SOCILOGISTS AT WORK
MURRAY STRAUS

In Chapter 2 we described the Conflict Tactics Scale, a series of questions that sociologist Murray Straus and his colleagues have used to ask people about their experiences with domestic violence. From his years of research in this area, Straus has found that family violence affects millions of men, women, and children each year.

Why did you become a sociologist, and how did you come to focus on family violence? I had always been fascinated by why things are so different in different countries. As a child I spent some years in England, and I remember stories my grandfather would tell of his years in India and the Middle East. In sociology this is one of the key issues: Why are societies so different?

I got into the area of family violence through a combination of accidents and social processes. It's the old scientific saying, "If you stumble over something interesting in your research, drop everything and study it." I did research on the family for twenty years before I started focusing on violence. It came up in my studies, but I always thought it was a problem with the research, not with the families.

By the 1960s there was a growing concern with and sensitivity to violence, in light of the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., and urban and racial tensions. I was revolted by the Vietnam War, and all of these factors sensitized me to the issue of violence. Then I surveyed my intro students and found that 25 percent had been hit by their parents during their senior year of high school. From thinking about why these parents were hitting their kids, I jumped to family violence.

What surprised you most about the results you obtained in your research? There were two surprises. One was how much violence there is between partners; what parents were doing to their children, they were doing to each other. Kids reported that 15-16 percent of their parents had suffered what the law calls simple physical assault, a slap or a thrown plate of food, in the last year. The level of family violence continues to surprise: A recent study showed that 52 percent of 13-14-year-olds had been hit by parents, and this is with the trend away from corporal punishment.

Yet these children experience the same problems with school achievement, employment, and teenage pregnancy as children living with only their mothers. Differences in family income don't account for any of these effects. But McLanahan and Sandefur found that changes in where children lived, including moving to schools where the children tended to associate with peers with lower aspirations, could account for about half of these differences. Differences in parental involvement and supervision could account for a little bit more. Thus, although small differences still remain, McLanahan and Sandefur's findings suggest that children in stepparent families who had fewer disruptions in their social networks and who received adequate parental supervision had life chances that were much more similar to children raised in nondisturbed families. 83

In general McLanahan and Sandefur's findings refine our understanding of the effects of family structure on children's well-being by demonstrating the importance of both social capital and family income. The findings also help us see how we can use different levels of sociological analysis—macro, meso, and micro—to understand families and their influence on our lives. A macrolevel analysis reveals trends, such as the increase in divorce and single
The second surprise was our finding that women assault their partners at the same rate that men do and that mothers assault children, even adolescents, more than fathers do (because mothers have more child-rearing responsibility). Also, who hits first is at the same rate, which shows that women assaulting partners isn't a matter of self-defense.

It's important to note the difference between men and women in results of injury; women suffer a seven times greater rate of injury because of the superior strength of men. A punch to the chin from a woman will probably result in a bruise, while a punch from a man may result in a broken jaw.

What was the reaction to your research among your colleagues? The reaction has been contradictory. In the late 1960s, before the Conflict Tactics Scale was published, they said there is no scientifically valid way to study family violence because no one will give you a true report of what's going on. Now that the results are out, some say the rates are too high and people are exaggerating and over-reporting.

The truth is, people don't want to hear the bad news about the American family. It is a highly valued institution. Studies have shown that at least 90 percent of family violence is committed by people without psychological pathologies. Family violence is built into the nature of the family.

This is the point I try to get across in my intro courses; so much of the course of human society is found in human social arrangements, not in individual pathologies.

Has your research been replicated? Yes, in thirty studies so far. We've made some changes and revisions of the scale in order to take social context into account more and have had the same results. The scale has made research into family violence very practical. In 1994 it was cited in an average of ten journal articles every month.

What do you think the implications of your research are for social policy? The reception of my research shows that social research is not likely to be used if it doesn't agree with prevailing opinions and trends. There first needs to be a shift of culture and a rise of advocacy groups before research is used to buttress opinions. For example, my study showed that corporal punishment is bad for kids, but it was ignored for twenty years until, for various reasons, it was decided that spanking was bad. Now my research is widely cited!

If I could dictate social policy, I'd institute campaigns of education and prevention that focus equally on men and women who assault their partners. Services should still focus more on women, however, since they receive more serious injuries and are more economically dependent.

parenthood, that affect the probability that children will live in disrupted families and experience a decline in family income and social capital. A mesolevel analysis shows us how changing family structures affect the interactions and resources of families. Finally, a microlevel analysis reveals how these structures affect individuals' life chances. Scholars and policymakers who want to alleviate the problems faced by people living in single-parent families will need to realize that solutions must deal with issues at all these levels of analysis (see Box 10-4, p. 261). Applying our sociological imagination to each of these levels of analysis can also help us understand other issues related to family life, such as the disturbing problem of family violence (see Box 10-3, p. 262).

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Think about changes in the family over the last two centuries other than the rise in divorce and single parenthood, such as the increase in life expectancy and the change in work patterns described earlier in this chapter. How might these changes have affected family interactions? How might they have affected the lives of children?