



# LIVING IN ABUSIVE FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

## Child's Reactions to Parental Conflicts of Lesser Intensity

Mira ČUDINA-OBRADOVIĆ  
Učiteljska akademija, Zagreb

Josip OBRADOVIĆ  
Filozofski fakultet, Zagreb

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The research was performed on 402 fathers and 438 mothers with the goal to test how parental experience of being verbally abused by spouse affects child's mood instability. In fathers' sample 592 children of different age, birth order and sex were included while in mother's sample 640 children of different age, birth order and sex were included. Three sets of variables: independent (experience of being verbally abused by spouse), control (child's gender, child's birth order, child's age and parental experience of being physically abused by spouse) and dependent variable (child's mood instability) were defined. ANOVA and ANCOVA statistical procedure was used to analyze data. According to the obtained results mother's experience of being verbally abused by spouse did not affect child's mood instability after control variables were introduced in the analysis. In contrast to these, the results for the father's experience of being verbally abused by spouse produced different effects. After statistical control was performed, the father's experience of being verbally abused by spouse did affect child's mood instability. Explanation of the results is offered in accordance with the existing theories and previous research data.

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Kinds, forms and determinants of abusive family relationships**

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The existence and high incidence of abusive family relationships have become publicly recognized and scientifically explored only recently. But once started to be analysed, the field

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mushroomed into an important and widely studied set of problems with many ramifications into the causes and consequences, as well as the possibilities of prevention and implementation of preventive programs. Most frequently the abusive family relations have been identified with the term domestic or family violence and these were depicting mainly physical violence aimed at wives and children in the family. But soon it was recognized that many specifics could put to question this simplification of the definition.

1. It was recently realized that "the causes and consequences of family violence and/or maltreatment are found throughout the entire family system," (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998), so that all the members of the family can be either the victims or the perpetrators. Various kinds of violence/maltreatment could be defined according to this victim-perpetrator relationship: wife and children abuse by father, siblings abuse, filial abuse (directed to parents, mainly mother), abuse directed to elders (especially abuse of mother-in-law by daughter-in-law), mutual spousal abuse and possible, not yet clearly defined and not researched abuse of husband by wife (Walker, 1999).

2. Various levels of intensity of abuse (sometimes called "forms") could be discerned, i.e. family maltreatment (characterized by low levels of physical harm and prevalent use of verbal kinds of abuse such as quarrelling, shouting, threatening, criticizing, denigrating and belittling) and family violence (characterized by high levels of physical harm such as serious injury or sexual violation) (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998; Walker, 1999).

3. There is a high degree of co-morbidity between various kinds of family abuse, especially high being that between the violence and/or maltreatment of wife and children. A median co-occurrence rate of 40% was found for these kinds of violence (Appel & Holden, 1998) while higher rates of 75 – 100 % in clinical populations were typical (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998). Also, the co-occurrence of various levels of intensity of abuse i.e. maltreatment (less harsh) and violent (more harsh) kinds of abuse is very high (Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, Vincent, & Mahoney, 1996), although families could be recognized as verbally aggressive or both verbally and physically aggressive (Fantuzzo, De Paola, Lambet, Martino, Anderson, & Sutton, 1991; Jouriles et al., 1996). The popular notion that physical violence is typical for men, while verbal aggression is more typical for women proved to be incorrect, seemingly verbal/symbolic aggression being equally used among men and women. In the Strauss & Sweet study (1992) 74% of men and 75% of women were verbally abusive to their spouse from 1 to 53 times in the past year. The means were 10.0 inci-

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dents per year for man-to-woman verbal aggression (SD=16.1) and 10.3 for woman-to-man verbal aggression (SD=16.3) (Strasus & Sweet, 1992).

