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INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE AMONG MARRIED AND COHABITING COUPLES*

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Abstract

Previous research on cohabitation and Levinger's (1965) model of marital cohesiveness and dissolution lead to the hypothesis that there is a higher level of violence in ongoing marriages than in ongoing cohabiting relationships. Data from a national sample of 2,143 adults did not support this hypothesis. Instead the reverse was found: cohabitors are appreciably more violent than marrieds. However, cohabitors who are over 30, divorced women, those with high incomes, and those who had been together for over ten years, had very low rates of violence. The fact that some cohabitors are much more violent than marrieds, whereas others are appreciably less violent, provides evidence that cohabitation should not be seen as a unitary phenomenon. Of the different types of cohabiting relationships, only a portion can be regarded as a liberal alternative to traditional marriage. The social, legal and educational implications of these findings are discussed.

Recent studies of family violence indicate that physical aggression between spouses is often viewed as legitimate (even if not mandated) in family relations. The tolerance, and sometimes approval, of spousal violence is not just a part of the folk culture. It is also embedded in the legal system (Straus, 1976). Suits and new legislation have been necessary to force the police and courts to treat husband-wife assaults as they would other assaults (N.Y. Times, 13 November 1976:10). Public tolerance of marital violence is also quite high. About 25% of a national sample of Americans stated that they would approve a husband or wife hitting one another under certain circumstances (Stark and McEvoy, 1970). This tolerance is further illustrated by the results of an unpublished experiment by Churchill and Straus. Subjects were presented with identical descriptions of an assault by a man on a woman. Those who were told that the attacker and victim were husband and wife recommended much less severe punishment for the man than those who were told that the two were unrelated.

Assaults by husbands and wives on each other are regarded differently than assaults between non-relatives. Evidence such as that mentioned above have led some family violence researchers to adopt the notion that the marriage license is, in effect, a hitting license (Straus, 1976).

LIVING TOGETHER WITHOUT THE MARRIAGE LICENSE

Another group of sociologists who have focused attention on what is implied by the marriage license is researchers concerned with alternative family forms, particularly cohabition. They have attempted to assess the effect of the license and legal contract on intimate relationships (Whitehurst, 1974). The researchers assume that there is a lot more to the marriage license than merely a piece of paper. Marriage brings with it, not just a change in the legal status of the couple, but also a change in the whole set of social expectations and assumptions regarding the couple. In a sense, the marriage ceremony transforms a private relationship into a public one in which social norms more closely govern the behavior of the couple.

Nevertheless, the behavioral importance and impact of the marriage license remains unclear. Much of the research has been limited by various methodological problems, in particular inadeguate samples and lack of empirical comparison with married couples (Cole, 1977). Still, some interesting findings have emerged from two studies which overcome these problems. It seems that there are few differences between marital and living-together relationships in such areas as division of labor, decision-making power, and communication and satisfaction with the relationship (Stafford, et al., 1977; Yllo, 1978).

A theoretical analysis of differences in violence rates between married and cohabiting couples suggests that there may be less violence among cohabitors than among marrieds for a number of reasons. Because they are not legally bound to their relationship, we expect that they are more likely to leave an unsatisfactory situation. If the marriage license is, in effect a covert hitting license (that cohabitors do not have), we expect cohabitors to view violence as less legitimate than marrieds, and also feel less bound to tolerate it.

On the other hand, there might be no difference between married and cohabiting couples because both types have certain things in common. Violence in marriage may be a reflection of the intense conflict which occurs in all intimate relationships (Foss, 1979; Gelles and Straus, 1978). It is difficult to speculate about how cohabitors react to violence because empirical knowledge about the nature of cohabition is so limited (Hennon, 1976). The prediction of lower violence among cohabitors is appropriate if the ideological basis of the relationship includes rejecting the traditional rules and rights of marriage, such as male leadership, the right to hit and so on. Unfortunately, we have no basis upon which to argue that all or even most cohabiting relationships are based on this type of counter-culture ideology. The popular media pictures living together couples as having chosen an avant-garde lifestyle. Social science research is part of the basis for their image of cohabiting couples because almost all studies of cohabitation are based on college student samples. These studies provide no information on the nature of cohabitation in the population as a whole. Consequently, the expectation that cohabitors are less violent than marrieds because of counter-culture life styles is quite tentative.

LEVINGER'S COHESIVENESS-DISSOLUTION MODEL

George Levinger's conceptual model of marital cohesiveness and dissolution (1965) is the theoretical framework with which we began the research. It identifies factors which may serve to keep intact a relationship in which violence has occurred and those which facilitate its breakup. These can help make sense of the rates of violence in marriages and cohabiting relationships.

