THE ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY
IN A WIFE ABUSE CONTEXT

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A wife abuse vignette embodied in a mailback questionnaire of a survey of the Detroit SMSA served as the bases for this analysis. The results focus on three issues: how responsibility is divided between the husband and wife in such situations, the nature of attributions in a wife abuse context - whether they are global or situationally specific and finally, whether the sex of the individual affects his/her attributions in a wife abuse situation.

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Wife abuse is emerging from the private domain of a family problem into the public domain of a social problem. Research in the area which has been used to support this transition has focused on: the prevalence of the phenomenon (Gelles, 1972; O'Brien, 1974; Martin, 1976; Eisenberg & Nickelow, 1976; Straus, 1977-1978), psychological and sociological profiles of the abusive husband, the abused wife and the relationship that binds them (Goode, 1971; Steinmetz & Straus, 1974; Martin, 1976; Straus, 1976; Roy, 1977; Prescott & Letko, 1977) and finally on the inadequate responses of the law enforcement, legal and social service sectors to the problem (Parnas, 1971; Field & Field, 1973;). One issue which has not been the subject of much systematic empirical investigation is the attitude of the general public toward wife abuse.

The lack of empirical focus on attitudes toward wife abuse makes it difficult to plan programs directed at attitude and behavioral change. To be effective change-oriented programs should be based on knowledge of the content of the object of change. An increased understanding of individual's attitudes about wife abuse would provide such knowledge and thus increase our ability to respond to the problem with educational and support services. To gain such understanding we investigated one particular attitude toward wife abuse - how individuals attribute responsibility between the husband and wife in a wife abuse situation.

The attributions of responsibility will be examined across three situational variables: past pattern of abuse (whether the husband has beaten his wife before), "justification" of the act (whether the abuse appeared to be justified in the context in which it occurred) and severity of consequences of the abuse (whether the consequences were high or low in severity). These situational variables have been found to be key considerations in judicial rulings on wife assault (Miller, 1975) and therefore they may in turn be related to the attribution of responsibility in such situations.

The attribution of responsibility in a wife abuse situation poses three questions. First, how do individuals distribute responsibility between the victim and perpetrator in such situations? In situations of interpersonal violence, it is commonly assumed that the bulk of responsibility will be attributed to the perpetrator. We will assess whether this expectation is upheld in the case of wife abuse. The second question related to the attribution of responsibility in a wife abuse situation deals with whether the attributions are global in nature or whether they vary with the situational context of the abuse. In studies of the attribution of responsibility in contexts not involving interpersonal violence social psychologists have found attributions to be situationally specific (Shaw & Sulzer, 1964; Walster, 1966; McArthur, 1972; Harris, 1977). We will assess whether these previous findings can be generalized to the wife abuse context. The final question relates to whether the sex of the individual making the attributions affects the nature of his/her attributions.
Social psychologists have indicated that attributions are affected by the similarity between the individual making attributions and the person to whom he/she is assigning attributions (Shaver, 1970; Chaikin & Darley, 1973). Since the roles in a wife abuse situation are sex-linked, it is expected that the sex of the individual might be related to attributional tendencies (men may attribute less responsibility to the husband and women may attribute less responsibility to the wife). This paper will present data that address the above three questions concerning the attribution of responsibility in a wife abuse context.

**Methods**

**Sample**

The data for this study are part of a mailback questionnaire from a survey conducted by the Detroit Area Study of the University of Michigan in Spring/Summer 1977. The sample consisted of two independent samples of persons 18 years and older residing in the Detroit Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, one an area probability sample of household units with respondents interviewed in person and the other a probability sample of residential telephones.

A mailback questionnaire was offered to each respondent interviewed. Eighty-nine percent of the 689 respondents accepted mailback questionnaires. The return rate for those who had accepted the mailback was 55 percent. After a period of time, respondents who had not returned the mailbacks were contacted and offered five dollars to do so. Approximately 33 percent of the mailback respondents returned them without being paid and the others did so after being offered five dollars. As is the case in most mailback studies, the return rate signals one to be cautious about generalizations.

**Design**

This analysis is based on one vignette from the mailback questionnaire which deals with an incident of wife assault. The vignette incorporated a 2x2x2 experimental design which systematically varied three situational manipulations: *past pattern*, *justification* and *consequences*. Each manipulation was divided into two experimental conditions. The presence of past pattern condition indicated that the husband had beaten the wife several times in the past, while the absence condition stated that he had never beaten her before. The presence of justification condition indicated that the husband had come home from a "hard day at work" and that he and his wife had engaged in a "heated verbal argument" prior to the abuse. The absence condition stated that he had come home from a "day at work" and omitted mention of a verbal argument prior to the abuse. The severity of consequences manipulation indicated that the abuse left the wife with either a black eye (low severity condition) or internal injuries (high severity condition). These three experimental manipulations and sex of the respondent served as the independent variables in the analysis.

