

CONTROLLING MALE AGGRESSION IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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Legal control of aggressive acts within the family must be assessed against a background of other familial controls. This study identifies factors that control male aggression against female partners in intimate relationships. Hirschi's (1969) theory of the social bond, applied almost exclusively to delinquency, is used to test the importance of attachments, commitments, involvement, and beliefs in controlling husband-to-wife assault. By looking at males who do not assault their partners, we gain some insight into the ways in which legal policies might be structured to reduce domestic violence against women.

I. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of the legal system in both public and private arenas of life continues unabated in American society. The rise in civil litigation and the increasing use of criminal statutes have prompted some legal scholars to ask why this legal explosion has occurred and whether it might be doing more harm than good (Friedman, 1985). Marriage and family relations are among the social spheres that have experienced this explosion. Once virtually ignored by the criminal law, family life is now more legalized than ever. Recently enacted laws have focused specifically on such areas as spousal rape and assault, and there are current efforts to expand the criminal law to cover "fetal abuse" (see *Harvard Law Review*, 1988).

This expanding legalization of the family suggests some basic questions: Are customary, non-legal controls within the family breaking down? Are families more violent today and hence in

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need of greater legal protection? Or has violence always been characteristic of family life but is only now becoming more visible? Are there forces beyond the family that stimulate the greater legalization of domestic relationships?

These questions assume there is some "need" for the law to be brought into family matters. The legal system is called upon when other controls and regulatory mechanisms fail to operate effectively. In this sense the law is the last bastion of social order after other controls have failed. But the evaluation of the place of criminal law in regulating family relationships requires a clear understanding of the other types of social control that operate in intimate relationships.

In this study, we examine various non-legal controls as they affect domestic violence, specifically physical assaults by husbands against their wives. We draw from Hirschi's (1969) theory of the social bond to predict which men will not be involved in violent confrontations with their wives. While Hirschi's formulation does not deal explicitly with legal controls (cf. Minor, 1977, 1978), respect for the law is included in his theory. Therefore, we examine the perceived likelihood of arrest for assaultive behavior as a determinant of conformity along with various non-legal controls. By understanding something of the control dynamics in marital relationships, especially non-legal as compared to legally based controls, we will be in a stronger position to judge the advisability of using criminal law to delimit domestic violence.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For more than a century, social scientists have pursued the Hobbesian question of social order. The importance of social controls, including the threat of legal punishment, was recognized by Durkheim ([1893] 1933, [1925] 1961), Mead (1918), and other theorists both in the United States and in Europe. An emergent theme in these early works was the importance of social integration for achieving conformity and well-being. One irony of this concern with integration as a major source of social order was the focus on dis-integration. In what was termed the "social dis-organization approach," the importance of integration was inferred from the detrimental effects of disorder. Beginning with Durkheim's classic work on suicide ([1897] 1951), the lack of integration into the family and community has been a causal theme in research on delinquency, adult crime, physical illness, mortality, mental disease, and family disruption.

In criminology, this social dis-organization approach drove the early theories of crime. Although its numerous shortcomings have been revealed (see, e.g., Bursik, 1988; Kornhauser, 1978), the perspective did provide one lasting influence in defining social integration as a given, a natural state of affairs. It was assumed, fol-

lowing Durkheim, that “we are moral beings to the extent that we are social beings” (cited in Hirschi, 1969: 18). By seeing integration as a natural state that some persons may never achieve and others may have but lose, theoretical interest centered on the dis-integrating influences of the structural features of urban communities. The result was the view that persons are not pathological but that social structure can be abnormal (Matza, 1969).

Since many early social theorists were writing against Freud’s psychogenic view of crime and dis-organization (Merton, 1938), a second assumption was incorporated into theories of crime: Humans are by nature good, seeking to please others with their conformity. These twin assumptions—that individuals were by nature good and that society was by nature destined to be socially integrated (for functional or other reasons proposed by various theorists)—meant that researchers focused almost exclusively on the questions of how and why some persons are pushed into deviance. How and why individuals *conformed* to rules and laws were not seen as relevant questions, because it was assumed that people would follow norms until forced to do otherwise.

A. *Social Control Theory and Research on Family Violence*

How persons are tied to conventional society was of minor interest until Hirschi (1969) forcefully argued for the centrality of this question. The controversial feature of Hirschi’s social control theory of delinquency is his assumption that persons are naturally deviant unless controlled. This means that the motivation to break rules is said to be constant across individuals. Variation in the extent of conformity to laws and rules is a function of the efficiency of various social bonds to contain this drive to deviance. For Hirschi, these bonds include attachment to conventional others (family and friends); commitment to societal goals and personal aspirations that are seen as stakes in conformity; involvement in conventional behaviors (work and social activities); and moral beliefs that operate as internal controls over behavior. Persons do not differ in their motivations for deviance but rather differ only in the extent to which they are tied to society through these four bonds.

