

Attitudes and Beliefs About Domestic Violence: Results of a Public Opinion Survey

II. Beliefs About Causes

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This report presents findings from a public opinion survey designed to measure beliefs about the causes of domestic violence (DV) based on telephone interviews with 1,200 residents across six New York State communities. Findings reveal substantial diversity and complexity among beliefs and interesting similarities and differences across open- and close-ended questions regarding explanations for partner abuse. Most respondents think about the causes of violence in the context of individual problems, relationships, and families, not as a problem with roots in our society or culture. Few believe that women are the cause of their own abuse, one fourth still believe that some women want to be abused, and most believe that women can end abusive relationships. Secondhand experiences with DV were associated with some beliefs about causes of abuse, and gender, age, education, and race were associated with certain beliefs in predictable ways.

Keywords: *domestic violence; intimate partner violence; public opinion; attitudes; beliefs*

The past two decades have witnessed significant developments in scientific knowledge about the causes of domestic violence (DV) and dramatic shifts in law and policy directed at this social problem. At national, state, and local levels, policy makers and administrators have criminalized and increased penalties for some types of partner violence and have allocated greater resources for victim services. However, few of these policy changes have been grounded firmly in theoretical or empirical knowledge about what

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causes violence, and most have been undertaken in the absence of information about how the public thinks about DV. The current research is part of a larger project designed to learn how people think about the causes of violence, appropriate and effective policies, and perceptions of community responses and practice. The preceding article reports the results of research on how people conceptualize DV—its character, prevalence, and seriousness. This article explores public understandings of the causes of DV.

People's perceptions of causes, contributing factors, and risk factors are important for several reasons. First, support for new laws (and for their enforcement) may depend on public acceptance of reformers' assumptions about offender culpability and accountability. Criminalizing partner violence may seem like an inappropriate or inadequate response to those who attribute violence to mental health problems or addictions, for example. Second, people's assessments of their own experiences, behavior, and choices, as well as those of friends, relatives, and coworkers, may hinge on what they believe about the causes of violence. One is unlikely to make use of victim services or legal protections (or to recommend those to others) if one believes some levels of violence are normal or justifiable, or that women are responsible for managing their partners' behavior. Third, and related, the effectiveness of public prevention and intervention efforts may depend on how well they capitalize on people's preexisting beliefs and their receptivity to new information.

The current research is organized around three objectives:

- exploring the ways in which people conceptualize the causes of partner violence
- assessing levels of agreement with research-based and common explanations for violence
- to the extent that there is dissensus on what accounts for violence, examining the associations between opinions and social background and experiences with domestic abuse.

BELIEFS ABOUT CAUSES OF PARTNER VIOLENCE

Studies of public attitudes about DV have addressed three related issues: beliefs about the causes of violent behavior, beliefs about women's responsibility or blameworthiness for men's violent behavior, and opinions about the circumstances under which violent behavior may be understandable or justifiable. Researchers agree that no single factor accounts for partner violence (for review, see Carlson, Worden, van Ryne, & Bachman, 2003) and that there may be distinctively different types of violent people and violent rela-

tionships (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe, & Stuart, 1994; Johnson, 1995; Saunders & Hamill, 2003). Furthermore, researchers have modeled violence at many levels—at the levels of societies, families, relationships, or individual perpetrators and victims (Carlson, 1984; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). Early studies of public beliefs about violence suggested that most people concur with statements that attribute abuse to characteristics of individuals, relationships, and households. Across different sorts of samples and using different types of questions, researchers have found significant agreement that personality characteristics or defects (Davis & Carlson, 1981; Greenblat, 1985; Koski & Mangold, 1988; Yick & Agbayani-Siewert, 1997) and alcohol abuse (Gentemann, 1984; Koski & Mangold, 1988; Yick & Agbayani-Siewert, 1997) lead to violence. Some of these same studies indicate that many or most people also believe household stress, financial hardship, and unemployment increase the likelihood of family violence (Davis & Carlson, 1981; Gentemann, 1984; Koski & Mangold, 1988; Yick & Agbayani-Siewert, 1997).

These patterns are corroborated by a recent and more comprehensive study of public attitudes. The Family Violence Prevention Fund survey (FVVPF; Klein, Campbell, Soler, & Ghez, 1997) revealed a wide range of answers to a vignette-based question about why a husband would assault his wife. It is interesting to note, the modal response was *don't know* (26% of women, 33% of men). Remaining respondents suggested a wide range of responses, including drunkenness (14%), inability to communicate (12%), disturbed personality (9%), controlling behavior (18%)—all attributes of, or attributions to, individual perpetrators.

Most of these studies have asked specific questions that focus attention on hypothetical incidents, so it is not surprising that respondents' answers center on the attributes of imagined individuals and situations, rather than broader familial, cultural, or social causes. This does not necessarily mean that people reject explanations for violence that involve less proximate causes, or more complex combinations of causes, nor would one want to conclude from these studies that people believe all violence results from the same cause or that all violent couples are similar. For example, only 5% of respondents in the FVVPF study attributed spouse assault (as depicted in a simple vignette) to exposure to violence in family of origin (but see Yick & Agbayani-Siewert, 1997), and none reportedly alluded to broader social constructs such as gender roles, culture, or socialization. However, when asked to agree or disagree with statements about the causes of violence, large majorities (more than 70%) agreed that violence was learned in the home and that men's motive was humiliation and control of women; and respondents were evenly divided

on a statement attributing social acceptance of violence to media portrayals of women's victimization.

