

Aggression in British Heterosexual Relationships: A Descriptive Analysis

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FORWARD:

A 12-item scale, derived from the Conflict Tactics Scale, was administered to a representative sample of 1,978 heterosexual men and women in Great Britain in mid November 1994. Men and women were asked to identify conflict tactics sustained or inflicted in all past and present relationships and those sustained in current relationships. This paper reports results for physical victimization and also reports on two further questions asked to discern context and meaning ascribed to such sustained or inflicted victimization. Both sexes reported having experienced physical victimization with a higher percentage of men sustaining victimization, mainly as a result of minor acts of assault. Almost equal percentages of men and women reported inflicting victimization against partners. Additionally, incidence of physical victimization is presented according to relationship status, age, socioeconomic category and by regional distribution. Both sexes reported a range of reasons or contexts ascribed to their sustained or inflicted victimization.

INTRODUCTION:

In North America and Canada, aggression within intimate relationships has been investigated by researchers using a variety of methodologies [Straus, 1993]. One technique has been to administer the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) developed by Straus [1979], to samples including large national population samples [for reviews of such studies see Straus and Gelles, 1986; Straus 1993; Straus and Kantor, 1994]. By contrast, in Britain research on violence in

relationships has focused almost exclusively on studies of battered women [Smith, 1989], community samples of women [Andrews and Brown, 1988], or on the nature of police or agency recognition and response to domestic violence [e.g., see Borowski et al., 1983; Edwards, 1988; Bourlet, 1990]. The only CTS studies known to the present authors in the United Kingdom are two small-scale studies of student dating relationships, one published [Archer and Ray, 1989] and one unpublished [see KIRSTA, 1994] and a convenience sample of married couples [Russell and Hulson, 1992].

In the discussion of aggression within intimate relationships, the results from CTS studies have been controversial as, when sampling both men and women, they purport to show that aggression can be committed both male-to-female and vice versa to about the same extent. Thus, a sometimes heated and even confrontational debate between North American researchers or academics [e.g., see Straus, 1993; Kurz, 1993] has centred on the nature of physical conflict in heterosexual dyads and the context and meaning of results obtained in such studies. Critics of the CTS methodology [e.g., Bogarde, 1990; Kurz, 1993] argue that female-to-male assaults are in no way equivalent to male-to-female assaults and suggest a number of deficiencies of these studies. Central to these arguments have been assertions such as female-to-male violence is only committed in self-defense, in anticipation of an assault, or in retaliation against a previous male assault or that it is expressive, rather than instrumental, and less injurious.

This paper reports results of the first survey of conflict tactics in the United Kingdom for a national representative sample of heterosexual adults. Additionally, the survey conducted asked questions designed to be able to ascribe reason and context to reports of sustained or inflicted victimization.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey of heterosexual adults was conducted on a sample of 1,978 UK adults aged 15 and over within a regular commercial bimonthly survey ("Omnibus Survey", Market Opinion and Research International [MORI]) seeking to determine consumer and social attitudes. The total survey was conducted as face-to-face interviews in the respondent's home by trained interviewers (75% female) who conduct these surveys regularly. The section containing questions relating to conflict tactics (verbal reasoning, verbal or symbolic victimization, and physical victimization) in personal relationships was administered as a self-completion instrument. Sampling quotas were used to ensure that the sample was representative of sex, age, socioeconomic group, relationship status, and geographical region of the adult population of the United Kingdom. To achieve this, 150 sampling points were used and data obtained were weighted to reflect the known profile of the adult population of the United Kingdom as determined from the most recent national census data.

The questions administered in this section of the survey were derived from the CTS as devised by Straus [1979]. The exact items of the original CTS were not used in every case, although items were derived from it and based on the concept of progressive series of escalating levels of possible conflict as outlined by the CTS [Straus, 1979]. The items used were as follows and are given the letters indicating their position in the 12 items asked:

Items of Physical Victimization

E. Your partner has, with some force, pushed, grabbed, bitten, scratched, or shoved you (you have, with some force, pushed etc.).

C. Your partner has slapped you (you have slapped your partner).

D. Your partner has punched or kicked you (you have punched or kicked your partner).

H. Your partner has thrown a heavy object at you, smashed something over you or hit you with a heavy object (you have thrown ...etc).

