

WHEN WOMEN LEAVE VIOLENT RELATIONSHIPS: DISPELLING CLINICAL MYTHS

ERIC GORTNER SARA B. BERNS
NEIL S. JACOBSON JOHN M. GOTTMAN

University of Washington

This article revisits and reexamines previously reported findings addressing the longitudinal course of violent couples (specifically, those in Jacobson, Gottman, Gortner, Berns, and Shortt, 1996). In doing so we sought to examine the validity of three pieces of clinical lore: (1) Victims of domestic abuse are unlikely to leave their abusive husbands, (2) Victims of domestic violence are passive and self-defeating, and (3) Physical violence is the most important factor in women's decisions to leave. By recontacting a previously missing subset of our data, we were able to reanalyze our previously reported findings. Reanalyses revealed faults in all three of the preceding pieces of lore. The clinical implications of all three findings are discussed here.

Domestic violence is a social problem of alarming proportions. Over 2 million women are estimated to be severely beaten by their partners each year (Straus & Gelles, 1990). In addition to the physical harm caused by domestic violence, there is also serious emotional trauma associated with battering, including Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression (Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Sandin, in press; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). The harmful consequences of domestic vio-

lence also extend to children who witness violence in the home, who are at higher risk of subsequent behavioral problems (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., in press). Homicide rates elucidate one of the most alarming consequences of battering: women are more likely to be killed by their male partners or expartners than any other category of perpetrator (Browne & Williams, 1993).

Even though emergency room physicians, primary care doctors, and mental health professionals frequently encounter women who have been battered, it often goes undiagnosed and undetected. Why? For one thing, domestic violence is often a "hidden" phenomenon: victims can be reluctant to openly disclose the violence they experience, even in a therapeutic setting. This reluctance is often based on a realistic appraisal of their life situations, which can lead to fear that they will be subject to more severe beatings and perhaps even murder, should they disclose the violence to professionals. Additionally, victims of domestic violence often blame themselves for their own victimization, leading to shame, guilt, and further secrecy. Therefore, unless professionals use care and skill in carefully assessing for domestic violence, they are likely to miss it quite frequently. In fact, Jacobson and Gottman (1998) report that only a small percentage of clinicians, even when assessing a couple, routinely conduct a thorough assessment for domestic violence, and an even smaller percentage incorporate abuse into their case conceptualizations (Hansen, Harway, & Cervantes, 1991; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). This is surprising, especially in light of the extraordinarily high rate of domestic violence in couples seeking therapy for relationship problems (O'Leary, Vivian, & Malone, 1992), and the recommendations of the American Psychological Association (APA, 1996).

Another reason why domestic violence is often neglected within clinical settings is that scientific

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Sara Berns, University of Washington, Center for Clinical Research, Department of Psychology, 1107 NE 45th Street, Suite 310, Seattle, WA 98105-4631.

research has offered little therapeutic guidance. Although there has been an abundance of important research regarding the facts of domestic violence, we still know surprisingly little about the course of domestic violence, and even less about effective treatments for battering. In the absence of enough guiding empirical work, the general public and some of the clinical community has been left with much speculation and unsubstantiated clinical lore about the longitudinal course of battering (e.g., "battered women stay in abusive relationships," or "leaving stops the abuse").

A small literature is accumulating on the longitudinal course of violence, and the findings to date present a different picture from previous clinical lore. Specifically, although it was once thought that violent relationships were quite stable, it now appears that they may not be as stable as previously thought—many battered women *do* leave their partners (e.g., Jacobson, Gottman, Gortner, Berns, & Shortt, 1996). For instance, Okun (1986) found that over 43% of abused women interviewed during their stay at a shelter, ended their relationships within two years, with 30% terminating their abusive relationships directly after leaving the shelter. In a study based on over 2,000 women in the National Crime Survey, Schwartz (1988) found that almost half of the women who had experienced domestic violence during their lifetime were currently separated or divorced from their violent partners.

