Leveling, Civility, and Violence in the Family*

MURRAY A. STRAUS**
Department of Sociology,
University of New Hampshire

The factual basis for therapy and family advice urging "leveling" in the sense of giving free expression to aggressive feelings is reviewed and the results of a study of 385 couples presented. The study tested the hypothesis that verbal aggression is a substitute for physical aggression. Opposite results were found: the more verbal expression of aggression, the more physical aggression. A similar analysis of "intellectualizing" marital conflicts found that such an approach is associated with low amounts of physical violence. These results apply most strongly for working-class couples. Historical and social trends which could account for the popularity of leveling approaches to marriage, despite considerable evidence suggesting the opposite, are discussed.

Bach and Wyden’s widely read book on The Intimate Enemy (1968) states that “...couples who fight together are couples who stay together—provided they know how to fight properly.” The authors go on to note that 80 per cent of the couples who come to them don’t fight at all; they avoid conflict. The penalty is “emotional divorce.” The perspective on marriage behind this statement is related to the encounter group movement, and both are part of a broader social movement—almost millennial in character—which deprecates verbal communication and the use of abstract reasoning and declares that the only real communication occurs at the direct sensory, physical, and emotional level (Bach, 1973).

Actually Bach and Wyden’s book is one of the more moderate statements of this movement. In his audio-tape course on “Therapeutic Aggression” (Bach, 1973), and in his work with clients, much stronger statements occur. During one group session on “Aggressive Dating” Bach urged the women participants “Don’t be afraid to be a real shrew, a real bitch! Get rid of your pent-up hostilities! Tell them where you’re really at! Let it be total vicious, exaggerated hyperbole!” (Howard, 1970:54). Others, such as Bindrim, Perl, and Lowen add physical acts of symbolic aggression to their procedures, for example, punching pillows, biting a plastic baby bottle while imagining it is someone you are angry with, and smashing a board in order “to let it out” (Berkowitz, 1973:28; Howard, 1970:94). Shostrom (1967:176) asserts that “Hurting is a necessary part of a [marriage] relationship.”

In fairness, it must be pointed out that Bach and Wyden’s book makes a sharp distinction between procedures for rational conflict and what they call “kitchen sink” or “Virginia Woolf” type fighting, characterized by insults and personal attacks designed to hurt the husband or wife. However, although Bach and Wyden reject Virginia Woolf type fights, they do advocate dropping inhibitions and “outmoded notions of etiquette”—what I will call “civility” later in this paper. Their emphasis on “leveling,” “honesty,” “having it out,” “overcoming inhibitions,” and venting aggressive feelings contradicts their rejection of Virginia Woolf type fights. My reading of the book indicates that there is a powerful meta-communication urging such actions as desirable for their own sake, not just as a means to an end.

The “therapeutic aggression” approach to family life which I have just described, raises a number of important questions. For example, it raises the question of whether, in the privacy of...
their own home and without the supervision of a therapist, couples will be able to turn off the aggression and proceed on to coming to grips with the basis of the conflict. In a forthcoming book on *Violence in the Family*, Steinmetz and Straus (1974:52) point out that, despite the clinical experience on which the "leveling" and "therapeutic aggression" approaches are based, there is no scientifically valid evidence supporting this type of marital therapy, and especially no evidence supporting it for families in general. "Gut-level communication," "leveling," and "letting it all hang out" may only be a modern psychological version of the old medical practice of blood-letting—harmless but useless in some cases and injurious or fatal in others. A case can even be made for the view that these are dangerous oversimplifications which, if widely followed, could well bring misery to the lives of millions. In view of the seriousness of the issue, this paper will examine certain aspects of the theoretical and factual basis for the "leveling" approach to marriage and also present some new evidence bearing on the issue.

In addition, there are two more general objectives of the paper. One of these is to provide an example of basic research which deals directly with practical issues faced by families and those seeking to aid families. The other general objective grows out of the frequently expressed frustration over the gap between research and its practical application. Therefore, the final objective is to use the tools of sociological analysis to understand the broad historical and social processes which come between the knowledge developed by social science research and the application of this knowledge.

"LETTING IT OUT" AS A SAFETY VALVE OR ROLE LEARNING?

A major element of the theories of aggression on which the "leveling" approach is based is the idea of "catharsis." Catharsis theories (also called "hydraulic models" by Bandura and Walters, 1963; and "ventilation theories" by Berkowitz, 1973) assume that all of us have built into our nature a greater or lesser tendency toward aggression which cannot be bottled up. According to these theories, if we attempt to repress this deep biologically based motivation, it will only result in a more destructive explosion of the innate aggressive drive at some later time. Hence it is important to "let it out." It is better to have a series of minor explosions than to let them accumulate into the equivalent of a thermonuclear bomb.

Three recent reviews of the evidence on catharsis (Berkowitz, 1973; Hokanson, 1970; Steinmetz and Straus, 1973) conclude that it is myth. In fact, almost none of the research with any pretensions to scientific rigor supports the idea of catharsis and some shows the reverse; i.e., opportunities to observe or give vent to anger, hostility, and violence tend to produce greater subsequent levels of aggression and violence. The theoretical arguments against the catharsis view are equally cogent. The instinct theory assumptions which underlie the idea of catharsis have long been discarded in social science. Modern social-psychological theories—including social learning theory, symbolic interaction theory, and labeling theory—would all predict the opposite of catharsis theory. That is, a deduction from any one of these theories predicts that the more frequently an act is performed, the greater the likelihood that it will become a standard part of the behavior repertory of the individual and of the expectations of others for the behavior of that individual.

Despite the negative empirical evidence and the cogent theoretical arguments against the idea of catharsis, it continues to gain in popularity among the general public and among a vocal and influential minority of therapists. In fact, a sizable industry to supply opportunities for the presumed therapeutic value of "letting it out" has arisen in recent years. The popular marketing of aggression includes a vast proliferation of encounter groups which encourage participants to shake off their inhibitions and verbally express their sexual and aggressive fantasies, and even styrofoam clubs to be used in mock fights.

1 It has been pointed out to me that the danger is less than might be suggested in this paper because the results of experimental studies of all types of therapy suggest no significant difference between treatment and control groups (Back, 1973; Eysenck, 1966; Meltzoff and Kornreich, 1970). However, this could well be because these experiments use an inadequate methodology for determining the effects of therapy. See Campbell and Stanley, 1963; Gottman, 1973.

2 In this paper the term "violence" is used to refer exclusively to physical violence and as a synonym for "physical aggression." See Steinmetz and Straus (1974:4) for a brief discussion of the reasons for this focus and the distinctive characteristics of the use of physical as compared to other kinds of force or coercion. In addition, as noted in another paper (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1973), the distinction between various uses of physical force is critically dependent on the social meaning of the act for the initiator, for the recipient, and for others directly or indirectly involved with the acts in question.

