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# Violence in the Family: A Review of Research in the Seventies

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*This paper reviews research on family violence in the seventies. The issue of family violence became increasingly visible as a social and family issue in the decade of the seventies. Whereas research in the sixties tended to view domestic violence as rare and confined to mentally disturbed and/or poor people, research in the seventies revealed family violence as an extensive phenomenon which could not be explained solely as a consequence of psychological factors or income. Students of domestic violence grappled with the problems of defining abuse and violence, sampling problems, and measurement issues as they focused their efforts on measuring the incidence of family violence, the factors related to violence in the family, and the development of causal models to explain family violence. The review concludes by discussing research needs and future issues in the study of violence in the family.*

The *Journal of Marriage and the Family* Decade Review of family research and action in the sixties did not contain a review of research on family violence. This is not surprising in light of O'Brien's (1971) report that the Index of the *Journal*, from its inception in 1939 through 1969, did not include even one article with the word "violence" in the title.<sup>1</sup>

## RESEARCH IN THE SIXTIES

That there was not any article on family violence in the first 30 years of publication of the JMF does not necessarily mean that there was no research on family violence carried out prior to 1969. There was burgeoning interest in the topic of child abuse, commencing with

the publication of Kempe *et al.*'s seminal article, "The Battered Child Syndrome," which appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1962. The majority of published work on child abuse in the decade of the sixties was written by and for medical or mental health professionals.

Scholarly and even popular literature on wife abuse was virtually nonexistent in the sixties. Snell *et al.* (1964) wrote a profile of battered wives, while Schultz (1960) examined wife assaulters. Violence toward husbands, parents, and the elderly was neither recognized nor reported in scholarly or lay literature prior to the seventies.

The knowledge base on family violence (in reality this applies mostly, if not only, to child abuse) in the sixties was characterized by singular and narrow theoretical and methodological approaches to the problem. No reliable statistics on the incidence of family violence existed in the sixties. Estimates of child abuse varied widely, from thousands to tens of thousands (Kempe, 1971; Steele and Pollock, 1968). In 1965, David Gil and the National Opinion Research Council collaborated on a household survey of attitudes,

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<sup>1</sup>It is noteworthy that O'Brien's article, containing this quote, was published in a special issue of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* published under the guest editorship of Felix M. Berardo on the topic of family violence in 1971. This was perhaps the first such special issue published on family violence by a scholarly journal.

knowledge, and opinions about child abuse. Of a nationally representative sample of 1,520 individuals, 45, or 3 percent of the sample, reported knowledge of 48 different incidents of child abuse. Extrapolating this to the national population, Gil estimated that between 2.53 and 4.07 million adults knew of families involved in child abuse (Gil, 1970). A 1968 survey yielded a figure of 6,000 *officially reported and confirmed* cases of child abuse (Gil, 1970). The problem with the latter estimate was that all 50 states did not, at the time of the survey, have mandatory child-abuse reporting statutes, and only a fraction of known cases of abuse were being reported to official agencies. The institution of uniform reporting laws by 1968 made it seem as though there were an exponential leap in child abuse in the seventies as more and more cases of abuse were actually reported.

Gil's estimate of millions of cases of child abuse was the exception and, by and large, the prevailing attitude in the sixties was that child abuse and other forms of family violence were rare occurrences in family life.

Early research and writing on family violence were dominated by the psychopathological model (Gelles, 1973; Spinetta and Rigler, 1972). Child abuse researchers discounted social factors as playing any causal role in violence towards children (see for example, Steele and Pollock, 1968, 1974). Rather, the explanation was thought to lie in personality or character disorders of individual battering parents (Steele and Pollock, 1968; Galdston, 1965; Zalba, 1971). The exception to this point of view was Gil's (1970) multidimensional model of child abuse which placed heavy emphasis on factors such as inequality and poverty. The rare reports on wife abuse portrayed both the battering husband and his victim as suffering from personality disorders (Schultz, 1960; Snell *et al.*, 1964).

The similarity of theoretical focus in the field of family violence was probably a product of the similar methods of procedure employed by investigators. Nearly all published work on child abuse and family violence was based on clinical samples (*e.g.*, hospitalized children, patients of psychiatrists or social workers) or officially reported cases of child abuse. Early studies of family violence typically failed to employ control or

comparison groups, based conclusions on *post-hoc* explanations, and were based on small, nonrepresentative samples (Spinetta and Rigler, 1972).