Researchers have been particularly interested in measuring the prevalence of victim-blaming attitudes and justifications for (or tolerance of) abusive behavior. There are several dimensions of this construct, all of which find some support among the public. First, some might believe that women's behavior provokes (and implicitly deserves) violent reactions; examples of such behavior range from adultery to nagging (Arias & Johnson, 1989; Dibble & Straus, 1990; Gentemann, 1984; Greenblat, 1985; Klein et al., 1997; Stark & McEvoy, 1970). It is important to remember that until only three or four generations ago, this perspective was legitimized in court decisions. Second, some might believe that women who are masochistic not only tolerate but also enjoy and invite abusive behavior, implicitly shifting the focus of responsibility away from the perpetrator toward the willing victim. Third, some might believe that regardless of what triggers violent behavior, the victim takes on some responsibility for continued abuse if she fails to leave the relationship.

Researchers have found evidence for all of these beliefs, although estimates of their prevalence varies with the specific question and sample. In general, it appears that a small minority attributes violence to women's provocation (Stalans, 1996). However, some studies suggest that a more substantial minority holds women victims at least partially responsible, although the nature of that responsibility is not altogether clear (Davis & Carlson, 1981; Ewing & Aubrey, 1987; Kalmuss, 1979). Perhaps the most troubling finding is that a majority of respondents in some surveys underestimated the difficulties women face in leaving abusive relationships (e.g., Ewing & Aubrey, 1987). On the other hand, a substantial majority of the FVPF respondents agreed that economic dependence also makes women vulnerable to violence, although an even larger percentage (71%) agreed that emotional dependence also leaves women vulnerable (Klein et al., 1997). Similarly, Greene, Raitz, and Lindblad (1989) reported that, in general, their respondents "understood that these women typically feel anxious, depressed, and helpless to change their situations, that they believe their husbands might kill them, and that leaving would result in further harm" (p. 116; see also Stephens & Sinden, 2000).

Finally, some, but not all, survey-based studies have explored the association between social background and attitudes about causes of, and justifications for, partner violence. The findings of these studies are not consistent, although differences in questions and samples make comparisons risky. The most frequently observed associations involve gender. Studies indicate that men are more likely than women to attribute violence to loss of self-control

(Greenblat, 1985). Researchers have found contradictory results regarding gender and attributions of masochism to women who are abused (Ewing & Aubrey, 1987; Greenblat, 1985), and regarding victim provocation (Ewing & Aubrey, 1987; Kristiansen & Giuletti, 1990). However, men are consistently more likely than women to consider violence a justified reaction to depictions of women's infidelity (Arias & Johnson, 1989; Greenblat, 1985).

Researchers have found little evidence that other social background variables are associated with beliefs about violence. Although Ewing and Aubrey (1987) concluded that older respondents were more likely to hold women responsible for men's violence, other researchers found conflicting associations between age and tolerance of violence resulting from provocation such as infidelity (Gentemann, 1984; Greenblat, 1985). There is little evidence that occupation, education, or income is significantly associated with beliefs about violence (Ewing & Aubrey, 1987; Gentemann, 1984).

Researchers have speculated about variation in attitudes grounded in ethnic, cultural, and racial differences. A review of theoretical and empirical issues on this topic concluded that opinions about DV, and particularly about appropriate responses to it, may be contingent on deeply held and culturally specific beliefs about gender roles, family responsibilities, and racism (Klein et al., 1997). These conclusions are consistent with the theoretical perspectives of researchers who suggest that attitudes about the specific issue of DV are shaped by fundamental social and political beliefs (which may, in turn, be shaped by social background and experiences). For example, Greenblat (1985) found that beliefs about proper gender roles were associated with tolerance for violence (see also Gentemann, 1984); Kristiansen and Giuletti (1990) found associations between political conservatism and victim-blaming attitudes.

Finally, it is reasonable to speculate that one's experiences with violence shape one's view about what causes it, although researchers have seldom explored this topic in community samples. At a minimum, one might expect that those who have used violence against a partner are more likely to blame victims for provoking them and less likely to attribute violence to offenders' personal traits.

To summarize, previous research suggests that people attribute violence to a variety of causes. However, there is reason to suspect that many people's beliefs about causes of domestic abuse are not well formed or strongly held. Respondents are most likely to account for violence in terms of the characters of individuals or households, although when prompted, many agree that social learning and cultural forces contribute to violence. Researchers have not been able to consistently distinguish among different types of so-called victim blaming, although there is ample evidence that many people do not

view victims of DV as blameless or unable to avoid or end abuse without help. Furthermore, because of the paucity of studies and lack of consistency in instruments and samples, it is not possible to determine whether public perceptions about DV have changed significantly since the proliferation of research and policy reform that began more than two decades ago (much less whether these advances in knowledge and policy contributed to changes in social norms). Finally, we have little empirical knowledge about how, if at all, people with different backgrounds and experiences vary in their understandings of the causes of violence.