3 It is important to note that there is an apparent
To the extent that the advocates of “leveling” and “having it out” mean getting the specific issue on the table, this seems likely to be sound advice. But to the extent that they mean “draining off” aggressive drives and releasing tension, modern social-psychological theory would predict the opposite. Translating this into the specifics of my research on physical violence between husband and wife, it leads to the question of whether verbal aggression acts as a substitute for physical aggression (as the catharsis and aggression release theorists would predict) or as a step in an escalating cycle of aggression (as symbolic interaction, labeling, and social learning theorists would predict). In short, is it: “The more verbal aggression, the less physical aggression” or “The more verbal aggression, the more physical aggression”? Perhaps one reason aggression-release-type advice to families and family therapy can experience such popularity even though it is contrary to the available scientific evidence is because the research evidence does not really apply to families. Most of the studies are experiments using children as subjects and none that I know of deals with families. They ignore such critical characteristics of the family as its intimacy and intensity of commitment. Disagreements and tensions encountered in other groups can (and often are) taken care of by terminating the relationship or minimizing contact. In the family, such a strategy is difficult and inherently limited by economic and physical space constraints, and by social norms which stress the undesirability (or impossibility) of terminating the relationship. Consequently, disagreements and tensions in the family, if not directly resolved are more likely to build up to an intolerable level.

A question as momentous as this demands evidence of high quality which is not now available. But in the meantime, I can report the results of a study which provides some preliminary empirical data.

contradiction in this similar treatment of sex and aggression by the encounter group movement. On the one hand, verbal expression of aggression and aggressive acts short of hitting another person are offered as a means of reducing aggression outside the confines of the therapy situation. But at the same time, verbal expression of sexual feelings and sexual acts short of genital contact (such as nudity and touching and feeling) are offered as a means to a more complete sex life, i.e., to more sex. The empirical evidence and the theoretical analysis given in this paper suggest that the consequences envisioned for being more open about sex are also likely to apply to being more open about aggression.

METHOD

Studies of physical aggression between husband and wife pose a number of methodological difficulties because of the sensitivity and taboo nature of the phenomenon (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1973). Consequently, I did not feel that I could directly question husbands and wives about physical violence. What was needed was an inside observer—a third party who knows the marriage well. As a teacher, I realized that I was in daily contact with hundreds of such inside observers: my students. I therefore asked students in introductory sociology and anthropology courses to complete a questionnaire about conflicts in their families during the last year that they were in high school (which in most cases was a few weeks previous to the time the questionnaire was completed). Questionnaires were anonymous and voluntary (although completed during the class period). Of the 583 questionnaires distributed, 95.2 per cent or 555 were completed. However, the usable sample size was reduced to 385 families (66 per cent) because of instances in which the parents were not living together that year, the child was not living at home, or the section on conflicts between mother and father was not adequately completed.

An obvious limitation of this data is that it describes only unbroken families with a child in college, which is far from representative of the population as a whole. For example, since these are stable families who have succeeded in raising a child who attends college, they are probably more adequately functioning than would be a representative cross-section of families. Consequently, a description of the amount of violence between family members based on this data is likely to be an underestimate. It is also likely to be an underestimate because parents (especially middle-class parents) usually try to have their fights when the children are not around. Nevertheless, a great deal of violence was reported. Specifically, 16 per cent of the couples were reported to have used physical violence against one another in that one year.4

4 Fortunately, the issue of this paper is not one of describing the overall amount of violence in the population. Rather, it is the question of whether verbal violence is a substitute for physical violence or an instigator of physical violence. That is, we want to know if high levels of verbal violence are associated with low levels of physical violence, or the reverse. Since a correlation is unaffected by the absolute level of the two variables, the same results will be found even if one or both variables are reduced by any constant, for example, reduced by 50 per cent under-reporting (Straus, 1970:572-573).
TABLE 1. CONFLICT RESOLUTION TECHNIQUE ITEMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Tried to discuss the issue calmly</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>Did discuss the issue calmly</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>Got information to back up his or her side of things</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>Brought in someone else to help settle things (or tried to)</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>Argued heatedly but short of yelling</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>Yelled and/or insulted</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.</td>
<td>Sulked and/or refused to talk about it</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>Stomped out of the room</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>Threw something (but not at the other) or smashed something</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.</td>
<td>Threatened to hit or throw something at the other</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.</td>
<td>Threw something at the other person</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.</td>
<td>Pushed, grabbed, or shoved the other</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.</td>
<td>Hit (or tried to hit) the other person but not with anything</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.</td>
<td>Hit or tried to hit the other person with something hard</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conflict Resolution Measures**

The questionnaire used for this study included a section asking for the three most important conflicts or disagreements between the father and mother of the respondent which occurred during his or her last year in high school. This was followed by a series of questions which asked for the frequency with which different conflict-resolution techniques were used during that year (Table 1).

The conflict resolution techniques listed in Table 1 are divided into three groups. Questions A through D refer to attempts at rational discussion and argument—essentially an intellectualizing of the disputes. The sum of these four items under Father was used to compute an *Intellectualization Index* for the husband. A similar index for the wife was computed from the Mother items.

Questions E through I describe increasing degrees of expression of emotion, anger, and verbal and symbolic violence. The sum of these items were used to obtain the *Verbal Aggression* indexes. Item J (smashing things) was included even though it does not literally fit the label of “Verbal Aggression” because it is so important for the catharsis theory. It will be remembered that this theory holds that if aggression can be ventilated symbolically or on inanimate objects, the aggression will be drained off rather than result in physical violence against another person. In a sense, this is the most crucial item to test that theory because it involves the greatest ventilation of aggression. Despite this, there are reasons for not including the smashing things item. A second version of the Verbal Aggression Index was therefore computed without item J.

Finally, items K through N refer to the use of physical force directed at a spouse. These items were summed to obtain the *Physical Aggression* indexes for the husband and wife.

**Validity.**

The data on husband-wife conflict was

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5 Item J (threatening physical violence) was included in the Physical Aggression index because it was felt that since the other physical aggression items would not always be visible to the child, they would underestimate the amount of violence between husband and wife. It was assumed that if the child observed the parents threatening each other with physical violence, then some violence is likely to have occurred. This reasoning was supported by the results of an item analysis of the Physical Aggression indexes. The correlation of the threat item (J) with the index is .86 for the husband and .87 for the wife. But since item-total correlations with only five items are inflated by the part-whole correlation problem, the correlation of item J with each of the other four physical aggression items was also computed. For the husband, these coefficients (of item J with items K, L, M, and N respectively) were found to be .69, .71, .68, and .57. For the wife, the parallel correlations are .68, .70, .71, and .60.
gathered by asking an "inside observer" to describe what happened in a specific time period rather than asking for self-report. It was felt that this would reduce the self-defensive refusals and unconscious self-defense omissions and distortions likely to occur if the husbands and wives were to be questioned directly on conflicts and physical violence. However, there is no evidence to prove this except informal interviews with eleven respondents in which this matter was discussed, and also the question of the extent to which they felt confident that

FIGURE 1. MEAN PHYSICAL AGGRESSION SCORE BY AMOUNT OF VERBAL AGGRESSION
they knew what disputes and fights their parents had had. Of these eleven, all were quite firm in stating that they reported everything known to them. However, one respondent suspected that there were conflicts that he did not know about. These interviews therefore suggest that the main threat to the validity of the measures is lack of knowledge of disputes between the parents and their modes of resolving them. In a group as intimate as a family living in a single household, it seems likely that children of senior high school age would typically have this knowledge but it will take further investigation to determine the extent to which this is the case.

