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Hitting Without a License: Testing Explanations for Differences in Partner Abuse Between Young Adult Daters and Cohabitators

We compared partner abuse by cohabitators and daters among 21-year-olds. Cohabitators were significantly more likely than daters to perform abusive behaviors. We identified factors that differentiate cohabitators from daters and tested whether these factors explained the difference in partner abuse. As controls in regression models predicting abuse, none of these factors individually explained the difference in partner abuse between cohabitators and daters. With all factors added to the model simultaneously, the effect of cohabitation remained significant, but was substantially reduced. These findings have intervention implications because premarital cohabitation is a risk factor for abuse after marriage.

The problem of abuse and violence between intimate partners is well established. Estimates from nationally representative samples in the United States suggest that prevalence rates among young adults may be as high as 51% for "general" violence and 23% for "serious" violence (Fagan & Browne, 1994). In a now classic paper, Stets and Straus (1990) referred to "the marriage license as a hitting license," and they implied that couples who are bound by the provisions of a legal contract may be abusive because of rights and normative expectations that are associated with the institution of marriage. Stets and Straus also found that couples in de facto marriages (i.e., living together without a marriage license) experienced even more violence than married couples.

In our study, we examined partner violence among young adults who have not waited for a license to abuse their partners, and we compared levels of abuse in different kinds of unmarried relationships. Because rates of partner violence are dramatically higher for young adults than for other age groups (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995), we need to pay more attention to the kinds of relationships that are typical of this age group (Reiss & Roth, 1993, p. 222). We documented differences in levels of partner abuse between young adults in dating versus cohabiting relationships in a representative sample of 21-year-old men and women. We then tested a set of hypothe-

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ses about factors that might explain these differences.

The majority of research on partner violence has focused on married couples (Fagan & Browne, 1994). However, studies of dating and cohabiting couples also reveal alarming rates of abuse in these relationships (e.g., Ellis, 1989; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; Stets, 1992; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Some research suggests that cohabiting couples engage in more violence than dating couples (Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985; Sigelman, Berry, & Wiles, 1984; Stets & Straus, 1990). Furthermore, research on newly married couples found that those who had lived together before marriage had much higher rates of premarital violence (McLaughlin, Leonard, & Senchak, 1992). These findings underscore the importance of studying cohabitation to facilitate intervention among youth who are at risk for violence in their relationships.

It is especially important to focus on cohabitation because of the low rate of marriage among contemporary young adults. In the U.S., the median age at first marriage for women has increased from 20.6 years in 1970 to 23.7 years in 1988 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). This historical shift has been mirrored in New Zealand, the site of the study presented here, where the average age at first marriage for women has increased from 21.2 years in 1971–1972 to 25.2 years in 1991 (New Zealand Department of Statistics, 1993). Concurrent with the trend toward later marriage, there has been a notable increase, in both the U.S. and New Zealand, in the prevalence of unmarried young couples sharing a residence, i.e., cohabitators (New Zealand Department of Statistics, 1993; Reiss & Roth, 1993).

Family scholars have not yet developed a complete understanding of the meaning of cohabitation among young adults. Is cohabitation a new form of marriage, a marriage substitute among young adults who, in earlier decades, would have been in legal marital unions (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991)? Is cohabitation an advanced stage of singlehood that has become more widespread in an era of liberalized sexual norms (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990)? Or is cohabitation a new social institution that is qualitatively different from both dating and marriage, with its own emerging norms and accompanying dysfunctional behaviors? An analysis of the differences in partner abuse between young adults who have entered into cohabiting relationships and those who have

not can contribute to a clearer understanding of this lifestyle in early adulthood.

Using a representative sample of young adults who were aged 21 in 1993–1994, we compared rates and levels of partner abuse in different types of relationships commonly found among contemporary young adults. We tested the hypothesis that cohabiting young adults engage in more partner violence than dating young adults. We then sought other factors to explain differences in partner abuse between young adults who live with their partner and those who do not. We considered three broad categories of explanations rooted in the individual, the couple relationship, and the social environment.

DIFFERENCES IN PARTNER ABUSE

Individual Factors

Individual characteristics might explain the higher levels of partner abuse among cohabitators if individuals who enter cohabiting relationships differ systematically from their noncohabiting peers. We tested three hypotheses about such individual characteristics.

Aggression. Aggressive and delinquent behaviors in adolescence have been linked to leaving the parental home early and to early cohabitation (Bardone, Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, & Silva, 1996). Aggressive adolescents might experience more conflict in their family of origin (Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995) and thus might be more likely to leave the parental home earlier, increasing their likelihood of moving in with a partner at a young age. Because aggressive behavior is stable across time and circumstance (Caspi & Moffitt, 1995), a history of prior aggressive behavior is also a risk factor for current partner abuse (Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, in press; Simons, Wu, Johnson, & Conger, 1995). To the extent that aggressive adolescents cohabit at a young age and are more likely to abuse their partners, the association between cohabitation and partner abuse could be a spurious function of pre-existing differences in aggressiveness between cohabitators and daters. Thus, adolescent aggression may be the third variable that explains why cohabitators engage in more partner abuse.

Hypothesis 1A: Prior aggressive tendencies predispose some young adults to enter early cohabiting relationships.

Hypothesis 1B: The difference in prior aggressive tendencies between young adult cohabitators and young adult daters is a predisposing factor that is confounded with differences in rates and levels of partner abuse among cohabitators and daters.

