

Reflection

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My work on the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) grew out of a mix of motivations that has been with me for a lifetime. First was a humanitarian concern, and in this case, a desire to contribute to reducing violence. The earliest manifestation was a 1953 article on suicide and homicide (Straus & Straus, 1953). The concern with reducing violence lay dormant until revulsion with the Vietnam war, the rising violent crime rates, and the feminist campaign against rape and wife-beating led me to study corporal punishment by parents (Straus, 1971), family violence in general (Straus, 1973), and violence against women (Straus, 1976).

The second influence was a predilection for research others regard as impractical or sometimes as “crazy.” Before the publication of the CTS, few believed it would be possible to knock on the door of a random sample of households and be able to obtain data on violent acts between members of the household. One of my most respected colleagues explicitly cautioned me that the national survey on family violence I was planning would not work because “you can’t get this kind of information in a survey.”

The third influence was a commitment to the scientific method, including the belief that scales to measure key phenomena are crucial for scientific progress. That belief has been amply supported. At least 400 articles and ten books have been published reporting research findings based on the CTS. Currently, about six articles are published every *month*. In 1979, I had to caution readers that “there is no definitive evidence supporting the validity of the CT scales.” Now the evidence of validity is overwhelming.

The contribution of the CTS to understanding family violence is greater than the sheer number of studies. It enabled studies of violence against women that would not have been possible without this instrument. For example, the CTS made it possible to estimate the prevalence of violence against women and physical abuse of children in representative samples of the general population, and to measure trends in violence against women (Straus & Gelles, 1986). These national surveys revealed that violence against women in marital, cohabiting, or dating relationships is several times higher than the rate of cases known to the police, to shelters for battered women, and much higher than the rate revealed by crime victimization surveys (Straus, 1999). Similarly, the rates of physical abuse of children revealed by the parent-child version of the CTS are ten times higher than the number of cases known to the child protective services of the 50 states.

Conflict Theory, Feminist Theory, and the CTS

As explained in the introduction to the article, the CTS is based on conflict theory. This theory assumes that conflict is inherent in all human groups, including the family. It is inherent because group members, while sharing many interests, also have different interests.

These range from specifics, such as what color to paint the bedroom, to the desire of those in power to stay in power and of those at the bottom to gain more control of their lives.

Conflict is also a key part of the feminist theory of family violence. However, the feminist version assumes male dominance in the family and the society, and the use of violence to maintain male dominance, is the source of violence (see Chapters 11 and 12 and Straus, 1976). By contrast, the version of conflict theory on which the CTS is based assumes that *any* inequality in the family, including dominance by a *female* partner, increases the probability of violence because the dominant partner may use violence to maintain his or her position, or the subordinate partner may use violence to try to achieve a more equitable relationship. Thus, a key feature of the CTS is that it measures violence by both partners in a relationship.

Unfortunately, the fact that the CTS measures violence by both partners is also the basis of the rejection of this instrument by leading feminist scholars, including some who have chapters in this book. The CTS was the bearer of the bad news that women perpetrate assaults on male partners at about the same rate as men attack female partners (Straus, 1997). Many feminists perceived these results as both implausible and as a threat to funding of services for battered women and have been bitter in their denunciation of the CTS.

The other main reason for critical analyses of the CTS is, ironically, that it is such a widely used test. This is a manifestation of the fact that the more widely used a test is, the more carefully it will be reviewed. If the CTS were rarely used, there would not be much point to scrutinizing it because the results would rarely be useful. The scrutiny of the CTS has revealed a number of limitations which I summarized in an article on “the Conflict Tactics Scales and Its Critics” (Straus, 1990). Many of these are corrected in the revised versions of the CTS (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). However, the revised versions deliberately do not “correct” the most frequent criticism because it is erroneous. This is the fact that the CTS does not measure the causes, context, and meaning of the violent acts. This criticism is analogous to criticizing a test of reading ability for not identifying the reasons a child reads poorly (such as limited exposure to books at home or test anxiety) and for not measuring the harmful effects of reading difficulty (such as low self-esteem or dropping out of school). These are vital issues, but they must be investigated by using separate measures of those variables along with the reading test. Similarly, the CTS is intended to be used with measures of whatever cause, context, and consequence variables are relevant for the study or the clinical situation, such as measures of the balance of power and feelings of fear and intimidation.

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