

A Tribute to Murray A. Straus

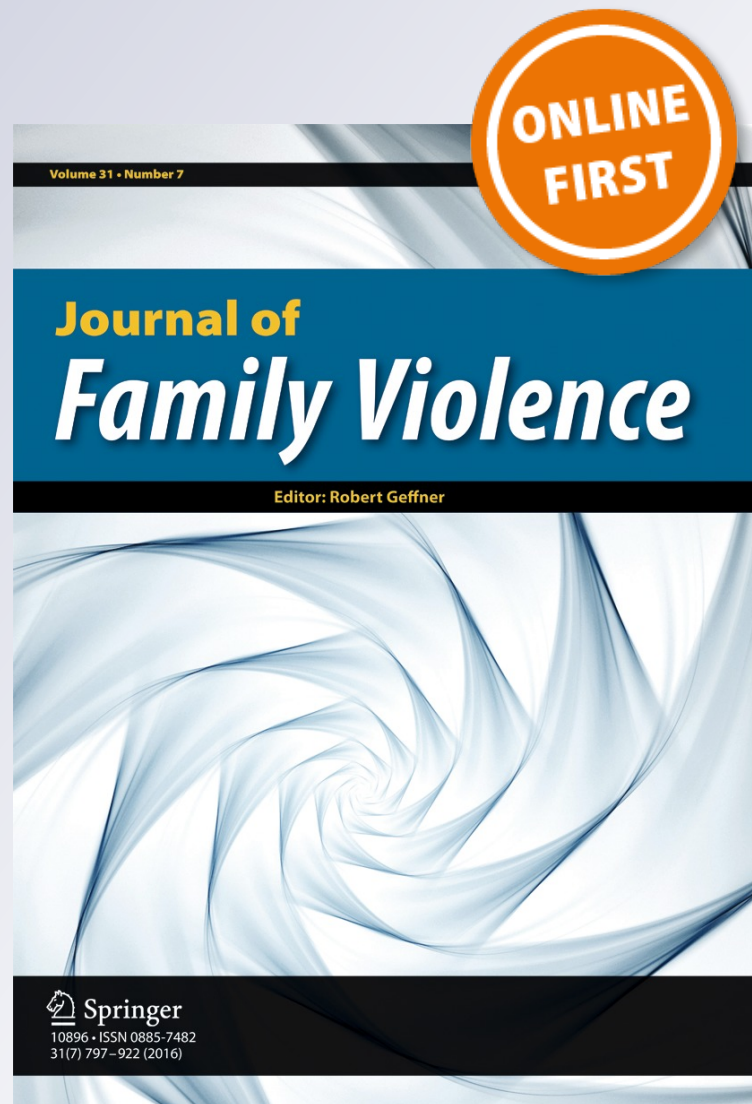
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A Tribute to Murray A. Straus

Emily M. Douglas¹

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Abstract This article offers a brief tribute to the father of the field of family violence, Murray A. Straus, Ph.D. Murray spent the bulk of his career at the University of New Hampshire, where he studied partner violence, corporal punishment, developed the *Conflict Tactics Scales*, and mentored thousands of students, post-doctoral research fellows, and colleagues alike. His productivity and the significant impact that he had on the field and the public at large, in addition to his warmth and good humor, are noted here.

Keywords Murray Straus · Family violence · Partner violence · Corporal punishment

As most readers of this volume know, Murray A. Straus, Ph.D., fathered the field of family violence research. Murray was a curious, persistent, open, and wonderfully generous man. Born in 1926, he passed away in 2016, just weeks before

I came to know Murray Straus during a post-doctoral fellowship from 2002–2004 at the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire. Murray was a mentor to me, and eventually a trusted friend and colleague. We authored several papers/chapters together and I worked with him on his last book, *The Primordial Violence: Spanking Children, Psychological Development, Violence, and Crime* (Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014). Lunches with Murray were never dull and I could never spend enough of them with him. I am an associate professor of social work at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts and I am spending the 2016–2017 year as a Congressional fellow for the Society for Research in Child Development/American Association for the Advancement of Science & Technology. It is my great honor to write this tribute to Murray. His absence is felt by me daily.

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his 90th birthday. There is no doubt that world is a safer place because of the contributions of Murray Straus.

