Sociological Research and Social Policy: The Case of Family Violence

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Articles in sociological journals on physical and sexual assault within the family show that research on “family violence” has grown exponentially since 1970, despite the fact that evidence indicates no increase in family violence. The paper suggests that this extraordinary growth in research is explained by changes in American society and in sociology as a discipline. The experience of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire is used to examine the interrelation of family violence research with social movements, and some pervasive and difficult aspects of these interrelationships, including the role of values in research, the selective use of research findings, and the involvement of the mass media in efforts to promote application of sociological research.

KEY WORDS: family, violence; science; policy; values; feminism.

INTRODUCTION

The tremendous growth of research on family violence within the past two decades is probably unusual in the history of sociology, and the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire was active in this development. Members of the laboratory published more than 250 articles and 31 books on family violence from 1974 to 1991. The journal articles published from 1974 to 1988 are approximately 20% of the work on family violence indexed in Sociological Abstracts in that period. This paper is a participant observation study of that unusual development.

1Revised version of a presidential address presented to the Eastern Sociological Society in Providence, Rhode Island, April 13, 1991.
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3It is a much smaller percentage of all such journal articles because Sociological Abstracts does not cover all the journals explicitly focused on family violence.
The objectives of the paper are as follows: (1) to suggest explanations for the growth of research on family violence on the basis of changes in American society and in American sociology during those two decades; (2) to explore some aspects of the interrelation of sociological research, social movements, and social policy; and (3) to examine some long-standing and difficult questions about the role of values in social research, the selective use of research findings, and the use of the mass media to advance a moral agenda in the guise of science.

GROWTH OF FAMILY VIOLENCE RESEARCH

“Family violence” is something of a misnomer because the research includes more than studies of physical violence. The field began with the study of physical assaults on children, and then expanded to studies of violence against wives, siblings, parents, the elderly. All of these can properly be termed “violence” in the sense of a physical assault. But research on “family violence” now also includes studies of sexual abuse of children (which frequently does not involve use of physical force), neglect, and psychological abuse of children and spouses. Consequently, “family maltreatment” would be a more accurate term. “Family violence” now dominates the field, however, and I will follow that convention.

New Journals

One indication of the phenomenal growth of research on family violence is the founding of new journals focused on these issues. From 1976 to 1987 seven new journals were founded. Probably no other subfield of sociology has so many journals and such a rapid expansion. At least in principle there was no lack of opportunity to publish because, even before the new journals, there were already journals on the sociology of crime, family, law, sexual behavior, and victimology. In practice, however, it might have been difficult to publish articles on family violence in some of those journals. Until recently, for example, many criminologists regarded wife beating as a “family matter” and relatively unimportant as a criminal offense.

Journal Articles

Figure 1 shows the year-by-year growth in the percentage of articles on family violence in Sociological Abstracts. Since the curve closely fits an
expontential growth model, even the availability of several long-established journals probably would not have been sufficient to accommodate the deluge of studies of family violence and therefore explains the founding of new journals. The number of papers per year rose from nine in 1974 to 222 in 1988. Moreover, because *Sociological Abstracts* includes only one of the seven new family violence journals, and omits many psychology and social work journals in which sociologists publish, the actual number of articles in 1988 was much greater than 222.

Magazine Articles, Books, and Pamphlets

Figure 2 shows a different pattern for magazine articles and books for the general public (as indexed in *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature* and *Library of Congress Catalog*). In contrast to the continuing exponential growth of scientific and professional articles, magazine articles peaked in the period 1984–1987, and books peaked in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The differences in these patterns can be a source of concern if it signals a flagging public interest. On the other hand, the continued growth in jour-
nal articles suggests that family violence is now an established field of research that continues to grow despite decreasing attention in the mass media.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE EMERGENCE OF FAMILY VIOLENCE RESEARCH

The explosive growth of family violence research cannot be explained on the basis of increases in wife beating or physical abuse of children, because available evidence suggests they have been decreasing. Rather, the growth exemplifies the social construction of a social problem in response to changes in American society and American sociology. The work of a pediatrician, Henry Kempe, is generally credited with alerting the medical and social work professions to what Kempe called the "battered baby syndrome" (Kempe et al., 1962). The efforts of these professions were important in creating public recognition of child abuse as a widespread social problem (Nelson, 1984; Pfohl, 1977). A decade later, the women's move-
ment brought about a similar transformation of the public perception of
wife beating (Straus, 1974; Tierney, 1982). The rapid emergence of public
concern and research on these and other aspects of family violence reflects
major social changes that were occurring at the time. I will list some of
them in approximate chronological order:

— The social activism of the 1960s, which championed oppressed
groups, was extended to children and women.

— The rising homicide, rape, and assault rates; violent political and
social protest and assassinations; terrorist activity; and the Vietnam
war—all these sensitized people to violence.

— Disenchantment with the traditional family in the 1960s and early
1970s facilitated perceiving negative features of family life,
including violence.

