Definitions of and Beliefs About Wife Abuse Among Undergraduate Students of Social Work
Muhammad M. Haj-Yahia and Miriam Schiff
*Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol* 2007; 51; 170
DOI: 10.1177/0306624X06291457

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ijo.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/51/2/170
Definitions of and Beliefs About Wife Abuse Among Undergraduate Students of Social Work

Muhammad M. Haj-Yahia
Miriam Schiff
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mt. Scopus, Israel

The article focuses on definitions of and beliefs about wife abuse among undergraduate social work students in Israel. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires. The vast majority of students in Study 1 acknowledged acts thought to constitute wife assault and disapproved of a husband’s use of force against his wife. The majority of students in Study 2 did not justify wife abuse nor tend to believe that battered women benefit from beating, although they tended to blame the violent husband for his behavior. Significant amounts of the variance in dependent variables were explained by the students’ marital role expectations (Study 1) and their attitudes toward women and sex role stereotypes (Study 2). The students’ year of study and participation in family violence or wife abuse courses did not contribute toward explaining the variance in their beliefs. Results are discussed in light of the students’ patriarchal ideology, and implications for future research are presented.

Keywords: domestic violence; violence against women; definitions of wife abuse; beliefs about wife abuse; social work education

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature on knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behavior of professionals and practitioners working with battered women and violent men. Even though social workers have historically been considered the main service providers for battered women (Edleson, 1991), their definition of and beliefs about wife abuse have only recently been examined empirically (e.g., Eisikovits, Griffel, Grinstein, & Azaiza, 2000; Home, 1994).

In a review of previous research, Eisikovits et al. (2000) identified several problems that characterize the relationship between social workers and battered women:

Authors’ Note: Both of the studies presented in this article were partially funded by grants from the Warburg Fund and the Kahanoff Foundation that were awarded to Prof. Haj-Yahia. Please address correspondence to Prof. Muhammad M. Haj-Yahia, Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel; e-mail: mshayah@MSCC.huji.ac.il.
(a) Social workers give clients conflicting messages, (b) professional ideology and orientation have more effect on referral and service needs than on women’s specific needs, (c) women’s socioeconomic status influences their perceived ability to cope with and stop violence, (d) marital status affects the recommendation to leave home after violence, and (e) social workers are found to be insensitive to specific race-related issues concerning battered women. It is therefore not surprising that a recent study on the relationships between battered women and social workers, as perceived by the victims, revealed that most of the women are disappointed with their relationship with the social worker. The reported reasons for this sense of disappointment included the social worker’s tendency to avoid acknowledging that wife abuse is a problem or to minimize the need for guidance and counseling that deal directly with the problem (e.g., considering issues “around” violence without focusing specifically on the problem), social workers’ lack of commitment toward the therapeutic relationship with the battered woman, considering the view of women as unreliable, decontextualizing problems of functioning encountered by battered women, and insisting on involving the violent husband in intervention (Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 1996).

From a historical perspective, psychotherapists, family therapists, social workers, counselors, and other groups of mental health practitioners have viewed the problem of wife abuse as the mutual responsibility of the woman and her husband. In so doing, they have obscured the seriousness of violence (Glick, Sakalli-Ugurlu, Ferreira, & de Souza, 2002; Pressman, 1989). Research has revealed a clear relationship between practitioners’ views of responsibility for wife abuse and their approach toward counseling battered wives and violent husbands. Findings also indicate that most practitioners who attributed sole responsibility to the husband believed that many batterers are unable to stop abusing their wife and that when a battered woman decides to remain married, her counselor should encourage her to change that decision. Moreover, results indicate that practitioners who view the husband as primarily responsible for abuse are more likely to argue that a batterer can stop being abusive and to express support for the wife’s decision to remain married (Home, 1994; McKeel & Sporakowski, 1993).

Actually, in many cases, the approach of practitioners toward battered women and violent husbands, and their interventions in the cases of wife abuse, are influenced by personal factors, such as their individual attitudes regarding men and women in general and their stereotypes of battered wives and violent husbands in particular, their definitions of the problem, and the extent of their leniency regarding wife abuse. Their stereotyped attitudes toward relations between men and women in the dyadic unit and in the family are also influential (Eisikovits et al., 2000). At the same time, they are influenced less by well-based information on these and other aspects of the problem than they are by personal negative and judgmental attitudes (Knickrehm & Teske, 2000; Wandrei & Rupert, 2000), similar to those in the general population (Simon et al., 2001).