## RESEARCH ISSUES IN THE SEVENTIES

It would be fair to say that the issue of family violence, especially forms of violence other than child abuse, suffered from "selective inattention" (Dexter, 1958) prior to 1970. It would be equally fair to conclude that the decade of the seventies witnessed a wholesale increase in attention to and published reports on various aspects of violence in the home.

Straus attempted to explain the shift from "selective inattention" to "high priority social issue" by positing that the emergence of family violence as an important research topic was the result of three cultural and social forces (1974a). First, social scientists and the public alike became increasingly sensitive to violence due to a war in Southeast Asia, assassinations, civil disturbances, and increasing homicide rates in the sixties. Second, the emergence of the women's movement played a part—especially by uncovering and highlighting the problems of battered women. One of the first major books on the topic of wife battering was written by Del Martin (1976), who organized and chaired the National Organization for Women task force on wife battering. The third factor postulated by Straus was the decline of the consensus model of society employed by social scientists and the ensuing challenge by those advancing a conflict or social action model.

Perhaps a fourth factor should be added. Someone had to demonstrate that research on family violence could be conducted. Researchers commencing projects in the early seventies were constantly told that reliable and valid research on domestic violence could not be carried out. Investigators were reminded that they would literally have to ask, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Early studies, such as those by O'Brien (1971), Levinger (1966), Straus (1971), and Steinmetz (1971) demonstrated that research could be done (using nonclinical samples) and outlined appropriate methods and sampling strategies for conducting research on domestic violence.

### *Difficulties Confronting Early Research*

There were a number of obstacles which faced researchers interested in the study of domestic violence. Among these obstacles was the need for an adequate nominal and operational definition of domestic violence.

*Defining abuse and violence.* One of the main problems which caused, and still causes, confusion for those involved in the study of child abuse, wife abuse, and family violence is that the terms "abuse" and "violence" are not conceptually equivalent. In some instances, abuse refers to a subset of violent behaviors—those which result in injury to the victim. An example is Kempe *et al.*'s (1962) definition of child abuse in which abuse was seen as a clinical condition (*i.e.*, with diagnosable medical and physical symptoms) having to do with those who have been deliberately injured by physical assault. In addition, Straus *et al.*'s (1980) definition of child and wife abuse referred to only those acts of violence which had a high probability of causing injury to the victim.

Other definitions of child and wife abuse refer to mistreatment including, but extending beyond, acts of injurious violence. Malnourishment, failure to thrive, and sexual abuse are among the nonviolent phenomena included in many definitions of child abuse (Giovannoni and Becerra, 1979). Some definitions of wife abuse include sexual abuse and marital rape. Some groups see the portrayal of women in degrading images (such as in pornography and some advertising) as constituting the abuse of women (London, 1978).

In short, while definitions of violence can refer to all forms of physical aggression, definitions of abuse often refer to only physical aggression that can or does cause injury and also to nonphysical acts of maltreatment which are considered to cause harm.

"Violence" has proved to be a concept which also is not easy to define. Some early researchers attempted to distinguish between legitimate acts of force between family members and illegitimate acts of violence (Goode, 1971). This was a consequence of the fact that much of the hitting in families is culturally approved and normatively accepted. Most individuals believe that spanking a child is normal, necessary, and good (Straus *et al.*, 1980). One in four men and one in six women report that they think it is

acceptable for a man to hit his wife under some circumstances (Stark and McEvoy, 1970).

However, research on family violence has found that offenders, bystanders, agents of social control, and even victims of family violence often accept and tolerate many acts which would be considered illegitimate violence if they occurred between strangers (Gelles, 1974; Steinmetz, 1977; Straus *et al.*, 1980). Thus, it has proven to be impossible to distinguish neatly and precisely between legitimate force and illegitimate violence in the family.

One frequently used nominal definition of violence was proposed by Gelles and Straus (1979). They defined violence as "an act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention of physically hurting another person." This definition includes spankings and shoving as well as other forms of behavior which do not actually typically lead to injury. Thus, the definition covers considerably more behavior than that viewed as physical abuse.<sup>2</sup>

*Operational definitions of abuse and violence.* While there was considerable variation in nominal definitions of abuse and violence, there was surprising similarity in the way researchers operationally defined abuse and violence in the seventies. In short, abuse was typically defined in an operational sense as those instances in which the victim became publicly known and labeled by an official or professional. Most studies of child abuse drew cases or subjects from two sources. The first were patients labeled victims of abuse by physicians. The second were children who had been reported to state or local child protection agencies and who were found, upon investigation, to be abused.