Education. Early cohabitators are likely to have curtailed their education sooner than their peers who are not yet living with an intimate partner. Young adults who want to continue their education may prefer to delay a cohabiting relationship because of the time, energy, and financial commitment required (Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995). Truncated education is also a risk factor for partner abuse (Hotelling & Sugarman, 1986; Magdol et al., in press), perhaps because low levels of education result in inadequate or inconsistent income (Straus, 1990a) or because low levels of education are an indicator of poor communication skills that lead partners to resolve conflict with violence instead of verbal reasoning (Infante, 1989). To the extent that young adults with low levels of education are more likely to cohabit at a young age and are more likely to abuse their partners, the association between cohabitation and partner abuse could be a spurious function of preexisting educational differences between cohabitators and daters. Thus, low levels of education may be another third variable.

Hypothesis 2A: Extending the length of formal education predisposes some young adults to refrain from entering early cohabiting relationships.

Hypothesis 2B: The difference in educational attainment between young adult cohabitators and young adult daters is a predisposing factor that is confounded with differences in rates and levels of partner abuse.

Stress. Cohabitation in early adulthood—like marriage at an early age—may result in more stress for young adult cohabitators relative to other young adults. This may occur due to the added responsibilities of sharing a home with a new partner and to the non-normative timing of this role transition (Elder, 1978). Stressors are thought to produce a condition of strain and a psychological state of distress that may facilitate aggression to-

ward intimates (Berkowitz, 1978). Indeed, both acute and chronic stressors have been found to increase the likelihood of partner violence (Makepeace, 1987; Seltzer & Kalmuss, 1988; Straus, 1990a). More stress may be an intervening mediator in the process leading to more partner abuse among cohabitators. This suggests the hypothesis that differences in partner abuse between cohabitators and daters are mediated by greater stressful life events among cohabitators.

Hypothesis 3A: Young adult cohabitators experience more life stress compared with young adult daters.

Hypothesis 3B: The difference in levels of stress in the lives of young cohabitators, compared with young adults who are dating, is a mediating factor that contributes to the higher rates and levels of partner abuse among young adult cohabitators.

Relationship Factors

Some researchers posit that abusive behavior is a property of the couple, rather than the individual partners (e.g., Stacey, Hazlewood, & Shupe, 1994). This perspective suggests the importance of analyzing couple characteristics when comparing abuse in different types of relationships. Characteristics of cohabiting relationships might explain the higher rates and levels of partner abuse among cohabitators if their relationships differ systematically from dating relationships. We tested five hypotheses about relationship characteristics.

Opportunity. Perhaps the most obvious differences between dating and cohabiting relationships are differences in the opportunity for the occurrence of partner abuse over time, as well as on a daily basis. Cohabiting arrangements are likely to be relationships of longer duration, on average, than dating relationships. Indeed, in the representative sample studied here, cohabitators had been involved in their relationships for significantly longer than daters. Higher rates of partner violence have been found in relationships of longer duration, in part because long relationships afford more contact hours when abuse can occur (Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987). In addition, partner abuse occurs most often in the home (Sugarman & Hotelling, 1989; Walker, 1984). This suggests the hypothesis that differences in partner abuse between

cohabitators and daters are mediated by cohabitators' more frequent opportunities to engage in abuse.

Hypothesis 4A: Young adult cohabitators are in relationships of longer duration than young adult daters.

Hypothesis 4B: The longer duration of cohabiting relationships is a mediating factor that contributes to the higher rates and levels of partner abuse among young adult cohabitators.

Hypothesis 5A: Young adult cohabitators share more time and activities with their partners, compared with young adult daters.

Hypothesis 5B: The difference in the extent of shared time and activities is a mediating factor that contributes to the higher rates and levels of partner abuse among young adult cohabitators.

Relationship quality. One aspect of relationship quality, which may differ for cohabitators and daters, is the amount of conflict in the relationship. Cohabitators may have more areas of conflict in their relationships because they share more role domains than dating couples. As Stets and Straus (1990) note, "In a marital or cohabiting relationship [as opposed to dating relationships], everything about the partner is of concern to the other, and hence little or nothing is off limits for discussion and conflict" (p. 243). Some researchers believe that partner abuse is a direct outcome of disagreements. An association has been reported between partner abuse and the number of areas of conflict (Coleman & Straus, 1990). Stets and Straus suggest that differences in partner abuse between cohabitators and daters are mediated by more areas of conflict between cohabitators, but to our knowledge this hypothesis has not been tested.

Hypothesis 6A: Young adult cohabitators experience more areas of conflict than young adult daters do.

Hypothesis 6B: The difference in the number of areas of conflict is a mediating factor that contributes to the higher rates and lev-

els of partner abuse among young adult cohabitators.

Balance of power is another relationship factor that may distinguish cohabitators from daters. Again, Stets and Straus (1990) note that when the issue of power to exert control over a partner arises, violence often occurs. Daters, as opposed to those in cohabiting relationships, "may feel that they do not have the right to control the other" (p. 242). In addition, because daters do not share as many decisions about their lives and household management as cohabitators, the balance of power over decisions may be less central to the quality of dating relationships. Stets and Straus suggest that differences in partner abuse between cohabitators and daters may be mediated by the imbalance of power often found in cohabiting relationships, but to our knowledge this hypothesis has not been tested.