— The growth in paid employment by married women provided the
economic means for them to escape the abuse that had long been
tolerated. Studies by Levinger (1966) and O’Brien (1971)
demonstrated that violence was a factor in 40% of divorces. The
increased legal, economic, and social acceptability of divorce also
helped make it possible to no longer tolerate abusive behavior.

— Professions with a stake in family intervention grew rapidly. For
example, the American Association of Marriage and Family
Therapists went from 3375 members in 1975 to 12,302 in 1985.
These professions created an audience receptive to findings on
family violence (Finkellhor, 1982).

— Social-activist baby boomers were entering graduate school, and
they were interested in using sociology as a means of social
activism. A growing number of them were women. Among the
results were more attention to gender roles and research on male
oppression, including violence used in maintaining male dominance
(Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Straus, 1973, 1976; Yllo and Bograd,

— The women’s movement made rape and then battering central
issues in the 1970s, and created a new public consciousness of these
ancient cruelties. The movement also created two new social
institutions: rape crisis centers and shelters for battered women.
Both did more than provide medical and psychological assistance
and safety. They were also ideologically important because they
concretized and publicized phenomena that had previously been
ignored (Straus, 1974).

— There was a convergence of certain aspects of the conservative
agenda of the period with the agendas of the feminist movement
and of sociologists engaged in research on family violence. The
conservative demand for "law and order" and use of punishment to correct social problems coincided with the demands of women to end the virtual immunity of wife beaters from legal sanctions. The sexual repression that is a traditional aspect of conservatism also coincided with feminist campaigns against pornography.

—Changes in theoretical perspectives in sociology put the consensus model of society under attack by conflict theory. The inevitability of conflict in all human groups, including the family, was recognized, along with the possibility of violent conflict.

—Certain enduring characteristics of sociology as a discipline meshed with these historical circumstances. One of these characteristics is the tradition of seeing sociology as a vehicle of social improvement. This tradition is especially strong in the United States, where many early sociologists were ordained ministers. A concern for the underdog and liberal political leanings are also part of the sociological tradition. Finally, sociology has a strong debunking tradition (Berger, 1973). Research on family violence was consistent with these elements of the culture of our discipline. It held out the hope of improving families and society, it came to the rescue of oppressed women and children, and it debunked the view of the family as a "haven."

CONTRIBUTIONS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE RESEARCH TO SOCIOLOGY

Most research on family violence was undertaken in the hope that it would help create a more humane society, and the focus of this paper is on the practical uses of that research. There have also been a number of theoretical and methodological contributions to sociology as a discipline. These contributions illustrate the artificiality of the distinction between basic and applied research.

Research on family violence has increased our understanding of the family as social institution. For example, as a by-product of the attempt to understand how there could be both love and violence between family members, we now know that there is an inherently high level of conflict built into the basic structure of the family (Gelles and Straus, 1979; Straus and Hotaling, 1980). As a result of the effort to carry out empirical research on intrafamily crime, family violence research also has fostered methodological innovations, such as improved techniques for studying "sensitive" issues (Gelles, 1990). More generally, family violence research, along with
feminism, helped put the nail in the coffin of functionalist approaches to family sociology.

Family violence research made basic contributions to understanding other social institutions, including the police and the legal system, and social services. In criminology, which generally accepted crime among strangers as its domain, research on wife beating, acquaintance rape and marital rape, sexual abuse of children, elder abuse, etc., helped force a redefinition of "crime" to recognize that the greatest risk of assault, including sexual assault, occurs within the family (Straus et al., 1980; Finkelhor and Yllo, 1985; Straus and Lincoln, 1985). The reconceptualization of crime is one of the reasons for a major revision of the two main sources of U.S. crime data: the National Crime Survey and the Uniform Crime Reports.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE RESEARCH TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

The combination of historical circumstances and the characteristics of sociology provided a unique opportunity to apply the distinctive theoretical and methodological tools of sociology. Consequently, there is an impressive record of sociological contributions to the efforts by advocates to change the institutional basis for dealing with child abuse and wife beating. Documenting these contributions provides evidence to contradict a belief that sociological research is rarely useful. Space permits only a brief listing.

— Child abuse legislation in all 50 states in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Pleck, 1987) drew on the work of sociologists such as Gil (1970) and Nagi (1976), who documented the prevalence of child abuse in all regions and in all socioeconomic groups.

— The almost universal belief that child abuse results from psychopathology was replaced by an explanatory model emphasizing social arrangements, social skills, and cultural norms legitimizing violence in the guise of "physical punishment" (Gelles, 1973).

— Research that documented trauma to rape and sexual abuse victims resulting from police and hospital handling of such cases (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974; Holmstrom and Burgess, 1978; Mc Cahill et al., 1979) led to changes in police and medical practices, sometimes including the establishment of rape crisis units.

— Passage of spouse abuse legislation in the 1980s drew on research documenting the extent of the problem and the failure of the legal system to protect victims (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Gelles, 1974;
Pagelow, 1981; Steinmetz and Straus, 1974; Straus, 1976; Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980).