Murray recounted numerous times that he stumbled into the area of family violence when he was teaching an undergraduate family sociology class at the University of New Hampshire (UNH).¹ The year was 1968 and the class turned to discussions of parenting and parent-adolescent conflict. A student volunteered that some of the conflict that she experienced with her parents resulted in minor physical violence, perpetrated by her parents. Later in his career, Murray would have described this as “physical attacks” by a parent against a child. He innocently thought that this was a unique set of circumstances and asked if anyone else in the class had similar experiences with their parents. Yes, they had. In fact, an overwhelming majority of students raised their hand when asked if they had been spanked or hit by a parent. Murray was curious, but reluctant to come to strong conclusions based on just one class. So, he asked some sociology colleagues if they would distribute a simple survey about experiences with corporal punishment and family violence to students in their classes. Obviously, this was in the days before institutional review

¹ Murray's professional life has been documented in many different sources, some of which are available on his website, which is still actively maintained: <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2/>. A summary of his life's work was published in the *Boston Globe*, Marquard, B. (2016, May 26). Dr. Murray A. Straus, 89: UNH researcher studied violence. *Boston Globe*, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/05/26/murray-straus-unh-researcher-who-led-groundbreaking-studies-corporal-punishment-domestic-violence-dies/RlmWltvNGe5I5TfUQFq1NM/story.html>. One of the best sources to learn about Murray, his work and personality, is through discussions with colleagues, former students, post-doctoral research fellows, and also his own reflections on his career in various publications. There is also a blog that has been set up by staff at his Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire, where many people have left remembrances of Murray. It is active and one can still post comments and memories today, <https://murraystraus.wordpress.com/>.

boards were in full swing! Murray found that 94 % of the students reported having been spanked or hit by a parent during their childhood and 26 % reported that this happened during their senior year of high school.

This was not the first time that Murray had encountered family violence. Earlier in the 1960s, he conducted a study where he imposed stressful situations on families and then observed their communication and resolution skills. One family that he observed used physical and psychological aggression as a way to cope with the stress that had been imposed. Instead of recognizing that some families use violence as a tactic to address conflict, he dismissed the family from the study session, feeling terrible about what he had observed. But, it wasn't until that class at UNH when the lightbulb went off that family violence might be a bigger problem than he had initially thought. Based on the simple data collection that he had done with the sociology students, Murray developed a comprehensive survey which would assess violence between parents in the family, siblings, and parents and children. This was the beginning of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) and the field of family violence research, in general. Murray spent the next four-and-a-half decades studying family violence: psychological aggression, physical assault, injuries, and sexual coercion. Murray noted in his writings that over 400 studies on family violence had been conducted using the CTS. In the midst of writing this tribute to Murray, I conducted a simple keyword search for "Conflict Tactic Scales" in five widely used U.S. social science databases and found that between 1978 and June of 2016, there were 1532 articles that mention the CTS. This is just one example of the magnitude and impact of Murray's work.

Murray was the first researcher to show that Americans are far more likely to be assaulted, attacked, and the target of violence by their family members, than by strangers, a fact which challenged common understandings both inside and out of academia.² His research made the hidden problem of family violence a public problem. It resulted in new interventions, legitimized advocacy movements, and contributed to new legislation, such as the *Violence Against Women Act*. Like his work on partner violence, Murray's work on corporal punishment explored the prevalence rates of physical aggression between parents and children, and the potential causes and consequences of this aggression. Murray was especially interested in how experiencing spanking as a child put one at risk for poorer outcomes in all areas of life: social, health, mental health, criminal activity, and how it increases the odds that one would perpetrate violence against an intimate partner later in life. These findings stand even in the context of warm

and loving relationships between parents and children. This research was the basis for Murray's strong belief that children should never be spanked.

The reach of Murray's work extended beyond the world of professionals and had a direct impact on the lives of victims not only in the United States, but across the globe. Shortly after Murray's death, David Finkelhor reflected on some of the contributions that Murray made to this world. He noted that when Murray's concentrated work on corporal punishment began in the 1990s, only a few countries had bans on this disciplinary approach. Today, 50 countries ban parents from using corporal punishment against children.³ What is most notable is that when these countries passed these bans, they cited Murray's research to bolster their argument for why corporal punishment should be outlawed.