Despite the abundance of studies on approaches and responses of social workers in particular and mental health practitioners in general to the problem of violence against women, there is a lack of research on these issues from the perspective of social work
students. Most of the recent studies on the attitudes toward battered women and violent men have been conducted among students majoring in the social and behavioral sciences, and they have revealed some negative attitudes and stereotyping (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Cook & Harris, 1995; Glick et al., 2002; Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990; Locke & Richman, 1999; Sakalli, 2001; Willis, Hallinan, & Melby, 1996). Kristiansen and Giulietti (1990) tested the effects of gender, attitudes toward women, and just-world beliefs on the perceptions and attributions of psychology students regarding the perpetrator and victim of an instance of wife abuse. Their findings revealed that the less favorable the attitudes of male students toward women are, the greater their tendency to blame and derogate the abused wife for violence against her. In comparison, the stronger the just-world beliefs of female students who expressed positive attitudes toward women, the greater their tendency to blame the abused wife without derogating her. Other studies revealed that sex role stereotyping affects students’ culpability attributions and that participants with traditional orientations show a favorable bias toward men in general and married men in particular (Willis et al., 1996). Previous studies also revealed that attitudes supporting patriarchy correlate positively with acceptance of wife beating and holding women responsible for violence against them, on one hand, and with the belief that violent men are not responsible for their behavior toward their wife, on the other hand. Those studies have also revealed that students who maintain high levels of hostile sexism tend to view wife beating as acceptable and blame women for eliciting the violence (Glick et al., 2002; Sakalli, 2001).

Researchers have also investigated the effects of factors such as sex differences, severity of abusive incidents, participants’ previous experience with dating violence, and relationship status (e.g., Bethke & DeJoy, 1993; Sugarman & Cohn, 1986). Sugarman and Cohn (1986) found that women were more likely than men to attribute origin and solution responsibility to the husband. Husbands were perceived as having more control than wives over solving the problem. There was no clear support for the effect of students’ estimations of the severity of abuse on their attitudes toward the problem. Bethke and DeJoy (1993) report that students were more tolerant of violent behavior when the couple’s relationship was depicted as serious and when the perpetrator was female. According to the findings, relationship status affected not only the acceptability but also the appropriateness of various actions that might be taken following the violent episode and particularly actions that could alter or terminate the relationship. In addition, violent behavior by a male was judged by the participants in Bethke and DeJoy’s study as less acceptable, more injurious, and more criminal. Male victims were seen as needing less recourse and redress than female victims.

Almost all of the studies conducted on students’ approaches toward wife abuse focus on psychology students, and similar research among social work students is lacking. The findings of the available studies are clearly insightful and can be generalized to other professional groups. Nonetheless, in the attempt to apply the findings to students in other fields—particularly social work—several limitations of these studies should be mentioned. First, most of the existing studies were conducted among
students in introductory psychology classes. Thus, the research population was apparently limited to freshman and sophomore students, without including students at more advanced levels of psychology programs. Hence, comparisons among students from different years and levels of schooling are lacking. Second, although there are some similarities between the curriculum of psychology programs and that of social work and other social science disciplines, there are specific topics and content that distinguish social work as a scientific discipline and professional field. Moreover, social work students receive fieldwork training, which equips them with knowledge and skills that are not taught at the undergraduate level in other social science disciplines (including psychology). Accordingly, similar research conducted among social work students can add further insights into their definitions of and beliefs about wife abuse and can influence the theoretical curriculum and training programs.

This article reports two studies that examined social work students’ definitions of acts that are considered in the professional literature as wife abuse (Study 1) and the students’ beliefs about wife abuse (e.g., justifying wife beating, perceiving battered women as benefiting from battering, and holding the violent husband responsible for his behavior; Study 1 and Study 2). The correlations among students’ beliefs about wife abuse and religiosity, attitudes toward women, and familial patriarchal beliefs were also tested.

**Method**

**Study 1**

**Sample**

The study sample consisted of 544 undergraduate social work students from two major universities in Israel. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 47 years old (M = 24.36, SD = 4.10), and 93% were female. Regarding marital status, about 82% of the participants were single, 16% were married, and 2% were divorced or separated. As far as country of origin, about 85% were Israel-born, and the rest immigrated to Israel from different countries, mainly from Eastern Europe, North America, and Western Europe. About 46% and 50% of the participants’ fathers and mothers, respectively, were born in Israel, and the rest immigrated from North African or Middle Eastern countries, from Eastern Europe, from Western Europe, or from other countries such as those in North and South America or South Africa.

