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The Controversy over Domestic Violence by Women

A METHODOLOGICAL, THEORETICAL, AND SOCIOLOGY OF SCIENCE ANALYSIS

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[Characteristics of NVAW Survey](#).

Murray A. Straus, whose book with Richard Gelles and Suzanne Steinmetz *Behind Closed Doors* (1980) led to the first public awareness of the extent of domestic violence, in one sense created the "domestic violence movement." Their research was widely cited to justify the need for public action programs to help women. But when these three researchers began to talk about *woman-initiated* violence, these former supporters turned hostile. In this paper, Dr. Straus does an excellent job of stepping back from the conflict in which he has been embroiled for 20 years, to offer fascinating and brilliant insights as to what the conflict is *about*.

In a nutshell, service providers and feminist activists take a broad view of violence, as a symbol of male oppression of women. Withholding money is seen as an act of violence, as is shouting or demeaning women. Researchers concerned about family violence, on the other hand, take a narrower view of violence, limiting their focus to actual acts of physical violence.

The picture gets further confused when we see disparities between family conflict studies, on the one hand, and crime victimization surveys and police reports, on the other. With all the "one hands" and "other hands" going back and forth, sometimes it appears that a shell game is going on, with groups selectively picking the definition of violence and incidence of incidents which best support their cause. Dr. Straus does an excellent job of sorting out this shell game.

Dr. Straus opens with his observations of a short history of the controversy:

In the mid 1970s my colleagues and I made the disturbing discovery that women physically assaulted partners in marital, cohabiting, and dating relationships as often as men assaulted their partners. This finding caused me and my former colleague Suzanne Steinmetz to be excommunicated as feminists. Neither of us has accepted that sentence, but it remains in force. So when Salman Rushdie was condemned to death for his heresy, we may have felt even more empathy than most people because we had

also experienced many threats, including a bomb threat.

The vitriolic 20-year controversy had largely subsided by 1997. There are a number of reasons the controversy subsided. One reason is the overwhelming accumulation of evidence from more than a hundred studies showing approximately equal assault rates. Another is the explosive growth of marital and family therapy from a family systems perspective which assumes mutual effects. In addition, research by clinical psychologists such as O'Leary brought psychologists face to face with the assaults by both parties. In November 1997, however, the controversy was suddenly reignited by newspaper headlines declaring "Partners Unequal in Abuse". These headlines were based on findings from the "National Violence Against Women in America Survey" (called the NVAW survey from here on). The NVAW surveyed 8,000 women and 8,000 men representing 16,000 households. The study was sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control. The NVAW study found that men physically assaulted their female partners at three times the rate at which women engaged in such behavior.

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The NVAW results differ from both "family conflict studies" and "crime studies." Straus cites Dr. Martin Fieberg's analysis of 58 family conflict studies, all of which found that "...women are as physically aggressive, or more aggressive, than men in their relationships... The aggregate sample size in the reviewed studies exceeds 58,000." Two-thirds of the studies that Straus himself tabulated showed that women initiated violence at a slightly higher rate. Crime studies such as the National Crime Survey (NCS), National Crime Victimization Study (NCVS-a revision of the NCS), police statistics studies and National Violence Against Women in America (NVAW) study show that most incidents are by men. Straus observes that what these crime studies have in common is "that they are presented to respondents as studies of crime, crime victimization, personal safety, injury, or violence, rather than as studies of family problems and conflicts."

The differences in study outcomes, Straus states in the first part of his paper, are due to differences in the methodology of crime studies as compared to family conflict studies. There are two significant differences:

- Family conflict studies show a much higher rate of assault.
- Crime surveys show a much higher rate of injury.

One reason for this disparity is that assaults do not always lead to injury. In fact, assaults legally do not even require body contact. Crime surveys and police reports focus on injury, "violence" or threats to safety. But a man, for example may not consider being slapped or kicked a "crime" or "threat to safety" even if it is an an assault. Family conflict researchers focus on assault, whether or not injury occurs. Strauss explains why:

From a social policy perspective, despite the much lower probability of physical injury resulting from attacks by women, one of the main reasons why "minor" assaults by women are such an important problem is that they put women in danger of much more severe retaliation by men. Assaults by women also help perpetuate the now implicit, but once explicit cultural norms that gave husbands the legal right to "physically chastise an errant wife." The legacy of that norm continues to make the marriage license a hitting license for both parties. To end "wife beating," it is

essential for women to cease what may seem to be "harmless" slapping, kicking, or throwing things at a male partner who persists in some outrageous behavior or "won't listen to reason."

Assaults by women also need to be a focus of social policy because of the harm to children from growing up in a violent household. The link between partner violence and child behavior problems occurs not only when both partners are violent (about half of families with partner assaults), but also when the assaults are committed exclusively by the male partner (about a quarter of the cases), as well as when the assaults are committed exclusively by the female partner.