Of the few studies that have examined the longitudinal course of domestic violence, several have examined factors related to women leaving their abusive partners (see reviews by Holtzworth-Munroe et al., in press; Strube & Barbour, 1988). For instance, studies have suggested that women who are in better financial circumstances are more likely to leave abusive partners (e.g., Strube & Barbour, 1983, 1984). Researchers have also looked at whether levels of violence relate to the likelihood of women leaving relationships. The results have been mixed with regard to the relationship between violence and leaving, with some studies finding that less severe or frequent violence is associated with women staying and others finding that more severe violence is correlated with staying (see Holtzworth-Munroe et al., in press). Unfortunately, most of the studies looking at the course of domestic violence have been cross-sectional in nature, and therefore have had

to rely on retrospective reports than the more powerful prospective, longitudinal designs. These previous studies have also relied exclusively on self-reports. Although these studies give us valuable information, data from unbiased observers are crucial to painting a complete portrait of a battering relationship.

Our own research on domestic violence has attempted to improve on the methodology of previous work, and revisit some of the pervasive beliefs about the course of domestic violence (see Gottman et al., 1995; Jacobson et al., 1994; Jacobson et al., 1996). We followed domestically violent couples over a period of two years in order to examine the ways in which couples that remained in abusive relationships differed from couples who were no longer together. We recently reported our results from this longitudinal study (Jacobson et al., 1996) and our findings regarding the stability of violent relationships were interesting: over one third (38%) of the domestically violent couples in our study had separated or divorced by two-year follow-up. Given the relatively brief two-year time span of this study, this seemed to be a quite high separation/divorce rate. We also found some intriguing differences between couples that remained together or who split up. For instance, husband emotional abuse was a stronger predictor of separation/divorce than physical violence, with wives more likely to leave husbands who were severely emotionally abusive. Wives were also more inclined to leave, the higher their own marital dissatisfaction and the more they defended themselves in an assertive manner.

At the time of these initial follow-up findings, we were unable to contact one fourth of our original sample, therefore, in our previously reported longitudinal analyses (Jacobson et al., 1996), we were missing follow-up data on 25% of our sample. Although missing data is a fact in longitudinal studies, we were still left wondering whether our previous findings regarding the prediction of divorce/separation in violent couples would replicate with our full sample. Were these missing couples somehow different than those who remained in contact with us? For instance, were the missing couples more likely to have been separated or divorced at follow-up? In the present study, we went to extraordinary lengths to find the missing couples. Our goal was a complete data set, the first of its kind in the history of

domestic violence research. We hoped that, with a complete data set, our published findings would hold up.

With the most complete sample we could acquire, we sought to reaffirm some truths, and separate them from myths regarding the longitudinal course of domestic violence. Specifically, we were interested in examining the validity of the following questions: Are victims of domestic violence unlikely to leave their husbands? Are victims passive and self-defeating? Does the level of physical violence determine who will leave? We had certain hypotheses that defied these pieces of lore. In particular, we assumed that the marriages would be less stable than many would assume, and that the more severely abusive the husband is, the more likely it is that the relationships will end. Finally, we assumed that battered women who seemed intolerant of the abuse (e.g., expressed indignation or "held their ground" on either observational or paper-and-pencil measures), would be more likely to end up separated or divorced.

Method

Subjects

We recruited 60 couples who engaged in severe husband-to-wife domestic violence (DV).¹ These couples were part of a larger sample collected by Jacobson et al. (1994), and this article should be referenced for recruitment information. All participants had to be 18 years of age or older, legally married, and both spouses had to participate. If individuals met these criteria, wives were administered our telephone versions of the Locke and Wallace (1959) Marital Adjustment Test and the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1979). They were not told explicitly that we were studying domestic violence.

The CTS was used to determine whether couples experienced severe enough levels of husband-to-wife violence for inclusion in the study. The CTS assesses partner and self-aggression during the past year. The scale has shown high reliability and a consistent internal factor structure (Caulfield & Riggs, 1992). To ensure a severely violent group of men, we chose husbands who, based on the wives' CTS reports of husband violence, exhibited any of the following behaviors within the past year: (a) pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped, hit, or tried to hit his wife six or more times; (b) kicked, bit, or hit his wife with a fist at least twice; or (c) beat her up, threatened her with a knife or gun, or used a knife or gun at least once. The CTS scores for the DV group indicated a moderate to severe level of violence. During the year prior to participation in our study, 34% of the wives had been beaten up, 66% had been kicked, bitten, or hit, 24% of the husbands had been arrested on a domestic violence charge, and 83% of the wives had been injured by their husbands' actions, with 21% seeking medical attention. Approximately 18% ($N = 8$) of husbands and 36% ($N = 16$) of wives were in some form of therapy. Couple therapy was most common, with half of the men in treatment being seen with their partners. Only one husband was currently in gender-specific treatment for violence. Given that 82% of male batterers in our sample were not in any current form of treatment and only one batterer was receiving therapy specifically geared toward violent behavior, our sample cannot be considered a clinical sample.

