

Gelles R J. Child abuse as psychopathology: a sociological critique and reformulation. *Amer. J. Orthopsychiat.* 43:611-21, 1973.  
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This paper assessed the major deficiencies of the psychopathological model of child abuse that explained child abuse as a function of psychological pathology or "sickness." Using the same data that had been presented in support of the psychopathological explanation, this article suggested a multidimensional social-psychological explanation of child abuse. [The *SCJ*® and *SSCI*® indicate that this paper has been cited in over 170 publications.]

## Reconceptualizing Child Abuse

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I was a fourth-year graduate student in sociology at the University of New Hampshire in 1971. Newly married, I had returned to school for the fall semester having recently presented my first paper at a professional meeting. The paper dealt with mass media and television—the intended subject of my dissertation. However, I was not enthusiastic about working with the departmental expert on this topic and was desperately casting about for a new topic and adviser. I also was in need of one more course to complete my program of studies.

Just before classes began, I happened to have lunch with Murray A. Straus. Murray and I exchanged stories about the recent American Sociological Association meetings. He asked about my paper and told me about his, which focused on family violence.<sup>1</sup> I became curious about the issue of family violence, mostly because I wondered how he proposed to solve

the problem of accessing subjects and eliciting valid answers to questions such as "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Towards the end of lunch, I asked if I could take a reading course with Murray on the topic of family violence—as much out of curiosity as in desperation trying to fill my program.

My first assignment was to review articles that Murray was reviewing for inclusion in his proposed book of readings, *Violence in the Family*.<sup>2</sup> Murray asked if I would review a number of articles on child abuse.

When I completed reading the articles, I had another lunch with Murray. This time we were joined by Arnold Linsky, a professor whose deviant behavior course I had recently taken. In the exuberance and arrogance of youth, I pronounced all of the articles unsuitable for inclusion in the planned volume and then ticked off my critique of the methods, data analysis, and conclusions. Murray and Arnold challenged me to write an article of my own.

"Child abuse as psychopathology: a sociological critique and reformulation" was hardly an instant success. Submitted to the following year's American Sociological Association meeting, the article was accepted but scheduled for a potpourri session at the end of the last day of the conference. My wife and the many people dressed as empty chairs were present. The paper was rejected by the first professional journal to which I submitted it.

The paper applies a classic sociological critique of psychogenic explanations of deviant behavior. The paper's appeal seems to come from the fact that it was one of the first examinations of child abuse that broke free of the bonds of the psychogenic explanation (David G. Gil had done so earlier<sup>3</sup>), and it was published just at the time when professional, governmental, media, and public concern became focused on the issue of child abuse.

The paper marked the beginning of my 20-year concern with the issue of family violence and a 20-year collaboration with my mentor and friend, Murray Straus.<sup>4</sup>

1. Steinmetz S K & Straus M A. *Some myths about violence in the family*. Paper presented at the 66th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, 30 August-2 September 1971, Denver, Colorado.
2. ———, eds. *Violence in the family*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. 337 p.
3. Gil D G. *Violence against children: physical child abuse in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970. 204 p. (Cited 440 times.)
4. Gelles R J & Straus M A. *Intimate violence*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988. 297 p.