— The “battered woman” syndrome was introduced as a legal defense in spouse homicide cases. This was the work of psychologists such as Walker (1979) and Browne (1987), but it was also facilitated by the sociological studies cited.

— Studies of marital rape such as Gelles (1977) and Finkelhor and Yllo (1985) contributed to removing the “marital exemption” in more than half the states.

— The field experiment by Sherman and Berk (1984) was particularly influential in the dramatic shift of police from avoiding intervention in a “family matter” to arresting the offenders.

— The Attorney General’s Task Force on Family Violence drew on many of the above studies as a basis for the recommendations in its influential report (U.S. Department of Justice, 1984).

— The Surgeon General of the United States convened a major national conference on family violence. Sociologists were invited to write position papers and played leading roles. The subsequent Surgeon General’s Report on Family Violence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1986) drew heavily on their research findings to formulate recommendations and goals.

— Legislation to protect older people from abuse drew on the pioneer work of Steinmetz (1988) and her testimony at a congressional hearing.

In each of these examples, sociologists benefitted from the ideas and efforts of advocacy groups, and advocacy groups were able to use sociological research (even though little of the research was commissioned by advocacy groups); researchers and advocates existed side by side. The same set of social forces that gave rise to the advocacy groups also stimulated the research and provided the basis for using the results of the research.

The interrelation of advocacy and research is illustrated by the rapid adoption of a policy recommendation based on the results of Sherman and Berk’s experiment on the deterrent effect of arrest vs. other modes of handling domestic assaults. The percentage of pro-arrest police departments went from almost zero to about half in only five years (Sherman and Cohn, 1989). It is unlikely that this many police departments would have adopted the recommended policy of arresting wife beaters if Sherman and Berk’s research had not been preceded by a decade of agitation for arrest by advocates for battered women, including a two-and-a-half million dollar damage award against the Torrington, Connecticut, police department for failure to arrest (Gelles and Straus, 1980).
Similar histories underlie each of the examples I have given. Thus, the extensive use of social research data in changing national policy on family violence resulted from a combination of historical circumstances, shared values, and pressures by advocacy groups, rather than only the type or quality of the research. Moreover, research that did not fit the agenda of advocacy groups tended to be ignored or rejected, again regardless of the type or quality of the study.

THE NATIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE SURVEYS: PATTERNS OF USE, NEGLECT, AND SCORN

Analysts of research utilization agree that there is a large disparity between production of research and its use (Barber, 1987; Bulmer, 1986; Komarovsky, 1975; Shostak, 1974; Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980). Many factors produce this gap, including the absence of receptive interest groups and social movements, the periodic oscillations from liberal to conservative political climate (Schlesinger, 1986), the characteristics of the researcher or research organization that produced the research, and the characteristics of the potential user of the research. As a result of the varying impact of these factors, some research is embraced, much is ignored, and some is vehemently rejected. Findings from the National Family Violence Surveys can be used to illustrate these patterns. Examining four sets of findings from the same study illustrates some of the social processes which lead some research findings to be used, others to be ignored, and some to be scorned.

Wife Beating

The 1975 National Family Violence Survey (Straus et al., 1980) was the first large-scale study of violence in a representative sample of American families. That survey was replicated a decade later (Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1990). The uses to which the results of the two surveys have been put are primarily what Pelz (1978) and Weiss and Bucuvalas (1980) identify as "conceptual" and "legitimative."

The main purpose of the surveys was to test theories that might explain physical violence in families. Consequently, a frequent use of the research has been conceptual, to provide background, awareness, and understanding. One of the most important conceptual contributions was to show that the causes of physical abuse lie in social arrangements more than in individual psychopathology. This conceptualization was developed over a period of years (Gelles, 1973; Steinmetz and Straus, 1974; Straus and Hotaling, 1980).
The findings from the National Family Violence Survey provided empirical evidence consistent with the theory that the high rate of child abuse and marital violence grows out of the very nature of the family and the society as currently constituted. Among these characteristics is a male-dominant society and family system (Straus, 1973, 1976; Yllo and Straus, 1990). There are also implicit cultural norms that make the marriage license a hitting license, just as being a parent is a license to spank—to hit children (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Straus, 1976). Other important structural effects include the tensions inherent in primary group characteristics of the family, stress and frustration of poverty in an affluent society, and racial discrimination in a society that proclaims equality of all.

Important as are the conceptual uses of the National Family Violence Surveys, the most frequent use of findings has been legitimative. The surveys provided the first national incidence and prevalence rates for marital violence. The rates were presented at a congressional hearing in 1978 and also in hearings of the U.S. Civil Rights Commision. Almost every book, article, and pamphlet on violence between spouses cites them, either as “more than 1.8 million women are severely assaulted by their husbands each year” or “a woman is beaten every 18 seconds.”