Reliability

There is, however, evidence to evaluate the reliability of the aggression indexes in the sense of their internal consistency. For this purpose an item analysis was carried out by computing the correlation of each of the items making up an index with the total score. These item-total correlations are given in Table 2. They show that the indexes have an adequate level of internal consistency reliability.4

VERBAL AGGRESSION AND PHYSICAL AGGRESSION

Figure 1 presents the main test of the hypothesis. As formulated on the basis of the Ventilationist perspective, the hypothesis is: The more one's aggressive feelings towards someone are expressed verbally and against inanimate objects, the less the physical aggression against that person.

The findings given in Figure 1 are exactly the opposite. It can be seen that as the level of verbal aggression increases, the level of physical aggression increases dramatically.5

The strong positive association between the level of verbal and physical aggression applies about equally to the husbands and wives. It should also be noted that the relationship between verbal aggression and physical aggression shown in Figure 1 indicates an accelerating trend. That is, as verbal aggression increases, the level of physical aggression does not merely keep up—it increases even more rapidly.6

Although the degree of association in Figure 1 between verbal aggression and physical aggression is impressive, cross-sectional data of this type are open to several different inter-

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4 The Intellectualization and Verbal Aggression indexes used in this paper were normalized by conversion to ten interval “Sten” scores (Canfield, 1951). The Physical Aggression indexes contained too large a proportion of cases with a score of zero to make Sten scoring appropriate. Instead, to achieve the convenience of a one-digit code and to avoid giving excessive weight to a very few cases with extremely high levels of violence, the following recoding was used: scores of 0 through 5 were retained in their raw score form; scores of 6 and 7 were coded as 6, scores of 8 and 9 were recoded as 7, and scores of 10 and over were recoded as 8.

5 Unless otherwise specified, the correlations and cross-tabulations given in this paper relate an independent and dependent variable describing the same actor, for example, husband's Verbal Aggression Index to husband's Physical Aggression Index.

6 Almost identical findings were obtained when Figure 1 was plotted using the version of the Verbal Aggression indexes which omitted item I (smashing things). Expressed as correlation coefficients, the results for Figure 1 are .36 for the husband compared to .38 for the equivalent graph plotted on the basis of Verbal Aggression Index without item I. For the wife, the corresponding figures are .37 compared to .36 for the index omitting item I.

7 These correlations are lower than one might guess from inspection of Figure 1 for two reasons. First, as the accelerating curve already noted: a product moment correlation always understates such a relationship because it assumes a linear relationship. Second, the correlations are attenuated because of the skewed distribution of the physical aggression indexes noted in footnote 6. Finally, even Figure 1 may underestimate the degree of association between verbal and physical aggression because of the attenuated range of both variables growing out of the nature of the sample. That is, the present data are probably a considerable underestimate of the level of husband-wife aggression because they exclude couples who have divorced and contain a larger proportion of middle-class families than the population as a whole. Moreover, the working-class families included are probably more middle-class oriented than the working class in general, as evidenced that they have a child attending a university. Still another factor likely to produce an underestimate of the level of aggression (and therefore to underestimate the correlation between verbal and physical aggression) is incomplete knowledge by the child of conflicts and fights between the parents.
preations. In particular, these data do not tell us whether verbal aggression leads to physical aggression, or whether physical aggression leads to verbal aggression, or (as is most likely) each accelerates the other in an escalating “feed-
back” or “feedforward” (Foss, 1973) loop. But, whatever the specific nature of the causal sequence, it is clear from these data that verbal aggression is not a substitute for physical aggression. Rather, the two go hand in hand.

The Aggressive Personality Theory

Another alternative explanation for the findings is that a general personality trait of aggressiveness is what accounts for the correlation between the verbal and physical aggression. According to this hypothesis, highly aggressive people express their aggression verbally and physically and it is this (rather than any causal connection between verbal and physical aggression) that accounts for the correlation shown in Figure 1. To test this explanation, a measure of General Aggression was obtained for each husband and wife. This was used to divide the sample into Low, Middle, and High groups.9

The correlation of the husband-wife Verbal Aggression with the husband-wife Physical Aggression scores were then computed within each of these groups with similar predispositions to aggression. If aggressiveness in personality is what accounts for the correlations in Figure 1, then we would expect that there should be little or no correlation within these groups because those in each group have roughly similar levels of aggression. The resulting correlations are .26 for husbands in the Low General Aggression group, .31 for husbands in the Middle group, and .39 for husbands in the High group. For the Low General Aggression wives, the correlation was found to be .32, for the Middle wives .41, and for the High wives .48. Comparing these correlations with the Figure 1 correlation between Verbal and Physical Aggression of .36 for the husbands and .37 for the wives does not support the “aggressive personality” theory as an alternative because the correlations for those high in Generalized Aggression are even higher than the Figure 1 correlations. Instead, the results suggest that

“ventilation” is even more unwise for those with the most “bottled up” aggression than for the rest of the population.

Tests of Theory Versus Practical Application

The amount of association between the Verbal and the Physical Aggression indexes shown in Figure 1 is high when compared to the typical correlation found in social science research. However, the usefulness of these findings depends on the use to which they are to be put. For example, if one is a clinician or a family life educator, and if we assume that findings of the study indicate that about 25 per cent of the variation in physical aggression is related to differences in the amount of verbal aggression, the “unexplained” 75 per cent of the variation in physical aggression is extremely important. It means that these findings cannot be the sole or even the major basis for dealing with clients or for giving advice to families. On the other hand, as a test of a theory which says that one of the factors associated with use of physical violence is verbal violence, correlations of this magnitude (for this size sample and assuming adequate measurement) are convincing evidence. This is because the original theory did not assume a single causal factor relationship. Therefore, one cannot discount the empirical findings for failing to show something not asserted by the theory being tested. The clinical and the theoretical perspectives can, however, come together if researchers aid clinicians in stating their theories in multiple factor form, and especially if some of the systemic characteristics of families are included in this formulation. Such theories can be developed and can be tested, as I have tried to show in a paper on a “General Systems Theory Approach to a Theory of Violence Between Family Members” (Straus, 1973).

Ventilation Versus Communication-Block

Another aspect of the findings shown in Figure 1 which needs to be clarified has to do with differences in the content of the items added together to produce the Verbal Aggres-
sion index. There seem to be two different components. First, all five items have in common the element of “gut-level communication” and “letting it out.” But, in addition to this, items E and F (sulking and stomping out of the room) also contain a second type of content. They are aggressive acts which, by their nature, also act as blocks to communication and rational problem solving. If the catharsis and emotional communication theory

9 The items used to obtain this score are “Tends to have it in for people” and “Enjoys hurting people.” These two items were added using the following response category weights: never = 0, rarely = 1, occasionally = 2, often = 3, very often = 4, and usually or always = 5. Those with scores of zero are the Low group, with scores of 1 or 2 the Middle group, and with scores of 3 or higher, the High group. There were 173 husband and 195 wives in the Low groups, 119 husbands and 109 wives in the Middle groups, and 61 husbands and 49 wives in the High groups.
is correct, these communication inhibiting behaviors should be associated with a high level of physical aggression because they interfere or block the communication which is essential to resolving conflicts. On the other hand, items E, F, and I (according to this theory) should be associated with low amounts of physical aggression because they are indicative of the type of nonverbal, emotional level communication which is so central to this theory. Table 3 was computed to test these expectations. It gives the correlation of these items, one by one, with the Physical Aggression Index.