Even though we were not seeking a sample where the violence was bidirectional, close to 50% of the wives admitted to levels of violence that would have qualified them for the study based on a criterion of wife-to-husband violence, and close to 80% acknowledged at least some violence. Thus, despite selecting for husband-to-wife violence, in the vast majority of DV couples the wife also admitted to engaging in at least some violence herself. This, however, should not imply that the form or function of wife violence was equivalent to that of the husbands: bidirectionality does not imply mutuality. Previous research indicates that male violence in this sample was unique in its ability to control, subjugate, and intimidate women (Jacobson et al., 1994). This finding may have more to do with the insensitivity of the CTS measure itself than with bidirectionality. Despite

¹ We used wife reports to classify husbands as DV for the following reasons: (a) We were primarily interested in husband-to-wife violence; (b) we expected many of the husbands to deny that they were violent; (c) we reasoned that if we only chose couples whose husbands acknowledged that they were violent, we would end up with a very unrepresentative sample. As it turned out, husbands' CTS scores of their own behavior were within the moderate to severe range on domestic violence, and 54 of 57 husbands in the DV condition admitted to at least some violence toward their wives.

the frequency with which the CTS is used to measure domestic violence (see bibliography in Straus, 1985), it has been criticized for its inadequacy in measuring domestic violence sensitively. Specifically, some fault the CTS for measuring acts out of context (e.g., were the acts in self-defense?), and for failing to measure who was injured (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kurz, 1993).

Overview of Procedures

A detailed description of study procedures is provided in Jacobson et al. (1994) and Gottman et al. (1995). Pertinent procedures will be described here.

Data were collected from available DV couples at two time points: Time 1 (initial assessment) and Time 2 (two-year follow-up). During their visits spouses completed a structured interview and a series of questionnaires that are detailed below.

Structured Interview

The couples participated in a laboratory interaction, during which they were videotaped while discussing areas of conflict in their relationship. After the participants filled out a problem inventory in which they each rated the perceived severity of particular conflict areas (e.g., in-law, sex, money, communication), the interviewer identified the two areas rated most problematic by both spouses. The couple was then interviewed to help make the problem areas more specific (e.g., "communication" might become "disagreeing about how to behave at a party"). Couples then talked for 15 minutes in the laboratory about these two problem areas in their marriages. The interactions were later coded using the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF) (Gottman, 1995).

The Specific Affect Coding System

The SPAFF is a cultural-informant coding system in which coders consider an informational gestalt consisting of verbal content, voice tone, content, facial expression, gestures, and body movement. Using a computer-assisted-video coding station and a computer program that gives automated timing information (with a vertical interval, time-code signal), observers coded the onsets of each of a set of listener and speaker affects. Three coders classified the behaviors of speaker and listener as affectively neutral, or as one of five positive affects (humor, affection, validation,

interest–curiosity, and joy–enthusiasm), or as one of 10 negative affects (anger, disgust, contempt, domineering, belligerence, whining, sadness, tension, defensiveness, and listening with stonewalling).

Our SPAFF coding system demonstrated high levels of reliability, with kappas averaging 0.89. Generalizability coefficients for individual codes were all over 0.80 and averaged 0.87 (see Gottman et al., 1995 for more information).

Additional Measures

Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-II (MCMI-II) (Millon, 1987). Husbands and wives were independently administered the MCMI-II to assess personality styles and clinical syndromes. The MCMI-II is a 175-item, true-false, self-report inventory intended to be used with clinical populations. This widely used instrument has 22 clinical scales that parallel the DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987), plus three response set scales.

Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ) (Waltz, Rushe, & Gottman, 1994). The EAQ is a project-designed, partner-report measure. It contains 66 items pertaining to threatening, controlling, degrading, and sexually abusive behaviors done in the past by the spouse. Each item is rated on a 4-point scale ("Never" to "Very Often"). Four subscales were theoretically derived from the EAQ: Isolation, Degradation, Sexual Abuse, and Property Damage. The coefficient alphas for the Isolation, Degradation, Sexual Abuse, and Property Damage subscales were .92, .94, .72, and .88, respectively. See Jacobson et al. (1996) for examples of sample EAQ items.

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976). The DAS is a widely used measure designed to assess the quality of marriage and similar dyads. It is a 32-item, paper-and-pencil measure intended to assess global marital satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, consensus, and affectional expression.

Participants

Of the initial 60 DV couples in our Time 1 sample, we were originally only able to contact and ascertain the marital status of 45 couples at the two-year follow-up. It was these 45 couples that formed the basis of our previously reported results (see Jacobson et al., 1996). In a population of couples who are notoriously hard to track in longitudinal research, we were not surprised to

be unable to contact all of the couples. Although that turned out to be the case, we decided a few years later to find these missing couples. We were curious as to what their marital status was at the time we found the other couples. We were not able to obtain additional information regarding these women because we did not contact them directly (see below). To ascertain marital status we hired a professional investigator (P.I.). For the fee of \$100 a person, she agreed to help us find the women who had participated, make sure they were still alive, and determine information regarding their marital status. We ensured that the methods employed by the P.I. would be unobtrusive, and would in no way invade the privacy of battered women. All information was obtained from the public record and no intrusive methods were used. The P.I. used a combination of public-record databases to locate the addresses of women from our study, to be used in later marriage-record searches. These databases included automobile records, which run plate numbers to provide the person's last home address. She also conducted nationwide computer checks based on social security numbers. This search gathers information from the three major credit bureaus, as well as publication mailing lists and voter registration. Those methods failing, she used a CD ROM cross-street directory that also aided in determining last-known address. Perhaps her most val-

uable resource was the public court records that informed her of civil, criminal, domestic, estate, and judgment claims. From these records she could determine the marital status of each of the women we were seeking.

Through the assistance of the P.I., we were able to ascertain the marital status of 11 of the originally missing 15 couples. Therefore, our total sample for these analyses was 56 couples, or 93% of our original sample.

Results

Predicting Marital Status at Two-Year Follow Up (Time 2) from Time 1 Data

In the following series of analyses, we considered Time 1 variables that discriminated between couples who were separated/divorced or still-together at two-year follow-up, to examine in what ways violent couples who remained in abusive relationships differed from couples who were no longer together. We first looked at differences in demographic, marital satisfaction, and severity of domestic violence variables. We also examined marital interaction variables, including both affective and personality/psychopathology factors.

Demographic variables and marital satisfaction. Of the 56 couples available at the two-year follow-up, 34 (61%) were still together and 22 (39%) had separated or divorced. Table 1 shows

TABLE 1. Time 1 Scale Scores and Demographics for Separated/Divorced (SEP/DIV) and Still-Together (TOG) Couples

Time 1 Scores	n	Time 2 Marital Status		f(df) and p
		TOG Couples M(SD)	SEP/DIV Couples M(SD)	
Dyadic Adjustment Scale				
Wife	54	93.33(13.92)	74.52(22.77)	F(1,52) = 14.25**
Husband	52	98.28(14.52)	84.35(17.85)	F(1,50) = 9.48*
Education ^a				
Wife	53	14.09(2.16)	13.71(2.67)	F(1,51) < 1, ns
Husband	52	14.06(2.99)	13.85(2.01)	F(1,50) < 1, ns
Income ^b				
Wife	51	798.00(719.72)	1054.26(765.72)	F(1,49) = 1.44, ns
Husband	49	1675.74(944.74)	1491.39(1044.71)	F(1,47) < 1, ns
Age				
Wife	53	36.82(11.37)	31.89(7.33)	F(1,51) = 3.08, ns
Husband	51	36.96(9.33)	32.91(8.39)	F(1,49) = 2.42, ns
Years married	53	7.76(7.78)	5.66(4.30)	F(1,51) = 1.27, ns
Number of children	53	2.22(1.86)	1.71(1.59)	F(1,51) = 1.04, ns

^a Years of education. ^b Gross monthly income.

