

---

# Gender Norms and Retaliatory Violence Against Spouses and Acquaintances

Scott L. Feld

*Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana*

Richard B. Felson

*The Pennsylvania State University, University Park*

This article examines an experiment embedded within a nationally representative survey of adult Americans to investigate gender norms regarding retaliatory violence between spouses and acquaintances. Contrary to claims that societal norms permit violence within marriage, respondents disapproved of retaliatory violence against spouses more than they did against acquaintances. Contrary to claims that gender roles encourage violence by males more than females, respondents were just as likely to approve of female retaliation against males as they were male retaliation against males, and they were more approving of females' retaliating against females than of males' retaliating against females. Male and female respondents had similar, strongly disapproving attitudes toward men's retaliating against women, even though male respondents were more accepting of retaliation in all other conditions. Evidence clearly shows that societal norms discourage retaliation between spouses and men's retaliating against women. Consequently, violent wife abuse continues despite (not because of) societal norms.

**Keywords:** *intimate violence; norms; retaliation; gender; experiment; national sample*

Violence is generally considered to be against social norms. However, when someone has been physically attacked, it is often acceptable and sometimes even socially prescribed to retaliate in kind (e.g., Brown & Tedeschi, 1976; Kane, Joseph, & Tedeschi, 1976). It is familiar to hear

---

**Authors' Note:** We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of TESS (Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences; National Science Foundation Grant No. 0094964, Diana Mutz and Arthur Lupia, principal investigators) for collecting the data for this project. Please send all correspondence to Scott L. Feld, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Purdue University, 700 West State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907; e-mail: [sfeld@purdue.edu](mailto:sfeld@purdue.edu).

children and adults justify their violence toward others by saying, "He hit me first." That justification assumes that people believe that hitting back is normatively acceptable and may be even expected. In addition, research shows that the behavior of those who retaliate after being physically attacked may not even be perceived as aggression (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). However, people also believe in "turning the other cheek" and that "two wrongs don't make a right."

The gender of adversaries may be a major factor affecting norms about the appropriateness of retaliation to a violent provocation. Some scholars argue that male gender roles encourage violent responses but that female gender roles do not (e.g., Eagly, 1987). From this perspective, gender differences in violence reflect different expectations that societies hold for men and women. At the same time, evidence indicates that gender norms discourage violent acts against women more than against men and that norms inhibiting male violence against women are particularly strong (cf. Felson, 2000; for a review, see Felson, 2002).

However, questions have been raised about the applicability of gender norms concerning violence when the violence is in response to violence. In fact, studies of violent behaviors (not norms) give reason to raise these questions; for example, Bettencourt and Miller's meta-analysis (1996) of violent behaviors shows that gender differences in use of retaliatory violence are much weaker than gender differences in unprovoked violence. Also, some observers suggest that the normative protection of women is conditional; that is, women who conform to gender roles are protected, but women who violate these traditional norms by using violence lose that normative protection (Baron & Richardson, 1994; Brownmiller, 1975; Young, Beier, & Barton, 1975).

Another issue concerns whether norms against violence are different within marriage versus outside marriage. Many analysts of domestic violence have suggested that Americans (among others) are more tolerant of marital violence than other violence; some even call the marriage license a hitting license (e.g., Pagelow, 1984; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Feminist scholars suggest that it is violence of men toward women that is especially legitimized within marriage (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Pagelow, 1984). However, evidence that these beliefs are widespread is weak. Most Americans disapprove of slapping spouses and other mild forms of spousal violence, even as many can imagine instances in which such behavior may be justifiable (Arias & Johnson, 1989; Greenblat, 1983; Straus, Kantor, & Moore, 1997). However, there is no empirical evidence that violent acts within marriage are considered more acceptable than violent acts outside marriage. In

fact, some research indicates the opposite: Rossi and colleagues (Rossi, Waite, Bose, & Berk, 1974) found that respondents ranked beating up a spouse as being more serious than beating up an acquaintance, and Felson and Ackerman (2001) found that police are more likely to arrest an offender who assaults an intimate partner than one who assaults someone else.

Some observers have suggested that the high frequency of wife abuse is evidence that norms encourage men to use violence against their wives (cf. Dobash & Dobash, 1998). However, frequent violence can occur in spite of the norms that inhibit it. Felson, Ackerman, and Yeon (2003) reported evidence that men are less likely to use violence against their wives than against female strangers during a dispute. They suggest that high spousal violence rates reflect a high frequency of interaction between husbands of wives in a context that is conducive to conflict. A high frequency of disputes can lead to relatively high rates of violence without supportive norms and even with norms against spousal violence.