Hypothesis 7A: Young adult cohabitators experience a greater power imbalance between partners than do young adult daters.

Hypothesis 7B: The difference in the balance of power is a mediating factor that contributes to the higher rates and levels of partner abuse among young adult cohabitators.

Age. Another index of an imbalanced or an egalitarian relationship might be a large age difference between partners. In most relationships, the normative pattern is for the woman to be a few years younger than the man. However, there is reason to expect that age differentials are wider among young adults who cohabit at an early age. Young women who enter cohabiting arrangements earlier than their peers may be involved with older males, either because these young women have physically matured ahead of their peers and attracted the attentions of older men (Magnusson, 1988) or because involvement with an older male offers more resources to sustain a viable household, especially if the woman is in her late teens or early 20s. Such a difference in age between partners may set the stage for a greater power imbalance in the relationship (Zinn & Eitzen, 1996, p. 266). Because partner abuse is associated with a less balanced distribution of power (Coleman &

Straus, 1990), a greater age gap between partners in cohabiting relationships, compared with dating relationships, may be another third variable that explains why cohabitators engage in more partner abuse. In short, the association between cohabitation and partner abuse may be a spurious function of differences in age heterogamy between cohabiting couples and dating couples.

Hypothesis 8A: A greater age difference between partners is more likely among young adults who enter early cohabiting relationships than among dating partners.

Hypothesis 8B: The difference in age heterogamy between partners in cohabiting versus dating relationships is a predisposing factor that is confounded with differences in rates and levels of partner abuse.

Factors of Social Control

Social ties are important to consider because they serve as informal agents of social control, providing norms, monitoring behavior, and applying informal sanctions for behavior that is unacceptable (Sampson & Laub, 1993). According to social control theory, antisocial behaviors emerge when an individual's bonds to society are weak or broken (Durkheim, 1951; Hirschi, 1969). Factors of social control might help to explain the higher levels of partner abuse among cohabitators if the social involvement of cohabitators differs systematically from that of daters. We tested three hypotheses about social control that may explain differences in partner abuse between cohabitators and daters.

Social ties. It is possible that cohabitators are more abusive than dating couples because they are more socially isolated. Cohabitators may be less involved in social networks than daters, perhaps because they have a more exclusive partner relationship that leaves less time and emotional energy for outside ties or because of a lingering stigma attached to cohabitation (Stets & Straus, 1990). Social isolation and lack of social support have been shown to correlate with family violence (Cazenave & Straus, 1990), especially with the perpetration of severe violence (Magdol et al., 1997), possibly because the behavior of socially isolated couples is less open to the scrutiny of sig-

nificant others (Stets & Straus, 1990; Yllo & Straus, 1981). Stets and Straus suggest that differences in partner abuse between cohabitators and daters may be mediated by the greater social isolation often found in cohabiting relationships, but to our knowledge this hypothesis has not been tested.

Hypothesis 9A: Young adult cohabitators have weak social ties (i.e., smaller support networks and fewer memberships in organizations), compared with young adult daters.

Hypothesis 9B: The difference in the presence and extent of social ties is a mediating factor that contributes to the higher rates and levels of partner abuse among young adult cohabitators.

Conventionality. Dating is consistent with the social mores that govern the lives of most 21-year-olds. In contrast, cohabitation, although increasingly common, is still a less conventional lifestyle (Thornton, 1988). Thus, it is possible that young adults who cohabit may be less conventional, in general, than those who date. By definition, individuals who espouse unconventional values and attitudes are less responsive to others' efforts of social control. They worry less often about what the neighbors think. Some evidence has been found for the proposition that partner abuse is associated with less concern for social desirability (Sigelman et al., 1984). In particular, partner abuse is associated with various forms of unconventional behavior, such as infrequent attendance at religious services (Fergusson, Horwood, Kershaw, & Shannon, 1986; Makepeace, 1987) and having deviant peers (Alder, 1985). To the extent that persons with less conventional attitudes and lifestyles are more likely to cohabit at a young age and are more likely to abuse their partners, the association between cohabitation and partner abuse could be a spurious function of preexisting differences in conventionality between cohabitators and daters. Thus, conventional attitudes and lifestyles may be third variables that explain why cohabitators engage in more partner abuse.

Hypothesis 10A: Less conventional young adults (i.e., those who are less religious and have more deviant peers) are predisposed to enter early cohabiting relationships.

Hypothesis 10B: The difference in conventionality between young adult cohabitators and young adult daters is a predisposing factor that is confounded with differences in rates and levels of partner abuse.

Informal sanctions. Unconventional people are likely to affiliate with other unconventional people (Kandel, Davies, & Baydar, 1990). Thus, there is reason to posit that cohabitators, who may be less conventional than daters, would expect less censure for partner violence from their social networks. In deterrence theory, formal sanctions by police and courts are contrasted with informal sanctions, such as disapproval, reprimands, or ostracization by family, friends, or employers (Williams & Hawkins, 1986). Deterrence theory suggests that the potential costs associated with disapproval from family, friends, and others may serve to deter deviant behavior. Indeed, research shows that men at risk for abusing their partners are less likely to be abusive if they expect negative sanctions (Lackey & Williams, 1995). This suggests the hypothesis that differences in partner abuse between cohabitators and daters are mediated by cohabitators' expectations of fewer informal sanctions against deviant behaviors.