The research reported here explores these issues through analyses of public opinion data gathered from six communities in New York State. The following sections examine (a) the explanations people offer for partner violence, (b) levels of agreement with statements about the nature and causes of violence based on both research and folk wisdom, (c) levels of congruence or consistency across these attitudes, and (d) associations among social background and experience and attitudes about what causes violence.

METHOD

Sample

Data for the current study were gathered in January through March of 2000 through telephone interviewing of a random sample of 1,200 residents in six communities in New York (please see preceding article for details on sampling, response rate, and interview protocol). The communities were selected based on two dimensions: the degree of urbanization and the character of the local criminal justice system's DV policy and practices. Overall, the sample reflected the demographic characters of these communities: About one half of respondents were female, one half were married, 80% were White, and about one third were college graduates.

Questions on direct and secondary experience with partner violence were included in the survey. About one third of respondents reported that a partner had acted violently toward them (35% of female respondents, 26% of male), and almost one in five respondents acknowledged having used violence toward a partner. Almost all who reported using violence toward a partner also claimed to have been the recipients of violence. The survey also included eight items about secondhand experience with violence (knowing a victim, knowing a perpetrator, witnessing or overhearing a DV incident, knowing

someone who had received counseling because of violence as either a victim or a perpetrator, knowing of a situation when police were called to an incident, knowing someone who received an order of protection, knowing someone who had used a shelter or victim services). Secondhand familiarity with violence was commonplace: Almost two thirds of respondents acknowledged knowing a victim, one half acknowledged knowing a perpetrator, and almost one in four knew of someone who had sought victim services. To capture variation in the level of experience with violence, we created a simple additive scale comprising these eight dichotomous items (see details in preceding article).

Measures

Dependent variables. The survey included open- and close-ended items about respondents' perceptions of causes.

Causes of DV: Open-ended responses. We asked a general open-ended question, relatively early in the survey, in an attempt to avoid biasing responses by suggesting explanations that respondents might not have offered on their own: "In your opinion, what causes couples to physically hurt one another?" Up to six responses were coded for each respondent. We developed a preliminary 28-category coding scheme to combine responses that were substantively similar, and then we collapsed these codes into the eight topical areas reported in Table 1. These areas were then categorized as individual-level factors, family and/or couple-level factors, and macro level or societal factors.¹

Unlike Klein et al.'s (1997) respondents, many of whom were reportedly reticent in discussing causes of DV, our respondents had no difficulty sharing their thoughts about causes. Only 8% did not provide an answer for this question; based on the collapsed eight-code scheme, 34% provided one answer, 33% provided two answers, and the remaining 25% provided three or more distinct answers.

Causes of DV: Close-ended responses. Earlier research suggested that open-ended questions produce somewhat different pictures of the distribution of attitudes than do closed-ended questions (Klein et al., 1997). To permit further exploration of this methodological issue, the survey included 10 statements that directly or indirectly identified causes of DV. To keep the survey at a manageable length, the sample was split into two groups of 600, and

TABLE 1: Perceptions of Causes of Domestic Violence: Open-Ended Responses

Individual factors	
Substance abuse	30%
Anger, loss of control	28%
Exposure to family violence	17%
Family history of violence	16%
Exposure to violence	1%
Adultery and/or jealousy	15%
Adultery	10%
Jealousy	6%
Mental health and/or personality problems	14%
Mental health and/or emotional problems	6%
Controlling and/or dominant personality	6%
Other personality problems	4%
Family factors	
Relationship factors	20%
Communication problems	18%
Nature of the relationship	2%
Child or family stress	9%
Child stress	7%
Family stress	2%
Macro factors	
Work-related and financial problems	37%
Financial stress	33%
Unemployment	3%
Other work stresses	5%
Other	
Lack of education	6%
Disrespect	4%
Factors related to the woman	2%
Social isolation	.1%
Breakdown of social norms	3%

each group heard a subset of five of these items (as indicated in Table 2). One half of the items were chosen to reflect empirical research findings about the nature and risk factors for abuse (persistence of violent behavior and escalation of verbal aggression, and psychological problems, substance abuse, and socialization of males to aggressive behavior, respectively). The remaining five items were designed to measure folk myths or misperceptions about causes of violence, particularly victim blaming: statements that women enjoy abuse, start fights, provoke men, and can get out of violent relationships, and a statement that DV is a normal reaction to stress.

TABLE 2: Perceptions of Causes of Domestic Violence: Closed-Ended Questions

<i>Item</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>
Question Set 1 (<i>n</i> = 600)			
People who are violent toward their family members are not likely to change	50.2	29.8	20.0
Husbands who shout, yell, and curse at their wives are likely to become physically violent eventually.	55.7	25.3	19.0
Society teaches boys to be physically aggressive.	64.7	22.8	12.5
A lot of what is called "domestic violence" is really just a normal reaction to day-to-day stress and frustration.	37.5	50.8	11.6
Some violence is caused by women starting physical fights.	68.3	14.3	17.4
Question Set 2 (<i>n</i> = 600)			
Some women who are abused secretly want to be treated that way.	23.0	59.6	17.5
Most women could find a way to get out of an abusive relationship if they really wanted to.	63.1	23.8	13.1
Some violence is caused by the way women treat men.	45.9	32.1	22.0
Most men who act abusively toward family members have psychological or personality problems.	70.4	11.8	17.8
Much domestic violence is caused by alcohol and drug abuse.	84.7	7.5	7.8

RESULTS

Causes of DV: Open-Ended Responses

Table 1 shows the distribution of responses across the nine coding categories, grouped into three broad categories (in addition to so-called other responses). Percentages sum to greater than 100 because most respondents offered more than one answer. The most commonly mentioned causes (based on the nine categories) were work-related or financial stress (37%), substance abuse (30%), anger and loss of control (28%), relationship problems (20%), early exposure to family violence (17%), adultery or jealousy (15%), and perpetrators' mental health problems (14%).

