

Evan Stark, 82, Dies; Broadened Understanding of Domestic Violence

He and his wife wrote pioneering studies; he used the term “coercive control” to describe psychological and physical dominance by abusers.



Evan Stark’s research with his wife revealed that women were victims of physical abuse at a rate much higher than previously identified.



By [Richard Sandomir](#)

April 11, 2024

Evan Stark, who studied domestic violence with his wife and then pioneered a concept called “coercive control,” which describes the psychological and physical domination that abusers use to punish their partners, died on March 18 at his home in Woodbridge, Conn. He was 82.

His wife, Dr. Anne Flitcraft, said the cause was most likely a heart attack that occurred while he was on a Zoom call with women's advocates in British Columbia.

Through studies that began in 1979, Drs. Stark and Flitcraft became experts in intimate partner violence, sounding an alarm that battering — not car accidents or sexual assault — was the largest cause of injury that sent women to emergency rooms.

But by talking to battered women as well as veterans who had experienced post-traumatic stress disorder from their treatment in the military, Dr. Stark began to understand that coercive control was a strategy that included violence but that also involved threats of beatings, isolating female victims from friends and family and cutting off their access to money, food, communication and transportation.

“Like assaults, coercive control undermines a victim's physical and psychological integrity,” he wrote in “Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life” (2007). “But the main means used to establish control is the micro-regulation of everyday behaviors associated with stereotypic female roles, such as how women dress, cook, clean, socialize, care for their children or perform sexually.”

Dr. Stark started a forensic social work practice in 1990 — a year later, he earned a master's of social work degree from Fordham University — and began to testify for victims in courts.

In 2002, he was the lead witness for 15 women whose children had been placed in foster care by New York City's Administration for Children's Services because they had witnessed their mothers being abused in the home. A federal judge ruled in favor of the women, concluding that the city had violated their constitutional rights by separating them from their children.

In 2019, Dr. Stark testified in London in an appeal of the murder conviction of a domestic abuse victim, Sally Challen, who had bludgeoned her husband to death with a hammer; she was released from prison.

“Coercive control,” he told the court, “is designed to subjugate and dominate, not merely to hurt.”

His research on coercive control has helped revolutionize the field of domestic abuse.

“What distinguishes him from everybody else is that he took this rather obscure concept that until that point was in the literature of prisoners of war and cults and transported it into the world of domestic abuse,” said Lisa Fontes, author of “Invisible Chains: Overcoming Coercive Control in Your Intimate Relationship” (2015).

Evan David Stark was born on March 10, 1942, in Manhattan and grew up in Queens, the Bronx and Yonkers, N.Y. [His father, Irwin](#), was a poet who taught narrative writing at the City College of New York. His mother, Alice (Fox) Stark, was a secretary for the

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union of Black workers run by the civil rights leader [A. Philip Randolph](#).