A major problem with these methods of operationally defining child abuse is that they overlook the fact that there is bias in the labeling process (Gelles, 1975a). Newberger *et al.*, (1977) report that lower-class and minority children seen with injuries in a private hospital are more likely than middle- and upper-class children to be labeled as "abused." Turbett and O'Toole (1980), using an experimental design, found that physi-

<sup>2</sup>These same researchers (*e.g.*, Gelles, 1978) frequently found themselves defining their interest as violence towards children and then using "violence towards children" and "child abuse" interchangeably in their reports.

cians are more likely to label as abused minority children or lower-class children (a mock case was presented to the physicians with the injury remaining constant and the race or class of the child varied). Giovannoni and Becerra (1979) found that attitudes toward and definitions of child abuse varied by professional group. In all, operationally defining "child abuse" as pertaining only to those children publicly labeled "abused" produced a major problem; that is, the factors causally associated with abuse became confounded with factors related to susceptibility or vulnerability to having an injury diagnosed as abuse.

Those studying wife abuse frequently develop similar operational definitions. A number of studies of battered women operationally defined wife abuse as pertaining to those women who publicly admitted they were battered. This could range from responding to an advertisement placed in a popular periodical asking for battered women to complete a questionnaire, as was done by Prescott and Letko (1977), to interviewing women in a shelter for battered women, as was done by Walker (1979) and Dobash and Dobash (1979). Another technique was to identify families through police records or social service agency files (Gelles, 1974). Again, since women who answer advertisements, flee to a shelter, or become known to public and private agencies are but a non-representative portion of the total number of abused wives, such techniques of operationally defining abuse produced systematic bias in the study results—ranging from lack of generalizability to confounding of variables.

One possible reason for the reliance on officially reported cases of abuse as the method of operationalizing the concepts of violence and abuse is the belief that reliable and valid research on family violence cannot be based on self-reports (Pelton, 1979). But, the early and continuing research of Straus and Steinmetz demonstrated that research could be conducted using nonclinical, nonofficially-reported cases. Both Straus and Steinmetz utilized the Conflict Resolution Technique [later renamed the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979b)] in their early research using college students as subjects (Straus, 1971, 1974b; Steinmetz, 1971). Steinmetz (1977) was perhaps the first family

violence researcher to attempt to study a representative sample of families. Finally, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz administered the Conflict Tactics Scales to a nationally representative sample of families. The rates of family violence reported by subjects responding to the Conflict Tactics Scales demonstrated that one could develop a rigorous operational definition of family violence and expect to obtain reliable data based on self-reports (Straus, 1979b).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

As we stated earlier, the prevailing attitude in the sixties was that family violence was rare, and when it did occur, was the product of mental illness or a psychological disorder. Research in the seventies was largely aimed at refuting these conventional wisdoms and replacing them with informed data. Researchers struggled to overcome the definitional problems involved in the study of family violence, and they also aimed at correcting the major methodological problems (such as lack of comparison groups) which plagued research in the sixties.

In reviewing research on domestic violence conducted in the seventies, it appears that the major research issues were to: (1) establish a reliable estimate of the incidence of family violence; (2) identify the factors associated with the various types of violence in the home; and (3) to develop theoretical models of the causes of family violence.

### *The Extent of Family Violence*

Among those who were concerned with the problem of family violence, one central research goal was to establish reliable and valid estimates of the incidence of various types of family violence—if only to answer the first and most obvious question asked by others—how much child, wife, husband, parent, or elderly abuse is there?

There were no shortages of estimates and extrapolations generated. Estimates of child abuse ranged from a low of 6,000 (Gil, 1970) to a high of one million (*New York Sunday Times*, November 30, 1975).<sup>3</sup> There were many problems with the various estimates of child abuse. Most estimates were based only on officially reported cases of child abuse

<sup>3</sup>The latter figure became the semiofficial estimate since it was frequently quoted by officials of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect.

(The American Humane Association, 1979). This is problematic because: (1) not all instances of child abuse come to public or official attention and (2) the definition of child abuse varies at least from state to state, if not from tabulator to tabulator (Giovannoni and Becerra, 1979).

Estimates of the extent of wife abuse were even more variable. Since there are no laws mandating the reporting of wife abuse, as there are in the case of child abuse, investigators had to make use of indirect measures of wife abuse, such as the percentage of homicides which involve domestic killings, number of wife-abuse claims handled by family courts, number of domestic disturbance calls responded to by police departments, and the number of cases of battered women treated by hospital emergency rooms (Martin, 1976; Walker, 1979). Estimates ranged from thousands to the nearly unbelievable estimate of 28 million battered wives (Langley and Levy, 1977).