Hypothesis 11A: Young adult cohabitators have fewer expectations of informal sanctions than young adult daters have.

Hypothesis 11B: The difference in expectations of informal sanctions is a mediating factor that contributes to the higher rates and levels of partner abuse among young adult cohabitators.

In sum, a variety of individual, relationship, and social factors may contribute to an understanding of partner abuse among young adults. Some of these factors, existing prior to the relationship, are confounds that might selectively predispose certain kinds of young adults to make the transition from a dating relationship to early cohabitation. These include adolescent aggression (Hypothesis 1), less education (Hypothesis 2), age heterogamy (Hypothesis 8), and unconventionality (Hypothesis 10). Other factors are mediators, explanatory factors that may contribute to the association between cohabiting and partner abuse because they are more strongly associated with cohabitators than daters. These include stress (Hypothesis 3), relationship duration (Hypothesis 4),

shared time and activities (Hypothesis 5), areas of conflict (Hypothesis 6), imbalance of power (Hypothesis 7), weak social ties (Hypothesis 9), and fewer expectations of sanctions (Hypothesis 11).

METHOD

The Dunedin Study's Design and Procedures

The sample was an unselected birth cohort that has been studied extensively for over 20 years as part of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study. The history of the study has been described in detail by Silva (1990). It is a longitudinal investigation of the health, development, and behavior of a complete cohort of births between April 1, 1972, and March 31, 1973, in Dunedin, New Zealand, a city of 120,000. Perinatal data were obtained at delivery. The children were traced for follow-up at age 3, and 1,037 children (52% boys and 48% girls)—91% of the eligible births—participated in the assessment and formed the base sample for the longitudinal study. The children's fathers were representative of the social class and race distribution in the general population in New Zealand's South Island. The study members are of predominantly European ancestry. Fewer than 7% identify themselves as Maori or Polynesian. The Dunedin sample has been reassessed at ages 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 21.

At the age-21 assessment, each study member came to the research unit within 60 days of his or her birthday for a full day of individual data collection. The various research topics were presented as standardized modules by different trained examiners in counterbalanced order throughout the day (e.g., demographics interview, mental health interview, physical examination, partner relations interview).

The Sample for the Study of Partner Violence

Of the 1,037 original study members, 941 provided data about their intimate relationships at age 21. Data were missing for 17 study members who had died since age 3, nine who were not located, 19 who refused to participate in the age-21 assessment, nine for whom there were too many missing items to be included in our analysis, and 42 who were interviewed in the field or by telephone with a short version of the protocol that did not include questions about partner abuse. The

941 who participated in the intimate relations interview were compared with the 96 study members from the original birth cohort of 1,037 who did not. The two samples did not differ in sex composition, $\chi^2(1) = 1.33, p = .25$, social class at birth, $t(939) = .78, p = .44$, or history of aggressive behavior measured at age 15, $t(958) = .26, p = .79$. It is thus unlikely that systematic attrition biases our results. The prevalence rate of partner abuse in the past year reported by the Dunedin sample was comparable with rates for this age group in the U.S. (in the National Family Violence Survey, analyzed in Fagan & Browne, 1994, and in the National Youth Survey, Elliott, Huizinga, & Morse, 1985; for a comparison, see Magdol et al., 1997).

For the purposes of this study, an intimate relationship was defined as a relationship with a romantic partner during the past 12 months that had lasted at least 1 month. Reports about the quality of a specific relationship sustained for at least a month were needed to test Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7. Of the 941 study members, 777 (83%) reported that they were involved in such an intimate relationship during the past 12 months and thus constituted the sample reported here. Study members who had not dated or who had dated but had not been involved in an intimate relationship for a month or more were excluded from this report because they could not provide information about a specific partner. For comparison purposes, we classified the 777 study members who were included in this analysis into three types of relationships. Those who reported that they were "going out" with their partner were classified as dating (68%), those who reported that they were "living together as a couple" were classified as cohabiting (28%), and those who reported that they were "married" were classified as married (4%).

Measuring Partner Abuse at Age 21

The set of questions about partner abuse was embedded in a 50-minute standardized interview about intimate relationships. Trained female interviewers asked in this portion of the interview a series of questions about whether or not the respondent had performed certain behaviors during the past 12 months toward the current or most recent intimate partner (0 = no, 1 = yes). Both positive and negative strategies for negotiating disagreements were included. The items about abusive behavior were drawn from previous research on partner conflict (Hudson, 1987; Margolin,

Burman, John, & O'Brien, 1990; Margolin, Fernandez, Gorin, & Ortiz, 1982; Straus, 1990b). Study members were asked to enter their responses to each question on a private answer sheet while the interviewer read each item aloud. This procedure was designed to allow privacy and to overcome any problems with illiteracy. In the Dunedin study, as in the general population, approximately 15% suffer from some level of reading disability. Although this was the first follow-up when the study members were asked about partner abuse, in the past they have repeatedly reported to us on sensitive topics such as their sexual behavior, illegal behavior, substance abuse, and symptoms of mental disorders. Because there has never been a violation of confidentiality, this sample is willing to provide frank reports. Printed brochures about how to get help for abuse were available, as was referral information for those requesting it.