Levinger conceives of marriage as a special case of all two-person relationships and marital cohesiveness as a special case of group cohesiveness. He defines group cohesiveness as "the total field of forces which act on members to remain in the group" (1965:19). Inducements to remain in the group include the attractiveness of the group and the strength of restraints against leaving it. Inducements to leave the group include the attractiveness of alternative relationships. Levinger proposes that the

strength of the marital relationship is a direct function of the attractions within and the barriers around the marriage, and an inverse function of such influences from alternative relationships (1965:19). Thus, the strength of the intimate relationship is regarded as a function of bars as well as bonds.

The generality of Levinger's scheme makes it suitable for our purposes. The relative stability of marriage as opposed to cohabitation may be considered in terms of the three dimensions Levinger outlines.

Attractiveness of the Relationship

The cohabitation research discussed above indicates that the attractions within marriage and cohabition should be fairly similar. Both are intimate relationships with similar internal structures. Cohabitors and marrieds do not differ significantly in their feelings of satisfaction with the relationship (Yllo:1978).

A key difference between marriage and cohabition in relation to attractiveness may be differences in the degree to which the two types of relationships are embedded in kin support networks. The new husband and wife officially become members of one another's families. The couple generally receives support (both financial and emotional) from kin (Sussman, 1959). The cohabiting couple, on the other hand, seems more likely to be isolated from such a support network. The data on cohabitors indicate that their parents often do not even know of the relationship (Henze and Hudson, 1973; Macklin, 1972; Peterman, et al., 1974).

However, another interpretation of the involvement of family in the marriage is that it is often regarded as interference rather than support. From this perspective, the relative isolation of cohabitors from their kin may be regarded as an advantage of living together unmarried.

It is difficult to assess the relative attractiveness of marriage as opposed to cohabitation. Certainly, it depends to a great extent on the individual couple and their values. There seems to be no reason to assume, in general, that one type of relationship is inherently more attractive than the other. In content and intimacy these relationships differ little. These factors lead us to assume that there would also be little difference in conflict and violence between marrieds and cohabitors.

Barriers to Dissolution

Levinger points out that it is also important to consider the barriers around the relationship. It is with regard to barriers that there are important differences between marrieds and cohabitors.

Levinger maintains that barrier forces exist both inside and outside the individual. Feelings of obligation to the marital bond are an important barrier to the dissolution of a marriage. Little information is available on feelings of obligation which living together couples feel for their relationship. However, it seems reasonable to assume that, while cohabitors may feel as satisfied and as strongly about the importance of the relationship to them as marrieds, their commitment is more dependent on the attractions within the relationship. After all, they have not made a public statement of life-long commitment, nor have they signed a legal contract.

The social and legal status of marriage is a source of barrier strength outside of the individuals. The most obvious barrier to the dissolution of marriage, which does not exist for cohabitors, is the necessity of a legal divorce. Resources such as time, effort, and money are required to obtain a divorce and work to make the break-up of a marriage a costly option.

While the legal system works to keep marriages together, it serves opposite ends for cohabitors. In many states it is still a criminal offense to live together unmarried. This prohibition makes it difficult for cohabiting couples to establish the same kind of financial interdependence as marrieds. In addition, it is sometimes difficult for cohabitors to find a place to live and there are even more problems when it comes to major purchases which require credit (Gagnon and Greenblat, 1978:19).

In addition to the legal boundary around marriage, there are numerous informal social forces which maintain the relationship. For example, religious proscriptions against divorce may influence a couple to stay together, even at the cost of tolerating some violence. Another informal barrier which Levinger discusses is kinship affiliation. As pointed out earlier, the networks of family relations are different for marrieds and cohabitors. Whereas family members may support the efforts of the married couple to work out their differences and avoid the turmoil and social stigma of divorce, they may actively encourage the break-up of a cohabiting relationship which they regard as illicit.

Alternatives

The third dimension which Levinger discusses is attractiveness of alternative relationships. While there is no empirical evidence on this issue, the case can be made that alternative attractions would be stronger for cohabitors. If one's parents oppose living together unmarried, the desire to reestablish relations with one's family may serve to weaken the relationship.

Also, alternative sexual and emotional involvements seem more available to cohabitors. The advances of others are less likely to be deterred. The fact that one is living with someone is not usually as widely known as the fact than one is married. In addition, marriage carries with it stronger expectations of sexual and emotional exclusivity. Adultery is a legally defined act. Involvement with another person when one is cohabiting receives fewer negative sanctions.

