

---

THE ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY  
IN A WIFE ABUSE CONTEXT

Debra Kalmuss

University of Michigan

October 1978

---

CRSO Working Paper No. 182

Copies available through:  
Center for Research on  
Social Organization  
University of Michigan  
330 Packard Street  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109

The Attribution of Responsibility in a Wife Abuse Context\*

Debra Kalmuss  
University of Michigan

\*This paper is a revision of a paper presented at the 1978 meetings of the American Sociological Association. The research was conducted as part of the Detroit Area Study of the Department of Sociology, at the University of Michigan. The author would like to express special appreciation to Lee Hamilton, Joe Sanders, Bob Groves and Richard Katz for their assistance with various aspects of this paper.

The Attribution of Responsibility in a Wife Abuse Context

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.

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 & Mickelow, 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 questions 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.

-----  
Insert Table 1 About Here  
-----

In order to preserve large enough cell frequencies for tabular analysis it was necessary to collapse the responsibility scale. Based on empirical and theoretical considerations the scale was collapsed in the following manner: 1-5, 6-8, 9. Aside from being the modal category, nines were maintained as a separate category because predominant and total responsibility were considered to be qualitatively distinct responses.

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. Stud-

ies 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.

-----  
Insert Tables 2 and 3 About Here  
-----

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.

-----  
Insert Table 4 About Here  
-----

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.

-----  
Insert Table 5 About Here  
-----

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

Response Category	1.	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Frequencies	(6)	(3)	(0)	(2)	(79)	(13)	(40)	(40)	(154)
	Barbara totally responsible				Both equally responsible			John totally responsible	

Table 2: Responsibility by Justification Manipulation

Justification Manipulation	Responsibility Levels			Total
	1-5	6-8	9	
Presence	34.1%	29.3%	36.5%	100% (167)
Absence	20.0%	26.5%	53.5%	100% (170)

$\chi^2 = 11.9$        $p = .0026$       Missing Data = 0

$\lambda = .3063$        $N = 337$

Table 3: Responsibility by Consequences Manipulation

Consequences Manipulation	Responsibility Levels			Total
	1-5	6-8	9	
Low Severity	32.8%	29.9%	37.4%	100% (174)
High Severity	20.9%	25.8%	53.4%	100% (163)

$\chi^2 = 9.78$        $p = .0078$       Missing data = 0

$\lambda = .278$        $N = 337$

Table 4 : Responsibility by Sex

Sex	Responsibility Levels			Total
	1-5	6-8	9	
Male	25%	35%	40%	100% (140)
Female	28.4%	22.8%	48.7%	100% (197)

 $\chi^2 = 5.9$ 

N = 337

p = .05

Missing Data = 0

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

	Coefficient	Standard Error
<b>Manipulation</b>		
<b>Justification x Responsibility</b>		
Male	.21103	.17328
Female	.51231	.15143
<b>Consequences x Responsibility</b>		
Male	.32749	.17474
Female	.39265	.15202

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.

References

- Beranrd, J.  
1971 "Paradox of a Happy Marriage." Pp. 85-98 in V. Gornick and B. Moran (eds.), Women in Sexist Society. New York: Basic Books.
- Brownmiller, S.  
1975 Against Our Will. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Burgess, E.W. and Wallin, P.  
1953 Engagement and Marriage. New York: Lippincott.
- Chaikin, A.L. and Darley, J.M.  
1973 "Victim or Perpetrator: Defensive Attribution of Responsibility and the Need for Order and Justice." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 25:268-275.
- Dobash, R.E. and Dobash, R.P.  
1977- "Wives: The 'Appropriate' Victims of Marital Violence."  
1978 Victimology 2:426-442.
- Eisenberg, S. and Mickelw, P.  
1976 "The Assaulted Wife: Catch-22 Revisited." Womens Rights Reporter 4:
- Field, M.H. and Field, H.F.  
1973 "Marital Violence and the Criminal Process: Neither Justice Nor Peace." Social Science Review 47:221-240.
- Gelles, R.  
1974 The Violent Home. California: Sage.