We constructed two measures of partner abuse. The Physical Abuse Scale was the sum of responses to the nine items dealing with physical violence from the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS, form R, Straus, 1990b), plus four additional items, drawn from Margolin's Domestic Conflict Index (Margolin et al., 1990), that capture other physically abusive behaviors—twisting your partner's arm, physically forcing sex on your partner, shaking your partner, and throwing your partner bodily. (See Moffitt et al., 1997, for details.) The Physical Abuse Scale had a reliability (α) of .76, comparable with the reliabilities reported by Straus for the physical violence section of the CTS. In addition to the continuously distributed scale, we followed procedures used by Straus and Gelles (1986) and constructed for some analyses a dichotomous variable indicating if any of the behaviors itemized in the scale had occurred (1 = any abuse, 0 = no abuse).

Predisposing Factors and Mediators

The study presented here includes 13 measures of the individual, relationship, and social factors that were hypothesized to explain differences in partner abuse in different types of relationships.

There were three measures of individual factors. Prior aggression was measured at age 15 in a private, individual interview, using a standardized survey instrument developed for use in New Zealand (Moffitt & Silva, 1988). Items used to construct a scale of aggressive behaviors asked whether the respondent had set fire to a building,

hit a parent, fought in the street or in another public place, struggled to escape from a policeman, used force or threats to extort money, or used a weapon in a fight in the past year. Responses were totaled (0 = *zero times*, 1 = *one or two times*, 2 = *three or more times*.) The potential range of scores was from 0 to 12. This instrument has been shown to be reliable and valid. One-month test-retest reliability is .90, internal consistency (α) is .88, and criterion correlations with parents' reports and police records hover near .35 (Moffitt & Silva, 1988). Education was measured by a 5-point scale relevant to 21-year-olds in the New Zealand educational system (1 = *no school qualification*, 5 = *university entrance examinations*). Stressful events were measured as the total score on a 24-item checklist of stressful life events that had happened in the past year (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*), such as changing residence, a death in the family, birth of a child, or a major accident. This was a shorter version of the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1968), which excluded items that would not apply to the 21-year-old respondents.

There were five measures of relationship factors, obtained from an interview constructed from standard instruments (Beier & Sternberg, 1987; Hudson, 1987; Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Locke & Wallace, 1987; Olson, Portner, & Bell, 1981; Spanier, 1976), with additional items constructed by the authors. Relationship duration was the length of the relationship in months. The average length of the relationships was 16.6 months. Sixty-one percent of the relationships had lasted for more than 6 months, 45% of the relationships had lasted for more than 12 months, and 26% of the relationships had lasted for more than 2 years. Shared time and activities were measured as the total score on a five-item scale that assessed the extent to which members of the couple spent time together and shared interests (e.g., "We spend time together" and "we tend to do more things separately than together"). Responses were 0 = *never*, 1 = *sometimes*, and 2 = *almost always*. The reliability (α) of this scale was .75. Areas of conflict were measured as the total score on an 18-item checklist of areas of conflict in the relationship, including conflicts about commitment, autonomy, values, sex, having or raising children, money, and religion. Responses ranged from 0 = *none* to 2 = *a lot*. The reliability (α) for this scale was .84. Balance of power was measured as the total score on a 15-item scale that assessed how

members of the couple handled differences, shared responsibilities, set rules, determined fairness, and considered each other's needs. Typical items were: "We have a good balance of leadership" and "we each have input regarding our major decisions." Responses ranged from 0 = *never* to 2 = *almost always*. High scores on this scale indicate a more balanced relationship. The reliability (α) of this scale was .82. Age difference was the difference in years between the sample member's age and the partner's age. Partners' age differences ranged from 0 to 18 years.

There were five measures of social control factors. Social support was measured by a 37-item scale based on published instruments (Barrera, 1981; Marziali, 1987; Norbeck, Lindsey, & Carrieri, 1981; Power, Champion, & Aris, 1988; Reis, 1988; Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983; Vaux et al., 1986; Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987) about the availability of material support, emotional support, companionship, and mentoring advice (e.g., "If you were sick in bed for several weeks, [how many people] would help you?" [How many people] can you count on to listen when you truly need to talk?"). The total number of people available for all types of support was calculated, and this score was logged to adjust for the extreme skew of the raw score. The reliability (α) of this scale was .95. Memberships were measured by the number of groups and organizations in which the respondent was involved during the past year, including social clubs, service organizations, sports teams, hobby groups, and political organizations. Religiosity was measured with one item that asked how important religion was to the respondent. The four response options ranged from *not at all important* to *very important*. The presence of deviant peers was measured with a six-item scale used in the National Youth Survey that asked the sample members how many of their friends (1 = *none*, 5 = *all*) were not good citizens, had personal problems, broke the law, had problems with alcohol, had problems with drugs, and had problems with aggression (Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989). The reliability (α) of this scale was .79. The importance of informal sanctions was measured with a 28-item scale based on self-ratings of whether the sample members believed their relationships with friends and family, their job prospects, and their ability to find an ideal mate would be affected if people knew that the sample members had shoplifted, used marijuana, stole a car, hit someone in a fight, committed bur-

glary, drove while drunk, and used a stolen bank card. The response format was 0 = *no*, 1 = *maybe*, 2 = *yes*. The reliability (α) for this scale was .91.

RESULTS

Do Cohabiters Engage in More Partner Abuse Than Daters?