At the same time, Murray's work, and the work of others for four decades, has shown that women are just as likely to perpetrate partner aggression in heterosexual relationships as are men. This research also showed that despite the bi-directionality of much of partner aggression, women are more likely to be injured as a result of this violence. Murray believed that denying the role that women play in perpetrating partner aggression actually puts women at further risk of being harmed. In the last five years or so of his life, his work focused exclusively on dyadic concordance types, which examines partner aggression (or any other dyadic behavior) in four combinations: (1) no violence by either partner, (2) violence perpetrated by partner A, but not partner B, (3) violence perpetrated by partner B, but not partner A, and (4) violence perpetrated by both partners. The consistent findings that women perpetrate as much aggression as men was, and still is, controversial. Research on this issue created a firestorm of resentment and resistance against Murray and some of his colleagues. They received death threats and conferences where they were scheduled to present received bomb threats. Invitations to speak began to dry up and librarians threaten to remove their book, *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family*, from their libraries.⁴

Murray's work on corporal punishment has received some of the same resistance. In 1995, he received an envelope addressed to: "Murray Strauss [sic] – Lying Nazi Leftist Schmuck." There was no letter inside. In today's climate, this might stop a researcher in his or her tracks or bring a research career to an end. In retrospect, Murray described these times as being difficult, but recounted them almost with glee, humor, and disbelief, years after they passed. These kinds of troubles also made him rethink how he presented information,

² I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge that many of these accomplishments have been noted in Murray's obituary and other writings since his death. The obituary can be found on his professional website, <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2/>.

³ For more information, see the website for "Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children," at <http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/progress/prohibiting-states/>.

⁴ This information comes from: Gelles, R.J. (1999). The missing persons of domestic violence: Battered men." *The Women's Quarterly*, Autumn, 18–22.

how to anticipate questions from critics, and to use scientific findings to battle against ideologies.

Murray wasn't always a family violence researcher. When he came to UNH in the late 1960s, he had already been an academic for over 20 years. Having earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Wisconsin, Murray held positions at Washington State University, University of Wisconsin, Cornell University, and University of Minnesota. He was also drawn to international travel and taught or spent sabbaticals in Sri Lanka, England, Belgium, France, Canada, and many other far-away places. Much of this time, he was a scholar of rural sociology. His interest, however, was in *studying* rural sociology, rather than making claims about the need to preserve the ways of rural life. This is an early example of how Murray relied on using data to find answers to questions rather than relying on ideology. His approach, however, was met with skepticism by his tenured colleagues; Murray saw the writing on the wall and started to migrate toward studying families. In so doing, he made important contributions to the measurement of family issues, understanding family dynamics and family stress, and to the science of teaching sociology, all before getting started on family violence.

Murray founded the Family Research Laboratory (FRL) at UNH in the 1970s. Shortly thereafter, he, along with other colleagues at FRL, received a post-doctoral training grant from the National Institute of Mental Health. This was a grant which, for the next 30-plus years, brought up to four post-docs annually to "the Lab." As part of this training program, Murray established the weekly research seminar. This is when papers that were nearly ready for submission to a journal were reviewed by a body of colleagues and one-by-one, feedback is provided to the author(s) by each person in attendance. It is an informal peer-review that comes before the official peer-review. As readers can imagine, this requires a heavy investment in time, commitment, and goodwill, by all of those in attendance. Murray attributed the high productivity of FRL members to the weekly seminar. In 2008 he counted that students and scholars who had passed through the Lab had published 746 scientific papers and 46 books. The weekly seminar has been meeting consistently since it was founded in the late 1970s. In fact, it still meets today, even though Murray's absence at the table is keenly missed. Those in attendance offer, "If Murray were here, he'd say..." In the weeks that led up to and that followed Murray's death, I heard and read many comments about the wonderful contributions that Murray made in so many different ways. Routinely, the topic of "seminar" was raised. Former colleagues and post-docs report trying to establish something similar at their own institutions, but were never able to get it off the ground: competing demands take over, not enough "experts" in one's given area to get solid feedback, competition between colleagues, or a simple lack of interest. So far everyone has agreed about what is missing at those other institutions: Murray.

Despite his fame, Murray sought feedback on his work from everyone. Somewhere along the way he learned that he gained new insight into his research when he asked questions. As a result, he routinely opened himself up to criticism and critique and this was the model on which seminar was built: supportive colleagues coming together to share ideas and wisdom. This was also the foundation for collaboration with other researchers. He treated every partnership as an opportunity to learn from someone else, rather than an opportunity to flex his ego. When Murray was conducting the International Dating Violence Study, he sent every collaborator a note when they came on board, which stated how excited he was about the many things that they were going to learn together. These collaborators consisted of international tenured and untenured faculty members and even doctoral students. Imagine being a doctoral student in another county receiving an email like this from someone of Murray's stature? His enthusiasm and openness were impressive.