Estimates of the incidence of abusive violence are at best limited by definitional problems and nonrepresentative samples and at worst are based on no empirical data whatsoever. Moreover, the crude estimates provide little or no information on age-specific or gender-specific rates.

One study which was based on a nationally representative sample of families and which used a standard operational definition of violence was conducted by Straus *et al.* (1980) in the mid-seventies. These investigators based their estimates of violence and abuse on self-reports of a nationally representative sample of 2,143 individual family members who responded to Straus's Conflict Tactics Scales measure of violence (1979b).

The national survey yielded an incidence rate of 3.8 percent of American children aged 3 years to 17 years abused each year (see Table 1). Projected to the 46 million children aged 3 to 17 who lived with both parents during the year of the survey, this meant that between 1.5 and 2 million children were abused by their parents (Gelles, 1978; Straus *et al.*, 1980).

Focusing on violence between marital partners, the investigators report that 16 percent of those surveyed reported some kind of physical violence between spouses during the year of the survey, while 28 percent of those interviewed reported marital violence at some point in the marriage (Straus, 1978; Straus *et al.*, 1980).

In terms of acts of violence which could be considered "wife beating," the national study revealed that 3.8 percent of American women were victims of abusive violence during the 12 months prior to the interview (see Table 2).

The same survey found that 4.6 percent of the wives admitted or were reported by their husbands as having engaged in violence which was included in the researchers' "Husband Abuse Index." This piece of data, as reported by Steinmetz (1978a) in her article on "battered husbands" set off a major controversy in the study of family violence in the seventies. Steinmetz was accused by her critics (see Pleck *et al.*, 1978) of having misstated and misrepresented the data. While there were significant political overtones to the debate and discussion, it became apparent that the presentation of only the incidence data did not fully represent the different experiences and consequences of violence experienced by men as opposed to women. As the decade closed, the investi-

TABLE 1. TYPES OF PARENT-TO-CHILD VIOLENCE (N=1,146)<sup>a</sup>

Incident	% Occurrence in Past Year				Occurrence Ever
	Once	Twice	More Than Twice	Total	
Threw something	1.3	1.8	2.3	5.4	9.6
Pushed/Grabbed/Shoved	4.3	9.0	18.5	31.8	46.4
Slapped or Spanked	5.2	9.4	43.6	58.2	71.0
Kicked/Bit/Hit with Fist	0.7	0.8	1.7	3.2	7.7
Hit with Something	1.0	2.6	9.8	13.4	20.0
Beat Up	0.4	0.3	0.6	1.3	4.2
Threatened with Knife/Gun	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	2.8
Used Knife or Gun	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	2.9

<sup>a</sup>On some items, there were a few responses omitted, but figures for all incidents represent at least 1,140 families (from Gelles, 1978).

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF HUSBAND AND WIFE VIOLENCE RATES

	Incidence Rate (%)		Frequency			
	H	W	Mean		Median	
			H	W	H	W
Wife-Beating and Husband-Beating (N to R)	3.8	4.6	8.0	8.9	2.4	3.0
Overall Violence Index (K to R)	12.1	11.6	8.8	10.1	2.5	3.0
K. Threw something at spouse	2.8	5.2	5.5	4.5	2.2	2.0
L. Pushed, grabbed, shoved spouse	10.7	8.3	4.2	4.6	2.0	2.1
M. Slapped spouse	5.1	4.6	4.2	3.5	1.6	1.9
N. Kicked, bit, or hit with fist	2.4	3.1	4.8	4.6	1.9	2.3
O. Hit or tried to hit with something	2.2	3.0	4.5	7.4	2.0	3.8
P. Beat up spouse	1.1	0.6	5.5	3.9	1.7	1.4
Q. Threatened with knife or gun	0.4	0.6	4.6	3.1	1.8	2.0
R. Used a knife or gun	0.3	0.2	5.3	1.8	1.5	1.5

\*For those who engaged in each act, *i.e.*, omits those with scores of zero. (from Straus, 1978).

gators were still attempting to clarify and interpret the data on violence towards men (Gelles, 1979; Straus, 1980).

While the national survey met the objective of basing an estimate of the incidence of family violence on a representative sample, there were methodological difficulties with the survey. Most obvious, the data were based on self-reports and it is probable that the data underrepresented the true level of family violence. Second, no data on violence towards children under 3 years of age was provided, and there were no data on parental violence in single-person families (see Straus *et al.*, 1980 for a complete explanation of the methodology). But, even with the methodological problems, the study fulfilled the objective of exploding the myth that family violence is infrequent and rare in society. The data clearly present the American family as one of society's most violent institutions and social groups.