The increased possibility for outside involvement among cohabitors seems to carry the potential for increased conflict among them. However, the greater chance for and acceptability of outside involvement may also be considered positively. An outside affair may have a much more serious impact on a marriage than on a cohabiting relationship. Within marriage such an act constitutes the breaking of a legal contract and the public marriage vows.

HYPOTHESIS

Our discussion of the nature of marital and cohabiting relationships, sources of their attractiveness and conflict within them, suggest that violence would be present and fairly high in both types of intimate relationships. However, our consideration of the barriers against dissolution of the relationships has emphasized that marriage is a much more binding commitment and would be more likely to stay intact despite problems, including violence. These factors lead to the following hypothesis:

> There is a significantly higher level of interpersonal violence in ongoing marriages than in ongoing cohabiting relationships.

THE SAMPLE

The data for this study were obtained from a survey conducted in January and February of 1976. Interviews were conducted with a national area-probability sample of 2,143 adults. To be eligible for inclusion in the sample each respondent had to be between 18 and 70 years of age and living with a member of the opposite sex as a couple.

However, the couple did not have to be formally married. A random half of the respondents were female and half were male. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was completely anonymous. Furthermore, interviewers were of the language or racial group which was predominant in the sampling area for which they were responsible. Further details on the sample are given in Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1979.

Interviews were completed with 40 persons who were not legally married to their partners. The 40 cohabitors make up 1.9% of the sample. This figure corresponds quite closely with the most recent census estimate of 2% (Glick and Norton, 1977). It is important to note that both our figures and the census estimate are probably underestimates of the actual rate of cohabitation. It is quite likely that a number of cohabitors, particularly those with long-established relationships, reported themselves as married.

CONCEPTS AND MEASURES

There has been considerable confusion regarding definition of concepts in both cohabitation and family violence research. It is therefore important to specify both the nominal and operational definitions of the central concepts used in this paper.

Cohabitation

The concept of cohabitation has been somewhat unclear because researchers of the phenomenon have used a variety of terms interchangeably. "Living together unmarried," "quasi-marriage," "trial-marriage," "shacking up," and "nonmarital cohabitation" have been used synonymously by some and defined differently by others. For the purposes of this research, the terms "living together" and "cohabitation" will be used interchangeably to refer to a more or less permanent relationship in which two unmarried persons of the opposite sex share a living facility without legal contract (Cole, 1977:67).

In this study, the marital status of respondents was determined on the basis of questions on family composition. All respondents who listed the marital status of both partners as "married" were coded as legally married couples and are referred to as marrieds. Those respondents who reported the marital status of partners as "single," "divorced," "widowed," or "separated" were coded as cohabitors. Because all of the relationships were intact and ongoing at the time of the interviews, all of the findings are with regard to currently married and cohabiting couples.

Violence

The term violence also requires some clarification. In this study, the terms violence and physial aggression will be used synonymously and are defined as "an act carried out with the intention of, or perceived as having the intention of, physically hurting another peson" (Gelles and Straus, 1978:16). Although violence connotes a more negative and political evaluation of an act than does physical aggression, the terms are used here to refer to the same actual behavior.

The data on violence were obtained using the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979). The overall violence scale contains eight items, starting with "mild" acts such as pushing, shoving, slapping, throwing things. For purpose of this paper, the Severe Violence Index will be used, this includes acts of violence that carry with them a high risk of physical injury, specifically: punching, biting, kicking, hitting with an object, beating up, and any attack in which a knife or gun was actually used. The violence rates reported are the percentage of couples in which someone did one or more of these things in the year prior to the interview. Violence rates will be reported for Male-to-Female violence and for Couple violence. The former is a measure of violence in which the woman is the victim and the latter is a measure of all violent acts, whether directed at the male or the female.

It is important to note that our data provide information only on the extent to which violent acts were carried out and not on the consequences of those acts (i.e. severity of injury).

VIOLENCE RATES

The findings of this research indicate that our assumptions about marital cohesiveness, the nature of cohabitation, and factors influencing the level of violence in both types of relationships need to be reconsidered. Not only was the hypothesis not supported, but the actual rates are significantly different in the reverse direction. Cohabitors are appreciably more violent than their married counterparts!

(Table 1 about here)

As Table 1 indicates, cohabiting women are almost four times more likely to suffer severe violence as married women. The data on total couple violence indicate that cohabiting women are not just the victimes of high rates of violence but that they are quite violent to their partners as well. The cohabitors are almost five times more likely to have a severe violent incident than are the marrieds. As

Table 1. Interpersonal Violence Rates for Married and Cohabiting Couples

	Married (N=2049)	Cohabiting (N=37)	Chi-square	p≤ (df=1)
Male-to-Female, Severe	3.6	13.5	7.251	.05
Total Couple, Severe	5.6	27.0	25.847	.05
Male-to-Female, Overall	11.6	32.4	9.048	.05
Total Couple, Overall	15.1	37.8	12.690	.05

Table 2. Severe Interpersonal Violence Rates for Married and Cohabiting Couples, Controlling for Key Variables.