In the first part of this analysis, we compared levels of partner abuse among young adults in different types of relationships using the scale of how many different types of abusive behaviors had been performed by the study member during the past 12 months. An analysis of variance (ANOVA), with relationship type (married, cohabiting, dating) and gender entered as independent variables and partner abuse as the dependent variable, revealed a significant effect of relationship type, $F(2,767) = 23.03$, $p < .001$. Cohabiters ($M = 1.45$) engaged in more partner abuse than daters ($M = .58$) and married individuals ($M = .93$). Cohabiters differed significantly from daters, $t(744) = 7.18$, $p = .000$. The interaction effect of gender and relationship type was not statistically significant. We also performed an ANOVA in which we included only sample members who had reported engaging in any physical abuse, i.e., those with a scale score of 1 or more. This analysis allowed us to test whether severity (i.e., variety of abusive behaviors) varied by relationship type. The analysis revealed a significant effect of relationship type, $F(2,264) = 4.68$, $p = .01$. Cohabiters who were abusive had engaged in the greatest variety of behaviors ($M = 2.78$), followed by dating ($M = 2.14$) and married ($M = 2.08$) study members. Cohabiters differed significantly from daters, $t(256) = 2.97$, $p = .003$. The interaction effect of gender and relationship type was not statistically significant. As a result of these two sets of analyses, we concluded that relationship type was associated with partner abuse similarly for women and men, and thus we pooled both genders for all subsequent analyses. Because of the small size of the subsample of married individuals ($n = 27$), we could not analyze them as a separate group in subsequent multivariate analyses, and they were eliminated from further analyses.

We also compared prevalence rates of partner abuse among young adults in different types of relationships, using the dichotomous measure that

indicated if any physical abuse had been performed by the study member during the past 12 months. In the full sample, men and women combined, about half of the cohabiting (52%) study members reported that they had behaved abusively toward their partner, compared with about one fourth of the daters (27%), $\chi^2(1) = 41.82$, $p = .001$.

How Do Cohabiting Young Adults Differ From Dating Young Adults?

Having shown that partner abuse is greater among cohabiters than among daters, we next examined characteristics of young cohabiters that might distinguish them from young daters. We conducted t tests comparing cohabiters and daters on each of the 13 measures of individual, relationship, and social factors. The results of these analyses are displayed in Table 1.

The first two columns of Table 1 show standardized group means (z scores) for cohabiters and daters. On our measures of individual factors, cohabiters had histories of more aggressive behavior and less education and had experienced more life stressors in the past year than daters. On our measures of relationship factors, cohabiters were in relationships of longer duration, and they reported more areas of conflict in their relationships than daters. Cohabiters and their partners had greater age differences than daters and their partners. On our measures of factors of social control, cohabiters had less social support, belonged to fewer organizations, were less religious, had more deviant peers, and expected fewer informal sanctions for deviant behavior than daters.

The third column of Table 1 shows the correlations between each of the 13 measures and partner abuse. These correlations suggest that the factors that differentiate cohabiters from daters are also some of the factors that are implicated in partner abuse. This suggests the need to examine whether these factors can account for the observed differences in partner abuse between cohabiters and daters, either as third variables that contribute to a spurious association of relationship type with partner abuse or as intervening mediators that help to explain the association.

We also tested whether differences in individual, relationship, and social factors between cohabiters and daters varied by gender. However, because only three of the 13 characteristics that

TABLE 1. GROUP MEANS FOR SELECTED INDIVIDUAL, RELATIONSHIP, AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG ADULT DATERS AND COHABITORS

Predictors	Daters	Cohabitors	<i>r</i> with Partner Abuse
Individual factors			
Prior aggression	-.08	.30 ¹	.19**
Education	.17	-.42 ¹	-.17**
Stressful events	-.00	.32 ¹	.10**
Relationship factors			
Relationship duration	-.11	.45 ¹	.29**
Shared time and activities	.03	-.07	-.17**
Areas of conflict	-.06	.18 ¹	.35**
Balance of power	-.02	-.01	-.26**
Age difference	-.12	.24 ¹	-.05
Social control factors			
Social support	.12	-.16 ¹	-.03
Memberships	.11	-.22 ¹	-.08*
Religiosity	.00	-.23 ¹	-.04
Deviant peers	-.04	.23 ¹	.24**
Informal sanctions	.07	-.30 ¹	-.19**

Note: All variables are expressed as *z* scores to allow metric comparisons across variables. For daters, *n* = 531. For cohabitators, *n* = 219.

¹ Means for cohabitators and daters differ at *p* < .01.

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

we tested had significant interaction effects, we combined women and men in our subsequent analyses.

Why Do Cohabiting Young Adults Engage in More Partner Abuse Than Dating Young Adults?

Next, in a regression framework, we tested our hypotheses about whether differences in the characteristics of cohabitators and daters might explain differences between the two groups in their rates and levels of partner abuse. We first estimated the effect of cohabitation status on partner abuse and then tested whether this effect was reduced or eliminated by entering the hypothesized individual, relationship, and social factors into the regression equation. As shown in Table 2, we performed the steps of this procedure twice, using logistic regression to predict the log odds of any partner abuse and OLS regression to predict the variety of abusive behaviors.