#### *Factors Associated With Family Violence*

The extensive search for personality and psychological factors related to child abuse, wife abuse, and other forms of family violence did not end in the sixties. Well into the seventies, investigators continued to concentrate on the intra-individual factors which were thought to be related to various forms of family violence. However, as the conceptual model used to examine family violence expanded in the seventies, research on intra-individual correlates with family violence was augmented by investigations which studied the social factors thought to be related to violence. This section draws both on key empirical studies and reviews of literature to

identify social factors which were found related to abuse and violence.<sup>4</sup>

1. *The cycle of violence.* One of the consistent conclusions of domestic violence research is that individuals who have experienced violent and abusive childhoods are more likely to grow up and become child and spouse abusers than individuals who have experienced little or no violence in their childhood years (Spinetta and Rigler, 1972; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Kempe *et al.*, 1962; Straus, 1979a; Steinmetz, 1977; Gayford, 1975; Owens and Straus, 1975; Byrd, 1979; Gelles, 1974; Flynn, 1975). Steinmetz (1977) reports that even less severe forms of violence are passed on from generation to generation. Straus *et al.* (1980) not only find support for the hypothesis that "violence begets violence," but they also provide data which demonstrate that the greater the frequency of violence, the greater the chance that the victim will grow up to be a violent partner or parent.

2. *Socioeconomic status.* Research on child and wife abuse in the sixties claimed that social factors were not related to acts of domestic abuse. Yet, the same articles which made these claims offered empirical evidence that abuse was more prevalent among those with low socioeconomic status (Gelles, 1973). Research on family violence in the seventies supported the hypothesis that domestic violence is more prevalent in low socio-

<sup>4</sup>Space precludes providing a complete and exhaustive reference list of articles and papers documenting each relationship. We have chosen to cite key studies and major review articles to document each relationship. The review articles (Maden and Wrench, 1977; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Byrd, 1979; and Steinmetz, 1978b) should be consulted for the exhaustive documentation.

economic status families (Byrd, 1979; Gelles, 1974; Levinger, 1966; Gayford, 1975; Maden and Wrench, 1977; Elmer, 1967; Gil, 1970; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Straus *et al.*, 1980). This conclusion, however, does not mean that domestic violence is confined to lower-class households. Investigators reporting the differential distribution of violence are frequently careful to point out that child and spouse abuse can be found in families across the spectrum of socioeconomic status (Steinmetz, 1978b).

3. *Stress.* A third consistent finding of most domestic violence research is that family violence rates are directly related to social stress in families (Gil, 1970; Maden and Wrench, 1977; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Straus *et al.*, 1980). In addition to reporting that violence is related to general measures of stress, investigators report associations between various forms of family violence and specific stressful situations and conditions, such as *unemployment or part-time employment of males* (Gil, 1970; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Prescott and Letko, 1977; Straus *et al.*, 1980), *financial problems* (Prescott and Letko, 1977), *pregnancy*—in the case of wife abuse (Gelles, 1975b; Eisenberg and Micklow, 1977), and being a *single-parent family*—in the case of child abuse (Maden and Wrench, 1977).

4. *Social isolation.* A fourth major finding in the study of both child and spouse abuse is that social isolation raises the risk that there will be severe violence directed at children or between spouses (Gil, 1970; Maden and Wrench, 1977; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Gelles, 1974; Ball, 1977; Borland, 1976).

In addition to these four general social factors found related to both violence towards children and between spouses, there have been studies directed at identifying specific factors related to child or spouse abuse.

In the case of violence towards children, some of the factors are: larger than average family size (Light, 1974; Gil, 1970; Maden and Wrench, 1977; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Elmer, 1967; Straus *et al.*, 1980); low birth-weight child (Parke and Collmer, 1975); prematurity of the child (Elmer, 1967; Maden and Wrench, 1977; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Steele and Pollock, 1974); lack of attachment between mother and child—sometimes as a result of low birth weight or prematurity (Klaus and Kennell,

1976). In addition, females are found to be slightly more likely to abuse their children (Maden and Wrench, 1977) and males are slightly more likely to be the victims of child abuse (Gil, 1970; Maden and Wrench, 1977). Researchers have also proposed that handicapped, retarded, developmentally-delayed children, or those perceived by their parents as being “different” are at greater risk of being abused (Friedrich and Boriskin, 1976; Gil, 1970; Steinmetz, 1978b).