One more issue concerning gender norms is that even in the context of generally shared norms, men may share somewhat different norms than women do. Research shows that men tend to have more favorable attitudes toward violence than women do (e.g., Smith, 1984). However, men's greater general support of violence may not apply to violence by and toward women or to violence in marriage. Perhaps men are more sympathetic with male adversaries, and women are more sympathetic with female adversaries. Or, maybe men hold more strongly to traditional gender norms that discourage violence by and against women. Little is known about gender differences in these specific norms, and it is important to understand whether men or women are more accepting of violence under particular conditions.

We are aware of two experimental studies that have examined gender norms of retaliation, both involving college students. One study showed effects of bystanders, which can be an indicator of norms. Feld and Robinson (1998) asked college students their likelihood of retaliating after being hit by a boyfriend or girlfriend in hypothetical situations of aggression with and without a bystander present. They found that the presence of a bystander reduced the likelihood of retaliation of male participants toward female aggressors, and it increased the likelihood of retaliation of female participants toward male aggressors. The results suggest that the respondents believed that those bystanders would disapprove of males' retaliating against females but would approve of females' retaliating against males.

The other study used an approach similar to the present one to study the norms themselves. Harris (1991) presented hypothetical scenarios to students at a Southeastern university in which she manipulated the gender

of the perpetrator and victim and their relationship and then measured respondents' attitudes toward retaliation. She found that the students were more accepting of retaliation by females than by males, more accepting of retaliation against males than against females, and especially disapproving of males' retaliating against females. Acceptance of retaliation did not depend on whether the adversaries were spouses, friends, or strangers.

These findings are relevant to our present concerns, but college students are hardly representative of the larger population. Compared to most American adults, college students are considerably younger, of higher social class, and better educated, and each of the above studies was based on an unrepresentative sample from a single college. The present study was designed to determine the existence and nature of shared gender norms concerning retaliatory violence for the larger population of all American adults. To the extent that such norms exist, we expect that they exert an important influence on whether people retaliate when confronted with violent provocations and may help to explain gender differences in violence.

In sum, the purpose of this study was to investigate gender norms regarding retaliatory violence in a nationally representative sample. Although many factors enter into the normative appropriateness of retaliatory violence, we focus on the relevance of gender and marriage. We examine how judgments about the appropriateness of retaliation depend on whether the perpetrator is male or female, whether the victim is male or female, and whether the adversaries are married or not. We also examine whether there are systematic differences in these judgments and if such differences depend on whether the judge is male or female.

## Method

We created an experiment within the context of a telephone survey conducted on a representative sample of American adults. The sample was drawn by the Indiana Survey Research Center using the Genesys list-assisted method as a guide to selecting a national random sample of home telephone numbers. Respondents were randomly selected from among adults who were residing in the selected households. Each selected respondent was randomly assigned to one of our six conditions with fixed probabilities. No categorical quotas were imposed on the sample. The Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (or TESS project) funded a total of 800 interviews containing the module for this project.

Respondents were presented with a scenario where one person was described as getting angry and hitting another unjustifiably. The primary dependent variable is the extent to which respondents believed that the victim would be justified in retaliating against the perpetrator. The experimentally manipulated independent variables included the gender of the perpetrator, the gender of the victim, and the relationship between the perpetrator and victim (spouse or acquaintance). We wanted to determine whether each of these independent variables affected the acceptability of retaliation. We also wanted to determine whether these independent variables had any interactive effects—for example, whether respondents were more or less accepting of male victims' retaliating against female perpetrators within marriage versus outside marriage.

The interviewer introduction was as follows:

Many people think it is important to stand up for yourself when someone mistreats you, but people have different opinions about what to do. I am going to describe a situation where someone is treated badly, and ask you whether you agree or disagree with several statements about what that person should do.

Then the scenario containing the experimental manipulation was read to the respondents. One version of the scenario is as follows:

Imagine that a young man, John, gets very angry at an acquaintance, Beth, for no good reason. John swears at Beth in front of a group of Beth's friends and hits her hard enough to bruise her arm.

This version includes a male perpetrator and a female victim who are acquaintances. Other versions vary the gender of the victim and that of the perpetrator, as well as the nature of their relationship (acquaintance or spouse), resulting in six conditions (excluding the two conditions that would involve same-sex spouses).

Respondents were then asked a series of questions concerning the scenario—specifically,

For each of the statements I'm about to read to you, please tell me how much you agree or disagree (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree):

1. [Victim] should hit [hitter] back.
2. It would be wrong for [victim] to hit [hitter] back.

3. [Victim] would be justified to hit [hitter] back.
4. If you were [victim] in this situation, you would hit [hitter] back.