The first panel in Table 2 shows the effect of cohabitation status (0 = *dating*, 1 = *cohabiting*) on partner abuse. When the logistic regression results are expressed as relative odds, the results indicate that the odds of performing any physical abuse toward a partner were almost three times as great for cohabitators as they were for daters. In the OLS model, the regression coefficient for cohab-

iting is positive and significant, implying that cohabitators performed a greater variety of abusive acts than did daters. These results are consistent with the differences in partner abuse among cohabitators and daters that were shown in the ANOVAS. These data are presented as a baseline for comparison with the models that follow in the next two panels of Table 2.

The second panel in Table 2 shows the effects of partner abuse that remain after controlling for individual, relationship, and social factors. We entered each of the 13 measures from Table 1 in separate regression equations to test which of these controls could independently explain the cohabitation effect. In all of the logistic models, the relative odds remained significant, ranging from 2.25 to 3.02. In all of the OLS models, the addition of a control variable did not reduce the significance level of the regression coefficient for cohabitation status.

With regard to individual factors (Hypotheses 1–3), our results indicate that, even though young cohabitators had histories of more aggression, had completed less education, and had experienced more stress than daters, none of these differences accounted for differences between the two groups in partner abuse. With regard to relationship factors (Hypotheses 4–8), our results indicate that even though cohabitators were in relationships that

TABLE 2. EFFECTS OF COHABITATION ON PERPETRATION OF PARTNER ABUSE: LOGISTIC REGRESSIONS PREDICTING LOG ODDS OF ANY PARTNER ABUSE AND OLS REGRESSIONS PREDICTING NUMBER OF DIFFERENT ABUSIVE BEHAVIORS

	Any Abuse	Total Abuse	
	Relative Odds	β	R^2
Cohabitation effect	2.89**	.25**	.07
With controls entered in separate equations			
Prior aggression	2.80**	.23**	.09
Education	2.58**	.23**	.08
Stressful events	2.76**	.24**	.07
Relationship duration	2.25**	.20**	.11
Shared time and activities	2.86**	.25**	.09
Areas of conflict	2.74**	.22**	.17
Balance of power	3.02**	.25**	.13
Age difference	3.01**	.27**	.07
Social support	2.87**	.26**	.06
Memberships	2.80**	.25**	.07
Religiosity	2.86**	.25**	.07
Deviant peers	2.74**	.23**	.12
Informal sanctions	2.75**	.23**	.09
With controls entered in one equation			
All covariates listed above	1.76**	.12**	.27

** $p < .01$.

had lasted longer, had more areas of conflict, and had a greater age discrepancy between partners, these differences also did not account for differences between the two groups in partner abuse. With regard to social factors (Hypotheses 9–11), our results indicate that, even though cohabitators had less social support, belonged to fewer organizations, were less religious, had more deviant peers, and expected fewer informal sanctions, these differences did not account for differences between the two groups in partner abuse.

The third panel in Table 2 shows the final step of our analysis, where we entered all 13 covariates together to test whether all our controls could explain the cohabitation effect additively. Although the relative odds were reduced by about one third (2.89 vs. 1.76), they remained significant, even with controls for all covariates in the model. Net of all 13 controls, cohabitators were still almost twice as likely to be physically abusive toward their partners than were daters. In combination, the 13 characteristics also reduced the regression coefficient for cohabitation by about half (.25 vs. .12). A t test for the difference between the two OLS coefficients for cohabitation, with and without controls in the model, revealed that the difference was statistically significant at conventional levels, $t(746) = 2.29$, $p < .05$. This suggests that, even though the hypothesized factors could not completely explain significant differences between young adult cohabitators and daters in partner abuse, there would be a cumulative additive effect if more than one factor were present.

DISCUSSION

We investigated partner abuse among young adult cohabitators and daters in a representative sample of 21-year-olds who were involved in a variety of intimate relationships, ranging from casual dating (for a month or more) to marriage. We documented that young adult cohabitators exceed daters in rates and levels of partner abuse. We tested hypotheses about the reasons for these differences. We focused on young adults because they are an at-risk group, with the highest rates of partner abuse of all age groups. We focused on dating and cohabiting relationships because they are the most commonly occurring intimate relationships in contemporary young adulthood. Our assessment of our study members allowed us to test multiple hypotheses about the individual, relationship, and social control factors that might explain differences in partner abuse in different types of relationships.

Our study had five limitations. First, it was limited by the fact that few study members were married by age 21. As a result, we compared cohabitators and daters but did not include married study members in our hypotheses tests. A second limitation was that our sample was restricted in age, representing only young adults who were 21 at the time of the interview. Thus, we were unable to analyze the influence of maturation on differences between cohabitators' and daters' abusive behaviors. Third, the age restriction of the sample limited our ability to analyze differences in social class. During the transition to young adulthood

when occupation is not yet a valid indicator of social stratification, the best indicator of a respondent's social class origin and destination is the key decision made by the young adult about how much education to obtain (Sewell, Hauser, & Featherman, 1976). Thus, we used education as an indicator of social class. Fourth, we were limited by the fact that we analyzed relationships cross-sectionally. We were unable to directly address the assumption that abuse during cohabitation is a risk factor for abuse in marriage. This proposition can be tested only by following young people after they marry, as was done by McLaughlin et al. (1992). Finally, our study was limited by the fact that our sample was primarily White.