The social control theory assumption that the motivation for deviance was constant across all individuals sets this position apart from other explanations of deviance. Other theories assume some push or drive to deviate, which fits the positivistic preference for some active source of causation (Hirschi, 1989). Since control theorists ask why individuals conform, the causal factors are the weakening or absence of controls. The result is an “absence-of-something” explanation (Hirschi, 1969: 32). As a result, critics were quick to suggest that Hirschi’s theory of social control was too indeterminate and, paradoxically, that it was too deterministic.¹

¹ Hirschi’s formulation is seen as indeterminate in at least 2 senses. First,

Furthermore, the assumption that persons are naturally deviant unless controlled did not appeal to many researchers who simply felt that it did not fit what they knew of the human condition. Hirschi (ibid.) justifies his position:

There is certainly nothing wrong with *making* such an assumption. We are free to assume anything we wish to assume; the truth of our theory is presumably subject to empirical test [emphasis in original].

Within criminological theory, the social control perspective remains unique because it is a theory of conformity that departs from the traditional search for etiological factors (cf. Gibbs, 1987: 833–834; Hirschi, 1986).

The social control perspective has been virtually absent from the literature on domestic violence, although some of this research does have implications for a social control approach. For example, studies have shown that isolated families tend to experience higher amounts of violence (for a review see Pagelow, 1984), whereas those embedded in social networks experience less (see, e.g., Cazenave and Straus, 1979). Additional evidence suggests that women resort to self-defensive violence at a lower rate in areas that offer more legal protections, feminist support networks, and other resources for non-violent conflict resolution (see, e.g., Browne and Williams, 1989). Nonetheless, little explicit theorizing and testing about social control has been done in this area (for an exception, see Gelles, 1983).

Most theory and research on family violence is driven by etiological concerns. The question typically asked is: Why do people involved in relationships, presumably based on love, physically assault each other? Given the widespread nature of violence in the family (see, e.g., Straus *et al.*, 1980; Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1989), the question is surely relevant. However, much can be learned for the purposes of theory and policy formulation by focusing on a different question: What produces non-violent relationships? In short, theories of conformity in addition to theories of deviance should guide research on family violence.²

he does not provide predictions of the type of delinquency or crime that results from weakened bonds (Thornberry, 1987: 865). Second, some feel his formulation fails to specify what the controls of the bonds are and thus “control is potentially virtually anything and everything” (Gibbs, 1987: 833). Ironically the theory is seen as too deterministic because once the controls are removed, the deviant motivation as a constant assumption pushes all individuals toward crime; the irony resides in the fact that Hirschi’s work set out to oppose overly deterministic theories. For rebuttals to some of these criticisms, see Hirschi (1986, 1989).

² This may appear to be a distinction without a difference. While most research on assaultive men has an implicit or explicit control group of non-assaultive men, this comparison group is usually not examined in any detail. As we will show, a focus on non-assaultive males means that a different set of questions will be asked and that a different set of assumptions will be made about the phenomenon under study. As in a gestalt, making the ground the figure changes the picture.

While there are probably many reasons why theories of conformity have been largely omitted, we will deal with two in passing. One is the independent development of the field of family violence and criminology. Based on the shared assumption of family researchers that domestic violence is different from crime (see Hotaling *et al.*, 1989), theoretical traditions outside of criminology were used to explain sources of family violence.³ One of the classical theoretical statements in family-centered violence presents fifteen theoretical positions, none of which are directly criminological (see Gelles and Straus, 1979). Only in the past few years has this bifurcation of theorizing on domestic violence been recognized and have steps been taken to remedy the situation (see Fagan and Wexler, 1987; Fagan, 1988; Hotaling *et al.*, 1989; Shields *et al.*, 1988).

A second and more direct reason is that most if not all explanations put forth by family theorists assume that a push or a drive produces the battering husband, the sexually abusive parent, and the like. Internal and external causes are posited, but the focus is on differential levels of motivation between offenders and non-offenders, indicated by such factors as alcohol and drug abuse, stress, patriarchy (which stands for a whole constellation of factors), values from the larger culture that legitimate violence, developmental differences (such as being beaten as a child or witnessing violence between parents as a child), psychogenic explanations, and even biological causes (for reviews see Dutton, 1988; Fagan and Wexler, 1987; Straus and Hotaling, 1980; Hotaling *et al.*, 1988; Hotaling and Sugarman, 1986).

Following the logic of social control theory, we prefer to ask why some men refrain from using violence in conflicts with their female partners. Why is there not more assault in intimate relationships than apparently exists?⁴ Our question is directed toward men, but the same model might apply to women.⁵ Hirschi presents a probabilistic model that states that the stronger a particular bond, the less likely one will break the law. What is it about each of Hirschi's four bonds in the context of a domestic re-

³ For other reasons why theories of family violence developed independently of criminological theories, see Fagan (1988); Fagan and Wexler (1987); Gelles and Straus (1979); Hotaling *et al.*, (1989); Shields *et al.*, (1988).

⁴ Matza (1964: 21) states that etiological theories of delinquency suffer from an embarrassment of riches in that they explain too much by over-predicting the degree of involvement in crime. Likewise, most theories of family violence imply that there should be more domestic assault than there is. Such theoretical embarrassment is evident in the phenomenon of the desistance of wife assault (see Fagan, 1989; Feld and Straus, 1989).