* p < .05. ** p < .01.

the means and standard deviations for husbands and wives in the still-together (TOG) and separated/divorced (SEP/DIV) groups on Time 1 demographic variables and marital satisfaction (measured by the DAS).

At Time 1, wives and husbands who had separated or divorced by the two-year follow-up reported lower levels of marital satisfaction than wives and husbands from couples who were still together. Even though the correlation between husband and wife DAS scores is .70, the wife DAS scores discriminated between the two criterion groups much more strongly. The two groups did not significantly differ on Time 1 demographic variables.

Physical and emotional abuse. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the TOG and SEP/DIV groups on frequency of violence (as measured by the CTS) and emotional abuse (as measured by the EAQ) at Time 1.

In couples who were separated or divorced at two-year follow-up, husbands reported significantly higher levels of wife-to-husband violence

at Time 1 than still-together husbands. Also, husbands in couples that were separated or divorced reported higher levels of wife-to-husband degrading emotional abuse at Time 1 than still-together husbands. Finally, women who were separated/divorced at Time 2 reported higher levels of husband emotional abuse in the forms of isolation and degradation at Time 1 than women in the still-together group.

Observed behavior and affect during nonviolent arguments. Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for both groups on SPAFF codes obtained during their 15-minute nonviolent argument at Time 1. Husbands from couples who were no longer together at Time 2 were significantly more contemptuous, displayed less humor, and showed less neutral affect toward their wives at Time 1 than still-together husbands. Separated/divorced wives displayed significantly less humor toward their husbands at Time 1 than their still-together counterparts. There was also a trend ($p = .08$) toward separated/divorced wives being more defensive at Time 1 than still-together wives.

TABLE 2. Time 1 Severity of Violence and Emotional-Abuse Scale Scores for Separated/Divorced (SEP/DIV) and Still-Together (TOG) Couples

Scale and Spouse Tested	n	Time 2 Marital Status		f(df) and p
		TOG Couples M(SD)	SEP/DIV Couples M(SD)	
Conflict Tactics Scale (Self)				
Wife	52	11.31(12.05)	11.70(13.40)	F(1,50) < 1, ns
Husband	51	10.29(22.43)	11.65(16.54)	F(1,49) < 1, ns
(Partner)				
Wife	54	21.44(21.98)	26.05(29.19)	F(1,52) < 1, ns
Husband	49	7.37(8.22)	22.47(23.53)	F(1,47) = 10.46**
Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (Partner)				
Isolation Subscale				
Wife	47	46.93(15.85)	57.40(19.41)	F(1,45) = 4.15*
Husband	51	49.59(14.70)	58.37(21.35)	F(1,49) = 3.02, ns
Degradation Subscale				
Wife	48	65.25(16.32)	80.00(24.51)	F(1,46) = 6.28*
Husband	49	57.00(17.57)	68.37(19.88)	F(1,47) = 4.40*
Sexual-Abuse Subscale				
Wife	49	12.31(3.98)	14.15(5.06)	F(1,47) = 2.02, ns
Husband	51	11.06(3.70)	11.26(4.20)	F(1,49) < 1, ns
Property-Damage Subscale				
Wife	49	13.10(5.70)	14.75(6.74)	F(1,47) < 1, ns
Husband	51	10.13(4.73)	10.74(3.90)	F(1,49) < 1, ns

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 3. Time 1 SPAFF Means and Standard Deviations for Separated/Divorced (SEP/DIV) and Still-Together (TOG) Couples

SPAFF Code	n	Time 2 Marital Status		f(df) and p
		TOG Couples M(SD)	SEP/DIV Couples M(SD)	
Husband Contempt	56	14.35(25.16)	33.68(38.67)	F(1,54) = 5.15*
Husband Neutral	56	547.18(130.06)	443.50(157.73)	F(1,54) = 7.17*
Husband Humor	56	16.94(23.74)	3.14(7.76)	F(1,54) = 6.92*
Husband Global Negative Affect	56	267.47(125.69)	368.59(150.77)	F(1,54) = 7.39**
Wife Defensiveness	56	153.91(118.47)	218.91(155.38)	F(1,54) = 3.14, ns
Wife Humor	56	16.71(24.21)	4.27(10.22)	F(1,54) = 5.18*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

As demonstrated (see Jacobson et al., 1996), the findings for neutral affect can be seen essentially as the inverse of negative affect, since positive affect was so rare in this sample. Therefore, when we say that husbands from the separated/divorced group displayed less neutral affect than still-together husbands, we are in fact saying that separated/divorced husbands were displaying significantly *more* global negative affect.