The result of comparing the two types of items, i.e., those involving ventilation of aggression and gut-level communication, but without any necessary block in communication (that is, items E, F, and I: heated argument, yelling, and smashing things), with the items involving both aggression and communication blockage (G and H: sulking and stomping out), shows that the three items containing ventilation of aggression component have as high or higher correlations with physical aggression as do the items combining ventilation with block in communication. This suggests that the factor underlying the correlation of the Verbal Aggression Index with the Physical Aggression Index is the ventilation component rather than the communication-block component.

The last item in Table 3 (smashing things) reveals by far the highest correlation with the Physical Aggression Index. This high correlation is important because it is the quintessence of the gut-level, emotionally charged, sensory communication so prized by the aggression-expression school of thought.

**AROUSAL LEVEL, ROLE LEARNING, AND THRESHOLD REDUCTION AS LINKING PROCESSES**

The findings just presented show that the greater the "ventilation" of aggressive feelings in the course of a dispute between husband and wife, the greater the amount of physical aggression. But what social and psychological processes account for this correlation? To answer this important question requires additional data, especially longitudinal data. At this point all I can do is to suggest four of the possible processes which need to be examined in such future research. These are "arousal level," "role learning," and "threshold reduction," and "feedback reciprocity."

**Arousal Level (See addendum diagram)**

Recent experimental studies (summarized in Johnson, 1972:104) show that subjects exposed to experimental treatments designed to produce hostile and aggressive feelings tended to also exhibit more signs of sexual arousal than the control groups. The opposite effect has also been found (that sexual arousal tends to increase aggression), but not as consistently. These studies have added further empirical evidence concerning the association of sex and violence. However, as Johnson notes (1972:105), the meaning of these findings must take into account other studies which show that aggression is also increased just by exposure to "white noise" and to strenuous physical exercise. This suggests that the causal process linking sex and aggression in these experiments is the generalized activation or arousal level of the person. It could well be that when individuals reach a high level of arousal, they are more likely to go to extremes in whatever they are doing at the time, provided it is consistent with the social cues and the subject's cognitive orientation (Schachter and Singer, 1962).

To the extent that this is the case, it would seem as though the most efficient means of avoiding physical aggression in disputes between husband and wife is to maintain some of those "outmoded notions of etiquette," thrown out by Bach and Wyden. These are, in my opinion, the rules of civil behavior which mankind has evolved through the ages to deal with the arousal level problem. The rules of "civility" undoubtedly are inhibiting and restrictive, and sometimes even the source of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Aggression Item</th>
<th>Husband's Physical Aggression</th>
<th>Wife's Physical Aggression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E. Heated argument</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Yelled</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Sulked/refused to talk</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Stomped out</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Smashed something</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
much discontent and unhappiness. But they also seem to be one of the mechanisms by which the arousal level and hence the likelihood of physical violence can be avoided.

Role Learning

A second linking process which might account for the correlation of the Verbal Aggression Index with the Physical Aggression Index is "role learning." By this I mean that by engaging in an act which has elements in common with another act, one has practiced part of the behavior of the other act, and hence made it easier to carry out that act. Thus, if a person has hurt a spouse verbally, part of what is involved in hurting a spouse physically has been learned or practiced, i.e., deliberately hurting.

Aggression Threshold Reduction

A final speculation on processes which could account for the correlation between verbal and physical aggression is based on the assumption that social circumstances are important in defining the threshold at which physical violence takes place. A high level of insult-exchange or other verbal aggressive acts can lower this threshold so that disagreements which might not otherwise lead to blows now do. The verbal aggression may activate a variety of cues which signal the appropriateness of physical aggression, just as the visible presence of a gun led Berkowitz's subjects to express more aggression than was the case for those who participated in the experiment without a gun being visible (Berkowitz, 1967).

Feedback and Negative Reciprocity

Each of the linking mechanisms just described refers to intra-individual psychological processes. But physical violence between husband and wife is an interactional phenomenon for which interactional processes are important explanations. In the present case, the ventilation of aggression by a husband or wife can, in principle, set in motion either a positive (i.e., amplifying) cycle of events, or a negative (i.e., dampening) cycle. The data in Figure 1 suggest that a positive feedback (or "feedforward," Foss, 1973) is typical. Very likely, part of the feedback process involves what can be called "negative reciprocity," but many other elements must also be considered, as I have suggested in a paper specifically on this issue (Straus, 1973; see also Pisano and Taylor, 1971).

INTELLECTUALIZATION AND PHYSICAL AGGRESSION

Within the inherent limits of the data, the results just presented provide no evidence in favor of the presumed beneficial effects of "leveling," "letting it out," releasing inhibitions, and expressing one's anger to another. Quite to the contrary, they suggest that such "gut-level communication," rather than helping to avert physical aggression, is associated with physical violence. But what about the other side of the coin—the "outmoded notions of etiquette," decried by Bach and Wyden and the "excessive rationality" of the middle-class life decried by those who would "green" America? The data available in this study permit at least a partial look at these claims. The four items included in the Intellectualization Index all refer to the kind of rational, "cerebral," "buttoned-up" approach to family problems and disputes which are under severe attack—sometimes explicit, but more often an implicit attack. These include discussing things calmly, getting information bearing on the issue, and bringing in outsiders to help settle things. Each of these puts the emphasis on the intellect rather than affect. According to the proponents of the leveling approach, relating to others in this way lacks genuineness. They view it as a cognitive style which is the antithesis of true leveling because no "real" communication can take place by such abstract verbalizations. We can put this point of view to an empirical test by finding out if high Intellectualization scores are associated with much or little physical aggression.

Figure 2 shows clearly that the more couples engaged in this type of rational problem solving, the lower the level of physical violence. Of course, with cross-section correlation data of this type, it is impossible to know which causes which, i.e., is there little or no physical violence in the families that take the calm, rational, emotion-suppressing approach to resolving conflicts because they do the things specified in the Intellectualization Index, or, could there be some third factor which accounts for both the high level of Intellectualization and the low level of physical violence?

One such variable which might produce the kind of "spurious correlation" just suggested is the socioeconomic status of the family. High status couples are both given to more intellectualization and to less violence. Consequently, what may seem like the prophylactic effect of intellectualizing issues, may merely be a social class difference in disguise. To investigate this possibility, the correlations between the Intellectualization Index and the Physical Aggression Index were recomputed separately for the families classified as working class (on the basis
of the husband being a manual worker) and middle class (on the basis of the husband being in a nonmanual occupation).

The results of this replicated correlation analysis make it unlikely that the results for the total sample are due to confounding of the Intellectualization and the Physical Aggression measure with middle-class socioeconomic status because inspection of Table 4 shows that the correlation of Intellectualization is greatest among the working-class part of the sample and almost zero in the middle-class part of the sample.