The most fundamental reason for giving attention to assaults per se, regardless of whether an injury occurs, is the intrinsic moral wrong of assaulting a partner. Assaults by women are a crime and a serious social problem, just as it would be if men "only" slapped their wives or "only" slapped a fellow employee and produced no injury. Although this is a fundamental reason for morally condemning women who "only" slap their partners, it should not be allowed to obscure the fact that assaults by men are likely to be even more morally reprehensible because they result in injury so much more often than women. Nevertheless, an even greater wrong does not excuse the lesser wrong. A society in which dating, cohabiting, and married partners never hit each other is not a more unrealistic goal than a society in which co-workers never hit each other, and is certainly no less a hallmark of a humane society.

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What about the National Violence Against Women Survey? It used the same Conflict Tactics Scale that Strauss, Gelles and Steinmetz used in their family conflict studies. But they used it in a different context: not a neutral "conflict occurs, has this happened to you," but specifically in a "personal safety" context. As Straus states, "I classified the National Violence Against Women (NVAW) study as a crime study because, it was presented to respondents as a study of 'personal safety' and the term 'personal safety' is used repeatedly. The tone of the NVAW keeps threats, injuries, violence, and safety before the respondent at all times. In this context, reporting that one's partner has done any of the things asked about is the same as saying that the partner is a criminal or is about to injure them. These and other aspects of the wording and questions ... may have ... led many respondents to perceive the NVAW as a study of crime, and therefore to restrict their reports to 'real crimes,' thus excluding most instances of assault by a partner, and especially the 'harmless' assaults by women. These unintended demand characteristics probably account for the low prevalence rate found by the NVAW and for and 3 to 1 ratio of male to female offenders found by the NVAW. To the extent that this occurred, the NVAW study does not contradict the large number of family conflict studies which show that women initiate and carry out assaults on male partners at about the same rate as men attack female partners."

In the second part of the paper, Straus points out that the high rate of domestic assaults by women is inconsistent with cultural norms and beliefs which hold that women are much less violent than men, and inconsistent with data showing that in nonfamily situations, the rate of assault by women is only a fraction of the male assault rate. Why the paradox?

Straus developed a brilliantly concise table, which lays side by side cultural norms and beliefs which inhibit women from violence in public, contrasted with cultural norms and beliefs that facilitate violence by women in private.

TABLE 2. WHAT EXPLAINS EQUAL ASSAULT RATES BY WOMEN IN THE FAMILY, BUT MUCH LOWER RATES ELSEWHERE? © 1999 by Murray A. Straus, from <i>The Controversy over Domestic Violence by Women</i> from Arriaga, X. B. & Oskamp, S. <i>Violence in Intimate Relationships</i> . (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999)	
<u>INHIBITORS OF ASSAULT BY WOMEN OUTSIDE THE FAMILY</u>	<u>FACILITATORS OF ASSAULT BY WOMEN WITHIN THE FAMILY</u>
A. <u>CULTURAL NORMS:</u> "Unfeminine" for women to hit, but "manly" for men	A. <u>CULTURAL NORMS:</u> An indignant women slapping a man's face epitomizes femininity to many -"if he gets fresh, slap him" ·survey data "ok for a wife to slap" ·examples in media
B. <u>LESSER SIZE AND STRENGTH:</u> Makes women fearful of retaliation and injury by someone who is not committed to them	B. <u>LESSER SIZE AND STRENGTH:</u> "I knew I wouldn't hurt him"
C. <u>SELF DEFENSE OR RETALIATION:</u> Low because women assaulted less often (Except for rape)	C. <u>SELF DEFENSE OR RETALIATION:</u> High because women assaulted frequently by partners
D. <u>GENDER NORMS FOR CONFLICT:</u> Outside the family, women interact more with women and men more with men and male culture is more Pro violence as a means of conflict resolution	D. <u>GENDER NORMS FOR CONFLICT:</u> In couple relations, male partners may be less reachable with non-violent problem solving that works in woman-to-woman relationships. This increases probability of violence to force attention to the problem
E. <u>SOURCE OF IDENTITY:</u> Women's identity is not as strongly based on extra family interests. Therefore less need to defend interests and reputation by violence	E. <u>SOURCE OF IDENTITY:</u> Women's identity is as strongly or more strongly based on family than men's. Therefore equal need to defend interests and reputation
F. <u>VIOLENCE LEVEL OF SETTING:</u> Women are less often in high violence occupations: those requiring violence (police, military, some sports) and jobs with high violence rates such as heavy physical labor jobs	F. <u>VIOLENCE LEVEL OF SETTING:</u> Women spend more time at home, and 90% hit toddlers. Mothers get five to 14 years of practice in hitting as morally correct through corporal punishment of their own children
G. <u>CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT</u> Police involvement not greatly different for men & women	G. <u>CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT</u> ·Men not likely to call the police ·Police not likely to arrest women So women can get away with it even more than men

In the paper, Straus does a concise job of elaborating on each of the factors in the table. I found his discussion of criminal justice system involvement in domestic violence particularly interesting and insightful.