Personality and psychopathology. We examined the Time 1 MCMI-II scale scores to compare psychopathology and personality disorders between the separated/divorced and still-together groups. Separated/divorced men were significantly higher on the antisocial (SEP/DIV: $M = 87.5$, $SD = 25.6$; TOG: $M = 71.6$, $SD = 20.6$, $F(1,48) = 5.81$, $p < .05$), histrionic (SEP/DIV: $M = 71.9$, $SD = 19.9$; TOG: $M = 58.6$, $SD = 21.6$, $F(1,48) = 4.72$, $p < .05$), and narcissistic (SEP/DIV: $M = 89.1$, $SD = 18.4$; TOG: $M = 66.3$, $SD = 27.6$, $F(1,48) = 10.2$, $p < .01$) scales than still-together men. The mean antisocial and narcissistic scale scores for husbands in the separated/divorced group were well above the scale score cut-off of .75 for diagnosing antisocial or narcissistic personality disorder. The men in the two groups did not differ on any of the MCMI-II Axis I scales.

Discussion

This article revisits and reexamines previously reported findings addressing the longitudinal course of violent couples (specifically, those in Jacobson et al., 1996). We engaged in unprecedented efforts to obtain follow-up data from couples that were formerly missing during the two-year follow-up. Our efforts were remarkably successful: we received follow-up (Time 2) mari-

tal status information for 73% (11 of 15) of these formerly missing couples. We now have Time 2 marital information on 93% of our Time 1 couples, which is an unusually high retention rate for a two-year time frame.

Our main goal in conducting this study was to examine whether the addition of formerly missing couples would substantially change any of our previously reported results. In other words, can we remain confident in our earlier findings, now that we have the most complete sample possible? We found strong convergence in findings, even though we included data on 25% more couples than in the previous study. This further confirms the strength of our previous results that were based on a partial sample. Since we are interested in how our results coincide or conflict with clinical speculations, we will discuss our results within the context of three prevalent clinical myths.

Clinical Myth #1: Victims of Domestic Abuse Are Unlikely to Leave Their Abusive Husbands

Our findings suggest that the relationships of violent couples are quite unstable. Victims of domestic violence are likely to leave their abusive partner within two years. In order to better understand the process of separation, Jacobson and Gottman (1998) later contacted a large percentage (85%) of these women who left. These interviews took place, on average, a full three years after the conclusion of the formal follow-up period. We discovered that women had initiated the separation or divorce *in every instance*. Furthermore, we did not find a single case where women had returned to their abusive partners after separation. Finally, within five years of our initial encounter with these couples, this informal follow-up sug-

gested that over half were now divorced. Considering the fact that the *lifetime* prevalence of divorce is 50% in the general married population, these findings suggest that most victims of abuse *do* indeed leave batterers and, once they do leave, they do not return.

Clinical Myth #2: Victims of Domestic Violence Are Passive and Self-Defeating

We continue to find support for the idea that women who manifest intolerance of husbands' emotional and physical abuse are likely to subsequently leave their abusive partners. We saw evidence of this intolerance in several different ways in our study. For instance, women who left by Time 2 were more likely to physically defend themselves against their husbands at Time 1, according to husband reports. Women who left were also significantly more dissatisfied with the condition of the marital relationship than women who stayed. Our observational data revealed that women who showed less humor toward their husbands during nonviolent arguments were more likely to later leave. We also observed a statistical trend in our observational data that indicated that these women were also more likely to respond assertively (but not aggressively) to their husbands' emotional abuse.

Interestingly, we also found that women who left were more likely to be emotionally abusive themselves, according to their husbands. Of course, these findings need to be taken with a grain of salt, given batterers' capacity for minimization, denial, and distortion (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). Moreover, we also found a clear discrepancy between the levels of wife physical abuse reported by the husbands, and the levels that the wives self-reported. Husbands separated or divorced at Time 2 reported higher levels of wife physical abuse at Time 1 than still-together husbands. The wives of the separated or divorced husbands, however, did not self-report higher levels of physical abuse than still-together wives. This discrepancy confirms our wariness regarding the veracity of husband reports. We found moderate ($r = .37$) correlations between husband and wife reports of wife abuse. The husbands are giving us only partially accurate information.