Students of wife abuse have reported abuse more common when husband and wife report low job satisfaction of the husband (Prescott and Letko, 1977), when the husband has no religious affiliation (Prescott and Letko, 1977), and when there are alcohol problems (Byrd, 1979; Gelles, 1974; Gayford, 1975; Eisenberg and Micklow, 1977). Furthermore, investigators have pointed out that there is an interrelationship between spouse abuse and child abuse (Rounsaville and Weissman, 1977-1978; Straus *et al.*, 1980).

#### *Important Caveats in Understanding the Relationship Between Social Factors and Family Violence*

While there appears to be consistent support for the existence and persistence of the associations between family violence and the four major factors and many of the minor factors, it is important to point out some caveats in accepting these findings uncritically.

For example, in the case of the proposed cross-generational pattern of violence, Potts and Herzberger (1979) explain that the hypothesis relating abuse as a child with adult abusive behavior is overstated. Potts and Herzberger argue that, while some authors state that there is near unanimity among researchers that abusing parents were themselves abused or neglected physically or emotionally (Spinetta and Rigler, 1972), the evidence on which this claim is based must be examined more critically. First, Potts and Herzberger note that some publications which are widely cited as supporting the cycle of violence hypothesis actually present no empirical data (see for example, Curtis, 1963, and Spinetta and Rigler, 1972). Second, where data exist, they typically are based on small case studies. Other papers present data, but the study designs include no comparison group(s) so that no actual evidence of a

statistical association exists. Finally, Potts and Herzberger note that, where reasonably reliable data are presented (e.g., Straus, 1979a), the actual magnitude of the association is modest compared to the claims made by many researchers concerning the importance of violent childhood socialization in explaining later adult abusive acts.

Potts and Herzberger (1979) identify problems which are applicable to other areas of study in family violence research. One general problem is what Houghton (1979) calls the "Woozle Effect" (based on a Winnie the Pooh story). The "Woozle Effect" begins when one investigator reports a finding, such as Gelles's (1974) report that 55 percent of his sample of families reported one instance of conjugal violence in their marriage. The investigator may provide qualifications to the findings. In Gelles's case, it was that the sample was small, nongeneralizable, and the sampling technique was designed to draw cases from police and social service agency files which would insure that a large portion of the sample would have engaged in spousal violence. In the "Woozle Effect," a second investigator will then cite the first study's data, but without the qualifications (such as done by Straus, 1974a). Others will then cite both reports and the qualified data gain the status of generalizable "truth." In the case of the Gelles statistic, by the time Langley and Levy cited the figure in 1977, it had become so widely cited that Langley and Levy used it to extrapolate an incidence estimate for all married women and concluded that 28 million women were abused each year!

A second problem, indirectly noted by Potts and Herzberger (1979), is that evidence will accumulate for an association without any measures of the magnitude of that association. Within a short time, the fact that many researchers find an association between a certain factor and family violence will come to be interpreted as meaning that this factor is *strongly* associated with family violence. While most investigators find socioeconomic status, stress, isolation, and history of violence statistically related to family violence, the associations have, in large part, been relatively modest both for each individual factor and for the factors combined.

A third problem is that the methodological shortcomings which existed in the sixties still

persisted in the seventies. Researchers continued to operationalize child abuse and wife abuse as involving solely those cases which are known by social agencies, police, or hospitals. Such operational definitions continue the problem of being unable to partial out the factors that lead a family to be identified as abusive from those factors actually related to abuse. The introduction of survey research methods and operational definitions of abuse and violence which are not tied to those families known to agents of social control does not completely solve the problem. Straus *et al.*, (1980) based their research on a nationally representative sample and used a self-report measure of violence. There are problems with their data. Most obviously, the use of a self-report measure of violence leaves open the plausible rival hypothesis that many of the relationships discussed were the result of respondents' selective reporting, rather than true associations. When the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979b) were administered to a representative sample of 1,900 women in Kentucky (see Schulman, 1979) by telephone interview (Straus *et al.*, relied on face-to-face interviews), the difference between the rates of interspousal violence in lower-class homes and middle- and upper-class homes was much less than the difference reported by Straus *et al.*<sup>5</sup>

The final problem is that, while there have been factors found related to domestic violence (even considering methodological problems), these factors have remained largely *unexplained*. To date, few studies have employed multivariate methods of analysis which would allow for explaining, interpreting, or specifying relationships. This problem brings us to the final issue in the study of family violence in the seventies, the development of theoretical models to explain family violence.