J. Your partner has struck you with a sharp or pointed object (you have struck ... etc.).

A total of three questions each using this scale were used to gain data on conflict tactics. Two questions were asked in the context of any past or present heterosexual relationship, where one question related to victimization sustained and one to victimization inflicted. The third question asked for victimization sustained solely within current relationships. Thus, respondents supplied data concerning victimization both sustained and inflicted in any of their heterosexual relationships and victimization sustained in their current relationship. In each case, the scale items were prefaced with an introduction that stated:

Thinking about any personal relationships you have ever had (with a member of the opposite sex) which, if any, of the actions below have you ever had done to you by a partner, boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife when one or both of you has disagreed or quarrelled?

As appropriate, this wording was changed to "thinking about your current relationship ... " to ascertain victimization sustained in current relationships and " ... have you ever done to a partner" to ascertain victimization inflicted against a partner in any relationship.

Eliciting data in terms of relationships, rather than a specified time period, was a similar approach to that adopted in a previous small-scale conflict tactics study conducted in the United Kingdom [Archer and Ray, 1989; Russell and Hulson, 1992]. This particular methodology was preferred as it obviates criticisms leveled when conflict tactics are only asked in context to a period of, for instance, the last year. It was not possible to ask the extent to which respondents had experienced or committed each form of assault on more than one occasion. Some evidence of multiple victimization (sustained or inflicted) has been derived by identifying the numbers of individuals reporting more than one category of assault.

In a further two questions, respondents were asked to ascribe possible context and meaning to the conflict tactics either sustained or inflicted in all past and present relationships. Items used in these two questions were formulated de novo and sought to offer respondents a series of alternatives which included such explanations as self-defense, instrumental or expressive reasons, or the involvement of alcohol. Respondents were allowed to identify any number of items, rather than given a forced choice, as where more than one assault was identified different contexts might be possible. The items used in these two questions are shown in detail below:

Items for Reason and Context

A. He/she thought it was the only way to get through to me / I thought it was the only way to get through to him/her.

B. He/she was getting back at me for something nasty I said or threatened to do to him/her I was getting back at him/her for something nasty he/she said or threatened to do to me.

C. He/she was getting back at me for some physical action I had used against him/her/I was getting back at him/her for some physical action he/she had used against me.

D. To stop me doing something/ to stop him/her doing something.

- E. To make me do what he/she wanted / to make him/her do what I wanted
- F. He/she thought I was about to use a physical action against him/her / I thought he/she was about to use a physical action against me.
- G. He/she was "under the influence" of, for instance alcohol at the time / I was "under the influence" of, for instance, alcohol at the time.
- H. It is or was in his/her character, that's the way he/she is or was / It is my character, that's the way I am.

In addition, respondents could cite "other," "no particular reason," or "don't know" to these questions. Although the options offered are by no means extensive, they allow preliminary analysis of the context and reason respondents considered for the conflict tactics reported. All the data for survey forms were collated and computerized and tables of results were produced by MORI in the form of simple descriptive statistics. The levels of sample difference needed for statistical significance at the 5% level for this survey data were 3-4% when comparing samples of between 500 and 1,000 and 5-8% when comparing samples of 200-500, where between 10 and 30% (or between 90 and 70%) of a sample respond positively.

3. RESULTS

Of the total number of adults (1,978) completing the questionnaire, 1,865 had been in a heterosexual relationship at sometime (894 men and 971 women) and 1,481 of these adults (707 men and 774 women) were in a heterosexual relationship at the time of the survey.

Overall Incidence of Victimization

The numbers and percentages of men and women who reported sustaining or inflicting any of the items of designated physical assault are shown in Table 1. These results show higher numbers of men reporting any victimization from female partners than women report having sustained from male partners in respect to all and current relationships. Fifty-one per cent of men and 27% of women identifying any item of victimization sustained for all relationships also identified victimization in their current relationship. Both sexes stated they inflicted physical victimization less than they have experienced being the victim, confirming other reports of disparity between admitted victimization and perpetration of assaults [Riggs et al., 1989]. However , men and women admitted inflicting assaults to about the same extent overall with any act admitted by 10% of men and 11% of women. Of 285 men and women reporting sustained victimization and 191 reporting inflicting victimization across all relationships, 127 reported having been both a victim and a perpetrator, although this does not necessarily mean that sustained and inflicted victimization occurred in the same relationship.

TABLE 1. Overall Incidence Rates of Victimization for All Relationships and Current Relationships*

	All Relationships		Current Relationships	
	Male(N=894)(%)	Female(N=971)(%)	M(N=707) (%)	Fem(N= 774)(%)
Sustained	155 (18)	130 (13)	79 (11)	35 (5)
Inflicted	85 (10)	106 (11)	--	--

* Shown are numbers and percentages of the male and female populations who report experiencing any item of physical victimization or aggression in either all their past or current relationships. Details of aggression committed in their current relationships were not elicited. A difference of 3-4% or more for these sample sizes indicates a statistical significant difference at the 5% level.