Our classification of these responses is grounded in categories of factors of interest to researchers, and we were interested in what, if any, patterns of responses emerged among the many respondents who offered more than one. To explore this question, we performed chi-square tests on all combinations

of the nine dichotomous variables generated by the coding scheme.² Eleven of the associations among these 28 pairs of variables failed to reach the .05 level of statistical significance, indicating that many of these items are independent of one another. Only one of these associations is positive: general financial stress and family problems. On the other hand, there are several interesting patterns of negative associations. Most notably, respondents who mentioned either stress or family issues were significantly less likely than others to mention causes related to perpetrator characteristics (history of witnessing violence, inability to control anger, personality problems), or relationship problems. Likewise, those who attributed violence to adultery or jealousy were less likely than others to cite perpetrator characteristics. Furthermore, the data indicate negative relationships between mention of substance abuse and personality or anger control problems.

What can we conclude about the complexity and consistency of people's thinking about violence based on their answers to this open-ended question? First, in the absence of prompting, few people think about DV beyond the context of the incident, the individual, the relationship, or the household. Second, a small but not trivial minority (10%) attributed violence to adultery; very few mentioned women's behavior as an explanation for violence. Third, although these results suggest most people can offer at least one explanation for violence, many of those who offer more than one account do not have clearly integrated or even consistent opinions.

Agreement With Research and Folk Theories About Violence: Close-Ended Responses

Table 2 depicts the distribution of responses to the 10 statements about the nature and causes of violence, reflecting four general types of beliefs: (a) views about the nature of physical violence (as an unalterable feature of individuals' behavior, as a predictable escalation of verbal abuse), (b) beliefs about causal or contributing factors (psychological problems, alcohol, or drug abuse; male socialization toward aggressive behavior), (c) attribution of violence to women's motives or behavior (masochism, provocation, treatment of men, failure to leave abusive relationships), and (d) a general justification or excuse for violence (as a so-called normal reaction to stress).

Responses to these statements suggest the following. First, one half of respondents agreed that abusive behavior is unlikely to change and is likely to escalate from verbal to physical aggression over time. These beliefs are modestly associated with each other; and nearly one third of respondents agreed with both of these statements. Second, most people agreed that personality

characteristics and substance abuse are associated with violence, and two thirds agreed that society socializes boys to be aggressive.

However, an equally substantial majority of respondents concurred with the statement that some fights are started by women, and nearly one half agreed that women's treatment of men accounts for "some violence." Furthermore, nearly one in four agreed that some women want to be abused, and nearly two thirds believed that women can exit violent relationships "if they really wanted to." More than one third agreed that violence is often a "normal reaction to day-to-day stress and frustration."

These results suggest that while most people agree that violence is associated with documented risk factors, many also attribute some abuse to women's role in seeking, provoking, and tolerating violence. Analyses of contingency tables indicate that most of these items are independent of one another, with a few modest and commonsensical exceptions.³ Within Question Set 1, people who agreed that personality problems account for violence were also likely to agree that another individual-level factor, substance abuse, contributed to violence. Responses to the set of three questions about women's part in violence were modestly associated with each other. For Question Set 2, those who agreed that violence is normal were neither more nor less likely to accept the notion that society or female partners played a role in aggression. However, the two statements characterizing violence as escalating and unchanging are associated.

Table 3 presents the results of a principal components factor analysis of selected items from open- and closed-ended responses. The analysis included the eight variables created from the open-ended question, and the five variables included in the second set of close-ended questions.⁴ The analysis produced five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The first factor is a dimension anchored by attributions to financial and household problems, on one end, and attributions to personality problems, on the other; respondents with high scores on this factor would tend to hold one of these views while rejecting the other. The second factor captures woman-blaming attitudes, as reflected by the high loadings of those three items on the scale. The third factor distinguishes respondents who tend to attribute violence to psychological problems and substance use from those who do not agree with these explanations. The fourth separates those who blame violence on relationship problems and anger from those who emphasize personality problems and substance abuse—again suggesting that these explanations are somewhat oppositional. Finally, the fifth, and least interpretable, factor distinguishes those who attribute abuse to childhood exposure to violence from those who think it is provoked by adultery or jealousy.