With respect to level of studies, about 41% of the participants were 1st-year students, 34% were 2nd-year students, and 25% were 3rd-year students. Notably, a bachelor’s in social work (BSW) degree is the entry degree for social work practice in Israel and is granted after 3 years of academic studies. About 16% of the students took family violence courses during their studies, 14% took a course on wife abuse, and 12% and 6% had worked with an abused wife and violent husband, respectively.
during the fieldwork program. About 17% of the participants indicated that the academic program had provided them with a large amount of knowledge about violence against women, 18% indicated that they had gained a moderate amount of knowledge, and 65% indicated that they had gained minimal or no knowledge about violence against women. As far as religiosity, about 17% of the participants identified themselves as religious (16%) or ultra-Orthodox (1%), 16% identified themselves as traditional, and the rest (67%) identified themselves as secular.

**Instrument**

A closed, self-administered questionnaire was utilized in the study, and it was composed of the following questions and measures.

**Background characteristics.** The questionnaire included items or questions regarding the following background characteristics of the participants: age, gender, marital status, participant’s and parents’ country of birth, and religiosity (i.e., secular, traditional, religious, and ultra-Orthodox). In addition, information was obtained regarding students’ academic status and professional experience, such as year of study, personal or professional relationship with a battered wife or violent husband, and participation in a course on family violence in general and a course on wife abuse in particular.

**Acts thought to constitute wife assault.** Choi and Edleson’s (1996) seven acts and an eighth act (“The husband has sex with his wife against her will”; see Table 1) were presented to participants “to elicit finer distinctions regarding respondents’ definitions of wife assault” (p. 79). Students were required to read a list of eight forceful acts that a husband can perpetrate against his wife. Each student was told to keep in mind that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act</th>
<th>Major Assault (%)</th>
<th>Moderate Assault (%)</th>
<th>Minor Assault (%)</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Uses a weapon against her</td>
<td>99.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hits her with a fist</td>
<td>98.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Kicks her</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Has sex with her against her will</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Bangs her against the wall</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Slaps her</td>
<td>84.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Pushes or shoves her</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Smashes things</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>538</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. The percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding errors.
Assault is a crime. Against this background, the participants were asked to indicate if they thought each of the listed acts constituted wife assault, based on a choice among 1 of 3 possible answers: minor, moderate, and major. In the present study, the interitem reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha$) of this measure was .61. The results are summarized in Table 1.

### Study 1: Approval and Disapproval of Husband’s Use of Force Against His Wife in Different Situations (in Ascending Order)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Strongly Disapprove (%)</th>
<th>Disapprove (%)</th>
<th>Approve or Strongly Approve (%)</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husband is frustrated by work</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband comes home drunk</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife nags husband</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife refuses to have sex with husband</td>
<td>89.1</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife interferes in husband’s social life</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife keeps reminding husband of his weakness</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife is sexually involved with another man</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife abuses their children</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>525</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. The percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding errors.

### Attitudes toward use of force in specific situations

Choi and Edleson’s (1996) measure of social approval or disapproval of husbands’ use of force against wives in eight situations was utilized in this study (see Table 2). Two of the eight items describe situations in which husbands were at fault. Another two items describe situations that could typically have been considered the wife’s fault, and the other four situations fell into a category that may often generate uncertainty. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they approve or disapprove of each act, on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disapprove) to 4 (strongly approve). Interitem reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha$) of this measure as utilized in this study was .90. Because of the very low frequency of responses in Categories 3 and 4, those two categories were combined for the purpose of data analysis.

### Marital role expectations

Following Choi and Edleson (1996), a short version (i.e., eight items) of Dunn and DeBonis’s (1979) Marital Role Expectations Inventory was utilized to measure the students’ marital role expectations. The Spearman-Brown reliability coefficient for this measure on a split-half correlation analysis as reported by Dunn and DeBonis was .975. Interitem reliability of the short version as used in the
current study ($\alpha$) was .83. In this study, responses to items were based on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree).

**Procedures**

At first, the questionnaire was composed in English and translated into Hebrew. Afterward, it was back translated into English to ensure the accuracy of the Hebrew translation. The Hebrew questionnaires were distributed to students in the core required courses for each year of the BSW program at two major universities in Israel. Participants were asked to fill out the questionnaire during the first 15 minutes of the class and took about 11 to 14 minutes to complete. On the average, about 93% of the students attending the class at the time the questionnaires were distributed participated in the study.