The statistics are widely used because they are a basis for “claims making” in the struggle for allocation of scarce resources (Aronson, 1984; Best, 1987; Gusfield, 1989). The need for sociological research to justify such claims is one reason research is done on already acknowledged social problems. Research was not needed to convince the public to oppose physical and sexual abuse of children or assaults on wives. A commitment to “do something,” however, is not enough. Advocates tend to focus on dramatic case examples, but legislators and others allocating scarce resources also want “hard evidence” such as prevalence rates (Gusfield, 1989). The rates from the two National Family Violence surveys have been used many times to claim resources for shelters for battered women, and to show the need for legislative and police action against offenders.

**Corporal Punishment**

The National Family Violence Survey findings on corporal punishment (spanking and slapping a child) provide an example of research that

*The data are used even by critics, because rates based on measurements that meet the demands of these critics would be less persuasive. If wife-beating rates were based on whether the woman was injured, it would omit 97% of the cases revealed by the surveys, because the cases are based on occurrence of physical attacks, only 3% of which result in injuries (Stets and Straus, 1990). If psychological attacks were included, as also demanded by some critics, this would increase the number of cases to almost the entire population.*
is ignored. There have been many studies in the last 40 years of the use of corporal punishment by parents, yet a search of advice books for parents (Carson, 1988) and textbooks on the family, child psychology, and child development found that few discuss the prevalence and consequences of corporal punishment (Straus, forthcoming—a). This is particularly noteworthy because the studies show that over 90% of parents use corporal punishment. The research suggests, moreover, that spanking may correct misbehavior in the short run, but it increases the probability of antisocial and violent behavior the more the parents interviewed had themselves experienced corporal punishment as children, depression in the long run. The National Family Violence Surveys showed that the more parents hit children, the greater the probability of the child severely attacking a sibling and hitting the parents. The surveys also found that the more the parents interviewed had themselves experienced corporal punishment as children, the higher the probability of their physically assaulting a spouse (Straus, 1983, 1991a) or suffering depression (Straus, 1991b). The more frequent the spanking, the greater these risks—but even rare spanking was associated with some increase. Of course, only a small proportion of those spanked become wife beaters or depressed. However, it would be as erroneous to dismiss the findings on that account as it is to dismiss smoking as a risk factor for lung cancer because less than a third of those who smoke a pack a day or more die of a smoking-related illness.

Findings such as these have been in the literature for decades and have been ignored for decades. Yet they are extremely important because almost everyone is involved in hitting children and because the potential consequences are so serious. The following summary (from Straus, forthcoming—a) of the reasons underlying the neglect of this research illustrates the complex interweaving of social structural and social psychological influences on the utilization of research.

The social structural impediments begin with the fact that hitting children is an aspect of child rearing in which virtually the whole society participates, as either victim or administrator. It is a taken-for-granted aspect of life that almost no one thinks about, much less challenges. The social construction of corporal punishment casts it as harmless if done in moderation. Even the use of terms such as “physical punishment” instead of “hitting” and “administrator” instead of “offender” is a symbolic mode of expressing the social construction of this particular aspect of violence as harmless.

At the social psychological level, since almost everyone has been spanked or slapped as an infant or toddler, and since the hitting was done for morally correct purposes, the appropriateness of hitting children “when necessary” is internalized as part of the American psyche as well as culture (Greven, 1991). And since almost all adults with children have hit their
children, guilt and/or resentment and denial tend to occur when these acts are labeled as "violence"—especially when they are implicitly condemned by noting that spanking children is associated with increased risks of depression, aggression, and crime.

Finally, child advocacy groups have been preoccupied with the struggle to correct more immediate problems such as child abuse, poverty, inadequate nutrition, and inadequate schools.

These structural and psychological characteristics may explain why this nearly universal aspect of American child rearing is mostly ignored in parental advice books (Carson, 1988) and in child development and child psychology textbooks (Strauss, forthcoming—a) and why no advocacy groups are eager to use the findings on corporal punishment as the basis for claims making.

**Change in Family Violence**

In the period between the two National Family Violence Surveys, 1975–1985, both the mass media and the scientific literature tended to assume that physical abuse of children and spouses was increasing. Words like "epidemic" were common. The number of child abuse cases reported to state child protective services increased by more than 10% per year. Shelters for battered women increased from a handful to almost a thousand, and even this number could not provide enough places. There have been changes in American society, however, that suggest the incidence of physical abuse of children and spouses might actually be decreasing.

One of the purposes of the 1985 National Family Violence Survey was to obtain data that could determine whether family violence rates had changed, and if so, whether there was an increase or a decrease. Almost to our surprise, we found very large decreases in both child abuse and wife beating (Straus and Gelles, 1986). We attributed that decrease to a number of factors, especially changes in American society during that decade. These changes included both a huge decrease in women totally dependent economically on spouses, and nationwide campaigns against child abuse and wife beating. We also pointed out that even accepting the decrease in rates at face value (which we did not) "still leaves a minimum estimate of over a million abused children aged 3–17 in two-parent households. Similarly, the reduction of 27% in wife beating still leaves over a million and a half beaten wives each year in the United States" (Straus and Gelles, 1986).