Our original plan was to include all these responses in an index to indicate the normative acceptability of retaliatory violence in this situation. However, the association between the second question and the others was much weaker than the association among the others, so the second question was omitted from the index for the following analyses. (Including all four items does not change the substantive findings or interpretation.) The reliability coefficient (alpha) was .76 for these three items. The response to each question was coded from 0 (*most disapproved/unjustified*) to 3 (*most justified/approved*), and the scores from the items were summed to provide a scale that ranged from 0 to 9.

## Findings

Our most general finding for the scenario studied is that Americans do not approve of retaliatory violence in any of the conditions that we presented. The greatest mean acceptance in any condition was 3.26, which is statistically significantly less than the midpoint of 4.5 of the 0-9 scale ( $t = 6.15, p < .000$ ). Nevertheless, there was considerable variation in the acceptability of retaliation, and it depended on the genders and relationships involved.

### Findings Regarding Gender of Victim and Gender of Perpetrator

To study gender effects, we focused on the four experimental conditions involving acquaintances because those conditions include all possible gender combinations. Table 1 presents our findings for the four acquaintance conditions varying gender of victim and gender of perpetrator.

We performed an analysis of variance that included the effects of gender of perpetrator, gender of victim, and a term reflecting a statistical interaction between the two. The results reveal a significant effect of gender of perpetrator ( $p < .000$ ), a marginally significant effect of gender of victim ( $p < .056$ ), and a strong statistical interaction ( $p < .000$ ). The results show that respondents believe that it is less acceptable to retaliate against female perpetrators, that it is less acceptable for male victims to retaliate, and that it is particularly unacceptable for male victims to retaliate against female perpetrators.

**Table 1**  
**Mean Acceptance of Retaliatory Violence by Gender**  
**of Perpetrator and Gender of Victim**

Gender of Victim	Gender of Perpetrator		
	Female	Male	Combined
Female	2.16 (2.31) <i>n</i> = 152	2.87 (2.72) <i>n</i> = 151	2.51 (2.54) <i>n</i> = 303
Male	1.01 (1.51) <i>n</i> = 116	3.26 (2.58) <i>n</i> = 163	2.32 (2.46) <i>n</i> = 279
Combined	1.66 (2.08) <i>n</i> = 268	3.07 (2.65) <i>n</i> = 314	2.42 (2.50) <i>n</i> = 582

Note: To improve the statistical power of comparisons between single conditions, the condition for male victim and female perpetrator was deliberately assigned a lower frequency than that of the other conditions, in anticipation of its having less variation than that of the other conditions. Different numbers for different conditions create some bias in the combined means of conditions, but that small bias does not affect the substantive results in these analyses.

### Findings Regarding Type of Relationship: Acquaintance Versus Spouse

To study relationship effects (acquaintance versus spouse), we focus on the four experimental conditions involving cross-gender pairs. Table 2 presents our findings comparing the acquaintance conditions with the marriage conditions when adversaries are of different genders.

We performed an analysis of variance including terms for relationship and gender combinations (male victim and female perpetrator versus female victim and male perpetrator) and a term reflecting a statistical interaction between relationship and gender combination. This analysis revealed a significant effect of relationship ( $p < .011$ ), a significant effect of gender combination ( $p < .000$ ), and a nonsignificant interaction ( $p < .654$ ). The results suggest that respondents believe that it is less acceptable to retaliate within marriage and less acceptable for males to retaliate against females. The gender effect does not depend on the relationship between perpetrator and victim.

### Findings Regarding Gender of Respondents

In Table 3, we present data on the attitudes of male and female respondents for all six of our experimental conditions. Before comparing the responses

**Table 2**  
**Mean Acceptance of Retaliatory Violence by Relationship Between Adversaries and Gender for Mixed-Gender Conflicts**

Gender Combination	Relationship		
	Acquaintance	Spouse	Combined
Woman retaliating against a man	2.87 (2.72) <i>n</i> = 151	2.29 (2.32) <i>n</i> = 112	2.62 (2.57) <i>n</i> = 263
Man retaliating against a woman	1.01 (1.51) <i>n</i> = 116	0.61 (1.15) <i>n</i> = 107	0.82 (1.36) <i>n</i> = 223
Combined	2.06 (2.45) <i>n</i> = 267	1.47 (2.02) <i>n</i> = 219	1.79 (2.29) <i>n</i> = 486

of males and female respondents to the scenarios, we examine the data for subsamples of males and females as separate replications of the experimental results reported above. Table 3 reveals that all of the patterns described above are the same for male and female respondents. Of course, the smaller numbers of cases in the male and female subsamples increase the potential sampling error and reduce the statistical significance of the mean differences. (These analyses are not shown but can be computed from the information in Table 3.)