FIGURE 2. MEAN PHYSICAL AGGRESSION SCORE BY AMOUNT OF INTELLECTUALIZATION

![Graph showing mean physical aggression score by amount of intellectualization.](image-url)
sample. Thus, intellectualization seems to be most important for avoiding physical aggression in the working-class rather than the middle-class part of the population studied. A possible explanation is that among the working class the norms disapproving physical aggression against a husband or wife are less strongly institutionalized, thus allowing other factors—such as Intellectualization—to play a larger role in inhibiting violence.¹⁶

SOCIAL TRENDS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

To the extent that the research and theories reviewed in the introduction to this paper are correct, and to the extent that the findings of the study just described are correct, there seems to be a glaring contradiction between what science tells us and what a major group of family educators and family counselors are telling us.

¹⁶ There are, of course, many other possible explanations. The one offered is consistent with the findings to be reported in other papers on this research which also suggest that the normative prohibition on physical aggression is greatest in the middle class. The plausibility of this explanation is also enhanced because it was possible to check on at least one other possibility: that the mean intellectualization score is so much higher among the middle-class part of the sample that the resulting attenuation imposes an upper limit on the correlation. The same might be true in the opposite direction for the level of physical aggression. To check on this possibility, the mean Intellectualization and Physical Aggression scores, together with their standard deviations were compared. This showed a somewhat higher mean Intellectualization Index for the middle-class husbands compared to the working-class husbands and also a somewhat lower standard deviation (working class X = 4.2 ± 2.2; middle class X = 4.7 ± 1.9) but not enough to account for the lack of correlation. For Physical Aggression, the scores for the middle-class husbands, although considerably lower (X = 0.9 ± 2.2 versus X = 0.3 ± 1.3) are also unlikely to account for the lack of correlation. This conclusion is strengthened by the data for the wives. No difference at all was found for this sample in the average level of Intellectualization of the working and middle-class wives (X = 4.6 ± 2.1 versus X = 4.6 ± 2.0). Among the wives, the average level of Physical Violence was also lower for the middle-class than for the working-class wives (X = 0.4 ± 1.5) but it is unlikely that the resulting attenuation was sufficient to cause the near zero correlation within the middle-class part of the sample.

It is important to understand the reasons for this contradiction. It is a case study in the application (or really, lack of application) of social science, which has implications for researchers, for those providing professional services to families, and of course, for families. Therefore, the remainder of this paper will describe some of the factors which might account for this glaring discrepancy between social science and its application.

(1) A Swing Of The Historical Pendulum in Relation to Family Roles

The first of the factors which I believe account for the discrepancy between the scientific findings and the current emphasis on “letting it out” is part of a larger historical trend in American society away from, and in reaction to, the previous rigidity and formalism of family roles, especially in the middle class. It is an over-reaction to past and still lingering elements of repressive Victorian society. These new value commitments—emphasizing the importance of flexible rather than fixed roles, openness and frankness rather than formal etiquette, and expression of emotions rather than self-control—all tend to block perception of evidence which might question the value of the new life styles or which might weaken the thrust toward needed social change. Hence the ignoring of the evidence cited earlier in this paper.

(2) Changes in Social Science Theories

Reinforcing the changes in social values just mentioned is a parallel development among social scientists and those providing professional services to families. This is the growth of theories which recognize that conflict is an inherent feature of all human societies and of social institutions such as the family (Coser, 1966, 1967). As in the case of the reaction against Victorian formalism in family patterns, the social-scientific and therapeutic reaction against the previous consensus and harmony models of social interaction has tended to
overemphasize the formerly neglected element. In short, like the popular culture, the scientific culture of the last few years represents an over-reaction to a previous pattern of society and social theory. And, like the new value commitments, the new theoretical commitments also tend to blind us to evidence which might question their validity or weaken their potential for bringing about desired change.

(3) The Inevitability of Conflict in a Time of Change

Part of the reason for the upsurge in conflict models of social behavior just referred to is the fact that we are in a time of far-reaching change in the pattern of social relations. This is nowhere more evident than in the family. But change does not come about easily. The shift to a more equalitarian family pattern has been the source of untold strife, as countless marriage counselors can testify, and as also suggested in a recent study by Kolb and Strauss (1973). The same holds for the change to a less restrictive sexual code. Furthermore, there is a growing recognition by those who advocate further changes in the family that conflict will be necessary and inevitable. But that is quite a different matter than advocating openness and conflict as means of securing family harmony. If harmony and family stability are the desired goals, they can best be reached by restricting conflict. But if, as I think is the case, the conscious or unconscious goal of much recent social science, and of leaders of therapeutic-aggression movement, is really to change society and to drastically restructure the family, then it might be appropriate to advocate open conflict as socially desirable. However, aggressiveness is not the only alternative to passive acceptance of the status quo. One can be assertive without being aggressive. Unfortunately, the important difference between these two modes of interaction is usually blurred because, as pointed out in footnote eight, current terminology tends to equate them. In any case, as Olson (1970:527) notes, researchers and practitioners cannot collaborate unless the goals of therapy or family life education are specified. But this is more easily said than done because of the tremendous diversity of goals among those providing professional services to families.

(4) The New Biological Determinism and its Fusion With the Freudian Aggression-Instinct Theory

A similar but distinct historical trend is the renewed interest among the general public and social scientists in the biological foundations of human behavior. This is a needed corrective to the social determinism which has dominated behavioral science for two generations. But, as exemplified in the widely heralded work of Ardrey, Lorenz, and Morris, this new interest in the biological roots of behavior goes far beyond a needed corrective because these authors essentially say that there is a basic innate drive of aggressiveness in human beings. Among many social scientists and among even more therapists, this is a theme made familiar by the psychoanalytic doctrine of the "instinct for aggression." There are other reasons than the prestige of psychoanalytic theory for the receptivity of the discredited "instinct for aggression" doctrine; for example, the rejection of the intellect, and anti-rationalism which is discussed below. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to document either the causes of the re-emergence of instinctive theories of behavior, nor to document the case against such theories. But whatever the reasons and whatever the merits of such a view, it lays the groundwork for accepting therapeutic procedures and advice to families which involve encouraging people to give vent to aggression because such theories assume that it is unhealthy to bottle up such powerful innate drives.

(5) Alienation and Anti-Rationalism

Modern industrial societies are based on science, technology, and a rationalist perspective. As increasing numbers of individuals become disaffected with the mass-society aspect of modern industrial systems, they tend to turn against the science, technology, and rationalism which made such a society possible.

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11 I will simply say that there is a vast difference between asserting that humans have the biological capacity for aggression and asserting that they have an innate tendency to exercise that capacity which can be thwarted only at the risk of an explosive outburst of aggression at some later time. It is like asserting that because humans have the biological capacity to read, all or most of us will read even if not taught to read. Three excellent sources on the presumed instinctual basis of aggression are Allard, 1972; Fromm, 1973; and Johnson, 1972. See also the discussion of "The Catharsis Myth" in Steinmetz and Straus, 1973, 1974.

A clear analysis of the issue of the instinctual basis for aggression is obscured by virtue of its confounding with larger political and social values and by unfortunate terminology. The terminological confusion I have in mind comes from the fact that in psychoanalytic and much lay usage, the term aggression is not restricted to "acts carried out with the intention of injuring another" but also refers to such things as "drive level," assertiveness, and exploratory behavior. Similar problems beset the term "violence." To avoid these terminological confusions, it seems best to use compound terms such as verbal violence, physical aggression, and physical violence. See also footnote 2.
This anti-rationalism and its corollary emphasis on emotions rather than intellect takes many forms. One is the feeling that modern societies have overemphasized critical thinking and rational planning and neglected spontaneity and expression of inner feelings. Berkowitz (1973) for example, quotes Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, as follows:

"Each time you use the question why, you diminish in stature. You bother yourself with false, unnecessary information. You only feed the computer, the intellect. And the intellect is the whore of intelligence. It's a drag on your life."