Control Variables	N		% Violent: Male-to-Female Violence		% Violent: Couple Violence	
	Mar	Coh	Mar	Coh	Mar	Coh
A. Income						
High (over 20,000)	553	7	1.6	0.0	2.9	0.0
Middle ($10,000 to $19,999)	833	10	2.4	10.0	4.4	20.0
Low (under $10,000)	471	15	8.4	20.0	11.5	40.0
B. Age of Respondent						
Thirty and under	556	23	8.4	21.7	13.3	43.5
Over thirty	1466	14	1.8	0.0	2.7	0.0
C. Female Previously Divorced or Separated						
No	1705	25	3.1	16.1	5.0	36.0
Yes	244	8	7.4	0.0	9.8	0.0
D. Male Previously Divorced or Separated						
No	1711	25	3.5	16.0	3.6	36.0
Yes	237	11	4.6	9.1	7.6	9.1
E. Duration of Relationship						
Under 2 years	177	16	10.0	12.5	18.2	31.2
3 to 10 years	599	10	5.8	30.0	8.7	50.0
Over 10 years	1251	10	1.7	0.0	2.3	0.0

the overall violence rates parallel the severe violence rates in this analysis (and all others), only the latter will be reported in the remainder of the paper, so as to avoid the complexity of two sets of data presentations.

In order to insure that the above differences in levels of violence are not spurious, the relationship between marital status and violence was controlled for a number of key variables. Previous comparisons of these samples of marrieds and cohabitors showed that cohabitors are significantly younger and more likely to be divorced or separated. Also, the duration of the cohabiting relationships was found to be significantly shorter than that of marriages (Yllo, 1978). These variables were introduced as control factors. In addition, the relationship was controlled for level of family income.

All differences in violence rates between marrieds and cohabitors are statistically significant at the .05 level.*1 However, because of the small number of cohabitors, these differences must be examined with caution.

(Table 2 about here)

Income

It is clear from Table 2 that income has a direct effect on level of interpersonal violence. There is an inverse relationship between income and rate of physical aggression for both marrieds and cohabitors. However, this effect is much more dramatic for those living together. Cohabitors earning over $20,000 annually reported no violent incidents. In contrast, a full 40% in the low income group (family income under $10,000) indicated that they had had at least one incident of severe violence in the last year. In contrast, the rate of couple violence for marrieds ranged from 2.9% in the high income group to 11.5% in the low income group. It appears that the stresses of living on low income are somehow compounded for couples living together unmarried.

Age

Age also has a strong effect on interpersonal violence for both marrieds and cohabitors. The rates of wife-beating and total couple violence are considerably greater for those under 30. Again, this factor has greater impact for cohabitors. Those over 30 who were living together reported no violence at all within the previous year. But, as Table 2 shows, 43.5% of cohabitors under the age of 30 had been involved in one or more violent episodes within that year.

Previous Divorce or Separation

As reported in an earlier paper (Yllo, 1978) many more cohabiting than married couples reported that a previous marriage had ended in divorce. Divorce is introduced as a control on the assumption that the different marital histories of the two groups might differentially affect levels of violence. This turned out to be the case. As Table 2 illustrates, previous divorce has opposite effects for marrieds and cohabitors as far as physical aggression is concerned.

For the marrieds, the rate of severe violence is somewhat higher for those who had previously been divorced. Perhaps these couples are willing to tolerate a higher level of violence in order to avoid the stigma of a second divorce.

The rate of violence for cohabitors who had been divorced or separated, in contrast, was lower than for those who had not been previously married. Among those cohabiting couples in which it was the woman who had been married, the violence rate is zero. For those living together couples who had not been previously married the rate of wife-beating is 16% and total couple violence is 36%. Perhaps those people who experienced the break-up of a marriage and then chose to cohabit rather than remarry are quite cautious about their new involvement and do not tolerate any abuse. Why the rate of severe violence is over seven times higher for cohabitors with no prior marriage than for their married counterparts is unclear.

Duration of the Relationship

The duration of cohabiting relationships is significantly shorter than that of marriages. Further, this relationship remains significant when controlled for age of respondent.