**Dependent Variable**

The dependent variable was a measure of attribution of responsibility for the abuse. It was based on a split responsibility scale which directly followed the vignette. The scale and frequency
distribution of responses are presented in Table 1.

Results and Discussion

We can assess how respondents distributed responsibility between the participants in a wife abuse situation by referring to Table 1. The expectation that in a situation of interpersonal violence, the bulk of responsibility would be attributed to the perpetrator was only partially confirmed by our data. Table 1 indicates that while 73 percent of the respondents attributed predominant or total responsibility to the husband, 27 percent of the respondents attributed at least equal responsibility to the wife for the abuse inflicted upon her by her husband. Further study is needed to investigate why in this particular situation of interpersonal violence so many individuals assigned at least half of the responsibility to the victim. Does the sex of the victim or the role relationship of the victim to the perpetrator affect the attribution of responsibility. Studies utilizing vignettes that manipulate victim characteristics could provide insight into the phenomenon of victim blaming. In addition, questions related to the perceived causes of wife abuse might help us to understand what respondents feel is the wife’s role in such situations. These questions might clarify the reasoning behind victim blaming in a wife abuse context. In sum, in response to the question about how respondents attribute responsibility in a wife abuse situation, we have found that while the majority attribute predominant or total responsibility to the husband, a sizable minority attribute at least equal responsibility to the wife.

The second question related to the attribution of responsibility in a case of wife abuse deals with the nature of the attributions—whether they are global or situationally specific in nature. Tables 2 and 3 present data that address this question.

It can be seen that justification for the abuse and severity of consequences of the abuse are both significantly related to responsibility. Less responsibility is attributed to the husband in the presence of justification for the abuse and when the consequences of the abuse are low in severity. The past pattern of abuse was not found to be significantly related to responsibility. Since the justification and consequences manipulations significantly affected the attribution of responsibility in a wife abuse context, it appears that such attributions
are not global but rather situationally specific in nature. In situations of wife abuse the perpetrator is not inherently viewed as responsible for his violent act. Rather, responsibility is determined by the situational context of the abuse. This finding has implications for the planning of programs designed to change attitudes related to wife abuse. Programs of attitude change may respond to the situational nature of attributions in wife abuse situations by stressing that physical abuse between spouses is an unhealthy response to frustrations regardless of the situational specifics. They may help the wife to stop situationally excusing her husband's behavior and provide the husband with alternative responses to frustration.

Additional research is needed to assess whether situational variables are as strongly related to responsibility in other situations involving interpersonal violence. Much work in this area asserts that there is an implicit normative acceptance of physical violence if the victim is a woman and especially if she is a wife (Brownmiller, 1975; Strauss, 1976; Dobash & Dobash, 1977-1978; Schwartz, 1978). This would suggest that the role-sex configuration of victim and perpetrator is an important determinant of attributions of responsibility. Specifically, the particular configuration of a wife abuse situation should yield a greater tendency to use situational information to decrease attributions to the perpetrator than should most other configurations. A systematic examination of the relationship between situational variables and responsibility across different role-sex configurations would provide a test for this prediction, thus shedding further light on the relationship between role-sex configuration and the attribution of responsibility in situations of interpersonal violence.

The final question that we will examine regarding the attribution of responsibility in a wife abuse situation deals with the relationship between the sex of the respondent and the attribution of responsibility. It was hypothesized that women would assign less responsibility to the wife than men and that men would assign less responsibility to the husband than women. The hypothesis was supported for men but not for women. The relationship between sex and responsibility is presented in Table 4.

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Insert Table 4 About Here
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Table 4 indicates that fewer men than women assigned total responsibility to the husband. However contrary to our hypothesis, women, albeit in a nondramatic fashion, assigned greater responsibility to the wife than did men.

To further explore the relationship between sex and responsibility we examined the relationships between the experimental manipulations and responsibility for each sex separately using a logit regressions analysis. Past pattern was excluded from the
the analysis at this point because its relationship to responsibility was not significant at the bivariate level. In logit regression, a comparison of the size of the coefficients to their standard errors indicates whether the tested effects are significant. A coefficient that is twice its standard error represents a relationship significant at the .05 level. The logit results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 shows that sex significantly specifies the relationships between justification, consequences and responsibility. The coefficients for female respondents meet the criterion of being twice their standard errors, while those for males do not. As such, the relationships are significant for women but not for men.

One explanation for the fact that justification and consequences are significantly related to responsibility among female but not male respondents deals with dependency on the marital relationship. It has been argued that women are more dependent on the marital relationship than men. In terms of economics, many women depend on their husbands for financial support. On a psychological level, Bernard (1971) and Burgess and Wallin (1953) have found that women's overall happiness is more contingent on the state of their marriage than is men's. In addition many women derive their primary role, status and meaning in life from their familial relationships. Men, on the other hand, generally have jobs which aside from income offer them a role and source of status outside of their relation to the family unit. As such, women appear to be more dependent on and have more to lose with the dissolution of the marriage.