As in the case of the presumed instinct for aggression, it is easy to see why those who hold beliefs such as those expressed by Perls will take a dim view of calm intellectual discussions of family disputes and a favorable view of the presumed beneficial effects of "letting it out."

(6) Congruence with the Positive Value of Aggression in America

Human societies vary in the extent to which the components of their social structure are integrated with each other. Some are quite "loosely structured" (Embree, 1950; Ryan and Straus, 1954) in the sense that they have norms and values which are inconsistent with each other or which are inconsistently followed. Physical aggression is an aspect of American society which is loosely integrated in this sense. Although we have clear norms and values restricting violence and emphasizing the value of peace and harmony—especially between family members—simultaneously there exists a high level of actual violence and also norms glorifying aggression and violence.

The normative approval and actual occurrence of physical violence is not confined to such things as "preventative" air raids in Viet Nam, the death penalty, police brutality, vigilante activities, and the right to own nonspointing type guns. Physical violence also characterizes the family. In fact, as documented in previous papers, the family is pre-eminent in every type of violence from slaps to torture and murder (Steinmetz and Straus, 1973; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1973). In childhood, the persons most likely to strike a child are his brothers, sisters, and parents. In adulthood, the victim of assault or murder is more likely to be a relative than any other category of offender-victim relationship. There are informal norms, largely unverbalized, which make a marriage license also a hitting license (Gelles, 1973; Schultz, 1969).

I have emphasized the high level of aggression in American society and the norms approving aggression because these aspects of American society are likely to be an important part of the reason for the popularity of "let it all out" type advice and therapy. These data suggest that the American people do not need such advice. In this sense, they have been "leveling" all along, but (at least in the middle class where the ventilationist approach is most popular), also feeling guilty about it because of the simultaneous existence of norms and values which emphasize nonviolence, especially between family members. One of the appeals of ventilationist type advice and therapy, therefore, is that this approach helps to reduce guilt about the high level of verbal and physical aggression which characterizes the family by declaring that such acts are psychologically and socially beneficial. 1 2

(7) Confusion of Immediate Satiation with Long-Term Reinforcement

As Steinmetz and I have pointed out elsewhere (Steinmetz and Straus, 1973, 1974), one must distinguish between immediate and longer term effects. There can be little doubt that an outburst of aggressive activity is often followed by a sharp reduction in tension, an emotional release, and even a feeling of quiescence. Thus, there is often an immediate cathartic effect. But to the extent that such tension release is produced by verbal and physical aggression, this immediate effect is likely to powerfully reinforce the aggression which preceded it. Having reduced tension in one instance, it becomes a mode of behavior that is likely to be repeated later in similar instances. An analogy with sexual orgasm seems plausible. Following orgasm, there is typically a sharp reduction in sexual drive, most obvious in the loss of erection by the typical male. But at the same time, the experience of orgasm is

1 2 The fact that the past decade has been a period of greater than usual level of violence is probably also important. Crimes involving violence increased during this period. At the same time there was the pervasive influence of the Viet Nam war—which most Americans supported until it became clear that we had lost the war—and also the violent opposition to that war and the violent repression of that opposition. The fact that aggression-expression therapies also arose during this period is consistent with the general tendency for societies that are characterized by a high level of aggression to express this in many ways. For example, a cross-cultural comparative study (Sipes, 1973) found that societies which engage in warfare tend to be societies that have aggressive combative type sports. Similar effects would probably be found within societies over historical time. Huggins and Straus (1973), for example, found just this in a study of violence in children's literature from 1850 to 1970. The number of physically violent incidents in these stories increased sharply during the Civil War period, during both World Wars, and during the Viet Nam war.

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powerfully reinforcing so that the successful orgasm has the long-term effect of increasing sexual desire. It seems likely that aggression and sex are similar in at least this respect. That is, the short-term effects are cathartic; but the long-term effect is a powerful force towards including aggression as a standard mode of social interaction. I suggest that the clinical observations on which aggression-release therapy is based are the short-run effects visible in the therapist's office or group. In any case, I have been unable to find any long-run consequence studies. This would seem to be a high priority type of study for researchers who want to aid those who provide services for families.

(8) Inappropriate Application of Therapeutic Techniques to the General Public

Another reason for the growing popularity of "therapeutic aggression" is that the needs of certain individuals and couples who seek the aid of therapists is assumed to be needs of the population in general. A survey by R. D. Palmer of over 500 hospitalized psychiatric and non-psychiatric patients found that the feature most characteristic of the psychiatric group was conflict "... involving a fear and inhibition of aggressive feelings" (cited in Berkowitz, 1973:30).

There has been no similar study of families comparing those in therapy with a random sample of families. But the data presented above on the high level of verbal and physical aggression in American families makes it likely that there would be an equally sharp contrast between the two groups. Thus, to advocate what may be appropriate to reduce tension and secure communication of grievances on the part of certain aggression-inhibited individuals, may only serve to increase an already high level of aggression among the nonclinical population. This poses no problem for the marriage counselor because the counselor is treating a specific case and adapts the treatment to the needs of that specific case. The danger lies when aggression-expressing behaviors are advocated in books, cassette tapes, and encounter groups for the public at large, without the ability to consider the already existing level of aggression.

(9) The Kernel of Truth

Finally, it is important to point out that the ventilationist approach to human relationships is far from devoid of a factual basis. There are important grains of truth underlying this position. But the ventilationists, in their focus on one aspect of human behavior, oversimplify and overgeneralize. The previous discussion of the difference between the needs of certain clinical populations and the needs of the public at large is an example of such an inappropriate extension.

There are probably a number of other factual bases which are inappropriately extended, of which only three will be mentioned here. The first is a confusion between "leveling" as communication and as acting-out. It may be true that leveling and honesty in the sense of getting issues out into the open and in the sense of not hiding one's anger or disagreement are positive forces in human interaction. That is, to try to deny to ourselves and others that we feel anger is a distortion of reality which is likely to cause trouble; and to avoid bringing out issues is to preclude the possibility of resolving them. But leveling in the sense of acting-out one's anger by verbal or physical aggression against another is an inappropriate extension of these truths, and one which the evidence presented in this paper suggests tends to lead to heightened rather than reduced aggression and which is likely to produce retaliatory aggression rather than a resolution of the conflict.

Another grain of truth underlying the ventilationist approach is what I have elsewhere called the "Clockwork Orange" theory of violence (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1973), derived from the book of the same name (Burgess, 1962); and specifically, the episodes in which Alex and the Droogs commit violent acts when there is nothing else to do. The Clockwork Orange theory serves as a broad label for the variety of explanations of violent acts which locate the cause of violence in boredom, the urge to seek thrills, and "excessive reciprocity" (Cohen, 1955; Klausner, 1966; Palmer, 1972). If one grants the concepts of excessive reciprocity and an optimum tension level, then what seems to have happened is that the ventilationists have made an inappropriate linear extension of a relationship which is curvilinear. That is, although a completely tensionless and conflict-free set of social relationships is a state to be avoided, it does not follow that an increase in tension and aggression is generally desirable because most of us already have a fully adequate level of tension, conflict, and aggression in our individual and family lives.