Image

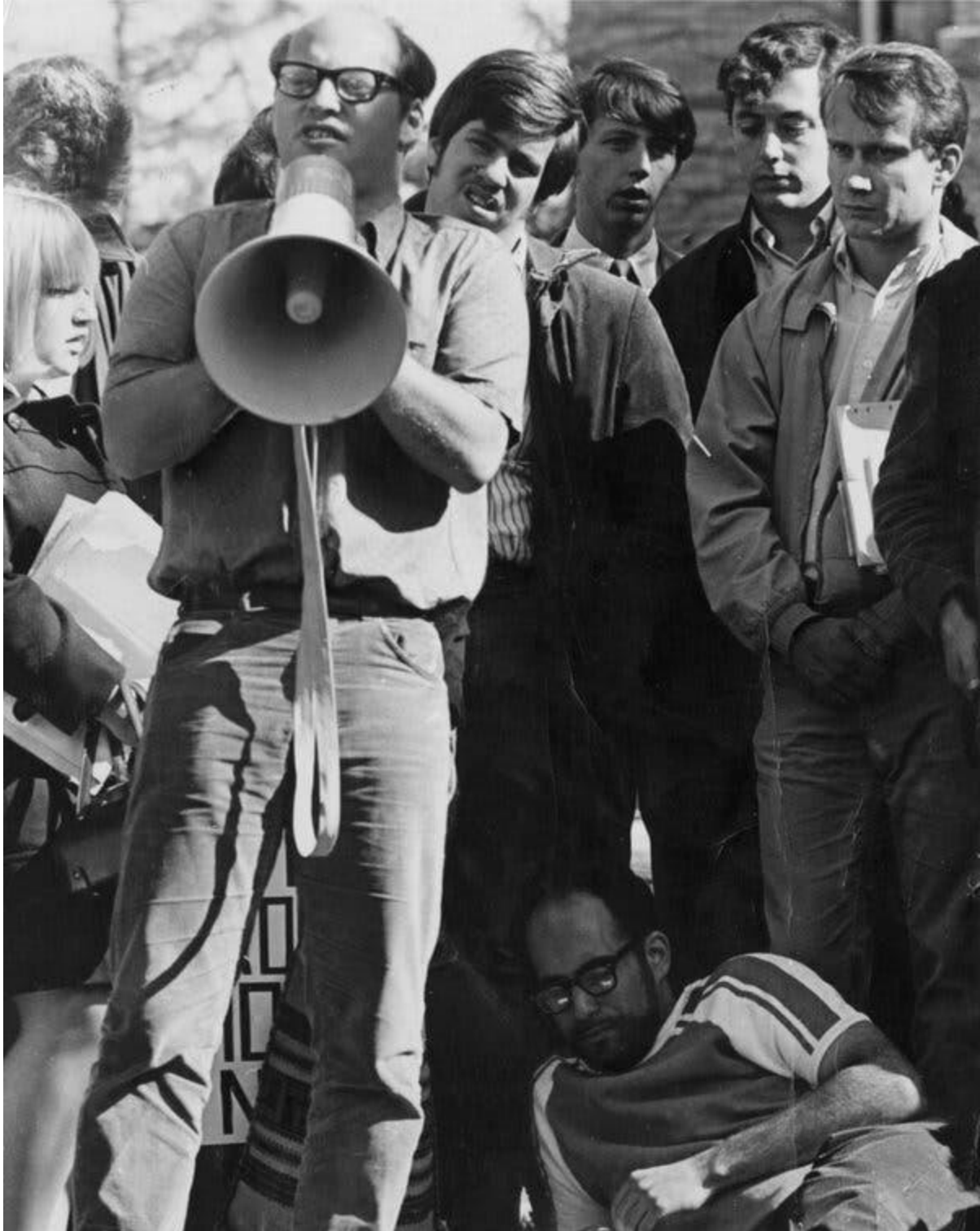


As part of his work, Mr. Stark testified on behalf of victims of domestic abuse in courts. Credit... Elizabeth Starling

Dr. Stark received a bachelor's degree in sociology from Brandeis University in 1963 and a master's in the same subject in 1967 from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. As a doctoral student, he helped organize [a protest](#) in late October 1967 against on-campus recruitment of students by Dow Chemical, which manufactured napalm for the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. The demonstration turned bloody when police officers with riot sticks forcibly removed students from a campus building where Dow's interviews were being held.

After the protests, an F.B.I. agent visited a university official, Dr. Flitcraft said, and Dr. Stark's graduate fellowship was soon rescinded. (He subsequently received his Ph.D. in sociology in 1984 from the State University of New York at Binghamton.) He fled to Canada with his future first wife, Sally Connolly, finding work there as a senior planner for the Agricultural and Rural Development Agency in Ottawa in 1967.

Image



Dr. Stark was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, when he helped lead a protest in 1967 against on-campus recruitment of students by Dow Chemical, which manufactured napalm for the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. The demonstration turned bloody. Credit...The Daily Cardinal

After returning to the United States, he spent a year, beginning in 1968, as an administrator for an antipoverty program in Minneapolis.

In 1970, Dr. Stark helped organize the Honeywell Project, which campaigned to persuade Honeywell Inc. to halt its weapons manufacturing.

He went on to teach sociology at Quinnipiac College (now Quinnipiac University) in Hamden, Conn., from 1971 to 1975. He married Dr. Flitcraft in 1977, when she was working on her thesis at the Yale School of Medicine. She examined the injuries of 481 women during one month at Yale New Haven Hospital's emergency room and found that they had been victims of physical abuse at a rate 10 times higher than the hospital had identified.

Dr. Flitcraft and Dr. Stark together expanded the study, which was published in the *International Journal of Health Services* in 1979. They wrote: "In sum, where physicians saw one out of 35 of their patients as battered, a more accurate approximation is one in four; where they acknowledged that one injury out of 20 resulted from domestic abuse, the actual figure approached one in four."

They added, "What they described as a rare occurrence was in reality an event of epidemic proportions."

Dr. Stark was a research associate at Yale's Institution for Social and Policy Studies from 1978 to 1984. He was hired the next year by Rutgers University and taught in its School of Social Work as a professor of women and gender studies until he retired in 2012.

In 1985, he and Dr. Flitcraft chaired the United States surgeon general's special working group on prevention of domestic violence.

In subsequent studies, they replicated their initial findings on a broader scale, showing that of the 3,600 women treated for injuries at Yale New Haven's emergency room in one year, 20 percent had been beaten by their husbands or other male intimates.

He and Dr. Flitcraft were co-authors of "Women at Risk: Domestic Violence and Women's Health" (1996). On his own, Dr. Stark wrote "Children of Coercive Control" (2023).

In addition to his wife, he is survived by their sons Sam, Daniel and Eli; another son, Aaron, from his marriage to Ms. Connolly, which ended in divorce in 1975; three grandchildren; and a sister, Joyce Duncan.

Dr. Stark's work in coercive control has resonated in the United Kingdom, where he taught sociology at the University of Essex in the early 1980s, had a fellowship at the University of Bristol in 2006 and was a visiting professor at the University of Edinburgh in 2013.

In a speech to the organization Scottish Women's Aid in 2006, he "first convinced campaigners that a new approach to the criminalization of domestic abuse was needed," The Guardian wrote in his obituary.

Cassandra Wiener, a legal scholar at The City Law School in London who wrote the obituary, said by phone that Dr. Stark's promulgation of coercive control helped lead to its criminalization in England and Wales as well as to similar laws in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Last year, Ms. Wiener said, she was with Dr. Stark when he spoke to a delegation of French government officials who were considering whether to criminalize coercive control in their country.

"You could hear a pin drop," she said, "and the head of the delegation, a judge, said, 'I get it, we need to make progress on it.'"

[Richard Sandomir](#) is an obituaries writer. He previously wrote about sports media and sports business. He is also the author of several books, including "The Pride of the Yankees: Lou Gehrig, Gary Cooper and the Making of a Classic." [More about Richard Sandomir](#)