4. Strong sociocultural influences on recognition, definition and incidence of various kinds and forms of family abuse are present. The social norms of particular societies must be carefully considered when analysing its causes and consequences. For instance, the prevalence of intensive domestic violence directed toward women is typical in patriarchal societies in which the men in the family have the right and power to punish the wife for all real or imagined dissgressions and "many women view violence as an expected part of life" as show the research results in Nicaragua (Ellsberg, 1999), Chile (McWhirter, 1999), Mexico (Fawcet et all., 1999) and Russia (Horne, 1999). The found triad of factors seems to be pronounced here: machismo, social permissiveness of alcohol abuse and a higher social value of men than women. On the other hand, some kinds of maltreatment/violence are specific to Japanese society such as filial violence directed to their parents, which was up to very recent times the only kind of family violence admitted as a problem. Another kind of maltreatment in Japan which did not get any attention in other societies is mutual emotional abuse between mother and daughter-in-law. Both of these kinds of abuse stem from specific strained relations between sons and parents (especially mothers) during their adolescence and culturally defined mutual dependence of daughter and mother-in-law, prevalent in Japanese society (Kozu, 1999). On the other hand, sibling abuse which is maybe the most prevalent kind of violence in families (80% of children being the victims, Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998), is rarely seen as a problem and in most societies it is viewed upon with a smile and the "boys will be boys" attitudes. Generally, family maltreatment and violence is perpetuated by broad cultural beliefs and values as well as permissiveness to use of violence in open and private life and mass media (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998).

5. Together with before mentioned more distal cultural determinants, there is a host of proximal social influences which are reflected in the immediate social environment of the family: joblessness and other stressful events in family life which are combined with individual characteristics and coping styles of family members (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998). Another proximal predisposing factor is the violence in the immediate community, such as absence of community services, poverty and isolation as well as lessening of norms after social upheavals such as wars, revolutions or economic disasters (Walker, 1998).

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6. Together with socio-cultural influences, many individual characteristics of the family members also predispose some families to be more abusive than others. As typical predispositions of the perpetrators often mentioned are: low self-esteem, poor impulse control, external locus of control, negative affectivity and heightened response to stress (Pianta et al., 1989). The child-victims typically have some common characteristics too, such as poor health, physical defect or difficult temperament (Belsky, 1993), while adult-victims are commonly of a lower social status, less physical and legal power.

### **Consequences of abusive family relationships**

1. Consequences of abusive relationships for the family are reflected in the deteriorating of marriage satisfaction of the partners, and higher levels of marriage instability. In many cases especially extreme forms of conflict can create distressed marital relationship which eventually end up in divorce (Glenn, 1990).

2. Abusive relationships in the family create a wide range of negative consequences for the victims of the abuse, ranging from death and physical injury, to immediate or/and long-term psychological distress and to radical life changes such as leaving the family or being left by the family members. The severity and duration of the consequences depend on 5 broadly defined variables (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998):

- the frequency, intensity and duration of abuse
- victim's characteristics
- the nature of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator
- accessibility of social or legal support
- family organization or disorganization due to abusive relationships.

3. Of all the kinds and forms of family abuse and of all kinds of its victims most researched is the family violence, i.e. its most intensive form and two kinds of victims: wives and children of violent perpetrators. Aside from physical injuries the victimised women suffer numerous psychological consequences ranging from aggression, to anxiety, to depression, acute stress disorder and PTSD, and opening new avenues for further life risks such as poverty, social isolation and general family stress. All these factors are present also in victimized children, together with some subtle psychological changes which take place as a consequence of accumulated life stress and negative affect. One of the frequently researched changes is setting in motion the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of violence. That means that changes in children's life due to abuse and its consequences for the child's

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family predispose the children to become aggressive themselves in adult life (Loeber & Stouthame-Loeber, 1999) or to become depressive and inadequate parents in the future (Cicchetti & Toth, 1999).

4. A quite special kind of victimization of children in abusive family relations is the problem of children being witnesses of spousal abuse. Even if the child itself is not the victim of the abuse, his mere presence in the abusive family and witnessing the conflict between the parents acts as a threat, a stressful event and a loss of emotional support or security which leads to a number of emotional reactions and future problems for the child (Davies & Cummings, 1994). As the marriages are mostly discordant during the child-rearing years (Glenn, 1990), most children are bound to experience some marital discord of their parents. The discord may vary in intensity (form), frequency and duration and its consequences for children witnessing or being involved in these different types of parental conflict are of greatest theoretical and practical significance. This kind of children victimization deserves a special analysis and research efforts.