Item Victimization

In Table II, results for each of the five items of physical assault are presented for what respondents stated they had sustained or inflicted in all their heterosexual relationships and also what they had sustained in their current relationships. Not unexpectedly, level of victimization sustained on each item are higher across all relationships, rather than just in current relationships, and are also higher than levels of inflicted victimization admitted. It is evident in each of these categories that being slapped by a partner or slapping a partner was the most frequently quoted physical assault sustained or inflicted. In terms of individual assaultive acts it is apparent that, although women report being pushed or grabbed more than men and men admit they commit this assaultive act more than women, significantly more men ($P < .05$) than women report being slapped by a female partner. Also, more women report having slapped a male partner, but the difference for inflicted victimization on this or any other item between the sexes was not significant. On the remaining three items, which are also potentially more serious, men and women report almost equally being the victim of such an act. The numbers and percentages either sustaining or inflicting these acts are low, however, being 1% or below in number of cases.

TABLE II. Physical Victimization by Sex*

	All Relationships				Current Relationship	
	Sustained		Inflicted		Sustained	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Victimization	(N=971)(%)	(N=894)(%)	(N=971)(%)	(N=894)(%)	(N=774)(%)	(N=707)(%)
E. Pushed Grabbed etc.	95 (10)	80 (9)	37 (4)	48 (5)	19 (2)	32 (5)
C. Slapped	84 (9)	121 (14)	85 (9)	49 (6)	24 (3)	62 (9)
D. Punched kicked	59 (6)	59 (7)	27 (3)	19 (2)	15 (2)	30 (4)
H. Thrown or hit with object	19 (2)	22 (2)	15 (2)	6 (1)	4 (1)	8 (1)
J. Struck with sharp object	13 (1)	13 (1)	16 (1)	--	4 (1)	4 (1)

* Item victimization as reported by men and women given as both numbers and percentages of the male and female sample for all relationships and current relationship categories. Percentages rounded up below 0.5% of sample. A difference of 3-4% or more for these sample sizes indicates a statistical significant difference at the 5% level.

Although respondents were not asked to give a measure of chronicity for each item, it is possible to present the numbers of men and women identifying they had sustained or inflicted one or more of the individual items of physical assault (see Table III). In terms of all relationships, this may not mean that there was chronicity of aggression in any particular relationship; the individual reporting could have sustained or inflicted separate assaults in more than one relationship. In current relationships, however, this analysis would be symptomatic of a chronicity of aggression within that relationship.

TABLE III. Incidence of Repeated Victimization*

	Sustained Victimization				Inflicted victimization	
	All relationships		Current relationships		All relationships	
	Men(%)	Women(%)	Men(%)	Women(%)	Men(%)	Women(%)
Any act	155(18)	130 (13)	79 (11)	35 (5)	85 (10)	106 (11)
One act	80 (9)	59 (6)	48 (7)	21 (3)	58 (6)	68 (7)
Two acts	34 (4)	24 (2)	11 (2)	3`	21 (2)	22 (2)
Three acts	26 (3)	30 (3)	17 (2)	9 (1)	4`	11 (1)
Four acts	8 (1)	10 (1)	0	1`	2`	3`
Five acts	7 (1)	7 (1)	3`	2`	1`	3`

*Repeated victimization (sustained or inflicted) compounded as occurrence of one or more of each type of assaultive act for men and women in all or current relationships. Percentages quoted are the percentages of the total men or female sample.
` Percentages are rounded up: ` indicates less than 0.5% of sample

From Table III it can be derived that for all and current relationships, 73.5 and 74.5%, respectively, of victimized men experience only one or two types of assault. By contrast, 63.8 and 68.5%, respectively, of victimized women experience the same. Thus, approximately one third of assaulted women, as opposed to one fourth of assaulted men, reported experiencing three or more types of assault. A similar analysis for perpetration of assaults found that 91% of men and 84% of women aggressing admitted only one or two acts.

From cross tabulations of each item of physical victimization against the other four items, it was apparent that the greater the level of assaultive act, the greater the likelihood that those reporting experience of it would also identify they had experienced all lesser forms of assault. For instance, in the case of an assault with a sharp or pointed object, 90-100% of individuals so assaulted identified they had also been slapped or punched or kicked. A similar pattern also existed for inflicted victimization.