Despite these disclaimers about the continuing extent of the problem, the findings were almost universally rejected. When the *Christian Science Monitor* interviewed criminologist Richard Berk, he commented, "Given all
we know about the pattern of crime statistics, a 47% drop is so unprece-
dented as to be unbelievable. Never before has there been a drop of that
magnitude, that rapidly” (November 18, 1985:3–4). But other crime rates
have changed that much and that fast. The homicide rate increased by over
100% between 1963 and 1973, and decreased by 29% between 1980 and
1984. The National Crime Survey assault victimization rate also decreased
from 1975 to 1985 by about the same percentage as did the National Family
Violence Survey rate of wife beating.

Advocates for children were equally vehement in rejecting the find-
ings. The Child Protection Report carried a story headlined “Gelles Study
 Strikes Discordant Note” (22 November 1985: 3), and went on to document
the disbelief and anger that our findings produced when they were pre-
sented at the 1985 National Conference on Child Abuse. The disbelief oc-
curred because the findings contradicted the daily experience of an
audience struggling to keep up with increases in reported child abuse cases
of more than 10% per year. The anger was aroused by fear that the results
would be used to undermine efforts to maintain or increase funding for
child protective services. Few seem to have been moved by our argument
that it was partly through their efforts that the rates were decreasing; that
if we had found no change—or an increase—the budget cutters could then
argue that ten years and millions of dollars of public and private funds had
been wasted.

Assaults by Wives

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the National Family Vio-
lence Surveys was the unexpected finding that—in marked contrast to the
behavior of women outside the family—within the family women are about
as violent as men. The 1975 survey found annual incidence rates of 11.6
for assaults by men on their partners and 12.1 for assaults by women on
their partners. This highly controversial finding was confirmed by the 1985
study rates of 11.6 and 12.4 (neither difference is statistically significant).
These findings are consistent with those of all other studies that investigated
general population samples (rather than samples from battered women
shelters or from police reports), and there have been more than 20 such
investigations to date (Straus and Gelles, 1990). These findings produced
outrage by some scholars and some advocates of battered women, despite
our having repeatedly cautioned that the meaning and consequences of that
violence are easily misunderstood. For one thing, the greater average size
and strength of men and their greater aggressiveness mean that the same
act (for example, a punch) by a man is likely to inflict more pain or injury (Straus et al., 1980; Stets and Straus, 1990).

Objections were much more strenuous to the findings on assaults by women than to the findings on change in violence rates. Perhaps the most important reason is that the findings on the high rate of physical attacks by wives were perceived as a threat to claims making on behalf of battered women. The anger also was intensified because the National Family Violence Surveys were quantitative studies, which are contrary to one school of feminist scholarship that holds such methods are inherently male oriented and distort the reality of women’s lives (Westkott, 1979; Yllo, 1988). Our research no doubt seemed a glaring example of the inherent defects and biases of what one reviewer called “phallo-centric science,” despite the fact that studies using qualitative methods (Giles-Sims, 1983; Greenblat, 1983), and clinical studies (O’Leary et al., 1989), revealed the same high rates of assault by wives.

Cognitive dissonance may also play a part in the negative reaction to the findings on assaults by wives. Dissonance occurs because, outside the family, assaults by women occur at a fraction of the male rate. The dissonance is especially great among those in the battered women’s movement. Shelter residents tend to have been assaulted many times more often than the average of six times per year experienced by the battered women in the National Family Violence Survey (Straus, 1990), and the assaults are much more dangerous. Less than one percent of the survey victims were attacked with a knife or gun, compared with 47% of the residents of the Safe Place in Portsmouth, New Hampshire (Kaufman Kantor, personal communication, 1991). These and other differences can create what I call the “representative sample fallacy” (Straus, 1990). This refers to the danger of generalizing from women in a community survey to women who have been driven to take refuge in a shelter (Straus, 1990). Thus, the high frequency of assault on husbands by women in the National Family Violence Survey may not apply to the battered women served by shelters.

Another probable reason for the resentment aroused by the findings on assaults by women is that they were perceived as defaming women. One of the most vocal critics was Barbara Hart, staff counsel of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. I mention her because, in a book on lesbian battering she says “[it] is painful. It challenges our dream of a lesbian utopia. It contradicts our belief in the inherent nonviolence of women. And the disclosure of violence by lesbians … may enhance the arsenal of homophobes… Yet, if we are to free ourselves, we must free our sisters” (Hart, 1986). My view of publishing research on violence by wives is parallel to Hart’s view on lesbian battering: Both are painful but necessary.
The structural and psychological barriers to accepting the findings on corporal punishment seem to apply also to the findings on assaults by women. A great deal of the violence by wives is in the form of stereotypical, almost ritualistic, slapping or plate throwing. This type of behavior is deeply embedded in American culture and can be seen every day on television. I estimate that two thirds of American women have hit their partner (Straus et al., 1980). The degree to which slapping a husband who does or says something outrageous is embedded in American culture is similar to the embeddedness of spanking a misbehaving child. And just as parents do not like to spank children, wives do not like to slap husbands. Nevertheless, both actions are institutionalized as something that—if all else fails—may sometimes be necessary. Both are also so frequent and so deeply ingrained in cultural images and cultural norms as morally correct and harmless that most people find it difficult or impossible to perceive such acts as violence. And since so many have done it, guilt and/or resentment and denial tend to occur when these acts are labeled as “violence” or when it is suggested that violence by women provides part of the justification men use for their own violence. Thus, all five of the explanations suggested for denying the harmfulness of spanking children probably also apply to denying that the stereotypical slap or plate throwing by women is “violence,” and has long-term serious consequences.