We found significantly more partner abuse among cohabitators than among daters. This finding is consistent with previous research (Stets & Straus, 1990). We also confirmed that cohabitators differed from daters as individuals, in their relationships, and in their social involvement outside the relationship. However, regardless of statistical controls for aggression, education, stress, opportunity, relationship quality, balance of power, social ties, conventionality, and informal sanctions, cohabitators were still nearly twice as likely as daters to be physically abusive toward their partners. Neither individual predisposition, nor synergistic chemistry within relationships, nor responsiveness to the wider social context with its potential for social controls can completely explain the observed differences in physical abuse between cohabitators and daters.

Some of our results are consistent with the existing literature on partner abuse. Stets and Straus (1990) published the most often-cited article comparing partner abuse in dating and cohabiting relationships. They offered six explanations for differences between daters and cohabitators (age, education, occupation, isolation, control, investment) and were able to test three (age, education, occupation). Stets and Straus report that differences in partner abuse between daters and cohabitators remained after controlling for age. This is consistent with our study, which controlled for age by matching. Likewise, our finding that educational differences do not explain differences between young cohabitators and daters in partner abuse is consistent with the findings of Stets and Straus, who also found that rates of partner abuse were higher for cohabitators, even after controlling for education. We were able to test the three additional hypotheses suggested by Stets and Straus.

Our finding that social isolation does not explain higher rates and levels of partner abuse among cohabitators is contrary to the expectations of Stets and Straus. Although social ties may account for some of the differences in partner abuse by cohabitators and married couples (Stets, 1991), they did not explain differences between cohabitators and daters in our study. Stets and Straus also suggested that differences in partner abuse between cohabitators and daters may be mediated by differences in autonomy and control, described by them as conflict over "rights, duties, and obligations." We tested this hypothesis by measuring control, directly with a balance-of-power scale including equity in problem solving, responsibility, fairness and consideration and indirectly with age differences between couple members. Using these two variables, we found that autonomy and control do not account for differences in abuse between cohabitators and daters. This finding is consistent with Stets and Pirog-Good (1987), who found that, among daters, the age difference between partners is not a risk marker for partner abuse. Stets and Straus also suggested that differences in partner abuse are mediated by more areas of conflict for cohabitators, compared with daters, and weaker long-term investments in the relationship, compared with married persons. Our results show that, although cohabitators do have more conflicts than daters, these conflicts do not account for their greater partner abuse. Finally, consistent with an observation made by Stets and Straus, we found that differences in relationship duration partially explain differences in partner abuse. They observed that when dating relationships lasted longer and grew more serious, they would become more like cohabiting relationships in the extent of partner abuse.

The individual, relationship, and social factors that we tested, when combined in a single additive model, explained from one third to one half of the effect of cohabitation status on partner abuse. Which factors not included in our study contribute to the unexplained variance in our models? Perhaps the more proximal aspects of daily interactions in shared living quarters are relevant to a fuller explanation. The fact that most partner abuse occurs within the home suggests that it is difficult to accurately assess the surrounding circumstances of this private behavior syndrome. Apparently, there is something about cohabitation itself that generates risk for violence, over and above selection into cohabitation or so-

cial controls applied to cohabitators from outside the relationship.

Although we cannot completely explain why cohabitators engage in more partner abuse than other young adults, we can conclude that young cohabitators differ from young daters and should be analyzed as a distinct type of couple in future research. There is still much that is unknown about this relatively new social institution. Cherlin (1978) introduced the concept of an "incomplete institution" when discussing remarriage to explain how the lack of normative standards in a new family arrangement creates stresses and strains for its participants. Cohabitation may be another example of an incomplete institution. As cohabitation increases, it may gain recognition as a legitimate stage of the life course. If cohabitation becomes a more "complete" institution with its own norms, it could acquire a status of respectability that would reduce partner abuse indirectly by reducing the strains associated with uncertain norms and directly with the emergence of norms that would clearly discourage abuse between cohabiting partners.

On the other hand, it is unclear that the "complete institution" of marriage reduces the risk of partner abuse significantly among young adults who are in the peak period of risk for engaging in abuse. Although it may seem that married couples engage in less abuse than cohabiting couples, married couples tend to be older than cohabiting couples (Stets, 1991). When age is controlled, initial differences in abuse between married and cohabiting young adults appear much smaller. For example, rates of partner abuse among married and cohabiting young adults were 36% and 40% in Stets and Straus (1990; Figure 13.3) and 41% and 48% among Dunedin young adults. It may be that the distinction between cohabitation and marriage is less salient for younger cohorts. Young adults who enter cohabiting relationships may be as abusive as their married peers because they adopt patriarchal norms surrounding the institution of marriage, i.e., the marriage license as hitting license. Cohabitation among older adults, e.g., those who are divorced, is less common. It may represent a different kind of relationship, one that is less normative and more incomplete. As such, cohabitation by older adults may be associated with more abuse, relative to that reported by married adults, because it is more stressful and because the constraints of marriage that Stets and Straus consider are not present in the relationships of older cohabitators.

As cohabitation increases, it will be both easier and more important for researchers to explore the dynamics of this type of relationship. Abuse by cohabitators merits the attention of practitioners. If young adults are hitting each other and living together without a license, early counseling to prepare young people for domestic life is essential. Such counseling could occur in the context of family living education provided by schools in early adolescence, before the onset of de facto domestic unions.

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