4. DISCUSSION

Large-scale conflict tactics surveys undertaken in the United States between 1975 and 1992 indicate that approximately 10% of husband or wives commit minor assaults, and approximately 6% or below severe assaults, against their spouse during a 1-year time period [Straus et al., 1980; Straus and Gelles, 1986; Straus and Kantor, 1994]. This study of a representative sample of UK adults has found that 13 and 18% of women and men, respectively, experience any assault by a heterosexual partner across all their relationships or that 5 and 11% of women and men experience assault by their current partner. In reports of the first nationally based US study [see Straus et al., 1980], figures for the incidence of any

assaultive act at any time during a marriage were given by 27.8% of wives. This is a more directly comparable comparison between these studies. It shows, in contrast to the previous assertion for the UK population based on a small convenience married sample [Russell and Hulson, 1992], that, if anything, UK heterosexual relationships seem to be less physically abusive than their American counterparts. This is in accord with the disparity in general levels of violent assault between the United Kingdom and the United States [Archer and Lloyd, 1985].

Incidences higher or lower than either these US or UK national samples are reported, using CTS methodology or other methodology, for different samples and smaller sample sizes, which are neither necessarily random nor representative samples [Straus and Gelles, 1986; Andrews and Brown, 1988; Straus, 1993; Straus and Kantor, 1994]. Clearly the heterogeneous nature of assault data, when broken down by both sex and other variables such as relationship status, social category, age or region supports concern that inference and projection to the general population from other smaller or selected samples may be spurious or unsound [Andrews and Brown, 1988; Straus, 1993].

In itself, some caution must also be exercised in the interpretation of this study. The exact CTS physical aggression scale [Straus, 1979] was not used and more severe assaults may have been underestimated. However, in as far as the results attempt to provide incidence, they may not be grossly inaccurate as this, and other studies [Straus et al., 1980] have shown that where serious assaults occur, lesser forms of assault almost always occur as well. Although a measure of chronicity has been provided (see the Results section), no information on chronicity of any one assaultive act was collected and so inference as to severity of assaults, as in a chronic battering relationship, is speculative especially as no attempt was made to collect data on the injurious consequences of assaults. It has been consistently pointed out that because of size and strength differences, more women are likely to incur injury from male domestic assault [Straus and Gelles, 1986] and that even more minor non-injurious assault may be fear invoking for women [Straus, 1993]. However, some male victims of domestic assault are found to have sustained serious injury [Smith et al., 1992; Buzawa and Austin, 1993; Stitt and Macklin, 1995]. A female to male ratio of between 6-8 to 1 is evident from analysis of available US data [Straus, 1993], which may be supported by the UK observations of Smith et al. [1992] who found wives and husbands seeking emergency hospital treatment in approximately this ratio.

Despite such reservations, however, the study has provided preliminary data for a representative sample of the UK population for the first time and generates the impetus for future more expansive and exacting UK study of this type. A clear inference drawn from these results is that victimization of women by male partners is more likely for women who are single and young, while for men being married or cohabiting and living in the southern part of the United Kingdom is most associated with assault by a female partner. It can also be suggested that there is some evidence to suggest that assaults between partner in the United Kingdom is increasing, given the higher percentage incidence recorded in the youngest age group.

The finding of a higher overall incidence of claimed male victimization is in line with other findings which have reported a higher incidence of men assaulted either by married or dating female partners [e.g., Nisonoff and Bitman, 1979; Cate et al., 1982; Plass and Gessner, 1983; Brutz and Ingoldsby, 1984; Deal and Whampler, 1986; Arias et al., 1987; Brinkerhoff and Lupri, 1988; Archer and Ray, 1989; Stetts, 1990; Russell and Hulson, 1992]. Other studies

have found women reporting aggression against a male partner at or even above male levels [Plass and Gessner, 1983; Archer and Ray, 1989; White and Koss, 1991; Russell and Hulson, 1992, Straus and Kantor, 1994]. This study has found a negligible difference between the incidence of men and women who reported inflicting assault on a partner overall, although with some variation from this in subsamples of the total population with either higher male or female rates of admitted assault.

It is suggested that it is reasonable to argue that the excess of male victimization found seems, at least in part, to result from the greater frequency at which "slapping a partner" occurs female to male. Female-to-male acts of assault are perceived less negatively than male-to-female assaults [O'Leary, 1993; Harris and Cook, 1994] and it has been suggested that in a "slap the cad" scenario, they are rationalized to a justified acceptance [Straus, 1993]. Further, it has been suggested that minor assaults by women on men equate with female verbal aggression, as opposed to a distinction between verbal and a move to physical aggression for men [Stets, 1990].