⁵ A complete model of social control and "domestic tranquility" would require an assessment of the control potential of Hirschi's 4 bonds as they relate to women who might assault their male partners. Although such assaults do occur (Straus *et al.*, 1980), they are less frequent and less serious in terms of possible physical injury compared to assaults by men within a marriage (see, e.g., Berk *et al.*, 1983).

relationship that might preclude the use of force by males against their female partners? We shall examine each bond in turn.

1. Attachment. Integration of the husband and the family as a unit into the larger society should serve as a source of control over aggressive acts within relationships. Measures of integration into community networks of friends and kin are positively associated with health (Umberson, 1987; Anson, 1989) and with the absence of suicide (Pescosolido and Georgianna, 1989), mental well-being (Gove, 1972), and the lower likelihood of domestic violence. Embeddedness in locality and family-kin networks appears to have had an ameliorative effect on family violence (Cazenave and Straus, 1979: 297). Caring about the good opinion of others should help prevent assaultive acts for the same reasons that social support and integration yield positive health benefits.

A second component of attachment to persons outside the family is visibility of behavior. The more networks of interaction, the more visible behavior becomes. Visibility is in part a function of whether people participate in exchange or interactive networks. Exchange networks "tend to average 20 or so members who represent a psychologically based collection of people who are in some way unique and significant" (Milardo, 1989: 168). A large share of these persons are relatives. Interactive networks refer to acquaintances, co-workers, and others found in one's daily round, where the focus is on the frequency of interaction rather than its significance (Milardo, 1988). The two networks of intimates and associates serve a surveillance function. The power of the attachment bond is a function of the size and degree of inter-connectedness between the networks (cf. Krohn, 1986).

These two networks suggest the dual basis of affectional control in domestic relationships. Exchange networks are likely to invoke conformity because of the importance of emotional ties to significant others.⁶ Emotional ties to spouse, children, and other relatives may operate to control aggressive acts. The key is the importance placed on these intimate relationships in the exchange network, since the more salient the ties, the more they should curb actions that would damage or disrupt them. Likewise, the importance placed on contacts in interactive networks, for example, those resulting from community activities, should serve to control men concerned with their own reputation and the image of their family in the larger community. In sum, both exchange and interactive networks will affect the exposure of assaultive behav-

⁶ The role of social support and network connections as they affect decisions by battered women to do something about their relationships has been a central concern in research on family violence. These concepts are used here in a different way to examine how they may operate to tie men to conventional groups in ways that reduce the likelihood of using violence against a spouse.

ior, especially if there is significant overlap of these networks, even though privacy norms can make family life very invisible (Gelles, 1983).

2. Commitment. The greater one's commitment to conformity, the more one has to lose and the less likely one is to violate the law. We would expect adults to have more stake in conformity than juveniles, and therefore this bond should have a major role in preventing deviant behavior. An application of Hirschi's commitment bond to business executives found that it was related to a lower probability of white-collar offenses (Lasley, 1988). Whether stakes in the work world transfer to the family context is less certain, however. We know, for example, that the stress created by a man's job bleeds back into the family context (see Bolger *et al.*, 1989), but there is little evidence on whether the controlling benefits of employment and occupational status serve to reduce domestic violence.

There are other types of commitment besides employment. Time in the community may suggest a geographic commitment, the length of marriage has obvious commitment connotations, and the presence of children in the home represents another potential controlling influence. Educational investments also tie one into the existing system. The cumulative effect of these social ties should be to lower the probability of assaultive behavior within the home, although we would predict an even greater controlling effect on crime at work or in the community at large.⁷ The reasons for this prediction are the greater salience of commitment costs for non-domestic assaults and the greater likelihood of discovery and legal action. But to suggest that the commitment bond may operate more effectively in other areas is not to deny its potential within intimate relationships. The investment of time, energy, and resources in a personal relationship generates a commitment in much the same way that occupational stakes in conformity are produced. Therefore, commitments within as well as beyond intimate relationships must be examined.

3. Involvement. Another dimension of Hirschi's control theory is involvement, meaning participation in conventional activities. The involvement bond has failed to engender much empirical support, a result anticipated by Hirschi (1969: 230). The weakest of the four ties to society, involvement has disappeared from some

⁷ This raises the question of the extent of overlap between domestic and non-domestic violence in terms of the husband's possible involvement in each type (see Hotaling *et al.*, 1989). A related issue is whether different theories are needed to explain family violence compared to "street crime." For a description of the position that "violence in the family may be considered, for a variety of reasons, a *special* case of violence which requires its own body of theory to explain it [emphasis in original]," see Gelles and Straus (1979: 552). Also see Fagan and Wexler (1987); Shields *et al.*, (1988).

tests of Hirschi's formulation (see, e.g., Liska and Reed, 1985; Thornberry, 1987), but it would be premature to dismiss it before more adult samples are studied.

Involvement in conventional activities, including work, should help secure conformity in adults. In Lasley's (1988) study of white-collar crime among automobile executives, for example, higher involvement in company affairs reduced the likelihood of crimes against the company.

