Once hidden behind closed doors, the
Safe at Home?
By Elibet Moore Chase '81

SOCIOLGIST MURRAY STRAUS stood on one side of a one-way mirror. On the other side was a family—father, mother and 12-year-old son—who had volunteered to participate in his study of the various ways families deal with conflict. The experiment was set up like a game, something like shuffleboard, using balls and pushers of different colors. To gain points, the family had to work together to figure out the rules.

With the researchers out of the room, the family tackled its task. The father worked aggressively, and within 20 seconds it was clear that he knew the rules. His wife and son were still struggling. "You gotta match the colors, dummy," he barked at his wife. And then he kicked her.

"Even though this was a study of how families deal with problems, it didn't occur to me at the time that violence is one method," Straus observes. Not until a few years later, in 1968, when Straus was in his first year of teaching sociology at the University of New Hampshire, did it occur to him that violence is not an anomaly in American family life, but a common part of it.

"I conducted a survey in class and found that one-fourth of my students had been hit by their parents during their senior year in high school," says Straus. "I was startled. I had thought that corporal punishment was used only with little kids."

The realization that behavior within families often includes some degree of violence prompted Straus to wonder if this could be related to the societal violence of the time: the Vietnam War, political assassinations, the Los Angeles riots, the rising rate of violent crime. He began to reflect on the man's kick as an indication of the violence in American culture, violence that needed to be studied if it were ever to be understood and changed.

In the 30 years since, Straus has dedicated himself to the study of family violence and its relationship to violence in the larger society, and his work has become the cornerstone for a whole new field of sociology. His research is changing the way parents, educators, social workers, police and lawmakers look at the "ordinary" violence that takes place in our homes, schools and neighborhoods every day.

The Family Research Lab
Today, Straus is co-director, with David Finkelhor '78G, of UNH's Family Research Laboratory, which was established in 1975. Located on the first floor of the Horton Social Science Center, the lab is devoted exclusively to understanding family violence and its impact on individuals and society. While it receives some funding from the university, the lab's research is supported primarily through grants from government agencies and private
There is evidence that abusive behavior is passed along from one generation to the next.

foundations, including the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Justice and the National Institute of Mental Health, which has funded four post-doctoral fellowships yearly for the past two decades.

The Family Research Lab's 12 staff members are both researchers and teachers, educating not only students but also the public in general about the extent and effects of family violence. Because of the breadth of research methods used — surveys, analyses, interviews — their work has received global acclaim for its credibility. Their findings are used not only by other academics, but also in the public education system and to inform public policy in Congress and state legislatures.

Straus has written or co-written 20 books and published more than 200 papers. He has been a mentor for more than 75 graduate, doctoral and post-doctoral students who have gone on to conduct research in the field. "Under Murray's leadership," states Texas Christian University sociologist Jean Giles-Sims '73, '76G, a former Straus student, "so many were trained, mentored and encouraged. That model of research has produced an enormous body of literature." Indeed it has: nearly three dozen books and more than 550 papers.

In sociological circles, Straus and his colleagues and students are known as the New Hampshire School. Their collective work has led them to several general conclusions. They believe that conflict is universal, and there is no single cause of violence in the home; that the various forms of family problems are interrelated, both within the home and in society; and that much of the conflict and violence in society at large can be traced to roots in the family.

Tackling Taboos

Straus is best known for his development, with sociologist Richard Gelles '73G, of the Conflict Tactics Scales, a method of measuring the extent of violence in the home on the basis of information gathered by asking family members how they resolve conflicts. Developed at UNH in 1971, the Conflict Tactics Scales have been modified over the years and are now used all over the world.

The scales measure the extent to which each of three tactics is used to resolve conflict within the family: reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression or violence. For example, "discussed an issue calmly" is one of six reasoning tactics. "Insulted or swore at him/her" is one of eight possible verbal-aggression responses. "Kicked, bit or hit him/her with a fist" is one of 12 violent responses.

In 1975, Straus and his researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of 2,146 people who were married or living with a partner of the opposite sex. The goals of this first National Family Violence Survey were to find out what proportion of American families were violent, how extensive the violence was (including behavior that is not usually considered violent, such as spanking), what the violence meant to the participants and what caused the violence to occur.