Based on what I have already covered, it's not surprising that Murray was also incredibly approachable. Anyone could call or visit him. He shared his knowledge, expertise, and mistakes willingly. He showed genuine interest in everyone who sat at the long table in his office in the Horton Social Science Center at UNH and he was a mentor to undergraduates, graduate students, post docs, and colleagues. Murray was known for never meeting a research question that he didn't like. Anyone who met with him had his undivided attention, always delighted to see anyone who appeared at his office door. A colleague recently said that when Murray was advising her master's thesis, he greeted her every week with such enthusiasm that she wondered which of them was more excited about her thesis project.

Murray published 15 books and hundreds of articles, and traveled the globe reporting his research findings. Like many academics, he worked long days in the office, continued his work in the evenings at home, and spent many Saturdays and Sundays back at his Lab. But, his work never seemed burdensome. He seemed to marvel in it all. He loved getting started on new projects. One would never know it based on his Curriculum vitae, but he often confessed how much trouble he had wrapping up old projects while new ideas burned brightly in front of him. When he was about 80, he said that he probably had enough unfinished projects in his office to easily provide data for 15 dissertation projects. Murray retired from a full professorship at age 85, but he was still the most productive person I knew, coming into the office daily until just a few weeks before he succumbed to cancer. A couple of months before his death, Murray counted that he had 17 papers in various stages of completion. This, in the year when he was fighting cancer and his health and energy were declining. Throughout his career, Murray was incredibly skilled at using a team of research assistants to further his productivity, but he kept a close eye on the work being completed. He had a 10-

page document entitled: "Guidelines for working with me" that he would give his assistants. One of the most important rules was to always write in pencil. It was much easier to clean-up our mistakes and to reuse paper supplies this way. In his weekly meetings he would sit side-by-side with research assistants at the long table in his office and say, "Well, what I think we should do is...." And, then he'd pause and say, "And, when I say *we*, I mean *you*." And, he'd laugh. His smile and demeanor were totally infectious, no matter how many times his assistants heard him say it.

One academician writing about university life described Murray's best qualities thus: "Curiosity. Determination. Humor. Commitment to scholarship. He epitomizes the all-around academician who strives to create new knowledge, to help others to do that, to translate knowledge into social good."⁵ This is a good description of Murray, but what is missing in this description is his warmth, interest in others, and his generous spirit. Murray once described himself as not being a very social person. I think that what Murray must have meant is that he was not a very political person when it came to nurturing important university relationships, because Murray was undeniably a social person. Colleagues and former students have recounted endless stories of Murray having people to his house for lunch, holding seminar at his home which would be followed with swimming parties, being driven around Durham, New Hampshire on the back of his scooter as they traveled the one mile from his office to his home, attending lunch with the current FRL postdocs, taking colleagues out on his sailboat, and skiing "black diamond"-rated slopes with others into his 70s.

Murray's persistence and dedication knew no bounds. This is perhaps best exemplified by noting the many health challenges which he overcame while still going to the office. There was the time that a doctor basically forbid him to attend the conference hosted by FRL. I visited him in the rehab

facility and he was incredulous. "It's just impossible that I would *not* attend the conference. *Impossible!*" He arranged to be discharged on the date that he desired, and had his administrative assistant pick him up and bring him directly to the conference hotel. He didn't even stop at home first. He attended the whole conference without incident.

In addition to these wonderful qualities, Murray was a little quirky. He wore sandals year-round, always wore a jacket and tie, he kept a small appointment book and later a mobile device connected to a mechanical pencil on a string in his shirt pocket, had a strict code for naming his computer files, skied in a suit because it was more efficient, at the age of 80 drove a scooter that was largely held together with duct tape, and he answered the phone with a simple greeting one would more likely hear in another era: "*Straus speaking.*" Despite this, in his later years, one never had the sense that Murray was an "old man." He was endlessly interested in gadgets, new efficiencies to improve his productivity, and the latest approaches in statistics to improve his analyses. He was engaged, enthusiastic, and totally committed to life every day, even at the end.

The impact of a scholar like Murray Straus is real and immediate. Allow me to expand on a reflection offered by his longtime colleague, David Finkelhor: Just think of all of the people today, across the globe, who are safer because of Murray Straus. People who live with less violence, who are able to seek help when needed, and where partner violence is no longer tolerated by social custom or public policy. Think of all of the children who live in homes where they are not spanked because it has been banned in their countries. And, then think of all of the future children of the world who are safer because Murray existed, because he was curious, asked questions, and let the data tell the truth. As family violence researchers, long may we carry on what he began.

⁵ Palmer, S. (1998). *The universities today: Scholarship, self-interest, and politics*. New York: University Press of America, Inc.