Embezzlement, pilfering, and domestic assault illustrate a paradox in Hirschi's involvement bond, however. When applied to delinquency, the logic of this bond translates into keeping young people busy with conventional activities to limit the opportunities for crime inherent in excessive free time. But while working forty hours a week may keep juveniles from such activities as auto theft and vandalism, their job may provide opportunities for employee theft. Similarly, involvement in intrafamily activities or in community events as a family unit increases the opportunity for assaultive acts within the family:

Most nonfamily social interactions are focused on a specific purpose. But the primary-group nature of the family makes family interactions cover a vast range of activities. This means that there are more "events" over which a dispute or a failure to meet expectations can occur (Gelles and Straus, 1979: 552).

Heavy involvement in family activities may result in quality time or greater time at risk, depending in part on the strength of other bonds.

Involvement reinforces the social bond of attachment. Doing things with others creates and shores up the social integration of relational networks. Consequently, men who spend more time socializing with friends, doing special things with their partners, and becoming involved in church and civic affairs should be non-assaultive compared to men who are isolated (Pagelow, 1984: 78). Especially if the attachments are strong, these integrative ties should overcome the greater opportunity for violence implicit in heavy involvement in the family.

4. Beliefs. Based in the Durkheimian tradition, social control theory asserts a link between social integration and socially approved moral views. "People with strong ties to conventional institutions are most likely both to internalize conventional beliefs and morals and to have the most to lose upon being socially identified as a deviant" (Liska and Reed, 1985: 547-548). In this sense, moral beliefs summarize the impact of the other three bonds. Internal control, in the sense of self-control, is achieved by socialization into the conventional moral order, which receives support through attachment, commitment, and involvement.

Moral beliefs vary in their potential to control behavior. This

“variation in the extent to which people believe they should obey the rules of society” (Hirschi, 1969: 26) may be explained in three ways. First, control theorists may assume that beliefs never form (incomplete socialization). Second, moral beliefs may be neutralized prior to an unlawful act, which frees the person to deviate. Third, there may be such normative ambiguity over an act that a clear moral position does not exist.⁸

A strong case can be made for normative ambiguity in the shared expectations about wife assault. As Gelles (1983: 157) writes, “there are conflicting norms concerning the use of violence in families—and thus some confusion as to whether the normative social order in families is one of harmony and peace or conflict and violence.” This ambiguity arises in part because there are some domains within the family in which hitting might be tolerated, if not expected (for example, a parent toilet training a toddler or punishing a rebellious teenager, a wife slapping her husband for marital infidelity, or a husband hitting his wife for leaving a sick child alone at home [cf. Greenblat, 1983; for a typology of family violence, see Gelles and Straus, 1979: 557–560]).

It is likely that normative ambiguity feeds the neutralization process so that both forces serve to remove the moral bind of the law.⁹ An important empirical question is whether moral beliefs are weakened more by male acceptance of a normative view that permits (rather than requires) hitting a female partner or by active justification applied prior to an assaultive episode. Very few studies have examined the neutralization techniques available to men who hit their spouses (see Bograd, 1988). But regardless of the source—neutralization or justification based on normative confusion—those men who feel their female partners can be hit under certain circumstances are freer to invoke assaultive behavior within the marriage.

An inability to neutralize moral beliefs is one factor inhibiting domestic violence. Another is the fear of legal consequences. Re-

⁸ Hirschi (1969) mentions the first, favors the second, and ignores the third possibility. He sidesteps the issue of normative ambiguity and moral conflict by assuming a common value system across all segments of society. In this way he rejects the position of cultural deviance theories, avoids the complexities of conflict theories, and finds himself agreeing with Merton (1938) on the common value assertion while dismissing the rest of strain theory. He was also aware of the evidence, available in the late 1960s, that supported the view that male delinquents of various social classes and racial groups held similar values as measured by attitudes (see, e.g., Short and Strodtbeck, 1965).

⁹ In this sense, domestic assault has another parallel to white-collar crime. Since the norms of doing business shade into sharp business practices, often requiring illegal acts, normative ambiguity also plays a role in corporate crime. When the concern is with employee crimes against the company, neutralization of controls seems to be required in embezzlement (Cressey, 1953). Lasley (1988: 360) found that a strong belief in corporate rules reduced the likelihood of involvement in employee law violations. However, his research did not permit a test of normative ambiguity versus neutralization of beliefs to explain his findings.

spect for the law is included in Hirschi's belief bond. The expectation that one can be arrested for wife assault may deter some men from hitting their female partners. Consequently, these two dimensions—moral disapproval of assaultive acts and perceived risk of arrest—must be assessed in any test of the control potential of beliefs.

B. Modifying Control Theory to Fit the Family Context

A unique feature of domestic violence, whether it be wife beating, child abuse, or sibling assault, is that victims and offenders share a relational history. This makes family assault different from typical "street crime" assaults. Obvious results are that victims may be reticent to report crimes, that the violent behavior is less visible to the community, and that witnesses may not want to intervene in a private affair. These examples imply that social controls from the larger community may have less relevance for family settings.