A final source of outrage was recommending a policy of total abstinence from violence by women (except in self-defense) as one of many steps toward primary prevention of wife beating. This seemed like “victim blaming” to some. Recognizing assaults by wives as one of the causes, however, does not justify assaults by men. It is the responsibility of both men and women to refrain from physical attacks, including retaliation, at home as elsewhere.

Although assaults by women usually have only minor physical consequences, there are theoretical grounds for believing they have major consequences in helping perpetuate the traditional tolerance of physical assault between married or cohabiting partners (Straus, forthcoming—b). When a woman slaps her husband, for example, to force him to stop ignoring her, she reinforces the implicit norms making the marriage license a hitting license (Straus, forthcoming—b). She thereby increases the probability that when she in turn does something infuriating, she will be the victim of a physical attack by her partner (Feld and Straus, 1989). To the extent that this is the case, a campaign to end even the stereotypical “slap the cad” type of violence by women can be an important step in “primary prevention” (Joffee et al., 1984) of wife beating.

As a result of the depth of the objections to our findings on assaults by wives, some of us became the object of bitter scholarly and personal attacks. These attacks included obstruction of my public presentations by
booming, shouting, and picketing. In elections for office in scientific societies I was labeled as antifeminist despite being a pioneer feminist researcher on wife beating (Straus, 1973, 1976). Suzanne K. Steinmetz, a co-investigator in the first National Family Violence Survey, was the victim of more severe attacks. There was a letter-writing campaign opposing her promotion. There were phone calls threatening her and her family, and a bomb threat at a conference where she spoke.

In view of the negative reaction even to the statistics on violence by wives, it will come as no surprise that to date the only effect of pointing out the policy implication has been further outrage. I believe in the long run what some now regard as "erroneous" findings and "outrageous" policy implications will be universally accepted, and the astonishment will be over the controversy they once created.

ABDUCTED CHILDREN STUDY

The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMAIT) illustrates other aspects of the hazardous road between research production and research utilization, even by an agency that sponsored the research with the avowed intention of using the findings—in this case, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the Department of Justice. More than 35,000 households were contacted (Finkelhor et al., 1990). The results left little doubt that some of the alarming high rates that formed the basis for congressional appropriations for missing children were vast overstatements. Moreover, 99% of abducted children were taken by a family member, and the study revealed a large number of "thrownaway" children. These findings were incompatible with the "crime wave" and "lock up criminals" perspective of the Department of Justice. The data made the problem seem more in the realm of family and mental health than of traditional crime-fighting functions of the police. Funding for the research was curtailed, and the agency wrote its own summary report casting the findings in a light more favorable to its philosophy.

The NISMAIT research illustrates the importance of refusing research sponsorship that leaves decisions about publication in the hands of the sponsor. Our lesson was learned in an earlier study that found the children of men in combat units were more likely to be abused than the children of men in noncombat branches of the Air Force, even though the comparison involved men in noncombat roles, such as truck drivers and clerks. We interpreted the findings as showing that war legitimates violence as a means of correcting wrongs, and this principle spills over to include violence to correct "wrongs" by children. The prin-
principal investigator of the study was an Air Force officer, and the study therefore needed Air Force approval for publication. The review board initially refused permission on the basis of purported technical deficiencies of the study. When these were shown to be irrelevant, the Air Force simply refused permission. In the case of the NISMA\textit{RT} research, the agreement requires submitting manuscripts for review and comment, which is all to the good. The agency can refuse to produce their own publications, which should be their right. But the agreement also protects researchers and society by leaving the researchers free to proceed with normal journal or book publication.

**MASS MEDIA AND RESEARCH UTILIZATION**

Although a systematic consideration of factors affecting research utilization is beyond the scope of this paper, the experience of the Family Research Laboratory in dealing with the mass media illustrates an aspect of the process that can be influenced by individual scholars or groups of scholars, and which, in my experience, plays an important role in research utilization.

Heads of public and private agencies often have a keen interest and respect for social science (Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980), as do many members of state and national legislatures. They support sociological research, and they want to use the findings. But it will come as no surprise that they do not read the \textit{American Sociological Review}. Even assuming the time to do so, reading journals would probably result in more frustration than information because the mode of discourse is usually understandable only by other sociologists or other social scientists. The gap between the desire to use sociological research and the inaccessibility of the major mode of communication research findings is filled in a number of ways, of which the use of the mass media is one of the most important (Webber, 1987; Weiss and Singer, 1988).