TABLE 3: Factor Analysis of Items About Causes of Domestic Violence

	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor 3</i>	<i>Factor 4</i>	<i>Factor 5</i>
Financial stress (open-ended question)	.714	-.157	.041	.173	.195
Family, child problems (open-ended question)	.706	.099	-.095	-.001	-.020
Women could leave (close-ended question)	-.169	.567	-.026	.203	.230
Women like abuse (close-ended question)	.103	.746	-.031	.037	-.159
Women's mistreatment of men (close-ended question)	.043	.628	.085	-.152	.088
Alcohol, drug use (open-ended question)	.295	.094	.467	.298	.012
Alcohol, drug abuse (close-ended question)	.073	-.001	.773	-.009	-.060
Psychological problems (close-ended question)	-.223	-.007	.654	-.056	.068
Personality problems (open-ended question)	-.410	-.075	-.102	.401	.023
Anger, loss of control (open-ended question)	.012	-.018	.026	-.630	-.063
Relationship problems (close-ended question)	-.135	-.014	-.103	-.640	.060
Adultery, jealousy (open-ended question)	.212	.004	-.023	.214	.620
Exposure to violence (open-ended question)	.062	-.090	-.034	.185	-.807
Eigenvalue	1.615	1.353	1.264	1.135	1.088

NOTE: Entries represent factor loading for principal component analysis, rotated component matrix. $N = 600$.

These factors are not very strong; however, they begin to suggest that the dimensionality of beliefs can be mapped, and that those dimensions reveal some potentially important knowledge about how people think about DV. One might cautiously conclude that people who accept financial, familial, and relationship-based explanations for violence are different from those who attribute violence to perpetrator characteristics and behavior, based on variables loadings on the first, fourth, and fifth factors. Independent of all of these, however, are the two factors that capture levels of agreement with victim-blaming explanations, and with substance abuse.

Social Background, Experiences, and Beliefs About Violence

These results suggest that people differ in their beliefs about what causes violence, in their agreement with research-based findings about factors associated with violence, and in their acceptance of folk theory or conventional wisdom about women's role in violence, particularly women's ability to leave abusive relationships. We turn now to the question of whether there is pattern to this dissensus—that is, whether people of different backgrounds and experiences tend to subscribe to different beliefs about violence.

Beliefs about causes of partner violence: Open-ended answers. Table 4 presents the results of logistic regression analyses of the eight variables resulting from the open-ended question about causes of violence, estimating their relationships with social characteristics (gender, marital status, age, economic status, race) and experience with DV (self-reported victimization, self-reported offending, and an index score of secondary experiences with partner violence). The first four columns of the table present analyses of responses that attribute violence to perpetrator attributes and behaviors (personality, anger, substance abuse, family history); columns 5 through 8 presents analyses of factors related to relationships and households (adultery, relationship issues, family issues, stress and economic problems).

First, women are consistently more likely than men to attribute violence to perpetrator characteristics and background. In addition, respondents who are better educated were more likely to suggest personality problems, anger problems, and violent family histories as explanations for violence.⁵ Married respondents (compared with those who are single or divorced) were less likely to attribute violence to problems of personality or anger control; the same holds for African American respondents. Older respondents were more likely to offer anger and substance abuse as explanations for violence than are younger respondents. Self-reported offenders were, it is interesting to note, more likely to explain violence in terms of personality problems; and second-hand experience with violence was associated with seeing substance abuse and early exposure to violence as important. All in all, however, social background accounted for surprisingly little variation in measures of attitudes about perpetrator responsibility for violence.

The last four columns of Table 4 show parallel findings for answers to this item that were coded as adultery or jealousy, relationship problems, family problems, and financial stress. In general, social background accounts for very little variation in these beliefs. Men were more likely than women to cite relationship problems as a cause for violence. Married respondents (compared with single or divorced others) were less likely to suggest adultery as a reason for violence, and more likely to suggest economic stress. African Americans were more likely than others to mention adultery or jealousy as a cause for violence. Beyond these modest relationships, however, there is little reason to conclude that social background or experience shapes people's opinions about these commonplace explanations for violence. Put another way, at an admittedly generalized level, we cannot distinguish between those who do, and do not, subscribe to these explanations based on what we know about their social status and experiences.

TABLE 4: Logistic Regression Analysis of Beliefs About Causes of Violence: Responses to Open-Ended Question

	Personality Problems	Anger, Loss of Control	Alcohol and/or Drug Abuse	Exposure to Violence	Adultery, Jealousy	Relationship Problems	Family, Child Problems	Financial Stress
Gender	-.363* (.190)	-.456** (.146)	-.239 (.142)	-.353* (.176)	-.128 (.188)	.324* (.159)	-.257 (.227)	.014 (.132)
0 = female								
1 = male								
Marital status	-.539** (.205)	-.308* (.157)	.034 (.153)	.047 (.191)	-.462* (.203)	.113 (.173)	.142 (.243)	.341** (.144)
0 = single, divorced								
1 = married								
Income	-.012 (.126)	.112 (.098)	.010 (.095)	.166 (.119)	-.020 (.125)	-.034 (.108)	-.001 (.152)	.135 (.090)
1 = less than US \$30,000								
2 = \$30,000 to \$50,000								
3 = more than \$50,000								
Age group	.068 (.070)	.106* (.055)	.128* (.054)	-.107 (.068)	.061 (.070)	.039 (.061)	.123 (.087)	.089 (.051)
1 = 18 to 35 years								
2 = 36 to 54 years								
3 = 55 years and older								
Education	.354** (.126)	.376** (.098)	-.071 (.095)	.432** (.120)	-.190 (.126)	.154 (.107)	.161 (.151)	.095 (.089)
1 = high school or less								
2 = some college								
3 = 4-year degree								
Race and/or ethnicity	-.795* (.417)	-.715* (.314)	-.253 (.277)	-.303 (.348)	.799** (.285)	.130 (.289)	.169 (.401)	.143 (.250)
0 = White, other								
1 = African American								
Self-reported victim	-.008 (.239)	.007 (.187)	.313 (.178)	-.141 (.227)	.218 (.231)	.066 (.203)	.326 (.279)	-.014 (.171)
0 = no								
1 = yes								
Self-reported offender	.546* (.252)	.336 (.209)	-.363 (.209)	.180 (.252)	-.141 (.264)	.261 (.226)	-.058 (.318)	-.049 (.197)
0 = no								
1 = yes								