On the other hand, the relational history of the family may mean that certain controls operate that are absent in other settings. One suggestive finding from research on Hirschi's attachment bond among juveniles is that attachment to parents is more influential on conforming patterns than is attachment to school (see Liska and Reed, 1985: 557). Implicit in this is the possibility that the dynamics of control within the family (e.g., between husband and wife) may differ from the dynamics beyond the family, where institutions such as churches and schools play a larger role. The theory is silent on possible reasons why control in a relational context should be different from that in the larger community. The development of such an explanation is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, the above discussion implies that when studying male aggression in intimate settings, measures of social control should include bonds to the relationship as well as to the wider community. We shall propose such measures below.

III. DATA AND MEASURES

Telephone interviews with married or co-habiting adults (18 years of age or older) in the United States were conducted by Louis Harris and Associates during the summer and early fall of 1985, 1986, and 1987. The first of these three sets of interviews was done as part of the National Family Violence Re-Survey (Straus and Gelles, 1986). This survey selected respondents through random digit dialing, although blacks, Hispanics, and sparsely populated states were over-sampled to ensure a sufficient number of cases for analysis.¹⁰ The 1986 follow-up survey attempted to contact all married or co-habiting respondents who had agreed in 1985

¹⁰ See Stocks (1988) and Gelles *et al.* (1988) for a discussion of the representativeness of the 1985 survey.

to be re-interviewed and who had reported any acts of assault (measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale described below) against their partner ($N = 1,395$).¹¹ A random selection of non-assaulters completed the budgeted number of interviews ($N = 1,409$). The 1987 survey sought to re-interview all respondents included in the second (1986) survey.¹² The analysis that follows uses the final wave of survey data, but the panel nature of the data (all 3 waves) is utilized to construct our measure of non-assault and one other variable (see below). Since the focus of the study is male aggression, only data from male respondents are analyzed ($N = 483$, or 40.4% of the 1,195 persons interviewed in 1987).¹³

A. *Identifying Non-Assaultive Males*

Data on wife assault were collected by administering Straus's (1979) Conflict Tactics Scale, which is designed to measure the frequency with which specific tactics are used in conflicts between partners.¹⁴ Three types of tactics are measured: reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. Respondents were presented the following instructions:

No matter how well a couple gets along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person or just have spats or fights because they're in a bad mood or tired or for some other reason. They also use many different ways of trying to settle their differences. I'm going to read some things that you and your partner might do when you have an argument.

Respondents were then read a list of twenty tactics, ranging from "discussed an issue calmly" to "used a knife or fired a gun," including a residual category of "other types of physical aggression." They were asked to indicate the number of times in the previous

¹¹ Of the total 1985 sample, 95% agreed to be re-interviewed in 1986, and of the total 1986 sample, 93% agreed to be re-interviewed in 1987.

¹² Moreover, the alteration of the sampling design between the first and second surveys resulted in over-representation of men reporting assault. This can be compensated for with a weighing procedure that essentially downweights assaulters and upweights non-assaulters, yet maintains the original N for both years (i.e., 1986 and 1987). See Williams and Hawkins (1989) for a discussion. For purposes of simplification, and because our objective is analytic (testing theory) rather than inferential, the results reported here are based on un-weighted data. However, we conducted an analysis using weighted data and found that substantive conclusions were unaltered.

¹³ The lower representation in the sample of men compared to women is not the result of differential attrition by gender across waves. Men constituted 44% of the initial 1985 sample. The overall attrition rate from 1985 to 1987 for this survey was high: 69.8% for all individuals (men and women). We conducted an analysis that takes the possibility of sample attrition bias into account (see Berk, 1983), but it did not significantly alter the results presented in this paper. In short, no evidence of significant differential attrition by assault (or gender) was detected when comparing 1985 to 1987.

¹⁴ For a summary of various criticisms of the Conflict Tactics Scale along with a defense of the scale, see Straus and Gelles (1989: 49–91): esp. chaps. 4 and 5.

twelve months they had used each tactic. The tactics, including the residual category, pertaining to types of physical aggression are used to identify assaulters and non-assaulters. These questions were asked in all three of the survey years. However, if respondents in the 1987 survey reported no use of physical aggression during the previous twelve months, they were asked whether they had ever used such tactics prior to that period.

Our goal was to use these survey data to construct a reliable measure of non-assault. This can be done by comparing across years and identifying those men who consistently reported no assaultive behavior (i.e., in all three years reported using no physical aggression tactics in the past year and in 1987 reported never using such tactics). A total of 308 men had not perpetrated some form of physical aggression against their female partner, 173 men did report such involvement, and 2 men gave no response.

We analyzed the panel data with all years combined because we are interested in the underlying social factors that produce conformity (i.e., non-assault). We are not interested in year-to-year behavioral changes, as relevant as they may be for some purposes (see, e.g., Paternoster, 1989), because single-year estimates may include men who were non-assaulters in that year but were assaulters in some other year that is not surveyed. Thus, those estimates preclude a mutually exclusive classification of non-assaulters and assaulters based on self-reports. In short, the focus on non-assaulters is not only consistent with Hirschi's theory of social control, contrary to previous tests of it, but also allows for a more refined identification of such men and thus less distorted estimated effects of theoretically relevant variables.