#### *Theoretical Approaches to Family Violence*

Family violence has been approached from three general theoretical levels of analysis: (1) the intra-individual level of analysis or the psychiatric model; (2) the social-psycho-

<sup>5</sup>Obviously, this could be the result of the different populations sampled. However, the results of the CTS administered in Kentucky and the one administered to the national sample showed no major differences between the two samples (Schulman, 1979).

logical level of analysis; and (3) the sociological or sociocultural level of analysis (Burgess and Conger, 1978; Justice and Justice, 1976; Gelles and Straus, 1979; Steinmetz, 1978b; Parke and Collmer, 1975).

*The psychiatric model.* The psychiatric model focuses on the offender's personality characteristics as the chief determinants of violence and abuse. The psychiatric model includes theoretical approaches which link mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse, and other intra-individual phenomena to acts of family violence.

*The social-psychological model.* The second approach assumes that violence and abuse can be best understood by a careful examination of the external environmental factors which impact on the family. In addition, this model considers which everyday family interactions are precursors to violence. Theoretical approaches which examine stress, the transmission of violence from one generation to another, and family interaction patterns fit into the social-psychological model. Such general theories as learning theory, frustration-aggression theory, exchange theory, and attribution theory, all approach violence from the social psychological level of analysis (Gelles and Straus, 1979).

*The sociocultural model.* The sociocultural, or sociological model provides a macro-level analysis of family violence. Violence is considered in light of socially-structured inequality and cultural attitudes and norms about violence and family relations. Structural-functional theory and subculture of violence theory are two of the better known theoretical approaches which come under the sociocultural level of analysis.

The seventies produced a number of extensive reviews of theories of violence in the family. Gelles and Straus (1979) listed, reviewed, discussed, and attempted to integrate propositions from 15 theories of violent behavior. In addition, they examined two theories which were developed to explain the specific case of family violence. Steinmetz (1978b) also provided a succinct review of the theories which have been used to explain family violence. While a number of investigators attempted to apply existing theories of interpersonal violence to the family (Gelles, 1974; Erlanger, 1974), others developed new or integrated theoretical approaches to family

violence. Still others attempted to apply existing theories of family relations to the phenomenon of violent behavior. The following section briefly reviews some of the approaches which developed new theories of violence in the home.

#### *Five Theories of Family Violence*

*Resource theory.* Goode's (1971) Resource Theory of Intrafamily Violence was the first theoretical approach applied explicitly to family violence. Goode states that all social systems "rest to some degree on force or its threat." Goode explains that within a social system, the greater the resources a person can command, the more force he can muster. However, the more resources a person can command, the less he will *actually deploy* violence. Thus, violence is used as a last resort when all other resources are insufficient or lacking. Applying this set of assumptions to the family, Goode explains that a husband who wants to be the dominant family member but has little education, job prestige, or income, and lacks interpersonal skills may be likely to resort to violence in order to be the dominant person. Empirical data from O'Brien (1971) and Gelles (1974) support this theory.

*General systems theory.* The second theory developed in the seventies to explain intrafamily violence was Straus's General Systems Theory (1973). Straus attempts to account for violence in the home by viewing the family as a purposive, goal-seeking, adaptive social system. Violence is viewed as a system product, or output, rather than an individual pathology. Straus specified "positive feedback" in the system which can create an upward spiral of violence, and "negative feedback" which can maintain, dampen, or reduce the level of violence.

*An ecological perspective.* Later in the seventies, Garbarino (1977) proposed an "ecological model" to explain the complex nature of child maltreatment. First, the ecological, or human development approach, focuses on the progressive, mutual adaptation of organism and environment. Second, it focuses on the interactive and overlapping set of systems in which human development occurs. Third, the model considers "social habitability"—the question of environmental quality. Lastly, the model assesses the political, economic, and demographic factors which shape

the quality of life for children and families. Garbarino identified cultural support for the use of physical force against children and the inadequacy and inadequate use of family support systems as two necessary conditions for child maltreatment. In short, maltreatment is believed to arise out of a mismatch of parent to child and family to neighborhood and community.

*An evolutionary perspective.* At the end of the seventies, Burgess (1979) proposed an evolutionary perspective for understanding child abuse. In it, Burgess attempts to go beyond intra-individual or social psychological levels of analysis to provide a model that can explain both the current phenomenon of abuse as well as the socially-patterned occurrence of abuse over time and across cultural groups. Using the concept of "parental investment," Burgess explains that, in situations such as lack of bonding and parental uncertainty, the risk of child abuse would be increased [as has been found by investigators who report higher levels of abuse in families in which the victims were stepchildren (Burgess *et al.*, in press)]. Burgess also proposes that an inadequate parenting resource base would decrease the probability of parental investment and, thus, raise the risk of abuse. Lack of parental resources would then explain the inverse relationship proposed between abuse and social class and the proposed positive relationship between family size and abuse. Burgess (1979) also points to problems with children that decrease parental investment and increase the risk of abuse—such as developmental problems, retardation, Down's syndrome, etc.