If a relevant research finding appears in the national press or on television, chances are it will come to the attention of key decision makers. They are likely to ask a staff person to check the journal, or more likely phone the author of the study. If that proves promising, the researcher may be invited to consult or to testify at a hearing. Often, even that is not necessary because, as Weiss and Bucuvalas (1980:303) note, the contribution of sociology to social policy is “primarily to provide background, understanding, awareness of new ideas” and to provide legitimization for the purposes of claims making.
Obstacles to Mass Media Use

Assuming this analysis of the research information transmission system is correct, a number of obstacles stand in the way of using the mass media to enhance research utilization. One of the obstacles lies in certain conventions and values of academic culture. Many academic persons tend to distrust the press and to question the motives of colleagues whose work appears in the mass media. There are sound bases for both these concerns. The press often does oversimplify and—on occasion—distorts (nevertheless, although the work of the Family Research Laboratory has been the focus of hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles, and is frequently on television, distortions have been rare).

As for the problem of oversimplification, in my opinion that is one of the inherent limitations of the mass media—when viewed from the perspective of a scholarly discipline. When viewed from the perspective of information transmission, however, it is one of the advantages of the press. Journalists have an ability that most of us lack: to present the crux of things in a way that is understandable to the educated general public.

Another obstacle is what can be called the San Francisco earthquake perception of how stories are covered. In this view, earth-shattering scientific events occur and journalists go out to cover them. That may be true for Nobel Prize winning research, but for almost all other research, unless press coverage is initiated by the researcher or her or his organization, it is unlikely to occur. This is the reason the American Psychological Association employs six full-time journalists. They prepare press releases based on research published in APA journals and papers presented at the annual convention. They also arrange media interviews with paper presenters at the annual meeting. By contrast, the American Sociological Association has had a volunteer as press officer at the annual meeting and employs no paid journalists. The almost complete lack of ASA activity to aid and initiate press coverage is not the only reason coverage of psychology is many times greater than that of sociology, but the experience of the Family Research Laboratory suggests it is one of the reasons.

The press policy of the Family Research Laboratory is based on the premise that scholars must initiate press coverage if they believe it is important to bring their findings into public policy. Members of the Laboratory are encouraged to have the university news bureau prepare and distribute a press release for all papers, either at the time the paper is presented or at the time of publication. Both national and local press were invited to each of the national conferences sponsored by the Family Research Lab. In the case of studies with major policy implications, such as the study of sexual abuse in day-care settings (Finkelhor et al., 1988), a
press conference was arranged at Children's Hospital in Washington because of the contextual suitability of that location.

Few researchers have the journalistic skill or the inclination to write and distribute press releases, so it is fortunate that every university has a news office eager to help. Our experience, however, is that even an excellent press release is not sufficient. Reporters do not usually write articles solely on the basis of a two- or three-page press release. Sometimes they want more detail; invariably they want to talk to the researcher to get a feeling for the researcher and the study, and to get one or two quotations—pithy ones if possible. Consequently, in the days following a press release, we found it necessary to be available to talk to the press. If the story attracts wide interest, many hours need to be allocated. I probably spent 20 hours on such interviews during the two-week period following the release of the National Family Violence Survey rates on child abuse and wife beating. Twenty hours seemed oppressive, but it is a small cost compared to the years of work that went into that study, and a reasonable cost for nationwide dissemination of research findings.

Some Dilemmas of Mass Media Involvement

Perhaps the most difficult problem with the mass media concerns protecting the norms and values of the scholarly world. Many academic persons question involving the press in the scholarly enterprise, and this concern has a sound basis. It would be dangerous for academic freedom if the reward system of universities were strongly influenced by whether or not the work of a scholar appeared in the mass media. The value of research must be based on peer review, not on what the public thinks of it, or on favorable or unfavorable press coverage. It is essential to preserve the autonomy of inquiry. Nevertheless, to the extent that social research is to influence social policy, involvement of the mass media is probably crucial. I believe this can be accomplished without surrendering control of science to the whims of the press and the public, because archival journals and books remain the primary place of publication. There are at least two deeply troubling issues, however.

The first of these issues is whether results should be released and publicized prior to peer review. The results of both the Minneapolis Police Experiment (Sherman and Berk, 1984; Sherman and Cohn, 1989) and the National Family Violence Survey (Gelles and Straus, 1988; Straus and Gelles, 1986) were widely publicized before journal review or publication. In both cases the authors believed the results were of such immediate public importance that delay was unethical. Both studies were subsequently pub-
lished in peer-reviewed journals, but the recent "cold fusion" disaster illustrates the danger.