They found that in 28 percent of marriages, either the husband or wife or both had resorted to hitting at least once. The survey was repeated 10 years later, in 1985, and parts were repeated in 1992 and 1995.

The years between the surveys brought some significant changes. "We found a substantial reduction in assaults by men on women, but no change in the rate of assaults by women on men," says Straus, who attributes the difference, in part, to public awareness of male batterers, coupled with a cultural acceptance of a woman "slapping the cad."

Instead of taking the usual path of publishing their survey results in sociological journals, Straus and Gelles actively disseminated the data to the general public. "When working on issues that affect people's lives directly, it's important to get the results out," Straus says. "Contrary to what used to be the case in sociology, we encourage people in the lab to talk to reporters and make contacts that will enable people to know what we've found out."
Straus and his colleagues had delved into an area that was historically taboo: what goes on behind closed doors. "Even raising the issue of family violence was controversial in the beginning," says Wheaton College sociology professor Kersi Yllo '77, '80G, another former Strauss student. "It undermined the images of the family that are held dear in our society. Murray followed his nose and found more and more. He is a superb quantitative researcher."

Other sociologists have criticized Strauss for his eagerness to publish his research results in the mainstream media. "He may be communicating with the media in a way that emphasizes his perspective before the data can be critiqued by his peers," says Robert Larzelere, research scientist at Girls and Boys Town in Nebraska, who did post-doctoral work with Strauss. But he adds that Strauss is always open to the ideas of others, even when they disagree with him. Giles-Sims concurs. "One thing I really respect Murray for is that he is so open about different kinds of research," she says.

And many people who work with children and families in trouble, including Larzelere, recognize that Strauss has been instrumental in raising public awareness of vitally important issues. "Having respected data was very important to the feminist movement and important in getting funding and support for the Violence Against Women Act," states Yllo. British psychologist and child advocate Penelope Leach states that Strauss' "decent, repeatable statistics" have been an important tool in her work.

At the Center of the Storm

A well-dressed, diminutive man, Strauss' easy smile and approachable demeanor seem at odds with his field of research. And he seems an unlikely person to find at the center of the controversies sparked by his revelation of the amount of pushing, hitting, slapping, burning, choking and kicking that goes on in ordinary homes.

In the early 1970s, Strauss wrote a series of articles on the topic of battered women and wife beating, which were used extensively by feminists to demonstrate the need for battered women's shelters. Then, when Strauss and Gelles conducted the first National Family Violence Survey, they found that wives are just as likely to hit their husbands as vice versa—and often women are the first to strike out. "I was excommunicated as a feminist," Strauss says. The data was troubling, especially in light of the fact that women are injured in domestic disputes seven times as often as men, and women are twice as likely to be killed.

"I, and others who have worked with Murray, know his core feminist values," says Yllo. "But some feminists see him as the enemy. Many of us have a problem leaping from quantitative data without context to the theory that woman are as aggressive as men. From the feminist perspective, there is a pattern of coercion and control that is reinforced by a violent form of male domination. It is a very rare woman who has a partner that is controlled and terrified in this way."

"The Conflict Tactics Scales are designed to measure how much physical violence there is," Strauss explains. "In order to study the atmosphere of fear and intimidation, you must get separate data."

In 1985, Strauss and UNH colleague Larry Baron released the results of a study showing a positive correlation between the sales volume for pornographic magazines in each state and the rate of rapes reported there. "For four or five years I was the darling of the anti-pornography movement," Strauss observes. But the study created an uproar between advocates of free speech and those who felt that the study bolstered the case for anti-pornography legislation.

More recently, Strauss has become embroiled in a controversy over corporal punishment of children. The 1975, 1985 and 1995 National Family Violence Surveys found that more than 90 percent of Americans use corporal punishment to discipline toddlers. That statistic was confirmed again in a 1999 paper Strauss co-authored with UNH graduate student Julie Stuart. Strauss' research looked at the potential long-term effects and led him to believe that corporal punishment, including spanking, has serious psychological side effects for children and that it hurts society as a whole.