**Research Questions**

In this study, the following three questions are tested: (a) What acts do social work students think constitute wife assault? (b) What behaviors related to husband’s use of force are approved or disapproved by students? and (c) To what extent can these two attitudes (i.e., acts thought to constitute wife assault and attitudes toward the use of force against wives) correlate with the students’ year of study, participation in a course on family violence, religiosity, and marital role expectations?

**Study 2**

**Sample**

The study sample was composed of 186 undergraduate social work students at a major university in Israel. About 92% of the participants were female. About 85% were 20 to 25 years old, 10% were 26 to 30 years old, and 5% were 31 years or older. About 88% were single, 11% were married, and the remaining 1% were divorced. About 83% were Israeli-born, and the remaining 17% immigrated to Israel from several different countries. About 86% were Jewish, 8% were Muslim, and 6% were Christian. About 33% of the participants were 1st-year students, 38% were 2nd-year students, and 29% were in their 3rd year. About 20% of the students had participated in a family violence course.

**Instrument**

A closed, self-administered questionnaire was utilized in the study. The questionnaire was composed of the following questions and measures.

**Background characteristics.** Information on gender, age, marital status, country of birth, religion, year of study, and participation in a family violence course was obtained.
Beliefs about wife beating. Three subscales of the Beliefs About Wife-Beating Inventory (BAWBI), developed by Saunders, Lynch, Grayson, and Linz (1987), were utilized to measure the approach of participants toward the following three beliefs: (a) justifying wife beating (11 items), (b) wives benefit from beating (10 items), and (c) holding husbands responsible for their violence (8 items). Saunders et al. reported several steps in the development of the BAWBI and described the tests conducted to measure its dimensionality, reliability, and validity. In this study, responses to all items of the three beliefs were based on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). The interitem reliability (Cronbach’s \( \alpha \)) of the total scale as utilized in this study was .91.

Attitudes toward women. A short version (13 items) of the Spence and Helmreich (1978) Attitudes Toward Women Scale (ATWS) was utilized to measure types of attitudes toward women among social work students (e.g., traditional–patriarchal vs. liberal–egalitarian). Spence and Helmreich found a correlation of .91 between this short version and the original version of the ATWS. Furthermore, they reported a Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) value of .89 for the ATWS. Responses to the items of the ATWS were based on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). The interitem reliability (Cronbach’s \( \alpha \)) of the scale as used in this study was .79.

Sex role stereotyping. Burt’s (1980) scale was used to measure sex role stereotyping among social work students. The scale consisted of 10 statements. Responses to these items were based on a 7-point Likert-type scale as described above. Burt reported that the Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) value of the scale was .80. In the current study, the Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) value was .72.

Religiosity. The following question was presented to students for the purpose of measuring their level of religiosity: To what extent do you feel religious? Students were requested to assign their answer from a 7-point Likert-type scale of responses ranging from 1 (very religious) to 7 (very secular). The mean response score was 5.28, and the standard deviation was 1.78.

Procedures

The questionnaire was composed at first in English and translated into Hebrew. Afterward, it was back translated into English to ensure the accuracy of the Hebrew version. The Hebrew version of the questionnaire was distributed to students enrolled in core required courses during each year of the BSW program at a major university in Israel. Students were asked to fill out the questionnaire at their convenience after class and then return it at the next session of the course. About 72% of the students who attended class when the questionnaires were distributed returned them at the next session.

Research Questions

In this study, the following two questions are examined: (a) To what extent do social work students justify wife beating, believe that wives benefit from beating, and hold husbands responsible for their violence? and (b) To what extent can each of these three beliefs
about wife beating be explained by the student’s year of study, participation in a family violence course, attitudes toward women, sex role stereotypes, and level of religiosity?

**Data Analysis**

Two types of statistical analysis were employed. First, descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies, means, and standard deviations) on the following research variables are presented: respondents’ definitions of acts thought to constitute wife assault, approval or disapproval of the husband’s use of force against the wife in specific situations (Study 1), and beliefs about wife beating (Study 2). Second, the associations and predictions related to approval of husbands’ use of force against women (Study 1) and beliefs about wife beating (Study 2) were examined as well.