Index of secondary experience coded 1 to 8	.042	(.037)	-.013	(.029)	.066*	(.028)	.096**	(.034)	.037	(.037)	.048	(.038)	.009	(.044)	.047	(.026)
Constant	-2.525	(.421)	-1.870	(.328)	-1.326	(.319)	-2.978	(.407)	-1.588	(.411)	-2.187	(.362)	-3.154	(.522)	-1.568	(.302)
Pseudo r^2	.055		.059		.031		.057		.044		.019		.015		.030	

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Agreement with research and folk theories about violence: Responses to close-ended statements. We conducted similar analyses for eight of the close-ended items that solicited agreement or disagreement with statements about causes of violent or aggressive behavior. The results of these analyses are reported in Table 5.⁶ The first four columns reports analyses of responses to statements that attribute some responsibility for abuse to women victims. For the first item (women start some fights), respondents with higher income were more likely to agree, as were those with higher levels of secondary experience, although neither of these coefficients reached the .05 level of statistical significance. Agreement that some women enjoy abuse was more common among older respondents and those with more secondary experience. Agreement with the item attributing violence to women's treatment of men was more common among men, older respondents, and those who are not married. Finally, the widely held view that women can exit abusive relationships was more common among men, younger respondents, and those with less education.

These results suggest that the social background and experience variables measured here explain only a modest amount of variance in victim-blaming attitudes. Notably, although, in general, self-reported offending is consistently positively associated with agreement with these items, and self-reported victimization is negatively associated, these coefficients do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Older respondents were more likely to agree that women provoke violence, although less likely to agree that women can get out of abusive relationships. Men were more inclined than women to ascribe some sorts of responsibility for abuse to victims.

The last four columns of Table 5 report results of analyses of the remaining items, measuring agreement with statements about psychological and personality problems, substance abuse, social teaching of aggressive behavior, and DV as a "normal response to stress." Those who attribute violence to personality problems were more likely to be older and less likely to report having used violence against a partner; those who attribute violence to substance abuse were less affluent and also more likely to report using violence. Those who agree that society teaches boys to be aggressive—suggesting that violence is a learned behavior—were more likely to have greater education; this view is significantly less common among African Americans.

Last, these social background variables explain the greatest variation in the last item, that DV is a normal response to stress, compared to the other items. Those who agreed with this statement were more likely to be male, older, less educated, African American, and had less secondary experience than those who disagreed.

TABLE 5: Logistic Regression Analysis: Agreement With Statements About Causes of Violence

	Women Start Fights n = 428	Women Like Abuse n = 427	Women Could Leave Abuse n = 425	Women Mistreat Men n = 411	Psychological Problems n = 418	Drug and Alcohol Abuse n = 475	Boys Learn Aggression n = 446	Some Domestic Violence Is Normal n = 457
Gender								
0 = female	-.123 (.276)	.273 (.235)	.471* (.228)	.539* (.220)	-.183 (.311)	-.001 (.382)	-.144 (.226)	.576** (.210)
1 = male	.316 (.308)	-.460 (.247)	.021 (.239)	-.680** (.234)	.094 (.330)	.158 (.396)	.121 (.262)	-.124 (.240)
Marital status								
0 = single, divorced	.331 (.189)	.101 (.157)	-.028 (.151)	.180 (.145)	-.345 (.209)	-.579* (.248)	-.070 (.156)	-.199 (.144)
1 = married								
Income								
1 = less than US \$30,000								
2 = \$30,000 to \$50,000								
3 = more than \$50,000	.077 (.105)	.307** (.090)	-.195* (.086)	.401** (.084)	.243* (.119)	.189 (.146)	.031 (.088)	.339** (.083)
Age group								
1 = 18 to 35 years								
2 = 36 to 54 years								
3 = 55 years and older	.004 (.191)	-.099 (.152)	-.623** (.148)	.010 (.142)	.188 (.203)	.072 (.238)	.444** (.162)	-.572** (.150)
Education								
1 = high school or less								
2 = some college								
3 = 4-year degree								
Race and/or ethnicity								
0 = white, other	-.102 (.487)	-.461 (.500)	.548 (.495)	-.375 (.402)	.491 (.656)	-.940 (.528)	-1.042** (.363)	.783* (.378)
1 = African American								
Self-reported victim	.163 (.366)	-.385 (.302)	-.239 (.278)	-.403 (.273)	-.006 (.373)	.018 (.469)	.098 (.308)	.134 (.272)
0 = no								
1 = yes								

(continued)

TABLE 5 (continued)