- Goode, W.J.  
1971 "Force and Violence in the Family." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 33:624-636.
- Harris, B.  
1977 "Developmental Differences in the Attribution of Responsibility." *Developmental Psychology* 13:257-265.
- Martin, D.  
1976 *Battered Wives*. San Francisco:Glide.
- McArthur, L.Z.  
1972 "The How and What of Why: Some Determinants and Consequences of Causal Attribution." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 22:171-193.
- Miller, N.  
1975 *Battered Spouses*. London: G. Bell and Sons.
- O'Brien, J.E.  
1974 "Violence in Divorce-Prone Families." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 33:692-698.
- Parnas, R.  
1967 "Police Response to Domestic Disturbances." *Wisconsin Law Review* Fall:914-960.
- Prescott, S. and Letko, C.  
1977 "Battered Women" A Social Psychological Perspective." Pp. 72-96 In M. Roy (ed.), *Battered Women*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

- Schwartz, R.  
forth-coming "Women and Violence: A Systematic Analysis." *Signs*.
- Shaver, K.G.  
1970 "Effects of Severity and Relevance on the Responsibility Assigned for an Accident." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 14:101-113.
- Shaw, J.T. & Sulzer, J.L.  
1964 "An Empirical Test of Heider's Levels in Attribution of Responsibility." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 69:39-46.
- Steinmetz, S. and Straus, M.  
1974 *Violence in the Family*. New York:Harper and Row.
- Straus, M.  
1976 "Sexual Inequality, Cultural Norms and Wife Beating." *Victimology* 1:54-76.  
1977-1978 "Wife-Beating: How Common and Why." *Victimology* 2:443-458.
- Walster, E.  
1966 "Assignment of Responsibility for an Accident." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3:73-79.

Working Papers of the Center for Research on Social Organization

The Center for Research on Social Organization is a facility of the Department of Sociology, University of Michigan. Its primary mission is to support the research of faculty and students in the department's Social Organization graduate program. CRSO Working Papers report current research and reflection by affiliates of the Center; many of them are published later elsewhere, after revision. Working Papers which are still in print are available from the Center for a minimum of 50 cents, with higher prices (at a rate of roughly one cent per page) for papers longer than 50 pages. The Center will photocopy other papers at cost (approximately .05 per page). Recent Working Papers include:

- 171 "British Contentious Gatherings of 1828," by John Boyd, R.A. Schweitzer, and Charles Tilly, March 1978, 111 pages.
- 172 "Language as Social Strategy: The Negotiation of Sex-Linked Barriers for Becoming a Medical Student," by Judith Hammond, February 1978, 11 pages.
- 173 "Anthropology, History and the Annales," by Charles Tilly, March 1978, 13 pages.
- 174 "The Web of Collective Action in Eighteenth-Century Cities," by Charles Tilly, March 1978, 29 pages.
- 175 "On Measuring a Norm: Should the Punishment Fit the Crime?" by V. Lee Hamilton and Steve Rytina, May 1978, 64 pages.
- 176 "Perspectives on Policing in Nineteenth-Century America," by Robert Liebman and Michael Polen, April 1978, 28 pages.
- 177 "Language as Social Strategy: The Negotiation of Sex-Linked Barriers for Becoming a Medical Student," (revision of no. 172) by Judith Hammond, May 1978, 29 pages; reprints unavailable.
- 178 "Collective Violence in European Perspective," by Charles Tilly, June 1978, 69 pages.
- 179 "Two Reports on Sociology and History," by Charles Tilly, July 1978, 24 pages.
- 180 "Organizations, Social Structure, and Historical Changes: Towards an Historical Sociology of Organizations," by Andrew G. Walder, September 1978, 66 pages.
- 181 "The Routinization of Protest in Nineteenth-Century France," by Charles Tilly, October 1978, 18 pages.

Request copies of these papers, the list of available Working Papers or other reprints, or further information about Center activities from: Center for Research on Social Organization, University of Michigan, 330 Packard Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109.