B. *Indicators of the Social Bond*

Each of the four dimensions of the social bond posited by Hirschi (1969) is measured, but the selection of indicators was guided by the distinction, mentioned above, between controlling influences within husband and wife relationships and those emerging from the larger community.

The index of *attachment* reflects the importance respondents place on certain social activities. They were asked to indicate whether it is extremely important, very important, somewhat important, or not important at all to socialize with neighbors, friends, relatives, or their partners. The attachment index is the mean across the four categories of people, and it ranges from one to four.

Commitment is measured by years with present partner as well as years lived in the present community. *Involvement* is an index of social activities. Specifically, respondents were asked about the monthly frequency with which they socialize with neighbors, friends, and relatives, or do special things with their partners. The response categories were zero times, once, twice, three

to five times, or more than five times. The involvement index is the mean of responses across the four categories of people, and it ranges from zero to five.

Beliefs are measured in two ways. First, respondents were asked to evaluate whether it is wrong to hit one's partner in eight situations, including partner "is screaming hysterically," "flirts with others at a party," "refuses to work around the house," or "refuses to have sex." For each situation, a zero-to-ten scale was used, with zero meaning not wrong at all and ten meaning extremely wrong. The measure is a summary scale across situations and thus ranges from zero to eighty.

The second indicator of moral belief is the perceived risk of arrest. Respondents were asked to estimate the likelihood that they would be arrested if they hit their partners. A zero-to-ten scale was used, with zero reflecting no chance and ten meaning an absolute certainty. These estimates were averaged over the three years of the survey to obtain a more reliable indicator of beliefs about arrest.

The rationale for this second belief indicator rests on Hirschi's (1969: 23–26, 29–30) contention that people vary in their beliefs about whether they should obey social rules and laws. Legislation prohibiting wife assault has proliferated in recent years, as have policies to arrest violators (e.g., Sherman and Cohn, 1989). To the extent that these developments send a message that physical aggression against wives is not only wrong but an arrestable offense, men bonded to their communities are more likely to believe that local police will be notified and an arrest made if they assault their wives.¹⁵ Our research is therefore in part an empirical test of the potential deterrent efficacy of arrest policies.

Three other variables are used in addition to the indicators of the social bond: family income, age, and race/ethnicity. They are known correlates of male aggression against women (see, e.g., Dutton, 1988; Pagelow, 1984; Straus and Gelles, 1989; Straus *et al.*, 1980), and are also likely to be associated with the indicators of attachment, involvement, commitment, and beliefs. For example, older high-income persons have greater stakes in conformity and therefore should be high on the commitment bond. Hence, controlling for these variables reduces the chances of confounding effects.

All independent variables were dichotomized at their respective medians, with the exception of race/ethnicity, which is already

¹⁵ Clearly there is more to the belief dimension than the perceived risk of arrest. Yet at a minimum, we think that such perceptions can be used as a proxy for other measures pertaining to the respect for law and that, in the case of wife assault, are meaningful in light of the policy developments mentioned above. Moreover, our use of this measure has implications for integrating Hirschi's theory with general deterrence theory, which will be discussed briefly at the close of this paper.

dichotomous (whites compared to blacks and Hispanics). This was done for two reasons. First, all of these variables, except the involvement and attachment indices, are highly skewed. For example, 51 percent of the male respondents score two (the median) or less on the zero-to-ten scale that indicates the perceived chances of arrest for hitting one's partner, with only 13 percent scoring above five on that scale (mean = 3). Such a highly skewed distribution increases the likelihood that results will be influenced by extreme cases.¹⁶

Second, dichotomizing the independent variables simplifies the interpretation of the parameters estimated in the logit model specified here. Rather than referring to increases in the predicted probability of non-assault associated with incremental increases in a particular independent variable, one can refer to changes in probabilities with shifts from low to high categories of that variable. More importantly, comparisons among estimated effects to determine which variables have the greatest effects can be made because the metric is comparable. Such comparisons are problematic if some variables are categorical (e.g., race/ethnicity) and others are continuous (e.g., the perceived risk of arrest). The indicators of all dimensions of the social bond as well as the control variables and the dichotomous breakdowns are shown in Table 1.

IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, simple bivariate comparisons were made between the dichotomous categories of each independent variable on the dummy dependent variable, that is, the percent who are non-assaulters. This was done by calculating measures of association (i.e., Gamma coefficients) between the dependent variable and each of the independent variables. Next, we estimated a multivariate logit model to determine and compare the independent effects of each independent variable on the non-assault/assault dichotomous dependent variable.¹⁷

A. *Bivariate Comparisons*

Gamma coefficients representing the strength of the association between the non-assault/assault dichotomy and each dichotomous independent variable are reported in Table 1. All of the coefficients are positive in direction, which is consistent with our expectations. Among variables indicating the dimensions of the social bond, those pertaining to attachment and moral beliefs have

¹⁶ However, we conducted the analysis with the independent variables in their original continuous form, and those having significant positive effects were identical to the ones reported here. The magnitude of the estimated effects obviously was different because of the change in metric.