A more compelling explanation for the higher levels of reported emotional and physical abuse by husbands resides in how these husbands interpret their wives' intolerance of abuse. For instance, it is quite common for men entering treat-

ment for battering to complain that *they* are the ones being emotionally and physically abused (Pence & Paymar, 1993). More careful examination of their complaints often reveals that what batterers term as "violent" behavior by women is often merely assertive behavior and intolerance of husbands' abusive behavior. It is possible that these elevated reports of wife physical and emotional abuse are signposts of husbands' sense of threat surrounding wives' assertions. We found physiological evidence of a heightened alarm response in husbands whose wives left them within two years (Jacobson et al., 1996). Indeed, there is a subtext underlying these husband reports that may reflect something accurate that these women are "fed up" and about to leave them.

Taken together, a portrait begins to emerge of the battered women who are likely to leave, and it is far from one conveying passivity or self-defeating tendencies. Instead, we see a person who is assertive and intolerant of her husband's contemptuous and belligerent, verbal and physical behavior. This is not to say that women who stayed in these relationships were characterized by a lack of assertion or intolerance of abuse, for we were struck by the strength of all the women in our study in coping with unthinkable emotional and physical abuse. What we found was that women who were more likely to leave showed remarkably courageous levels of assertion in an environment where such behavior contains enormous risks. As we will note below, there were also unique characteristics of the batterers that may have facilitated the women's decisions to leave.

Clinical Myth #3: Physical Violence Is the Most Important Factor in Women's Decisions to Leave

Our results continue to highlight the importance of husband emotional abuse in relation to women leaving. Interestingly, although levels of physical violence did not predict women's likelihood of leaving, emotional abuse did. In fact, emotional abuse was, by far, our strongest and most consistent predictor of women leaving. Women were particularly likely to leave those men who showed high levels of emotional abuse, particularly abuse that either attempted to isolate women from others or was by nature degrading. Our observational data showed these men to be particularly contemptuous and belligerent toward their wives. These batterers also seem to have a general antisocial and narcissistic personality

style. It should also be noted that marital satisfaction was strongly negatively correlated with emotional abuse ($r = -.62$), but not significantly correlated with physical abuse ($r = -.21$). The contribution of emotional abuse to wives' low marital satisfaction provides further evidence that emotional abuse may be a more important factor than physical abuse in driving women out of the marriage.

These findings should not be taken to imply that physical abuse itself is not an important factor in influencing the course of abusive relationships. Indeed, emotional abuse retains its power *because* it has been associated in the past with physical abuse. But once emotional abuse becomes associated with physical abuse, it can subjugate, intimidate, and control women just as effectively as physical abuse, and may actually become more prevalent over time as physical abuse, which becomes less necessary, decreases. This may explain why emotional abuse is more effective at driving women out of the relationship. Clinical trials that fail to carefully attend to changes in emotional abuse may be providing artificially inflated estimates of success. Although rates of physical abuse may go down, the abuse may simply be driven underground, and replaced by emotional abuse (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998).

Clinicians working with batterers and battered women need to base their decision making on fact rather than myth. We hope that our findings will help resolve a few of the many clinical ambiguities that exist when therapists are confronted with domestic violence. Unfortunately, clinical markers of imminent separation or divorce do not translate directly into advice for battered women (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). Therapists trying to make sense of our findings must not confuse correlation with causation. For example, our findings do not imply that women should be instructed to "hold their ground" or "fight back." Such an implication would imply that "fighting back" causes a safe departure from the relationship, when in fact "fighting back" may actually put battered women at increased risk for severe abuse. "Fighting back" and "intolerance of abuse" are characteristics of women who leave abusive relationships, but this does not mean that therapists can use a "matching to sample" strategy and advise battered women to behave *as if* they were like those who leave. Our markers can guide therapists in making prognostic estimates and in this way can indirectly influence treatment planning.

Our research, however, does not directly speak to what works in getting women safely out of abusive relationships. Research that experimentally evaluates advocacy, both before and after women are safely out of abusive relationships, will be necessary before we can draw causal inferences that have direct implications for therapy.

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