The previous small-scale CTS studies performed in the United Kingdom have both found that the female sample had committed more severe violence than male partners [Archer and Ray, 1989; Russell and Hulson, 1992]. The former study also reported more female minor assaults as well, with both minor and severe assaults as reported by either the male or female partner. The initial national US study reported an incidence of female reported assaults made on male partners, who were not themselves reported as being assaultive, as well as reciprocal and unidirectional male-to-female assaults [Straus et al., 1980]. Interpreting their UK findings Archer and Ray [1989] noted that previous suggestions [Arias and Johnson, 1989] that men may be more cognizant of the potential to cause serious injury and to do damage to the relationship, which effectively causes them to restrain their aggression. This might have been operating within married and cohabiting relationships, given the fact that married or cohabiting women were the least likely to report sustained victimization. The disparity in incidence of victimization between married/cohabiting or single dating women across all relationships, but not current relationships, may indicate that the women surveyed have tended to form more committed and enduring relationships with men who do not tend to assault them or to dissolve relationships in which they are assaulted.

It could also be suggested that higher levels of male victimization/female aggression in CTS studies might reflect that some heterosexual males may give tacit observance to "Macho" images in public, but privately their lived experience and this stereotype have nothing in common. It is also possible that their female partners also obey female stereotypes of lesser aggression in public, but less so in private. This, apart from other considerations, could account for some of the discrepancy between CTS studies where rough equality of assaultiveness male-to-female and female-to-male is found, as opposed to common perceptions of the greater aggressiveness or assaultiveness of males. Social unacceptability of males being victims of domestic assault [George, 1994; Harris and Cook, 1994] may also be part of the explanation for the higher percentages of victimization of married or cohabiting men remaining within current relationships.

Further, an analysis which allows for female assaultiveness [White and Humphrey, 1994] finds some support from the relatively low levels of gender difference in aggression found in meta-analysis of psychological studies [Eagly and Steffen, 1986]. It also seems to be supported in marriage guidance literature, where leading exponents in the field in the United Kingdom have noted the frequency with which they experience married couples where the

female is dominant and the male experiences loss of libido or impotence [Crowe and Ridley, 1990]. Thus psychological or emotional distress of males can be identified in female-dominated relationships and also in response to physical assault [Marshall, 1992]. Also, male or female-dominated relationships occur to about the same extent and show more relationship assaultiveness than more egalitarian couples [Coleman and Straus, 1986]. Thus, the finding in respect of male, as opposed to female, victimization reported in this study may not be as contentious as is often assumed, especially given that aggression by females can also occur frequently in lesbian relationships [Renzetti, 1992].

In allowing respondents to ascribe reasons or context to victimization, this study has attempted to go beyond many other studies utilizing the CTS approach. Clearly the interpretations given by both male and female respondents are varied, although with some tendency for explanations to divide by gender and a division of "reasons" operates between attributions to partners as opposed to self-attribution. This would tend to confirm the operation of social desirability, whereby it has previously been reported that victimization is more reliable than reported aggression [Jourilles and O'Leary, 1985; Arias et al., 1987; Riggs et al., 1989]. This may also explain the lower response levels for inflicted victimization found. Interestingly, however, the previous UK couple studies have noted that this aspect was less of a problem than anticipated, with little difference in the reliability of either male or female responses [Archer and Ray, 1989; Russell and Hulson, 1992].

In so far that reasons or contexts tested have attempted to assess a "self-defensive" motive, the results seem to support a Canadian study that the majority of women did not report their aggression against male partners in this context [Sommer, 1994]. It has also been suggested that within marital conflict, men more often withdraw from confrontation leading to an escalation from their female partners than vice versa [Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Noller et al., 1994]. This might be applicable, especially given that women identified a need to "get through to their partner," more than men, as a reason for their aggression. These findings on "self-defense" are contradictory, however, to the assertions of UK couple studies [Archer and Ray, 1989; Russell and Hulson, 1992] where either factor analysis of psychometric and other variables [Russell and Hulson, 1992] or correlation coefficients (Archer and Ray, 1989) suggested that female assaults were retaliatory or self-defence.

Finally, it would seem that both men and women recognized a greater involvement of male alcohol abuse within interpartner conflict, which tends to confirm previous analysis for a difference in the link between alcohol and aggressive behaviour for males and females [Sommers et al., 1992; Straus and Kantor, 1994].

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