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CULTURAL COMMENTARY:

USE THE ROD AND SPOIL THE CITIZEN

By William C. Levin

Some questions are sure-fire discussion starters in my classes. "Are genetic or environmental factors more influential in forming adult characteristics?" "What will be the eventual consequences of the current changes in gender relationships in America?" "Do cats act like that because they are too stupid to understand anything at all, or because they are too smart to care?"

Recently, I discovered a study which presented high quality data bearing on another hot topic; whether it is wise to physically punish children for wrongdoing. Because the data helped me make up my mind on the issue, I would like to summarize the research here. Perhaps it will help you, too.

The Consequences of Physically Punishing Children

Consider the motivation of parents who spank their four-year-old son for playing with matches in the attic. Presumably, they intend to make their home safer by preventing such dangerous play, and to make their child obey the rules of the home and the larger society. They may also hope that punishing the child will make him a better citizen of society as an adult. That is what we mean when we quote the biblical saying "spare the rod and spoil the child." But does their punishment accomplish these ends? Recent research on the subject by Murray Strauss, a University of New Hampshire specialist in the study of family violence, runs directly counter to these commonly held American beliefs about the effects of physically disciplining children.

Strauss cites data from the 1975 and 1985 National Family Violence Surveys to show that more than 90 percent of American parents physically punish their children to correct misbehavior. Figure 1 shows the reported rates of physical punishment of children for a 1985 national random sample of 3229 American parents. As you can see from the figure, almost all American families are reported to use physical punishment on their children who are between the ages of two and six; parents are permitted by law in all 50 states to physically punish their children. However, Strauss contends that physical punishment of children has quite different consequences than Americans generally believe. It may produce obedience in children in the

short term, but in the long run only increases the probability that they will engage in violent crime in adolescence and adulthood. To support this belief, Strauss develops a theory he calls "Cultural Spillover Theory," and then cites evidence from a range of surveys which are consistent with the theory.

Cultural Spillover Theory

According to Strauss, children learn about violence when they are punished by their parents, and that knowledge can be used in many ways. He claims that "Violence in one sphere of life tends to engender violence in other spheres, and that this carry-over process transcends the bounds between legitimate and criminal use of force." That is, parents who punish their children use violence with good intentions, such as teaching them that their behavior has endangered others, or that respect for authority is necessary for getting along in society. However, once parents have taught their children that violence has its uses, they no longer control how the lesson is applied. It is more than obvious to any American that violence also has its uses in a wide range of crime and deviance.

Strauss' Evidence for the Theory

Strauss was interested in demonstrating that where violence is approved of to achieve legitimate ends, it is also used in illegitimate behavior. In order to support this theory of Cultural Spillover Strauss cites data from a number of studies. Here are five of the many specific findings of research which he uses to support his theory.



1) In the late 1980's Straus, along with colleagues Larry Baron and David Jaffee, tried to account for the large differences in the rates of rape and murder in various areas of the United States. In order to conduct their study they developed a measure which they called the Legitimate Violence Index. It was used to measure the extent to which people in a given state approved of using violence as a means for achieving socially legitimate goals ranging from disciplining children to punishing crime. They discovered a strong relationship between scores on the Legitimate Violence Index and rates of violent crime such as rape. That is, the more the people in a state approved of the use of violence for legitimate goals, the greater the rate of illegitimate violence in the state.