Table 3 is organized to facilitate comparisons between male and female respondents. The table shows that there is a strong and significant overall tendency for males to be more accepting of retaliation than females ( $p < .000$ ). However, there is also a statistically significant interaction between condition and gender of respondent ( $p < .005$ ). Further inspection of the individual conditions shows that males are significantly more accepting of retaliatory violence in only four of the six conditions. In the two conditions in which males are retaliating against females (wives and female acquaintances), male respondents are just as strongly disapproving as females.

## Discussion

Our study is the first to provide experimental evidence on gender norms of retaliation among American adults. Our strongest and most consistent findings concern the normative protection of women from violence by men.

**Table 3**  
**Mean Acceptance of Retaliatory Violence by Experimental Condition and Gender of Respondent**

Experimental Condition	Gender of Respondent	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Woman retaliating against husband	Male	51	2.82	2.47	2.25	.027
	Female	61	1.85	2.09		
Woman retaliating against male acquaintance	Male	66	3.67	2.59	3.28	.001
	Female	85	2.25	2.68		
Woman retaliating against female acquaintance	Male	77	2.52	2.39	1.98	.050
	Female	75	1.79	2.18		
Man retaliating against male acquaintance	Male	83	4.02	2.80	4.04	.000
	Female	80	2.46	2.06		
Man retaliating against wife	Male	42	0.76	1.34	1.12	.265
	Female	65	0.51	1.00		
Man retaliating against female acquaintance	Male	52	0.85	1.29	1.05	.297
	Female	64	1.14	1.66		
All conditions combined	Male	371	2.67	2.61	5.62	.000
	Female	430	1.72	2.15		

Contrary to theoretical claims that gender norms encourage male violence toward women, Americans most strongly disapprove of men's retaliating against women. The results suggest that women receive normative protection even when they violate gender roles by using violence.

This conclusion, however, is based on the assumption that these norms actually inhibit men's violence against women. We cannot demonstrate this effect in this study, given that we did not measure actual behavior. However, it is widely recognized that social norms have important effects on behavior and that the literature on intimate partner violence places great emphasis on norms.

We also find that people are more disapproving of retaliation against spouses than of retaliation against acquaintances. This finding directly contradicts the idea that violence is legitimated within marriage, and it is consistent with Rossi and colleagues' finding (1974) that violence is considered more serious in marriage than otherwise. In addition, research cited earlier (Felson et al., 2003) indicates that at least some behavior differences are consistent with the norms that we find here; specifically, men are less likely to use violence in disputes with wives than in similar disputes with other women.

Gender and marriage have independent effects. A man's retaliatory violence against his wife is disapproved because it involves violence of a man against a woman, and it is further disapproved because it is within marriage.

We do not find support for the idea that gender roles encourage men to retaliate more than women. People are just as likely to think that female victims should retaliate when they are assaulted as they are that male victims should. Furthermore, in regard to scenarios when the perpetrator is a woman, it is clear that gender roles discourage males from retaliating more than they discourage females.

Finally, our findings are consistent with previous research in showing that men are generally more likely to approve of violence than women are. Men are more favorable toward retaliation by women as well as that by men. At the same time, our findings indicate a crucial exception to this general pattern—namely, men and women are equally disapproving of male retaliation against women. These results directly contradict the idea that men think that it is appropriate for them to use violence against women when they have been hit first. When a man retaliates against a woman, he is not following either men's or women's ideas of societal norms.

In focusing on retaliatory violence, our study did not directly address norms regarding unprovoked violence. However, some incidental findings with regard to respondents' perceptions of the seriousness of the initial offense (not shown) indicate that respondents perceived an unprovoked attack by a man against a woman as being considerably (and statistically significantly) more serious than attacks involving any other gender combination. Also, respondents tended to perceive unprovoked attacks as being more serious if the victim was a spouse. These findings suggest that norms regarding unprovoked violence and retaliatory violence follow the same patterns with regard to gender and marriage, and they certainly do not indicate any normative tolerance of husbands' using violence against wives either initially or in retaliation.

Future research with different scenarios would be useful to investigate the robustness and generalizability of our findings; perhaps effects depend on the seriousness of the provocation or the offender's motivation. Johnson (2006) argues that it is important to distinguish between common couple violence and *intimate terrorism*, which tends to be more serious. We have no information whether our respondents assumed different motivation in different conditions, but we do have information on seriousness. We intended the provocation in our scenario—a hit resulting in a bruise—to be serious, and 83% of the respondents reported that this was a serious offense. Specifically in the condition in which husbands assaulted their wives, 81% of the respondents strongly agreed that it was a serious offense, and a total of 94% agreed. Consequently, we believe that our findings describe the norms that apply to serious forms of violence. Nevertheless, it

is possible that respondents would feel differently if they knew details of the participants' history and relationship; that is an interesting and potentially important subject for further research.