Traditionally, police and prosecutors have been reluctant to become involved in the crime of assault, regardless of whether it occurs outside the family or inside. One of the reasons is that arrests and prosecutions for assault do not receive the public recognition of arresting, for example, a robber. Moreover, assaults are typically in the form of "fights" involving both parties and, legally, both parties should be prosecuted regardless of who started it. Under those circumstances, the probability of a case

actually being tried, much less resulting in a conviction, are low relative to arrests for other crimes. Such cases are regarded as "trouble." Police and prosecutors do not get much recognition, and may even be faulted if there are very many such cases in their record. Outside the family, those principles apply to both men and women and the risk of police involvement is not greatly different for men and women.

For domestic assaults, both women and men as well as the police have been even more reluctant to involve the police. As a result of the women's movement, this has changed. In most jurisdictions in the United States, state laws or police regulations now require or recommend arrest. However, consistent with the greater injury rate for women, these laws and regulations may state or imply a male offender. Although on average, when there is an injury, this is correct, it may deny male victims equal protection under the law. In fact, there are a growing number of complaints that attempts by men to obtain police protection may result in the man being arrested. That ironic situation is an additional reason that men are reluctant to call for police protection. The main reason is one already discussed in explaining gender differences in police statistics: the injury rate is much lower when the offender is a woman and there is therefore less perceived need to call for protection. The fact that assault is a legal and moral crime, regardless of whether there is injury is lost from view. '

Men are also less likely to call the police, even when there is injury, because, like women, they feel shame about disclosing family violence. But for many men, the shame is compounded by the shame of not being able to keep their wives under control. Among this group, a "real man" would be able to keep her under control. Moreover, the police tend to share these same traditional gender role expectations. This adds to the legal and regulatory presumption that the offender is a man. As a result, the police are reluctant to arrest women for domestic assault. Women know this. That is, they know they are likely to be able to get away with it. As in the case of other crimes, the probability of a woman assaulting her partner is strongly influenced by what she thinks she can get away with.

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In a section Straus calls "A Sociology of Science Analysis of the Controversy," he seeks to explain why the controversy has persisted despite the evidence, and is likely to continue. The most fundamental reason, he asserts, is that the controversy is rooted in deep seated differences in the underlying moral agenda and professional roles of service providers and feminist activists, on the one hand, and family violence researchers, on the other. Again, he lays out his concepts precisely in a table.

His paradigm for analysis centers on differences between definitions of "violence." Academics and researchers in family conflict use what he calls a "narrow definition" of violence which restricts violence to the act of assault, regardless of injury. Service providers and feminist activists use a "broad definition" which defines violence to include multiple modes of maltreatment and the resulting injury. He elaborates:

A broad definition is essential for service providers. It would be ridiculous and unethical if service providers such, as shelters, batterer treatment programs, or marital therapists, restricted their focus to physical assaults and ignored the psychological assaults, sexual coercion, subjugation, and economic situation of battered women, or the behavior of men who engage in these other forms of degradation. On the other hand, those who use a narrow definition tend to be academics and researchers. They tend

to focus on investigating one specific type of maltreatment, such as physical assaults, because each type is complex and difficult to investigate. Much can only be learned by a concentrated research focus. I believe that most of those who focus on just one form of maltreatment also recognize the need for research that takes into consideration multiple modes of maltreatment, even though they themselves do not conduct that type of research.

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TABLE 3. VARIABLES UNDERLYING BROAD VERSUS NARROW DEFINITIONS OF VIOLENCE.		
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	BROAD DEFINITION	NARROW DEFINITION
A. COVERAGE	All Types of Maltreatment	Only Physical Assault
B. ROLE OF INJURY IN CONCEPT OF VIOLENCE	An Inherent Part of the Concept	One of Many <u>Possible</u> Consequences to Be Investigated
C. OCCUPATION/ ROLE	Service Providers/Feminist Activists	Academics/Researchers
D. STATISTICS FAVORED TO DESCRIBE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM	Police and Crime Survey Because They Show More Women Victims and Suggest Cause Is Patriarchy	Family Conflict Because They Show Ubiquity of the Problem and Suggest Multiple Causes
E. STATISTICS FAVORED TO MOBILIZE RESOURCES	Family Conflict Because Rates Are Many Times Greater	Family Conflict Because Rates Are Many Times Greater
F. PRIMARY (BUT NOT EXCLUSIVE) MORAL CONCERN	End Oppression of Women, Regardless of the Type of Oppression	End Physical Assaults, Regardless of the Gender of Perpetrator or Victim
G. PRIMARY USE OF RESEARCH USING THE DEFINITION	Cessation of Assaults on Women, Especially Assaults Experienced as a "Real Crime"	"Primary Prevention" of Physical Violence of All Types, from Spanking to Murder