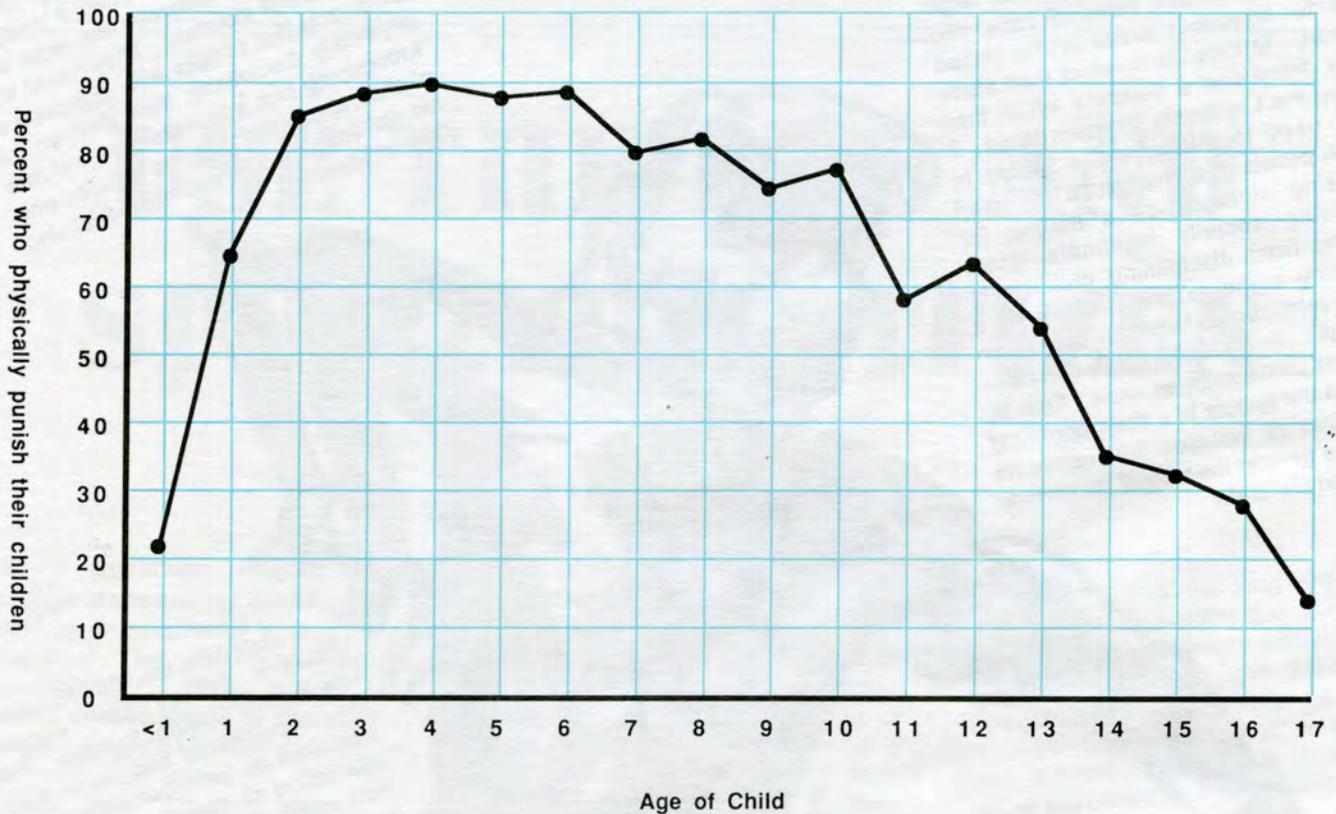
2) In 1987, using data from the New Hampshire Child Abuse Survey, Straus and David Moore published a study of the relationship between the legal and illegal use of violence. They found that parents in the sample who approved of physically disciplining their children for wrongdoing had a four times higher rate of child abuse than did the parents who did not approve of physically disciplining their children.

4) Data from the 1985 National Family Violence Survey also showed the operation of Cultural Spillover. The more the respondents had been physically punished as teenagers, the greater the likelihood of their committing violent acts outside their families when they became adults.

3) Straus examined the data from a 1972 study in which students were asked to recall events from their high school years, including the extent to which they had been physically punished by their parents and the amount of delinquency in which they had taken part. Again, the link between uses of violence (punishment by parents) and the extension of those lessons to illegitimate purposes (delinquency among the children) showed up in the data. The high school seniors who were physically punished reported having engaged in significantly more violent crime and property crime than did those who were not physically punished by their parents.

5) Working with John Schwed in 1979, Straus found that the legitimization of violence can extend beyond the family. The researchers examined the rates of physical abuse by parents serving in varying units in the military. They reasoned that the use of violence would be seen as more legitimate in combat than in non-combat units of the military. As predicted by Cultural Spillover Theory, they found that the reported rate of parental abuse was significantly higher among those serving in combat units than among those serving in non-combat units. And if you are thinking that this is just the likely consequence of parents spending so much time practicing for combat with varying sorts of weapons, Schwed and Straus also report that most members of combat units serve in non-combat jobs, such as "mechanics, truck drivers, and cooks."

Figure 1: Physical Punishment of Children in America: 1985



What Now?

One problem I have in class is that the questions that interest the largest number of students are also, too often, the ones for which solid evidence is either impossible to find or so contradictory that we can draw no solid conclusions. In this case, it has always been difficult to find data to address questions about the consequences of physically punishing a child. In addition, I wonder whether people are really interested in learning anything that might change, or make up their minds, about issues like these. It sometimes seems that no data could be good enough to impress a person who has

already taken a position on a controversial topic, whether that position is pro, con, or "nobody knows."

I wanted to show that solid data does exist, even in areas of controversy like this one, and Straus' work satisfies the most important criteria for useful social science data. It is carefully collected and analyzed, and it is expressed within a theoretical framework (Cultural Spillover Theory) which makes it understandable. Certainly no data is beyond criticism. In fact, Straus clearly acknowledges that the relationships he describes have not been shown to be causal. Look back at each of the six findings I selected from the study and

you will find a pattern. In each case it is impossible to determine whether the legitimation of violence or the illegitimate use of violence came first. He acknowledges the need for long-term, controlled studies, which compare families which approve of physical punishment of children with those who do not. Which produces the less violent, less criminal offspring? For the time being, I am convinced by Straus' data that cultural spillover is one of the forces that is contributing to the level of violence in America.

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If you would like to read the original study summarized here, you can find it in the journals section of the Maxwell Library at Bridgewater State College. The citation is: Murray A. Straus, "Discipline and Deviance: Physical Punishment of Children and Violence and Other Crime in Adulthood," *Social Problems* 38 (1991): 133-154