**Results**

**Study 1**

*Acts Thought to Constitute Wife Assault*

Eight acts were presented to the students participating in the study to elicit their definitions of wife assault. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate whether a specific act constitutes minor, moderate, or major use of force. The results in Table 1 reveal that five of the eight acts presented were clearly seen by more than 95% of the respondents as constituting wife assault. Specifically, the following acts were seen by almost everyone as constituting wife assault: using a weapon against the wife (99.6%), hitting the wife with a fist (98.9%), kicking the wife (97.0%), having sex with the wife against her will (96.1%), and banging her against the wall (95.2%). Slapping the wife (84.5%) and pushing or shoving her (78.5%) were slightly less consensual acts of wife assault, whereas smashing things was perceived by only about half (48.1%) of the respondents as a clear indication of wife assault.

*Approval and Disapproval of the Husband’s Use of Force*

The findings presented in Table 2 indicate that although none of the examined situations elicited approval of the husband’s use of force against his wife among the vast majority of the participants, two situations elicited more approval than others. Specifically, 93.3% of the participants strongly disapproved of the husband using violent force against his wife when he is frustrated by work or when he comes home drunk (93.0%), 91.9% strongly disapproved of the husband using force when his wife nags him, and almost the same percentages of participants disapproved of the husband using force when his wife refuses to have sex, interferes in his social life, or keeps reminding him of his weaknesses (89.1%, 89.0%, and 88.7%, respectively). In cases when the wife is sexually involved with another man (83.3%) or when she
abuses children (70.7%), the participants expressed less disapproval of the husband’s using force.

The results also revealed that 1st-year students expressed less severe perceptions of acts that might constitute wife assault than did 2nd- and 3rd-year students: \( F(2, 522) = 3.36, p < .05 \). Similarly, 1st-year students tended to approve of behaviors related to the husband’s use of force against his wife to a significantly greater extent than did students in more advanced years of study: \( F(2, 522) = 6.90, p < .01 \). Students who participated in courses on family violence or wife abuse did not differ from those who did not participate in such courses with regard to their perceptions of acts that constitute wife assault or with regard to the extent of their approval and disapproval of wife assault. As for religiosity, students who defined themselves as religiously conservative expressed less severe perceptions of acts that might constitute wife assault: \( F(2, 538) = 6.93, p < .01 \). They also expressed approval of more behaviors that are related to the husband’s use of force against his wife than did students who defined themselves as religiously orthodox or secular: \( F(2, 538) = 8.42, p < .01 \) (see Table 3).

**Predicting Definitions of Wife Assault and Approval of Husband’s Use of Force Against His Wife**

Two models of regression analyses were conducted on acts that constitute wife assault. The first model included the following predictors: approval of behaviors related to the husband’s use of force, marital role expectations, and background variables (i.e., student’s year of study, participation in a course on family violence or on wife abuse, and religiosity). The second regression model included only the two attitudinal variables (i.e., approval of behaviors related to the husband’s use of force and marital role expectations; see Table 4). The results reveal that the first model, which included the background variables, significantly explained 10% of the variance in perceptions of acts that constitute wife assault: \( F(6, 390) = 7.14, p < .01 \). The second model, which included only the two attitudinal variables (without the background variables), significantly explained the same amount of variance: \( F(2, 402) = 23.35, p < .01 \). Thus, the background variables did not contribute significantly toward explaining the variance in the students’ perception of acts that constitute wife assault.

The same analyses were conducted for approval of behaviors related to the husband’s use of force. In this case, the two attitudinal variables were acts that constitute wife assault and marital role expectations. Consistent with the findings presented above, the results indicate that the model without the background variables explained almost the same percentage of variance as the regression model that included the background variables: 21%, \( F(2, 402) = 54.53, p < .01 \), compared with 22%, \( F(6, 390) = 17.96, p < .01 \). Here, again, the background characteristics of the students did not contribute significantly toward explaining the variance in approval of behaviors related to the husband’s use of force (see Table 5).
Study 2

Beliefs About Wife Beating

Three aspects of beliefs about wife beating were examined: justifying wife beating, wives benefiting from beating, and holding husbands responsible for their violence.
The findings revealed a strong tendency among students not to justify wife beating ($M = 6.59$, $SD = 3.45$, on a scale from 1 to 7—the higher the score, the lower the level of justification). Students also tended to disagree that wives benefit from beating ($M = 6.59$, $SD = 3.70$) and tended to hold husbands responsible for their violence to a great extent ($M = 6.39$, $SD = 2.88$). There were no significant differences among students from different years of studies nor among students who had participated in a course on family violence, versus those who did not participate, with regard to their tendencies to justify wife beating, to believe that wives benefit from beating, and to hold husbands responsible for violence against wives (see Table 6).