Controlling the marital status-violence relationship for the duration variable also produced differences between marrieds and cohabitors. The meaning of those differences is far from clear, however. While the rate of total couple violence decreases from 18.2% for those married under two years to 2.3% for those married over ten years, this trend is not clearly paralelled among cohabitors. For the under two year cohabiting group, the rate is about double that of the newly marrieds (31.2%). Instead of declining as length of relationship increases, the violence rate goes up to a full 50% for those who have been living together for three to ten years. The rate then drops to zero for those couples who have been living together for over ten years.

. The barriers to dissolving a marriage may explain why longer established marriages are more violent than cohabiting arrangements of similar duration. However, it does not explain why the rate of violence is appreciably higher for cohabiting couples who have lived together from one to ten years.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis that the rate of violence among marrieds is higher than among cohabitors was not supported. The data show the reverse relationship to be significant. Overall, cohabitors are appreciably more violent than marrieds. However, certain cohabitors, in particular those who are over 30, divorced women, those with high incomes, and those who had been together for over ten years, had very low rates of violence. In fact, cohabitiors with these characteristics were less violent than their married counterparts.

These differences in rates of violence in cohabiting as opposed to marital relationships are striking, fascinating, and difficult to interpret adequately. Overall, the findings contradict the idea that relationships of cohabitors are less violenct because of a commitment to non-violent counter-culture ideology, or because such relationships can be dissolved more easily due to the lack of legal and social barriers around them. It appears that both marriage and cohabitation, as intimate relationships, involve conflict and, often, violence.

One possible reason that rates of violence are so high among cohabitors is that violence may be interpreted as a symbol of love by some. The joke about the woman who is concerned that her husband doesn't love her anymore because he hasn't smacked her in a week illustrates this point. Love, intimacy, conflict, and violence are closely entwined in our culture (Foss, 1979). It may be that for some cohabitors physical violence toward one's partner serves as a symbol of closeness and ownership in the absence of a legal license and label.

The fact that some cohabitors are much more violent than marrieds, whereas cohabitors with the characteristics listed above are appreciably less violent, provides empirical evidence for the view that cohabitation should not be seen as a unitary phenomenon. In attempting to understand various aspects of cohabitation it is important to avoid thinking in terms of the stereotype of living together couples which has been perpetuated by the presently available research. That research, having focused almost entirely on college students, tends to portray such relationships as liberal and avant-garde. Cole's (1977:76) review of the cohabitation literature, suggests that more

attention needs to be given to distinguishing between the types of cohabitation because couples differ in their motives for entering such relationships. Our data support the idea that there may be a number of <u>different</u> types of cohabiting relationships, and that only a portion of such unions can be regarded as a liberal alternative to traditional marriage.

The findings of this research also help to clarify the nature of violence among intimates. Of the several factors affecting violence which were considered, marrieds and cohabitors differred, in terms of direction of the relationship, only where divorced women were involved. Overall, the findings indicate that the same variables which explain spousal violence in marriage, explain violence among cohabitors, only more so. Cohabitors and marrieds who are over thirty, have a high income, or have been together for over ten years have very low violence rates. In general, rates of violence are higher among the young and the poor, whether they are married or living together. However, the married couples within this group seem to be a step ahead in coping with their problems, as they are less violent than cohabitors with the same characteristics. The greater social support and integration in the kin network of the married couple may explain this difference.

A number of implications emerge from the findings of this research. First, the high rate of violence among cohabitors has legal implications which should be investigated further. Although the problems which married women face when they call in the police to intervene in beatings are well documented, we know little about the position of the unmarried woman with a violent partner. While the married woman may receive little help from the police, the cohabiting woman may recieve none at all. In calling in the legal authorities she exposes the nature of her relationship, which in many states is still illegal. The cohabiting woman may, therefore, be regarded as less moral and less deserving of protection than her married counterpart. She may be trapped in a relationship because of a tangle of emotional and financial reasons, yet legal recourse limited because of the status of cohabitation in our laws.

The findings of this research also have implications for social services. The image that cohabitation is a liberal lifestyle, freely chosen as an alternative to traditional marriage, may obscure the need which many cohabitors have for the support of social agencies. The isolation or estrangement of living-together couples from the support of kin networks may enhance their need for help from other sources.

Finally the finding that cohabitors are more violent than married has implications for family life educators. This research underscores the inherent conflict in all intimate relationships. It is important for students to understand that the avoidance of legal marriage, alone, will not eliminate the problems which wives and husbands must face within their relationship. In fact some of the problems may be exacerbated. The ability to discuss, negotiate, and manage conflict non-violently are important skills for all, regardless of the type of intimate lifestyle they choose.

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FOOTNOTE

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1. The one exception is the difference between rates for those relationships in which the male was previously divorced or separated.

END