A final inappropriate extension of a correct observation stems from a troublesome aspect of modern society: the transitory social relationships characteristic of a highly mobile urban population. As a result, there is a longing for intimacy and community that is very wide-
spread. "Leveling" and aggression-therapy may be seen as a means of achieving the intimacy which so many find lacking in their lives. But the reasoning underlying this is a clinical version of the "correlation equals causation" fallacy. It is true that intimate groups tend to engage in highly emotional conflict (Coser, 1966) which writers from Simmel (1955) to Charny (1972) have called the love-hate relationship. However, the causal sequence goes the other way. That is, it is the depth of involvement and concern between members of intimate groups, such as the family, which makes conflict between them so emotionally intense. The appeal of the ventilationist approach to securing human intimacy is based on the implicit assumption that the causal sequence goes in the opposite direction, i.e., that an intense conflict experience leads to intimacy and mutual concern and involvement. There may be some circumstances in which relationships do develop in this way, but the more usual sequence of events is the opposite: engaging in an emotionally intense conflict, fully expressing one's anger at the other, typically leads to a reduction in mutual liking and concern.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper is focused on individual and marital therapy and advice to the public which promotes the desirability of "leveling" in the sense of giving free expression to one's aggressive feelings. Both the review of previously published research and data from a new study of 385 couples fails to support the value of such an aggression-release or "ventilationist" type approach. In fact, the weight of the evidence suggests that such an approach may be dangerous because, rather than reducing subsequent aggression (as argued by the ventilationists), expressing aggression against others probably tends to increase subsequent aggressive acts.

The new data presented deals with one aspect of this issue: is verbal aggression a substitute for physical aggression? The findings show just the opposite—that the greater the amount of verbal aggression, the greater the amount of physical aggression. The role of intellectualizing conflict was also examined. It was found that the greater the degree of intellectualization, the less the amount of physical aggression.

A number of alternative explanations of the association between verbal and physical aggression were examined, including what can be called the "aggressive personality" theory. It was shown that expressing aggression verbally is associated with physical aggression irrespective of this aspect of the spouses' personality. These findings support an interactional rather than a personality predisposition theory of the causes of husband-wife violence.

On the basis of the review of previous research and the results of the study reported in this paper, one can conclude that much of the new therapy and advice literature, and especially much current encounter group activity, is almost exactly opposite to what the scientific evidence suggests is appropriate for reducing physical aggression and bringing about satisfying interpersonal relationships. There are many factors which could account for this startling discrepancy between social science findings and clinical methods presumed to be based on social science. Nine are discussed in this paper. They range from broad historical trends in the society to simple errors in logic.

Although one can find many reasons why the ventilationists have ignored social science, and although there are many different points of view among the ventilationists, they have in common a disdain for "outmoded notions of etiquette," and for what is considered the "excessive rationality" of middle-class life. Instead, the ventilationists see the solution to problems of human relationships as being dependent on allowing the "natural man" free reign, including the presumed need to express aggression. They, therefore, ignore the evidence presented in this paper and the even more extensive evidence indicating that the "natural man" is really a product of social interaction.

The ventilationist position is analogous to that of the Puritans and Victorians who called on us to renounce emotion and sensuality in the name of God. The ventilationists ask us to renounce rationality (and to abandon the rules of "civility" which have evolved through the ages) in the name of humanism. Both Puritanism and ventilationism are social movements which set up a tragic false dichotomy between emotions and intellect. Ventilationism is an anti-humanistic social movement because its side of this false dichotomy denies to humanity
one of the most important aspects of the true human potential: the creative use of rational intelligence.

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Palmer, Stuart 1972 The Violent Society. New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press.


ADDITIONAL ON CHANGES IN TERMINOLOGY

1. The instrument described in Table 1 has been revised and renamed as the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS). A methodological article "Measuring Intramoral Conflict and Violence" will appear in a 1978 issue of Journal of Marriage and the Family.

2. The name given to one of the three Conflict Tactics described on page 16 has been confusing, especially to clinically trained persons. This scale was described as measuring "Intellectualization." I meant to refer to the active use of human intelligence to achieve a solution to husband-wife conflicts. However, among therapists, intellectualization also has another meaning: a mechanism for avoiding issues by distancing oneself and making them into impersonal problems rather than personal problems; of hiding behind abstract discussions rather than facing up to the real issues.

That meaning of "intellectualization" is almost the opposite of what is intended in this paper! Instead of avoiding the issue, my use of term is meant to signify an active and assertive, but also a "civil" and non-aggressive (in the sense of malevolent) approach to conflicts in the family.

To avoid further confusion, this scale is now called a measure of "Reasoning." However, that too has certain problems. The main problem is that it does not adequately denote the active, problem-solving, getting-the-issues-on-the-table aspect of things which is so crucial for conflict management.
Letters to the Editor

STRAUS ON STRAUS

One of the disadvantages which accompany the courtesy of immediate publication of a presidential address is that the author does not have the opportunity for a second look at the paper after the original round of writing and rewriting. The occasion of my presenting the paper on “Leveling, Civility, and Violence in the Family” (February, pp. 13-29) to a seminar at the University of York brought about such a second look and revealed the need for amplifications and qualifications.

On conflict in marriage. The paper was written in reaction to a particular theoretical position (the “catharsis” or “ventilation” theory of aggression) and to a particular social movement (the “encounter group” movement). My attack on these positions may in places be interpreted as advocating the elimination of conflict in marriage. That is not the case because to hold such a position would be empirically untenable since conflict is an inevitable part of all human association. It would also be theoretically restricting because it is the task of the sociologist to deal with any such major feature of social life. Most important of all, to do so would deny the creative function of conflict in bringing about needed adjustments and changes in the family. Rather than urging the elimination of conflict, the paper is an essay on what Dahrendorf would call “the regulation of conflict.” It focuses on one set of mechanisms or modes of dealing with the inevitable conflicts in marriage. More specifically, it is an attack on the view that by “ventilating” one’s aggressive feelings, the way can be paved for solutions to marital conflicts. Put most simply, the view presented in this paper is that for most people in contemporary American society, such ventilation of aggression typically adds another element to the conflict, heightens the tension and arousal level of the participants, and therefore makes it more difficult to come to grips with the substantive conflict.

Subjective meaning of verbal aggression. The paper assumes that yelling and name calling (and also “cutting remarks”—which should have been included in the Verbal Aggression index but, unfortunately, were omitted) are perceived by the actors as aggressive acts; that is, acts carried out with the intent to injure. Only if this is the case are the escalating processes described in the paper likely to follow. However, the paper omits an important contingency: if the spouses define such behaviors as a normal part of discourse, then they will not produce the heightened arousal and the role practice in aggression that are assumed to be part of the processes producing the escalation to physical aggression. Conversely, if the types of behavior subsumed under the Intellectualization index are seen as a violation of norms (for example, if intellectualization is taken as evading the problem) then intellectualization can be as infuriating as name calling, yelling, and smashing things, and can also set in motion an escalating cycle of aggression. The attached flow chart outlines the key elements of the theory as presented in the paper but adds to it this critical contingency.