**Explaining Beliefs About Wife Beating**

Attitudes toward women, sex role stereotypes, students’ year of study, participation in a course on family violence, and level of religiosity were examined as
predictors of each one of the three beliefs about wife beating. The findings are presented in Table 7.

Justifying wife beating. The students’ attitudes toward women \( (r = .43, p < .01) \) and sex role stereotypes \( (r = .37, p < .01) \) correlated significantly with justifying wife beating; that is, the more traditional their attitudes toward women and the more they held sex role stereotypes, the greater their tendency to justify wife beating. Two models of regression analysis were used. One included only two attitudinal variables (i.e., attitudes toward women and sex role stereotypes). The other included those attitudinal variables and background variables (i.e., student’s year of study, participation in a course on family violence, and religiosity). The results presented in Table 7 reveal that the regression model without the background variables explained almost the same percentage of variance as did the regression model that included the background variables: 21\% and 18\%, \( F(2, 143) = 15.94, p < .01, \) and \( F(4, 141) = 9.49, p < .01, \) respectively. Here, again, the background characteristics of the students did

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acts that constitute wife assault</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>4.56**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital role expectations</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>8.10**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s year of study</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in a course on family violence</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−1.14</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in a course on violence against women</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−1.38</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( F(6, 390) )</td>
<td>17.96**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only two independent variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acts that constitute wife assault</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>4.55**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital role expectations</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>8.03**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( F(2, 402) )</td>
<td>54.53**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( N = 459 \).

a. These variables were entered into the regression equation as a dummy variable (no = −1, yes = 1).

\*p < .05. \**p < .01.
not contribute significantly toward explaining the variance in justifying wife beating. In addition, the strongest predictor of justifying wife beating in both models was attitudes toward women ($\beta = .34, t = 3.58, p < .01$, in the model that included background variables; $\beta = .32, t = 3.34, p < .01$, in the model that excluded background variables).

Wives benefit from beating. The results in Table 7 reveal that the more participants hold traditional attitudes toward women ($r = .51, p < .01$) and maintained sex role stereotypes ($r = .38, p < .01$), the greater their tendency to believe that wives benefit from beating. The regression model analyzing the belief that wives benefit from beating in relation to attitudes toward women and sex role stereotypes explained almost the same percentage of variance as did the regression model that included the background variables: $26\%, F(2, 143) = 25.12, p < .01$, and $28\%, F(4, 141) = 13.88, p < .01$, respectively. In addition, the strongest predictor of the belief that wives benefit from beating in both models was attitudes toward women: ($\beta = .46, t = 5.06, p < .01$, in the model that contained only two variables; $\beta = .47, t = 5.24, p < .01$, in the model that included background variables).

Holding husbands responsible for their violence. The results indicate that the more students maintained traditional attitudes toward women ($r = .49, p < .01$) and sex role
stereotypes \((r = .33, p < .01)\), the less likely they were to believe that husbands should be held responsible for violence against their wife. Here, again, the regression model that included those two variables as predictors explained almost the same amount of variance as did the regression model that included those two variables together with background variables: 24\%, \(F(2, 143) = 22.95, p < .01\), and 26\%, \(F(4, 141) = 12.23, p < .01\), respectively (see Table 7). In addition, as was the case with the other two beliefs (i.e., justifying wife beating and wives benefiting from beating), the strongest predictor of holding husbands responsible for their violence in both of the regression models was attitudes toward women \((\beta = .47, t = 5.10, p < .01\), in the two-variable model; \(\beta = .48, t = 5.18, p < .01\), in the model that included background variables).

In sum, the findings of the present study suggest that only attitudes toward women can be considered as a strong predictor of the various beliefs about wife beating.
Discussion

