Work Stressors and Wife Abuse

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To assess whether work experiences and stressors are associated with wife abuse, separate groups of-maritally (a) satisfied, (b) dissatisfied, nonabusive and (c) dissatisfied, abusive husbands completed work involvement, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and work stress (yielding occurrence, positive, and negative impact indexes) questionnaires. Multivariate analysis of variance revealed that overall work experiences are associated significantly with wife abuse. Further univariate ANOVAs showed that only the occurrence of stressful work events and their negative impact were associated significantly with wife abuse. Conceptual and methodological implications concerning the association between work stress and wife abuse are suggested, and the need for (a) true causal analyses on the effects of work stressors on wife abuse and (b) a focus on personality and situational variables enhancing or reducing the likelihood of spouse abuse are emphasized.

Estimates of the number of wives in the United States who are physically abused by their husbands range from 30% (Straus; 1978) to 60% (Gelles, 1974), with 14% suffering severe, chronic abuse (Straus, 1978). Work stressors and experiences are often implicated in the etiology of wife abuse (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1981), yet there is little empirical research focusing on this relation. Wife abuse has been related to status inconsistency and the incompatibility of husband underachievement and holding a job of a lower socioeconomic status than the wife (Hornung, McCullough, & Sugimoto, 1981). Likewise, wife abuse may follow husbands' unemployment (Straus et al., 1981). Moreover, these data concern demographic correlates of wife abuse; no data is provided on subjective work stress. Even when subjective work stress has been studied (Straus, 1980), work and life stress are confounded. The present study focuses specifically on the relation between wife abuse and subjective work stressors and experiences.

The precise nature of any work-related variables that might be associated with wife abuse has not been identified. Anecdotes suggest that excessive work or organizational involvement may be related to wife abuse. Thus, work involvement and organizational commitment are studied as possible correlates of wife abuse in the present study. Also, stressful work events may be associated with husbands' abusive behavior. Empirical data on parental work stress and child abuse support this hypothesis (Agathanos & Stathakopolou, 1983; Justice & Duncan, 1978). In the studies cited, however, work and life stress were confounded, as were abuse and neglect. Finally, job satisfaction is investigated because job and marital satisfaction are related under certain conditions (Pond & Green, 1983).

If marital dissatisfaction and violence are related, they must not be confounded in studying the relation of work stress and spouse abuse. This is accomplished here with separate groups of-maritally (a) satisfied, (b) distressed, nonabusive and (c) distressed, abusive husbands. Within this design, differential correlates or effects of marital distress on wife abuse can be isolated (Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981).

Method

Subjects and Procedure

Abusive husbands (n = 18) were self-referred to the Men's Educational Workshop (for abusive husbands) at Syracuse University. Husbands in the nonabusive groups were recruited from newspaper advertisements requesting participation of satisfied and dissatisfied husbands in a research project. Because group status depended on response to a community newspaper ad (for satisfied [n = 18] and dissatisfied, nonabusive [n = 12] husbands), or treatment for wife abuse, the validity of the group composition was assessed. Abusive (M = 63.67) and dissatisfied, nonabusive (M = 75.08) husbands suffered more marital distress than their satisfied counterparts (M = 116.72, F(2, 65) = 39.44, p < .001) as measured on the Short Marital Adjustment Scale (SMAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959). There were no differences between the two maritally dissatisfied groups, and their mean scores on the SMAT indicated clinically discordant marriages (i.e., < 90; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981). Abusive husbands were more physically violent toward their wives (M = 9.17) than dissatisfied, nonabusive (M = 4.25) or satisfied (M = 4.17) husbands, F(2, 65) = 22.95, p < .001. as measured on Straus's (1979) Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). The mean age of the 48 husbands, all from currently intact relationships (M = 10.83 years, SD = 8.96) was 35.3 years (SD = 9.65), and their mean annual income was $20,209. Abusive husbands received a fee waiver for one session in the Men's Educational Workshop, those in the two nonabusive groups were paid an equivalent amount ($10) in cash. All questionnaires were completed voluntarily, privately, and anonymously.

Questionnaire Measures

Cook and Wall's (1979) scale assessed job involvement. This 6-item scale is internally (alpha = .63) and temporally (r = .56 over 6 months) reliable. Its validity is suggested by moderate but significant correlations.

Portions of this research were supported by National Institute of Mental Health Grant MH 35340. The authors express appreciation to K. Dan O'Leary, Steve Bluen, Clive Fuegler, and Cara Smith for constructive comments regarding an earlier version of this article.

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correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Work Experiences and Stressors, Marital Adjustment and Marital Violence

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Decimals are omitted within the matrix (N = 48). * p < 0.05. ** p < 0.01.