¹⁷ An estimation of logit models was used because the dependent variable is dichotomous (non-assaulters versus assaulters). For a general discussion of this method of analysis see Aldrich and Nelson (1984).

Table 1. Percent of Coupled Males Who Are Non-Assaulters by Categories of All Independent Variables

Theoretical Construct	Indicator	Category	Total Sample	Percent		Gamma
				Non-Assaulters	Assaulters	
Attachment	Importance of activities	(1) Very to extremely important	192	71.9		.27
		(0) Not important to somewhat important	272	59.6		
Commitment	Years with partner	(1) More than 15	237	66.2		.09
		(0) 15 or less	243	62.1		
Involvement	Years in community	(1) More than 15	225	67.6		.14
		(0) 15 or less	255	61.2		
Beliefs	Activities with significant others	(1) More than twice per month	205	64.9		.03
		(0) Two times or less per month	260	63.5		
		(1) High (greater than 61, 0-80 scale)	217	78.3		.57
Control variables	Moral disapproval of assault	(0) Low (61 or less, 0-80 scale)	242	49.6		
		(1) High (greater than 2, 0-10 scale)	232	68.1		.18
Control variables	Perceived risk of arrest	(0) Low (2 or less, 0-10 scale)	247	59.9		.11
		(1) High (greater than \$30,000)	254	66.5		
Control variables	Family income	(0) Low (\$30,000 or less)	227	61.2		.26
		(1) Older (greater than 40)	233	70.4		
Control variables	Age	(0) Younger (40 or younger)	248	58.1		.44
		(1) Whites	396	67.7		
Control variables	Race/ethnicity	(0) Blacks and Hispanics	76	44.7		
			481	64.0		

N

the strongest associations. Men who place greater importance on activities with significant others or more strongly disapprove of hitting one's partner are more likely to refrain from wife assault. While the coefficient for the perceived risk of arrest is not as strong, it suggests this variable may play an important role in the control process. The pattern holds for the control variables as well. The percent who are non-assaulters is greater for men in the higher income category, the older age group, and among whites compared to blacks and Hispanics. Although the coefficient for family income is rather weak, the associations between age as well as race/ethnicity and the non-assault/assault dichotomy are moderately strong.

In short, initial evidence is consistent with our application of Hirschi's theory to male aggression in intimate relationships. To determine the independent effects of each dimension of the social bond in controlling wife assault and to assess the relative contribution of these dimensions to the production of such conformity, we estimated a multivariate logit model.

B. Estimates of the Multivariate Logit Model

The results of the multivariate analysis are shown in Table 2. The proportion of cases correctly predicted was .677, and the Pseudo R^2 was .148 (see Aldrich and Nelson, 1984: 57), which suggests that this model does not provide a particularly good fit to the data, although it is statistically significant (chi-square = 73.37: $p \leq .000$, with 9 degrees of freedom). Nonetheless, indicators of attachment and beliefs have significant positive effects, as expected. Thus men who place greater importance on socializing with significant others, perceive a greater risk of arrest for wife assault, and more strongly disapprove of such aggressive behavior are significantly more likely to be non-assaulters. No evidence is found of an independent effect of commitment, involvement, or income. Yet apart from the independent effects of attachment and beliefs, white and older men are significantly more likely to be non-assaulters than their counterparts.

The results described thus far suggest that attachments both to one's partner and to a broader social network may play a significant role in the control process. This is also true of beliefs, whether based on the moral evaluation of aggression within the relationship or the perceived likelihood of intervention by community agencies (i.e., the police) if such aggression occurs.

To evaluate the relative impact of these dimensions on the production of conformity (i.e., non-assault compared to assault), we compared the coefficients among the dimensions of the social bond. Moral disapproval of assault has the greatest effect, followed by attachment and the perceived risk of arrest, respectively. The substantive significance of these estimated effects can be illus-

Table 2. Logit Models of Non-Assault (1)/Assault (0) with Dichotomous Indicators of Dimensions of the Social Bond and Control Variables ($N = 424$)^a

Independent Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error	<i>t</i> -value
Attachment			
Importance of activities	.701	.236	2.970**
Commitment			
Years in community	.178	.235	.757
Years with partner	-.418	.309	-1.353
Involvement			
Activities with others	-.217	.250	-.868
Beliefs			
Perceived risk of arrest	.556	.224	2.482*
Moral disapproval of assault	1.310	.231	5.671**
Control variables			
Family income	-.013	.227	-.057
Race/ethnicity	.972	.312	3.115**
Age	.801	.307	2.609**
Constant	-1.478		
Pseudo R^2	.148		
Proportion correctly predicted	.677		

^a The reduced N is due to listwise deletion of missing data.

* $p \leq .025$, one-tailed test

** $p \leq .005$, one-tailed test

trated by demonstrating how shifts from low to high categories of these variables increase the probability of non-assault. This is done by establishing a baseline probability of non-assault and evaluating the effect of each variable relative to it. Following Smith and Uchida (1988), we use the average probability of non-assault for the total sample (.64).¹⁸ The coefficient for moral disapproval of assault is 1.31 (see Table 2). Thus, shifting from the low to high category of this variable results in a predicted probability of non-assault of .868, a 35.6 percent increase over the baseline probability of .64.