This article documents the results of two studies regarding the approach of social work students toward wife abuse. Although a substantial majority of the students showed recognition and awareness of the problem of physical abuse (i.e., Acts 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7 in Table 1) and sexual wife abuse (i.e., Act 4 in Table 1), a relatively small percentage of them showed awareness and recognition of the problem of psychological wife abuse (i.e., Act 8 in Table 1). In addition, a higher percentage of social work students tended to acknowledge severe physical violence compared with those who acknowledged what is defined in the professional literature as moderate or minor violence. Notably, Study 1 revealed that 2nd- and 3rd-year students are more aware of wife abuse and show a lesser tendency to justify it than do 1st-year students. It should also be emphasized that according to the findings of this study, students who attended courses on family violence or on wife abuse did not differ in their definitions of wife abuse or in their disposition to approve such behavior, compared with their counterparts who did not attend such courses. The first finding can be attributed to the assumption that the more advanced the students are in their social work studies, the more they become exposed to a broad range of social problems and populations that have been harmed, exploited, oppressed, denied rights, and excluded. It can thus be assumed that a broad social work curriculum has a stronger influence on students than do courses that focus specifically on family violence and wife abuse.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the findings of Study 2 revealed that with regard to the following beliefs, there were no significant differences among students at different years of study or between those who participated in a course on wife abuse and those who did not: justifying wife abuse, the belief that wives benefit from beating, or the belief that violent husbands should be held responsible for violence against their wife. In addition, it was found that these variables (i.e., year of studies at the university and participation in a course on family violence or wife abuse) do not contribute significantly toward explaining the variance in the students’ definitions of acts that constitute wife assault over and above the variance that is explained by other variables such as marital role expectations, attitudes toward women, and sex role stereotypes.

Owing to these inconsistent findings, there is a need for more comprehensive studies on the nature and content of the theoretical topics in the social work curriculum and on the nature and processes of fieldwork training programs. Specifically, future studies can explore the emotional and cognitive processes that students experience in their fieldwork training and the extent to which those experiences (i.e., theoretical courses and fieldwork) explain the students’ recognition of and approach toward the various aspects and dimensions of wife abuse in each year of the social work program.

The findings of Study 1 revealed that with regard to religiosity, the secular and religious students showed a greater tendency than their conservative and traditional counterparts to acknowledge acts that constitute wife assault. In addition, the secular and
religious students showed less approval of husbands’ using of force against their wife compared with their conservative counterparts. The findings of Study 2 revealed that the students’ level of religiosity did not correlate with their tendency to justify wife abuse or with their belief that wives benefit from beating and that husbands are responsible for violence against their wife. These findings contradict the results of previous studies, which found that men and women who define themselves as religious show a greater tendency to justify wife abuse and to blame the woman for violence against her, although they are less disposed to help battered women and less likely to believe that perpetrator husbands should be punished (e.g., Haj-Yahia, 1998a, 1998b, 2002, 2003). It can thus be assumed that conservative culture of the students contributes more than their religiosity toward explaining their negative approach toward wife abuse. Specifically, conservative culture contributes toward failure to acknowledge acts that constitute wife assault, approving and justifying wife beating, the belief that wives benefit from beating, and the belief that husbands should not be held responsible for their violent behavior. This contention is supported by the finding that the more the students maintain traditional and nonegalitarian expectations of marriage, the greater their tendency to approve of husbands’ use of force against their wife. Moreover, the findings revealed that the more negative and traditional the students’ attitudes toward women and the more rigid their sex role stereotypes, the greater their tendency to adopt a negative approach toward wife abuse, as reflected in the above-mentioned dependent variables.

The above three predictors (i.e., nonegalitarian expectations of marriage, traditional and negative attitudes toward women, and rigid sex role stereotypes) are considered the main variables, among many others, that are related to patriarchal ideology among individuals in many social domains. Patriarchal ideology is expressed in values, beliefs, and norms that justify male dominance in private and public spheres (Mann, 1986). Moghadam (1992) maintains that patriarchy persists in family and social systems where male power over women and children derives from the social role of fatherhood and is supported by a political economy in which the family unit retains a significant productive role. According to this ideology, egalitarian structure is rejected in the public and private spheres of life (Mann, 1986). In the public sphere, power is shared by male patriarchs. Regarding the private sphere of extended and nuclear families, the senior man wields power over everyone else, including younger men, and exercises modes of subordination and control over women that transcend cultural and religious boundaries (Mann, 1986). Thus, the husband is culturally accepted as ruler of the family and is considered the central authority to whom the wife and children must ultimately respond. This approach argues that humanity has exhibited lenient attitudes toward husbands’ violence against wives throughout history to maintain the advantage of the male in conjugal power relations (Haj-Yahia, 2002, 2003). In line with this approach, the results of Study 1 revealed that the more social work students hold nonegalitarian expectations of marriage, the less they tend to perceive violent acts by the husband as constituting wife assault and the more they tend to approve of the husband’s use of violent force against
his wife. In addition, this approach is consistent with the finding that the more students hold negative and traditional attitudes toward women and the more they maintain rigid sex role stereotypes, the more they show a tendency to justify wife beating and to believe that women benefit from beating and the less they are inclined to hold violent husbands responsible for their behavior.

