	0	0
Weapon threat		5	6	1	1	0	0	6	6	2	0	0	0
Weapon use		11	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0
<i>N</i>		<i>17</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>82</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>56</i>

were about 5 times as often found in the victim category for kicking, biting, or hitting with the fist.

**Income Level Variation** Although 7 levels of income were listed on the questionnaire, ranging from under \$10,000 to \$50,000 and over, these were simplified to low, middle, and high levels as shown in Table 4. In serious and casual relations, the lower income levels were more likely to be aggressors in all 8 categories of violence. As victims, lower income level respondents were more frequent in 5 of the 8 categories. In casual relations, lower income level respondents were more frequent in 7 of the 8 categories. In all situations, middle income respondents usually ranked in the middle. But the involvement of upper income respondents was usually not far below that of the middle income group, and often was close to that of the lower income group.

#### POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

The findings of this relation between degree of commitment between dating partners from casual to serious, and abusive behavior were as expected. Serious relations contain the greater opportunity for abuse, carry a larger battery of arms which partners may use against each other, and have a greater potential for occurrence of stressful situations.

The finding that females were generally more abusive than males was not anticipated. The sample of females was generally older, since 85 percent were college level, compared to 54 percent of the males. They were more often black, composing 35 percent of the females, compared to 19 percent black among the males. There were slightly more from the upper income group, with 38 percent, compared to females from other groups. In spite of the fact more females were in the college level group, the college group as a whole showed less involvement in physical violence in courtship relations, the age difference could be an explanatory factor. The younger respondents, who were mostly male, could have been less likely to be black, even with the black race relating positively to both abuse and victimization.

Aside from possible explanations lying in the makeup of the sample, we could speculate

that courting males are less likely to be abusive, having been socialized to the notion that it is unacceptable to strike a woman in a courtship context. This could also be a regional characteristic of the South. The Makepeace and the Laner studies were conducted in the West, showing it more likely for females to be victims, and males to be aggressors. Perhaps greater male courtship passivity is a Southern quality, linked to the ideal of male chivalry.

This phenomenon could also indicate norm variation between males and females. In a dating relation, women may still have control. Males may be more anxious about displeasing or angering a dating partner than they would be about a wife. A woman can more easily end the dating relation. And a woman is more likely to tell others if she receives physical abuse in a dating relation than in a marital relation. Abuse in the dating relation may be more private for the female than for the male due to the greater reluctance of the male to tell others about it. A link may also be found in the influence of increased feminine assertiveness in the last decade.

The fact that younger respondents were more involved in violent behavior was also surprising. Perhaps high school students did not respond as carefully as the college group to the questionnaire. Besides sampling biases, the unexpected findings may also reflect a more violent subculture in the younger adolescent group. This age group, less skilled at interpersonal communication, may be more likely to use physical force to express anger and other emotions. Older persons are likely to have more alternatives to physical abuse, as in talking it out, and other activities. Younger adolescents are also likely to be less secure in a dating relation, and more prone to apply physical dominance and aggression.

This does not explain why the college level respondents, who by this reasoning, should have become less violent on leaving young adolescence, still reported less lifetime violence in courtship. Perhaps the more violent high school group never enters college, which could have eliminated them as potential respondents in the college sample. It is also possible that the high school group are more violent than the college group. The popularity of the "Punk Rock" movement in

the youth subculture, with its many violent components, could indicate the more violent tendencies in today's high school youth, as compared to the college cohort. The high school group has also been exposed to more graphic violence on television and in movies, and exposed at an earlier age, and for a longer time than the college cohort.

Though the lower income group respondents were generally more involved in violence than the others, the difference is far less than we expected. Violence in lower income levels is expected as connected with the culture of poverty and the fact that lower income persons are more prone to frustrations, have fewer legitimate outlets for their anger, and a sense of powerlessness in society. They are more prone to violent expression of emotion (Wolfgang, Ferracutti 1967; Gurr, Bishop 1970). The upper class presumably does not have such inducements to violence. The relatively high level of violence in the upper income group could be caused by a sampling anomaly in this study. It is also possible that these findings indicate some aristocratic tradition. Perhaps high income level people are bored by having already achieved so much as lower level people are by being able to achieve so little. Or perhaps the economic dominance that goes with higher income also comes into play in interpersonal relations.

The finding that blacks were more involved in violence in courtship than other racial groups was expected. The violence that characterizes the black subculture seems to enter also in courtship relations.

## CONCLUSION

Society in the United States seems characterized by a fascination with violence. The media, the music, and lifestyle of the people all seem to support acceptance and respect for violence as a way of life. It is important to study the violent aspects of the national culture to better understand and control them, and to help bring the lifestyles of the people closer to the ideals which they seek. We hope that future research will more adequately uncover information in the problem of violence in courtship, and that such information will lead to a more stable dating pattern and less violent marital relations.

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