Results and Discussion

ultrivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to ane relationship between work variables and wife abuse, because significant correlations between the work stressors and abuses (see Table 1). A significant MANOVA effect emerged be three groups as the categorical variable, Pillai-Bartlett F approximation (12, 72) = 1.98, p < .04. Univariate F satisfied the work variables contributing to this multivariate Significant differences emerged on the objective, occur-nex, F(2, 45) = 6.59, p < .005, and subjective, negative impact score, F(2, 45) = 4.08, p < .025. Scheffé tests showed that abusive husbands reported the occurrence of more work events (M = 15.06) and a greater negative stress impact (M = 11.5) than the distressed, nonabusive (M = 5.42 and 7.17, respectively) and satisfied (M = 2.47 and 5.63, respectively) husbands, who did not differ from each other. No other significant differences emerged.

The results of the MANOVA suggest an association exists between work-related variables and wife abuse. Subsequent univariate ANOVAs showed that the occurrence of stressful work events and their negative impact were related to wife abuse. It might be argued that this is a statistical artifact. Abusive husbands experience more stressful work events, and their negative impact scores are higher than those of nonabusive husbands. Differences in the negative impact measure might be a function of husbands’ self-reporting the occurrence of significantly more work events, particularly because the occurrence and negative impact indexes were highly correlated (r = .87). Should this be so, similar differences on the positive impact measure should also emerge, given its significant correlation with the occurrence index (r = .76); yet no such differences emerged. Because all data are based on self-reports, it could also be argued that the positive associations between violence and occurrence and negative impact indexes are autocorrelational confounds. Yet no significant between-group differences emerged on the positive impact index, and the possibility that the relation between negative stress impact and wife abuse is a statistical artifact is minimized. Given the cross-sectional design used, however, one alternative hypothesis remains plausible. Aware that abusive behavior is unacceptable, abusive husbands may report more stressful work events and a higher negative impact as a rationalization for their abusive behavior. Research focusing on the causal nature of work stress, therefore, is warranted.

The nature of the work stressor associated with wife abuse is important. Verifiable, objective events (e.g., promotion, unemployment) might be stressful (Stone, 1982), and subjective re-actions to objective events also determine subsequent impact. The results obtained here suggest that verifiable objective and subjective negative stressors are associated with wife abuse. Stressful work events demand change, and thereby affect the individual as considerable personal readjustment for successful coping is required. As the number of events and their negative impact increase, so too does the uncertainty, unpredictability,
and uncontrollability of the situation, and more personal adjustment is required (Vinokur & Selzer, 1975).

Why other work-related experiences were not related to wife abuse must be considered. First, positive stress is less predictive of psychopathology than negative stress impact (Vinokur & Selzer, 1975). Second, job involvement may not be associated with psychopathology (Barling & Van Bart, 1984). Third, commitment may be a moderator, not a predictor variable (Maddi & Kobasa, 1984). Finally, work and marital satisfaction may only be related under conditions (Pond & Green, 1983) not present or assessed in this research.

An agenda for future research on work stress and wife abuse emerges. First and foremost, research must assess whether work stressors cause wife abuse. This might best be accomplished using longitudinal designs, with data on work stressors and experiences and spouse abuse gathered simultaneously across two or more different time periods. In addition, a focus on acute work stressors (i.e., daily work events) is warranted. Based on data from a large random sample, Warr and Payne (1983) showed that not all individuals experience work stress each working day. A time-series analysis of the covariation of acute daily work stressors and marital violence would also provide an indication of their causal interdependence.

A second line of research could focus on personality, or situational, or a combination of such factors that increase or reduce the likelihood of marital violence occurring as a function of work stress. This is consistent with the fact that most people do not respond to work stress with family violence (Straus, 1980). There are considerable data suggesting that social support, particularly work-related support of an instrumental nature, moderates the harmful effects of work stress (House, 1981). Likewise, it has been reported that personality hardiness (a personality variable comprising commitment, perceived control over events, and the acceptance of events as challenges) moderates the negative effects of work stress on health (Maddi & Kobasa, 1984). Because personality hardiness also moderates the effects of fathers’ work-related stressors on their marital adjustment (Barling, 1986), it might be worthwhile investigating the role of personality hardiness in the relation of work stress to marital violence. Questions of particular relevance are whether some individuals are more prone to marital violence (e.g., because of their family of origin [Rosenbaum & O’Leary, 1981]), regardless of the level of work stress, and whether there is a causal relation between work stress and marital violence within nonclinical, community samples. In any further research on work stress and wife abuse, disentangling of the confounding variables of marital distress and violence warrants further attention.

References


Received March 4, 1985
Revision received July 30, 1985