The second problem is the depth and certainty of the evidence needed to enable sociologists to advocate policies based on their research. Even well-designed and conducted studies published in peer-reviewed journals can be wrong. Replication is needed, and that can take years. In the case of the Minneapolis Police Experiment, the replications did not support the original study; yet that study played a crucial role in persuading police departments to adopt a policy of arresting wife beaters. The most controversial findings of the National Family Violence Survey—the high rate of assaults by wives—has been replicated a number of times, but the decreasing rate of wife beating and child abuse has not been tested by others and might not replicate. As in the case of waiting for peer review, the even longer wait for replication poses an ethical dilemma for which there is no definitive solution. Each case must be evaluated in the context of many factual and contextual circumstances. In the case of the Minneapolis Police Experiment, I believe advocating arrests on the basis of that one study was correct, regardless of the fact that the findings have not replicated, because it is one more step in the process of creating more humane standards for interpersonal relationships, standards that have been evolving for several centuries.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined some of the ways in which the production and use of sociological research depends on the interplay between the main currents of the broader culture and social structure and the main currents of research. Conflict and controversy in this process are inevitable—even more so for research undertaken with the intention of "letting the facts prevail." Family Research Laboratory research has been attacked both by feminists and by "pro-family" Protestant fundamentalists, and the findings have been used by advocates of causes we espouse and of those we oppose.

Characteristics of Research Procedures and Consumers

Terms such as "activist," "social movements," "sociologists," and "policymakers" have been used as though each were a homogeneous category. In fact, there are enormous differences within these groups or categories, and these differences can provide additional explanation of why
some sociological research is eagerly assimilated, some ignored, and some rejected. For example, a group in which professionals are a major element (such as those involved in child abuse treatment) may be more receptive to findings that do not match their preconceptions, compared to a group that is dominated by laypersons (such as missing children's advocates or the battered women's shelter movement).

The stage of development of the social movement might also make a difference. Immature and new movements need legitimization and therefore welcome research findings that can be used for that purpose. For the same reason, they may be more skittish about accepting findings that do not support all of their claims. Even the idea of investigating certain topics may be anathema to them.

It seems reasonable to suppose that the more prominent the researcher or the sponsor of a study, the more attention—either positive or negative—the findings will get. If the findings are inconsistent with its approach, a social movement or agency may perceive a greater urgency to discredit the findings of a leading research group than those produced by a lesser known person or organization. That may be one of the reasons for the strong reaction to the findings of the National Family Violence Survey on assaults by women.

Research on these and other characteristics of both producers and consumers of sociological research needs to be undertaken because it is likely to yield information that can help both parties understand fluctuations in their relationship and, in some cases, enhance that relationship.

**Scientific and Public Policy Legitimacy**

Much of the controversy over the findings of the National Family Violence Surveys involves confusion of scientific legitimacy with the use of scientific research to legitimize claims making. As Prelli (1989) shows, standards for judging scientific claims and policy claims vary from one community of interest to another. Social scientists and social movement advocates tend to apply different standards when assessing the reasonableness of claims. Advocates tend to ignore the scientific legitimacy of the information they use, and scientists tend to ignore the political legitimacy of the information they produce (Prelli, 1989; Nelkin, 1984). This is one of the reasons that the debate over the findings of the National Family Violence Surveys persists after more than a decade. Each community thinks it is addressing the same issue, but each is addressing different issues, using different criteria, and often talking past each other.
Mass Media

The mass media may be more important than scholarly journals or books in bringing sociological research to the attention of persons in policy and administrative positions. Such mass media coverage, however, depends heavily on researchers taking the initiative to involve journalists by means of press releases and press conferences—yet academics are traditionally reluctant to do so because of the dilemmas inherent in disseminating research through the mass media. These dilemmas include the potential threat to the autonomy of inquiry if scholars become dependent on the mass media, circumvention of the peer review process, and the difficulty of knowing when the evidence is sufficient to justify advocating programs and policies. The experience of the Family Research Laboratory shows that if one is willing to confront these issues, mass media coverage can increase the probability of bringing the results of sociological research to bear on social policy.

Selective Use of Research

Family violence researchers are almost always ideologically aligned with social movements seeking to aid victims. This sometimes creates a conflict between their scientific commitments and their social movement commitments. The classic assumption of basic scientific research—that time and future research will settle disagreements—may not be satisfactory for a scholar who is imbued with the urgency of correcting a social problem. Difficult choices must be made if research findings do not legitimize objectives, support claims for allocation of scarce resources, or challenge assumptions or procedures. The shelter movement, for example, assumes that "family violence" is almost entirely a matter of assaults by men. I know of two researchers who deliberately omitted gathering data on assaults by women because they feared it would reveal findings that contradicted this assumption, and three researchers who refused to publish their findings on assaults by women. On the other hand, if the researcher concludes that the values and objectives shared with advocates would be threatened by disregarding the research findings, neither humanistic nor scientific norms would be satisfied by suppressing the findings. Consequently, there would be an obligation to continue to try to call attention to the findings, as I have done for physical punishment, change in rates of child abuse and wife beating, and assaults by wives on husbands.

Although a sizable part of this paper is devoted to research findings that have been neglected or rejected by some advocates for children and
battered women, those findings probably make up less than one percent of the major findings of family violence research. The other 99% have not been disputed, and the field would probably benefit from a more critical approach. Nevertheless, the contributions documented early in this paper suggest that family violence research may join such work as Recent Social Trends (Ogburn, 1933), An American Dilemma (Myrdal, 1944), and the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) as major examples of the application of sociological research to the amelioration of social problems.

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