In the case of wife abuse a woman who holds the husband responsible is making it difficult to justify the continuance of the marital relationship. Rather than jeopardize that needed relationship it seems that women look for situational excuses that will allow them to decrease attributions to the husband and increase them to the wife. In our vignette, the presence of justification and low severity of consequences served as such situational excuses and were utilized by women respondents in the manner described above. In the absence of these excuse variables, women in their identification with the same-sex victim assigned greater amounts of responsibility to the opposite sex perpetrator. Thus, the situational manipulations were significantly related to responsibility for female respondents.

In summary, the relationship between sex and the attribution of responsibility in a wife abuse situation is complex. In this paper we present a post hoc explanation for the attributional patterns among female but not male respondents. Our findings suggest that women may be in a double bind in terms of their attributions in the case of wife abuse. On one hand, in their role as, or identification with, the victim they are inclined to assign large amounts of responsibility to the husband/perpetrator. On the other hand, their dependence on the marital relationship encourages them to use situational variables to excuse the
husband's behavior and thus to depolarize the threatening abuse situation. In the absence of situational excuse variables women appear to follow the former path and attribute predominant/total responsibility to the husband. In the presence of such variables, women appear to follow the latter path and lower attributions to the husband while increasing them to the wife.

An independent test for this explanation of the attributions made by women in a wife abuse context would involve gathering information on women's subjective and objective dependence on the marital relationship and relating that information to the attribution of responsibility. Marital dependence could be measured by variables like: economic independence (employment status and type of employment), presence of children in the home, self-esteem in spheres unrelated to the family and direct questions assessing the strength of perceived dependence on the marriage. One would predict that those women who were neither objectively nor subjectively strongly dependent on the marriage would tend to assign more responsibility to the husband in a wife abuse situation than those who were strongly dependent. Such an empirical test would shed further light on the attributional tendencies among women in a wife abuse context.

In terms of application, these findings support the notion that women's economic and psychological dependence on the marital relationship are major forces behind their remaining with physically abusive husbands. These results indicate that long-term solutions to the problem of wife abuse can not succeed unless they somehow speak to the issue of women's structural and psychological dependence on the marital relationship.

Summary

This study has investigated one particular attitude toward wife abuse - how individuals attribute responsibility to the participants in such situations. Our findings suggest that the role-sex configuration is an important determinant of attributions. In the case of wife abuse, the combination of wife (female) victim and husband (male) perpetrator appears to temper the attributions to the perpetrator that one would expect in a situation of interpersonal violence.

The findings of this study have empirical as well as practical implications. Empirically, they suggest several areas for future research. They also indicate the value of utilizing large survey samples of representative populations in the study of wife abuse. In the practical sphere, focus on individuals' attitudes toward wife abuse will aid in the development of change-oriented programs. In addition our results may be relevant for understanding why women remain in abusive marriages.

It has been documented that lack of resources and support systems as well as inadequate responses by the police, legal and social services are important reasons for women remaining with abusive spouses. At the level of internal processes, attributional patterns may be a relevant determinant of why women stay. If women tend to use situational factors to assign less responsibility to the husband and more to the
they will be more inclined to remain with an abusive spouse and to blame themselves for the problem. Wife abuse programs may help victims leave their husbands by concentrating on understanding and altering their attributional patterns.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of the Responsibility Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequencies</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>154</td>
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<td>Barbara</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>totally</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsible</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>totally</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>equally responsible</td>
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</table>
### Table 2: Responsibility by Justification Manipulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justification Manipulation</th>
<th>1-5</th>
<th>6-8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presence</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$$X^2 = 11.9 \quad p = .0026 \quad \text{Missing Data} = 0$$

$$Y = .3063 \quad N = 337$$

### Table 3: Responsibility by Consequences Manipulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consequences Manipulation</th>
<th>1-5</th>
<th>6-8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Severity</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Severity</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$$X^2 = 9.78 \quad p = .0078 \quad \text{Missing Data} = 0$$

$$Y = .278 \quad N = 337$$
### Table 4: Responsibility by Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>1-5</th>
<th>6-8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X^2 = 5.9 \quad p = .05$

$N = 337 \quad$ Missing Data = 0

### Table: Logit Coefficients for the Relationships Between Justification, Consequences and Responsibility for Males and Females

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manipulation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification x Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.21103</td>
<td>.17328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.51231</td>
<td>.15163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences x Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.32749</td>
<td>.17474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.39265</td>
<td>.15202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Footnotes

1. Justification is placed in parentheses because the author wishes to be explicit about the fact that she feels that physical violence between spouses is never justified. Justification was included as a situational variable in the study to assess whether it had any effect on the attributions made by respondents.

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