As always, it would also be useful to replicate the study using other types of measures. We believe that respondents to telephone surveys generally feel free to express their points of view honestly. Nevertheless, complementary results using other methodologies (e.g., anonymous written surveys and behavioral experiments) can provide further support for the interpretations and conclusions.

Our findings that men are no more favorable than women are toward male retaliation against women do not support the argument that male peer groups influence men to use violence against women (e.g., Godenzi, Schwartz, & Dekeseredy, 2001). Nevertheless, it is possible that particular peer groups (e.g., some fraternities and athletic teams) might encourage such violence. Our findings that males are more supportive of retaliation under other conditions suggest that male networks are more likely than female networks to encourage both men and women to use retaliatory violence in all situations except where men are retaliating against women. Future research should examine the impact of the gender composition of social networks on violence by and against men and women in these other situations.

In conclusion, we want to reiterate the implications of our findings for wife abuse in particular. Our study indicates that Americans share norms against males' retaliating against females and against retaliation in marriage. Men are just as likely as women to share these attitudes in spite of their more favorable attitudes toward retaliation in other circumstances. Consequently, violent wife abuse continues despite (not because of) societal norms.

## References

- Arias, I., & Johnson, P. (1989). Evaluations of physical aggression among intimate dyads. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 4*, 298-307.
- Baron, R. A., & Richardson, D. R. (1994). *Human aggression* (2nd ed.). New York: Plenum.
- Bettencourt, B. A., & Miller, N. (1996). Gender differences in aggression as a function of provocation: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 119*, 422-447.
- Brown, R. C., & Tedeschi, J. T. (1976). Determinants of perceived aggression. *Journal of Social Psychology, 100*, 77-87.
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will: Men, women, and rape*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1998). *Rethinking violence against women*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Eagly, A. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Feld, S. L., & Robinson, D. T. (1998). Secondary bystander effects on intimate violence: When norms of restraint reduce deterrence. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 15*, 277-285.
- Felson, R. B. (2000). The normative protection of women from violence. *Sociological Forum, 15*, 91-116.
- Felson, R. B. (2002). *Violence and gender reexamined*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Felson, R. B., & Ackerman, J. (2001). Arrest for domestic and other assaults. *Criminology, 39*, 655-676.
- Felson, R. B., Ackerman, J., & Yeon, S. (2003). The (in)frequency of family violence. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 65*, 622-634.
- Godenzi, A., Schwartz, M. D., & Dekeseredy, W. S. (2001). Toward a gendered social bond/male peer support theory of university woman abuse. *Critical Criminology, 10*, 1-16.
- Greenblat, C. S. (1983). A hit is a hit. Or is it? Approval and tolerance of the use of physical force by spouses. In D. Finkelhor, R. J. Gelles, G. T. Hotaling, & M. A. Straus (Eds.), *The dark side of families* (pp. 235-260). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Harris, M. B. (1991). Effects of sex of aggressor, sex of target, and relationship on evaluations of physical aggression. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 6*, 174-186.
- Johnson, M. P. (2006). Conflict and control: Gender symmetry and asymmetry in domestic violence. *Violence Against Women, 12*(11), 1003-1018.
- Kane, T. R., Joseph, J. M., & Tedeschi, J. T. (1976). Person perception and Berkowitz paradigm for study of aggression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 33*, 663-673.
- Pagelow, M. D. (1984). *Family violence*. New York: Praeger.
- Rossi, P. H., Waite, E., Bose, C., & Berk, R. E. (1974). The seriousness of crime: Normative structure and individual differences. *American Sociological Review, 39*, 224-237.
- Smith, T. W. (1984). The polls: Gender and attitudes toward violence. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 48*, 384-396.
- Straus, M. A., Gelles, R. J., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1980). *Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press / Doubleday.
- Straus, M. A., Kantor, G. K., & Moore, D. W. (1997). Change in cultural norms approving marital violence: From 1968 to 1994. In G. Kaufman Kantor & J. L. Jasinski (Eds.), *Out of the darkness: Contemporary perspectives on family violence* (pp. 3-16). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tedeschi, J. T., & Felson, R. B. (1994). *Violence, aggression, and coercive actions*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Young, D. M., Beier, E. G., & Beier, P. (1975). Is chivalry dead? *Journal of Communication, 25*, 57-64.