The encounter group movement and subjective meanings. Assume for the moment that encounter groups and related ideological movements in American society have (or will) produce a change in the meaning of such things as name calling, yelling, and smashing things, to make them a normal, expected, and rule bound part of marital conflict; rather than indications of intent to injure, as a breakdown in “civility,” and as preludes to heightened forms of aggression. To the extent that this is the case, then the upward diagonal arrow in the attached figure would represent the typical sequence of events. This is a distinct possibility and indeed has always been the case in some families. However, to the extent that actors define such behaviors as normal and not intended to injure, they are not aggressive acts and therefore cannot be taken as evidence for or against the catharsis theory.

Definitions of violence. Although I have tried to make clear the limited and specific way in which the term violence is used in this
paper (see footnotes 2 and 11) it remains a persistent source of confusion. This is because violence is a political term as well as (or perhaps more than) a scientific concept. The most immediate source of confusion is with the use of "violence" by Laing and Cooper. I recognize the importance of the phenomenon to which they refer. But it is a separate phenomenon, as can be seen from the fact that they rarely mention instances in which physical force is employed. In short, violence in the Laing sense can occur with or without violence in the sense used in this paper, i.e., physical aggression. At the same time, in retrospect, I see that my use of the term violence also reflected a political stance because, unlike more neutral terms such as force and physical aggression, the term violence has a pejorative connotation. In respect to the politics of the family, I take a view directly parallel to that of Dahrendorf in relation to intergroup conflict, namely that "... violent conflict may at times ... be desirable .... Generally speaking, however, it would seem to be the task of social policy to try to regulate the inevitable conflicts of social life by other means ...." (p. 231).

MURRAY A. STRAUS
University of New Hampshire
( CURRENTLY AT UNIVERSITY OF YORK, ENGLAND)

MORE ON STRAUS ....

I would like to respond to what I consider an inaccurate and illogical attack on the Constructive Aggression system in Murray Straus' article, "Leveling, Civility, and Violence in the Family" (February 1974).

The article states that the book The Intimate Enemy is an example of a perspective on marriage related to the encounter group movement, and that the system developed in The Intimate Enemy for the resolution of marital conflict is "part of a broader social movement ... which depreciates verbal communication and the use of abstract reasoning and declares that the only real [italics mine]
communication occurs at the direct, sensory, physical, and emotional level (Back, 1973)."

In my opinion Dr. Straus bases his attack on "therapeutic aggression" on two logical fallacies—argumentem ad hominem and the "straw man" argument. Whether George Bach may or may not give metamessages urging hostile communications as desirable for their own sake is a highly debatable point. The Constructive Aggression system that Bach and others developed definitely does not include such metacommunication. Dr. Straus confuses what George Bach says in his personal coaching of participants at a Pairing session at Kairos, for example, with the techniques of the system of "therapeutic aggression."

Having been a trainer at the Kairos weekend which Jane Howard described in Please Touch, and from which Dr. Straus quotes, I can say with certainty that the statement attributed to Dr. Bach is both taken out of context and misleading. The context in which the statement occurred was a specific Hostility Ritual called "Gender Club." Ritualized expressions of male-female stereotypes do depend on the willingness of participants to vent hostile feelings associated with their unreal expectations and pre-judgments of the opposite sex; however, the eventual confrontation is done only by the permission of all the participants. By this I mean that the informed consent of the group is given only after rules are established—with a definite time limit agreed upon as part of the exercise. No one is forced to participate in any exercise in an Aggression Lab, neither by group pressure nor by the pressure of the trainer.

The system of "therapeutic aggression" (Constructive Aggression) is not what Dr. Straus says it is. The system is built upon a thorough training of people in delayed responses. No one is permitted, much less encouraged, to vent hostile feelings—either verbally or trans-verbally—without requesting and getting permission of the partner and/or listeners. If the listener agrees to hear the expressions of feelings, this is seen as a gift of positive regard. The person who is to hear the other, moreover, gets to set a time limit within his or her tolerance level for disengaged listening. Participants in Aggression Labs get to practice this kind of ritualized communication within the context of the group’s and the trainer’s observation. They seldom learn a specific ritual in one attempt, and the "homework" assignments are carefully limited in content with certain "beltline" issues declared off-limits by mutual consent. In my experience, this kind of structuring helps people contain the hostile feelings within rational bounds; hostility rituals are exercises in self-discipline for both speaker and listener. The irony, for me, of Dr. Straus’ attack is that the criticism I hear from advocates of some encounter groups is that our system is not spontaneous enough, is sometimes "too polite."

Dr. Straus seems to be lumping various aggression styles in one potentially explosive category. I have found that people often utilize one of the following styles in most of their relationships, although sometimes the style evoked is pair-specific.

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The system of "therapeutic aggression" described in The Intimate Enemy is a process of retraining the interpersonal communication of angry and hostile feelings, as well as of developing effective expressions of impact aggression (the rational desire to have a creative impact on one’s environment). This training process works best with people whose styles are either indirect (passive-aggressive) or abrasive (aggressive-aggressive). The constructive-aggressive style combines the directness of the aggressive-aggressive style with the timing and tact of the passive-aggressive. The extremely fight-phobic person as well as the "rageolic" usually needs counseling and/or psychotherapy in order to attain a level of conscious (Adult) control over his reactions. Nowhere in The Intimate Enemy does Bach suggest his system is the answer for severely disturbed individuals. The Constructive Aggression system is actually designed to increase a couple’s (or family’s) capacity to solve problems rationally. The Hostility Rituals which so offend Dr. Straus are actually highly disciplined exercises in the expression of irrational feelings, and these are only one-half of the training process. The Fair Fight, one of the main impact exercises, is based on a computer-model of communication, and is a highly efficient method of teaching people how to hear each other on a conflict issue. The trainers and coaches in Aggression Labs have never maintained that "real" communi--
cation must be irrational to be effective. To the contrary, we recognize that intense hostility often provokes people to irrational behavior, and we try to contain these expressions in carefully limited Rituals.

The use of Constructive Aggression in the family has been recently developed by Yetta Bernhard and others. Yetta Bernhard will be publishing some of her findings on the use of Constructive Aggression in counseling in a book due to be published in 1975. As a student-intern of hers, I would hasten to emphasize that we do not encourage couples or families to practice Constructive Aggression techniques without thorough training in their use—and potential abuse.

Catherine M. Bond

Aggression Lab Leader-Trainer
California Family Study Center

“Leveling, Civility and Violence in the Family” by Murray A. Straus (February 1974) reports a truly significant bit of research that has been needed for quite some time.

From 25 years experience in marriage and family counseling, I could write a book of clinical evidence and case studies to back up Murray’s thesis and findings.

In a quite recent case related to child custody, the fairly good marriage had been literally destroyed by verbal violence drawn out and encouraged by the leadership in a series of encounter group therapy sessions.

I believe in the need for frank honest communications. I encourage controlled, well-planned confrontations by couples when major differences surface. But an intimate enemy is still an enemy.

Thanks for your part in bringing this paper to those of us who were not there to hear it presented.

P. K. Houdek

Central Midwest Association of
Marriage and Family Counselors