Reports of Strauss' views on spanking created a sensation. Many psychologists and child development specialists, as well as the American public, simply don't agree that spanking can have long-range effects, including reduced cognitive ability in children and higher incidence of juvenile delinquency and adult antisocial behavior. Many respond by saying, "I was spanked, and I'm okay."

"That is equivalent to smokers saying that they've smoked all their lives, and they're okay," Strauss notes. "That's true for two-thirds of heavy smokers, because the death rate is one out of three." The implication is not that smoking is a harmless pastime, but that the speaker was one of the lucky two-thirds. The same logic applies to spanking. "For example, one out of seven children who are spanked often will be seriously depressed as an adult. So, six out of that seven will be the lucky ones who can say, "I was spanked, and I'm okay."

Straus marvels that something so prevalent in American culture can be so neglected in literature on child development. "Here is something experienced by 94 percent of the population, and it gets one half-page in this excellent book," Strauss states, indicating a recently published psychol-
ology text. Why is it ignored? Psychologists don’t want to take sides, says Straus. If they are in favor of spanking, it sounds like they support child abuse. “If they’re against it, they’re afraid they are going to lose readers because it goes against the grain of American society,” he says.

“If parents avoid corporal punishment,” Straus wrote in a 1998 paper, “they are more likely to engage in verbal methods of behavior control, such as explaining to the child. ... The increased verbal interaction with the child will, in turn, enhance the child’s cognitive ability.” In addition, Straus argues that there is evidence that abusive behavior is passed along from one generation to the next, that corporal punishment can more than triple the rate of marital violence, and that, while corporal punishment might lead to short-term conformity, in the long term it leads to violence and crime.

Larzelere disagrees. “I look at the same research and see a middle ground,” he says. Larzelere suggests that parents need to be taught more comprehensive techniques that find a balance between spanking and other forms of discipline, and he questions how realistic zero tolerance is for American society. “There are fewer resources today to solve this problem, while children are facing more difficult issues than ever,” he says.

But Straus sees no middle ground. “No matter what tools you use, you cannot control the behavior of a 2-year-old. The recidivism rate is 80 percent in the same day and 50 percent within two hours,” he states emphatically. In his view, whether parents choose spanking or verbal interaction, the result is the same. Either tactic requires many repetitions before it has any effect, and it may not work at all. Considering the negative ramifications of corporal punishment, he sees no alternative but zero tolerance.

Leach agrees with Straus’ conclusions. “His work has been crucially important to all of us around the world who work with children’s rights,” she says. “He has led people to serious research on a topic that, until 10 years ago, had been ignored. If you believe in the importance of this issue, Murray Straus is a very, very important guy.”

A Legacy of Research

Despite turning 74 this past year, Straus has no intention of resting on his laurels. Currently, he is working on a new book, The Primordial Violence: Corporal Punishment by Parents, which will provide the results of the research on corporal punishment he has conducted over the past six years. In addition to other research and writing, he is developing two new methodologies for studying family violence.

At this point in his career, Straus can easily see the influence his work has had on other social scientists. His most important contribution, he believes, was developing the Conflict Tactics Scales, which made quantitative research on family violence possible. “The Conflict Tactics Scales have provided the data for about 400 articles in scientific journals and perhaps a dozen books, not counting my own,” he says. “Each month sees the publication of about five journal articles based on them.”

While he is very conscious of the stir his research has caused, he is not particularly concerned. He defends his data but resists becoming a crusader in any of the causes that make use of it. “I let my humanitarian concerns tell me what to study to a considerable extent,” he says. “Then I let science stand on its own and govern how to do the research.”

That is another important part of Straus’ legacy: a tradition of research that is guided by humanitarian concerns but grounded in scientific rigor—the kind of research Murray Straus has been doing for almost 50 years.

Elisabet Moore Chase ’81 is a free-lance writer who lives in Concord, N.H. She is currently a graduate student in the nonfiction writing program at UNH.

“Much of the conflict and violence in society at large can be traced to roots in the family.”