The results of both studies presented in this article are highly consistent with the findings of earlier studies conducted among other research populations (Finn, 1986; Glick et al., 2002; Home, 1994). Finn (1986) found that both men and women who believe a man should “wear the pants” in the family are also likely to believe that men have the right to maintain their position through physical force. Conversely, Finn found that as sex role attitudes become more egalitarian and nonchauvinist, legitimization of force decreases and sympathy with abused wives increases. Similarly, the study conducted by Glick et al. (2002) among Turkish and Brazilian students and community members revealed that hostile sexism and benevolent sexism correlated positively with legitimizing wife abuse, among both men and women. Moreover, the relationship between hostile sexism and tolerance of wife abuse did not diminish when age, education, or benevolent sexism were controlled.

Notably, substantial percentages (10%-28%) of the variance in the dependent variables examined in this article can be attributed to the participants’ patriarchal ideology. Nonetheless, it is clear that substantial percentages of the variance are not explained by the conceptual framework of participants’ patriarchal ideology. As such, the results of the studies presented in this article provide some support for Carlson’s (1984) argument that “it is futile to attempt to demonstrate that one or two theories are correct, whereas others are wrong, when there are factors at many levels that play a causal role in domestic violence” (p. 571). Hence, besides the importance of exploring the relationship of other patriarchy-oriented predictors (e.g., perceptions of manhood and womanhood; hostile sexism; benevolent sexism; the code of honor; attitudes toward the status of women in politics, economics, the religious system, and education) to the students’ approaches toward wife abuse, other theories should be examined in an attempt to clarify the unexplained variance in this approach. For example, social learning theory might provide a basis for measuring the extent to which the social work students’ exposure to violence in childhood predicts their approach toward various aspects of wife abuse (e.g., O’Leary, 1988). To cite another example, exchange theory might provide a basis for examining the benefits and costs that students anticipate when they formulate and express attitudes about the topics under investigation and the extent to which those considerations explain their attitudes (e.g., Bersani & Chen, 1988). To cite a third example, psychoanalytic theory might provide a basis for examining how certain personality attributes, processes, and characteristics of social work students are related to their approach toward wife abuse (e.g., Aldarondo & Sugarman, 1996).

In addition, the general question as to whether the students have participated in courses on family violence or wife abuse is not sufficient. Future studies, therefore, should include more specific questions about the content of the courses and the
methods of instruction and questions about the emotional and cognitive processes that the students experienced in those courses and in their fieldwork practicum. The students should also be asked whether they have had personal or professional encounters with battered women and/or with violent men and/or with their children and how those experiences explain their approach toward wife abuse.

On the whole, the two studies presented in this article provide a reliable, comprehensive portrayal of social work students’ approaches toward wife abuse. Nonetheless, three main limitations of the studies should be noted. First, the questionnaires were administered in lecture halls during class time. Thus, even though the students were asked to give independent personal responses, it is likely that they felt uncomfortable filling out the questionnaire in the presence of their peers, and this may have affected their responses. Hence, in future studies on the topic, efforts should be made to help students feel comfortable and increase the atmosphere of privacy when the questionnaires are being administered. The second limitation, which may be consistent with the first one, is the sensitivity of the topic at hand, which may have affected the participants’ responses. Clearly, social work students know that they are expected to be sensitive to exploited and victimized populations such as battered women and that they should not justify such behavior. This awareness may arouse expectations of them that are reflected in their responses, such that the results may be affected by social desirability. In future studies, this situation can be alleviated by including a scale in the instrument that would control for potential social desirability at the stage of analyzing the participants’ responses to other parts of the questionnaire. Third, it should be noted that although the participants in the first study filled out the questionnaires at the beginning of a class, the participants in the second study had to return the questionnaires at the next session. This inconsistency in the data collection procedure may have caused methodological problems. For example, although 93% of the participants in the first study filled out the questionnaires, the response rate in the second study was 72%. Because this discrepancy may have affected the external validity of the studies, more consistent data collection procedures should be used in future research.

In conclusion, the results of the two studies presented here have important implications for social work education. In particular, it is recommended that lecturers and fieldwork supervisors find ways to identify students who have patriarchal beliefs and attempt to change those attitudes to instill a positive and empathetic approach toward abused women among future practitioners who are likely to deal with that problem in the field.

References