	Women Start Fights n = 428	Women Like Abuse n = 427	Women Could Leave Abuse n = 425	Women Mistreat Men n = 411	Psychological Problems n = 418	Drug and Alcohol Abuse n = 475	Boys Learn Aggression n = 446	Some Domestic Violence Is Normal n = 457
Self-reported offender 0 = no 1 = yes	.359 (.441)	.227 (.336)	.194 (.321)	.237 (.319)	-.849* (.396)	-.989* (.482)	.257 (.355)	.248 (.306)
Index of secondary experience coded 1 to 8	.096 (.056)	.127** (.046)	-.081 (.044)	-.047 (.043)	-.085 (.060)	-.109 (.074)	.137** (.047)	-.152** (.042)
Constant	.243 (.598)	-2.320 (.559)	2.989 (.528)	-.977 (.491)	1.996 (.700)	3.687 (.916)	-.200 (.510)	.278 (.458)
Pseudo r^2	.053	.072	.111	.139	.080	.108	.082	.182

DISCUSSION

The research reported here had three objectives: exploring how people think about the causes of partner violence, measuring agreement with research-based explanations for violence as well as conventional wisdom, and examining the associations between opinions, and social background and experiences with domestic abuse. Our survey results and analyses answer some questions while they raise others. The open-ended question about what causes people to hurt each other generated a substantial range of answers. Overall, these responses suggest that most people think about the causes of violence in the context of individual problems, relationships, and families, not as a problem with roots in society or culture. Very few respondents spontaneously identified women's provocative behavior as the cause of violence; however, substantial numbers of respondents, when prompted, agreed that women's behavior can lead to men's violence. Although most respondents attribute violence to more than one primary cause, there is little evidence of patterning among responses.

The most common explanations for violence match stereotypes about family violence: Respondents were most likely to mention financial stress, alcohol, and anger as causes of violence, corresponding to social stereotypes of abusers as men who feel financially pressured or inadequate, who have drinking problems, or who simply cannot control their tempers. Researchers have explored these diverse explanations for violent behavior but have also uncovered other theory-based explanations and risk factors that went unmentioned in our sample. Respondents seldom or never suggested risk factors identified in empirical research, such as youth, relationship status or stability, victims' or offenders' histories of previous victimization or emotional abuse, sexist beliefs and gender-role stereotyping, ethnic and cultural background, and urban residence (for a review, see Carlson et al., 2003; Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). To the extent that respondents failed to mention these sorts of explanations, however, it is important to note that neither did they paint portraits of violent couples as typically poor, uneducated, irresponsible, and incorrigible—stereotypes that dominate the thinking of some criminal justice practitioners (see McLean, 2003).

Levels of agreement with most of the close-ended statements about causes of violence were high; this was particularly true for the items attributing violence to substance abuse and men's psychological and personality problems. Majorities or large pluralities of the sample agreed as well that society plays a role in teaching boys to be aggressive, that violent men seldom desist, and their abuse is likely to escalate over time.

These findings suggest that, unless prompted, very few people associate abusive behavior with women's provocation—they are far more likely to characterize violence in terms of men's failings or problems. However, when presented with statements about women's possible role in violence, many respondents agree that some violence follows women's mistreatment or provocation of partners. Moreover, one in four respondents believed that some women want to be abused. It is also important to note that a large majority of respondents believe that women can exit abusive relationships, implicitly placing responsibility on victims for permitting, if not for initiating, violence. One might interpret these results as evidence of rather widespread victim blaming. However, a more nuanced interpretation—and one that merits further empirical inquiry—is that many people understand that violent relationships are not all the same: Although violence is most commonly a manifestation of individual failings, weaknesses, or excesses, sometimes abuse is triggered by partners' behavior. Furthermore, to the extent that respondents place some responsibility on women, they may hold them more responsible for tolerating continued abuse than for causing their partners to become violent.

There is an important distinction to be made between blaming (or assigning responsibility to) victims for violence and accepting violence as a normal part of some relationships. While one half the sample rejected the notion that much DV is so-called normal behavior, more than one third of respondents agreed with this statement, while the remainder were uncertain. This finding is disturbing, inasmuch as it suggests that many people are complacent about partner abuse and perhaps unaware of its many consequences for victims and family members.

There was little preexisting empirical or theoretical research to guide our explorations of the correlates of beliefs about causes of violence. Our results suggest that only a fraction of the considerable diversity of opinions about violence can be accounted for by diversity in people's backgrounds or experiences; however, a few patterns are noteworthy. Overall, older respondents were more likely than others to see women as provocative, to accept violence as normal, and to blame men's lack of control and substance abuse for their behavior. This suggests that people who reached adulthood before DV became a social and public policy issue are more inclined to hold traditional views about violent couples. Respondents who were better educated were more likely to suggest or accept social learning theories about violence and to reject the notions that women can escape violent relationships and that violence is normal. African Americans were significantly more likely than others to agree that violence is a normal part of relationships and to suggest adultery and jealousy as causes of violence; they were less likely to associate

violence with personality and anger control problems. Finally, there is a modest but persistent gender gap across these findings: Men were more likely to attribute violence to women and to relationship problems and to consider it normal, and they were less likely to associate violence with men's anger or personality problems.

These associations merit further examination. Two particularly interesting questions are suggested by these results. First, do general beliefs about gender roles and relationships and the uses of physical violence shape one's understandings of the causes of DV, and might these beliefs mediate the effects of social background and experiences? Second, are there interactive effects of social background and attributes that might influence how people think about the causes of violence? These data do not permit extensive exploration of these questions; however, future research might be designed to specifically address matters such as the conditional effects of gender on victimization experiences.