Predicted probabilities and percentage increase over baseline values for all variables having significant effects in Table 2 are presented in Table 3. A shift from low to high in the indicator of attachment, which has a coefficient of .701 in Table 2, increases the predicted probability of non-assault by about 22 percent, while that for the perceived risk of arrest results in an increase of approximately 18 percent over baseline. These are fairly substantial in-

¹⁸ See Smith and Uchida (1988: 99, n.5) for a justification of using the total sample mean as a base line and a discussion of the calculation procedures.

Table 3. Predicted Probabilities of Non-Assault and Percentage Increase from Baseline (.64) for Significant Predictors of Non-Assault (1)/Assault (0)

Significant Predictors	Predicted Probabilities	Percent Increase from Baseline
Attachment		
Importance of activities	.782	22.2
Beliefs		
Perceived risk of arrest	.756	18.1
Moral disapproval of assault	.868	35.6
Control variables		
Race/ethnicity	.825	28.9
Age	.798	24.7

creases, suggesting that attachments and beliefs may be quite influential in preventing aggressive acts against wives.

It is also important to note, however, that these indicators of social bonds do not explain away the significant effects of age and race/ethnicity. Table 3 shows that these variables have important effects on the probability of non-assault, increasing it by about 25 and 29 percent over baseline, respectively. The persistence of such effects, therefore, is due to other variables excluded from the model.¹⁹

V. CONCLUSION

Our objective was to determine the applicability of Hirschi's (1969) social control theory to male aggression against female partners. The results of our empirical test suggest that this perspective provides a fruitful avenue for understanding why men refrain from such behavior. Two sources of conformity emerged: attachments to significant others and beliefs about the wrongfulness of aggressive acts as well as the possible legal consequences of those acts. Whether the theory applies to other forms of family violence is a subject for future research, but the findings reported here should encourage such work.

Nonetheless, two caveats should be mentioned. First, we are assuming that attachments and beliefs develop while men are cohabiting, and that non-violent means of conflict resolution are a consequence of these experiences. It is also possible that prior to their relationship, some men are predisposed, for any number of reasons, to be more bonded to both their partners and the commu-

¹⁹ One can argue from a control theory perspective that whites are more invested in the "established order" than blacks and Hispanics. In short, the variable is a proxy for commitment. Yet surely there is more to the effect of race/ethnicity than commitment to the larger society. A similar argument can be made about age.

nity. Thus, factors other than the strength of social bonds may be operating to curb physical aggression. Moreover, the absence of violent behavior may reinforce those bonds, and its presence may undermine them. This reverses the causal order implied by our assumption. A more complete and dynamic model, one that includes other sources of non-assault/assault and that takes reciprocal causation into account, is needed before more definitive conclusions can be drawn (cf. Liska and Reed, 1985). Yet our analysis has at least demonstrated associations consistent with Hirschi's theory and thus should be an incentive for further model specification and testing.

Second, while significant effects were found, the model did not provide an especially good fit to the data. Put simply, much about conformity remains unexplained. This could be due to the standard reasons of omitted variables, measurement error, misspecification (e.g., neglecting reciprocal causation), and the like. However, it also could be due in part to the paradoxical nature of family relations and thus to their somewhat indeterminate nature.

Consider the example of attachments. We have argued, with support from our findings, that highly valued intimate relationships between men and women operate to control male aggression in those settings. Yet considerable evidence shows that batterers are emotionally dependent on their victims and ambivalent about their intimacy needs, with anxiety, anger, and aggression often the result (see Dutton, 1988). Thus, strong (possibly overly strong) attachments may provoke rather than control aggression among some men. This process, moreover, undoubtedly varies across the course of a relationship between a given man and woman; it is not constant for any individual but changes over time. Thus, it is difficult to capture through quantitative research. In light of this point, however, it is impressive that we found a significant effect of attachment consistent with the theory. A similar point can be made about the beliefs dimension. Given the normative ambiguity about aggression in intimate relationships and the variability of the means of dealing with conflicts throughout the history of any relationship, a degree of indeterminacy between beliefs and behavior is bound to prevail. Thus, the findings in this case are striking.

As a final note, the significant effect of the perceived risk of arrest has important implications for policy and theory. It reinforces the growing body of literature that suggests that arrest policies are increasingly utilized and may deter violence in the family (see, e.g., Sherman and Cohn, 1989). Additionally, others have argued that legal sanctions, like arrest, are significant, disruptive life events (see, e.g., Ekland-Olson, 1984); that they engender attachment, commitment, and stigmatic costs (see, e.g., Williams and Hawkins, 1986), and that the fear of arrest may be embodied in such costs (see, e.g., Williams and Hawkins, 1989). Hence the next logical step theoretically is to integrate notions of general deter-

rence with the basic bonds of Hirschi's control theory to create a firm understanding of how legal sanctions operate to deter aggression in intimate relationships. This would expand Hirschi's social control framework and ground notions of general deterrence in a broader theoretical context.

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