*Patriarchy and wife abuse.* Dobash and Dobash (1979) see the abuse of women as a unique phenomenon which has been obscured and overshadowed by what they refer to as the "narrow" focus on domestic violence. The Dobashes attempt to make the case that, throughout history, violence has been systematically directed at women. Their central thesis is that economic and social processes operate directly and indirectly to support a patriarchal social order and family structure. Their central theoretical argument is that patriarchy leads to the subordination of women and contributes to a historical pattern of systematic violence directed against wives.

The Dobashes' theory, while perhaps the most macro-level approach to wife abuse developed in the seventies, has the major drawback of being a theory which is essentially a single-factor (patriarchy) explanation of violence towards women.

### LOOKING AHEAD

Midway through the seventies, Zigler (1976), in an important and pessimistic paper titled "Controlling Child Abuse in America: An Effort Doomed to Failure," stated that the cumulative knowledge in 1976 about the nature of child abuse was comparable to what was known about mental illness in 1948! While Zigler may have been overly gloomy, the knowledge base on the nature and causes of family violence is indeed modest compared to the knowledge generated in the other areas of family study reviewed in the volume. In the first decade of intensive research on all aspects of violence in the family, investigators wrestled with definitional issues, tried to estimate the incidence and nature of the problem, inventoried social-psychological factors associated with or presumed to be associated with violence, and tentatively proposed theories and theoretical frameworks to explain violence in the home.

No doubt, researchers in the eighties will continue to find these issues compelling and significant. Nevertheless, having assessed what is known about family violence, we see some specific areas where knowledge is needed.

#### *Theory Testing and Building*

While research in the seventies was hardly atheoretical, the compelling issues of definition, incidence, and relationships meant that research was guided primarily by pragmatic goals (*e.g.*, answering the question: How much child abuse exists?) rather than theoretical goals. The seventies produced no shortage of theoretical frameworks and theories which were applied to family violence. However, what the decade did not produce was a systematic program of research to empirically test theories and also to use available data to build new theories of family violence. The work of Garbarino (1977) and Burgess (1979) speak to the kind of theory building which is needed. But, even more than that, investigators must design their research so as to *test theories*. By far the

greatest limitation of our current theoretical knowledge of family violence is that it is built on *post hoc* explanations of data.

#### *Longitudinal Designs*

While investigators have demonstrated that certain social factors are related to family violence and abuse, many of the associations found could be symmetrical. In other words, stress could lead to abuse or abuse could create family stress. A major gap in research in family violence is that there have been few longitudinal studies which could be used to reduce plausible rival hypotheses concerning time order and causal direction.

#### *More Nonclinical Samples*

Researchers in the seventies demonstrated that one could actually interview door-to-door and obtain reliable, if not valid, information about family violence. Social scientists no longer need to assume that subjects for studies of child and wife abuse can only be located in large numbers in police files, emergency rooms, and public welfare offices. By using more nonclinical samples, researchers can begin to overcome the confusion which arises out of confounding factors which lead to public identification of family violence with those factors causally related to violent behavior in the home.

#### *Methodological Triangulation*

There is a need for increased diversity of measurement instruments and data collection techniques to be used in the study of family violence. By and large, most research in the seventies employed survey research designs and gathered data through questionnaires and interviews. Steinmetz's (1977) use of daily diaries to record conflict and violence is a notable exception to this trend. Straus's Conflict Tactics Scales (1979b), since it is one of the only standardized measures of violence available, has been used and adapted in numerous investigations. It would be tragic if the field of family violence research changed from one "easy" research design (clinical case study of known abuse victims) to another easily available methodology (surveys using the CTS). Just as the study of family power has benefited from a concern for developing more adequate means of measuring power, so

too will the study of family violence benefit from diversity and refinement of measures and designs.

#### SUMMARY

The harshest critics of research on family violence have been those who viewed the study of violence in the home as only another "hot topic" or fashionable field of study. This criticism, while perhaps grossly unjust, could become true unless those interested in the study of family violence become increasingly sophisticated both theoretically and methodologically. There has been a major growth of knowledge in the seventies in this field. Where, formerly, conventional wisdom and myths prevailed, now there are empirical data and tested propositions. Data exist on many more aspects of family violence than existed 10 years ago. However, theoretical development and methodological refinement will be necessary to keep this field of study vital and viable.

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