Implications for Research

The results of the current study suggest several methodological and substantive lessons for future researchers. First, question format shapes responses and interpretations of responses. Open-ended questions yielded different distributions of beliefs than one would infer from discrete statements. We would not argue that one or the other is more valid, rather that these two sources probably produce slightly different information. Second, consistent with some findings from the FVPF survey (Klein et al., 1987), substantial minorities of respondents could neither agree nor disagree with the close-ended items. This result may be because of, in part, the fact that *don't know* was included as a specific choice, rather than simply the code used when respondents hesitated or refused to answer. Thus, it may represent a more accurate measure of uncertainty than other question formats produce. If so, then the current finding documents noteworthy levels of uncertainty on important topics—a potentially significant point of departure for public education efforts. Third, it remains difficult to compare findings from the current study with those of previous research, so we cannot conclude that beliefs about DV have (or have not) changed over time. Future research—and particularly assessments of the impacts of attempts to change or inform public opinion—should be preceded by development of standardized and validated questions that cover, at a minimum, the range of beliefs generated by our respondents. It will also be important to include samples that are sufficiently large to take into account the wide range of factors that may influence the complexity of these beliefs.

Implications for Policy

What do these findings suggest for policy and education efforts? Perhaps the most disturbing findings are that two thirds of respondents believe that women could find ways of leaving abusive relationships if they really wanted to, suggesting widespread lack of understanding of the complexities involved in terminating abusive relationships. Advocates for women who are battered and others have documented the extreme difficulty women have in leaving abusive relationships because of internal barriers (e.g., depression, fear of retaliation by the abuser, fear of losing child custody) and external barriers (e.g., lack of services, lack of affordable housing, lack of support in the criminal justice system; see Barnett, 2000, 2001). Moreover, a substantial minority—more than one third—saw DV as a normal response to stress—suggesting a lack of appreciation for the toll that violence takes on victims and family members. Therefore, education and outreach efforts should be directed toward better informing the public about the practical barriers involved in leaving abusive relationships, while more resources are allocated to removing those external barriers that keep women in violent relationships. To the extent that social services, criminal justice, and other public and non-profit sector workers share the views of the general public, education efforts should be targeted at better explicating important risk factors. Education efforts should also target the theme that violence is normal, because so-called normal suggests acceptability.

NOTES

1. Individual-level codes included controlling and/or dominating personality and/or punitive, stress (not otherwise defined), substance abuse, anger, history of family violence, exposure to violence in general, mental health and/or emotional problems of the offender, personality problems, lack of education, factors pertaining to the woman, breakdown of the marriage, breakdown of morality, victim provocation, machismo. Family and/or relationship codes included communication problems, adultery, jealousy, disrespect, familial stress, children, social isolation, and nature of the relationship. Macro level codes included financial stress, unemployment, and other work-related stresses.

2. Details of analyses are available from authors. The same results, with negligible differences, emerge when these coefficients are estimated for the entire sample.

3. Gammas were calculated for each pair of items in the two question sets ($n = 600$). Six relationships reached the .05 level of statistical significance (detailed results available from authors).

4. Both sets of questions could not be included, of course, because respondents answered only one set. We selected the second set because it included items that were more specifically focused on causes of violence, and because it included three of the items involving victim responsibility for abuse.

5. Recognizing the significance of gender in these analyses, we conducted separate regressions for male and female respondents. These analyses suggest that, beyond education, most statistically significant associations held for one gender only. Older respondents are more likely than others to attribute violence to long-standing stereotypes: Older women were more likely than younger women to mention anger and loss of control, and older men (compared with younger men) more likely to mention substance abuse. Overall, African Americans were more likely to mention personality problems and anger; African American women were more likely than White women to mention personality problems; African American men were more likely than White men to mention anger problems. Those who reported victimization were more likely to mention substance abuse, although this relationship is largely attributable to differences among women. Self-reported offenders were more likely to mention personality problems, and less likely to mention substance abuse—although again, these relationships hold among women, not men. Controlling for all other factors, women with greater secondary experience were inclined to mention substance abuse; men with greater experience more likely to mention a family history of violence. However, regressions conducted with interactive terms comprising these variables and gender add negligible predictive value to r^2 s, suggesting that the impact of gender is conditional, but only slightly so, on other characteristics (detailed results available from authors.).

6. The number of *don't know* responses was sufficiently large to argue against excluding those cases from analyses, so they were initially included as a third dependent variable category in multinomial logistic regression analyses. However, these analyses produced results that were different in very few ways from logistic regression analyses of these items excluding *don't know* answers, so the latter, more readily interpretable analyses are reported here. It should be noted that *don't know* responses, although numerous for some items, do not appear to be attributable to a core group of ambivalent people. Overall, 47% of respondents agreed or disagreed with all five statements they heard; 33% were unsure about only one of the items. In an attempt to assess any distinctive characteristics of the remaining 20%, we regressed a binary variable (coded 1 if respondent said *don't know* to at least two statements) on social background and experience variables. These variables account for only 4% of variance for this variable; statistically significant (although small) coefficients included lower education, no victimization experience, less secondary experience, and race (White, compared with African American).

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