Each side, of course, uses the statistics which favor their cause. Again, he elaborates:

The difference in emphasis on injury reflects the different needs of service providers and researchers. For a service provider, it is essential to know if the assault resulted in injury because different steps are needed to deal with cases involving injury. For a researcher who is investigating such things as the type of family or type of society in which partner assaults are most likely to occur, injury may not be a crucial issue because it can be assumed that injury occurs in a certain proportion of cases. Moreover, for some purposes it is necessary to exclude injury as a criterion. One of these is research that seeks to estimate the prevalence of domestic assaults. If injury is one of the criteria, it restricts the data to more serious assaults and, as we have seen, the overall prevalence rate is vastly underestimated. Thus, the widely cited figure from the National Family Violence Survey of 1,800,000 women severely assaulted each year becomes only 188,000 when the criteria for a severe assault includes injury. Of course, this is a false dichotomy. As indicated in a previous

section, both figures are needed. Feminist activists, for example use both figures. They have made extensive use of the 1,800,000 figure (often presented as a woman is battered every 15 seconds) to mobilize resources. At the same time they also use police, crime survey, and emergency room statistics to show that there are many more women victims (in the sense of injured) than male victims.

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He sees the differences as related to what he calls the "moral agendas" of the two groups:

... underlying the differences just discussed [between service providers and and feminist activists, on the one hand, and researcher into family violence, on the other] is a deep seated difference in moral agenda. Those who use a broad definition tend to be primarily concerned with the well being of women. They are, of course, also concerned with physical assaults regardless of who is the victim, but their primary concern is ending maltreatment of women. Moreover, as is to be expected, they are hostile to research that might be used by critics of feminism, and this includes research on assaults by women. On the other hand, those defining violence as a physical assault, tend to place ending physical violence at the **center** of their agenda, regardless of whether the offender is a man, woman, or child. Of the two evils, physical violence and the oppression of women, physical violence tends to take priority, even though (as in my case) they are also concerned with ending all types of gender inequality and maltreatment.

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So where is all of this going? Will the controversy over domestic violence ever end? That, in fact, is the title of the last section of Dr. Straus' paper, and I can do no better than to present his views.

The analysis in the preceding section suggests that neither side is motivated to understand the other. Rather, each seeks to impose its perspective because they believe the preferred definition is vital to advancing their moral agenda and professional objectives. In my opinion, that will continue. Moreover, society would lose if either side gives up their perspective because society benefits from the moral agenda and professional contribution of both sides. I for one do not intend to give up attempting to advance the "no violence **by anyone**" moral agenda that has informed my research on domestic assaults and spanking children for 30 years.

I believe humanity needs research inspired by the moral agenda and perspective of those who focus on the **oppression of women**, regardless of whether the oppression is physical, sexual, psychological or economic; and also research inspired by the moral agenda of those who focus on **physical assault**, regardless of whether the assault is by a man, woman or child. I even dare to hope that the controversy will be resolved by recognizing the need for both perspectives, and that this will bring an end to attempts to discredit those whose agenda and professional role requires a different approach and different perspective.

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Abstract

The methodological part of this chapter analyzes the discrepancy between the more than 100 "family conflict" studies of domestic physical assaults (those using the Conflict Tactic Scales and similar approaches), and what can be called "crime studies" (i. e. the National Crime Victimization Survey and studies using police call data). Family conflict studies, without exception, show about equal rates of assault by men and women. Crime studies, without exception, show much higher rates of assault by men, often 90% by men. Crime studies also find a prevalence rate (for both men and women) that is a small fraction of the rate of assaults found by family conflict studies. The difference in prevalence rates and in gender differences between the two types of studies probably occur because crime studies deal with only the small part of all domestic assaults that the participants experience as a crime, such as assaults which result in an injury serious enough to need medical attention, or assaults by a former partner. These occur relatively rarely and tend to be assaults by men. The theoretical part of the chapter seeks to provide an explanation for the discrepancy between the low rates of assault by women outside the family and the very high rates of assault by women within the family. The sociology of science part of the chapter seeks to explain why the controversy over domestic assaults by women persists and is likely to continue. I argue that neither side can give up their position because it would be tantamount to giving up deeply held moral commitments and professional roles. I conclude that society needs both perspectives. Neither side should give up their perspective. Rather they should recognize the circumstances to which each applies.