### **The psychological consequences of children witnessing parental conflict**

Witnessing marital conflict was identified as a factor causing a variety of emotional and behavioral problems in children: externalizing behavior problems (e.g. disobedience, fighting, difficulty getting along with others, impulsivity) and internalizing ones (e.g. anxiety, sadness, dependency) (Davies & Cummings, 1994), fear and distress, overt behavioral distress (Grych & Fincham, 1990), anger and aggression (Klaczynski & Cummins, 1989).

Two groups of theories tried to explain these negative consequences of marital conflict on witnessing children. The theory proposed by Davies & Cummings (1994), is the emotional security theory. It proposes the adverse effects on children observing hostility and aggression between parents because parental conflict threatens a child's sense of safety in the family. In the beginning the conflict may create an environment that is insensitive, neglecting and rejecting to the child, undermining parenting indirectly and thus causing distress and anger in the child. If prolonged or frequently repeated, the parental conflict causes directly the intense feelings of insecurity in the family and loss of confidence in the world in general. Also, these feelings of insecurity put the child in the state of constant stress and sensitize him to all the situations that can provoke this sense of insecurity, being it the parental conflict or any other stressful situation outside the family.

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Many confirmations of the theory were obtained by the research results which show that witnessing the parental conflict has been reported by children to be the third most distressing life stressor (Lewis, Siegel & Lewis, 1984). The emotional reaction of the child will depend on frequency, content and the form of the conflict. The frequency of the conflict is predictive for children's adjustment problems (Cummings, Iannotti & Zahn-Waxler, 1985; Hershorn & Rosenbaum, 1985; Jouriles, Pfiffner & O'Leary, 1988), more harmful being the frequent conflict. In opposition to the hypothesis of habituation or desensitization, the more frequent conflicts sensitize and make children more vigilant to new parental conflicts or any similar situation outside the family (Davies & Cummings, 1994). The content of the parental conflict which is the most disturbing to the children is the one focusing on the child and child related issues. The form of the conflict is the most important influence on the child's reaction, the parental conflict including physical violence having especially harmful and lasting effects for the child's short term emotional state and long-term consequences (Davies & Cummnigs, 1994).

The other theory explaining the mechanisms of the impact of parental conflict on witnessing child's distress is the Grych & Fincham theory (1990) which takes into account a cognitive-contextual framework of the conflict. In other words, the severity of the impact of conflict will depend on child's appraisals or evaluations of its meaning (Grych & Fincham, 1990). According to the theory, children witnessing the conflict assess the threat caused by conflict, try to understand its cause and decide how to respond. They do not react to conflict passively, but react to it according to their perception and decision to react. Some perceptions will be more disturbing and will cause emotional and adaptational problems. Perception of being guilty for the conflict could lead to depression and low self-esteem, while perception of immediate or future threat causes anxiety reaction. The conflicts that end in positive resolutions will not disturb children at all and even may set a good example of conflict resolution behavior (Grych, 1998). The empirical research data confirm the hypothesis that children's perceptions of conflict predict their adjustment (Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992). Their perceptions are influenced by situational factors and their own characteristics, so that younger children make the most difficult adjustment, children who were exposed to previous violent episodes and children exposed to higher levels of expressed interparental hostility (Grych, 1998).

### **The consequences of children witnessing verbal/symbolic parental conflict**

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Probably the most common and most frequent kind of parental conflict occurring in the families daily in front of chil-

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dren is the non-violent kind, the form which is called verbal or verbal/symbolic conflict and considered as a lesser intensity conflict. It is defined as "...a communication, either verbal or non-verbal, intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or perceived as having that intent. Examples include name calling or nasty remarks (active, verbal), slamming a door or smashing something (active, non-verbal), and stony silence or sulking (passive, non-verbal)" (Strauss & Sweet, 1992). But in spite of its commonness, it hasn't received as much attention as the violent conflict has, as its apparent consequences are supposed not to be so drastic, harmful and obvious. But some findings suggest that verbal/symbolic aggression is not a mild replacement for physical aggression and that in intent and consequences it is the same as the physical one (Strauss & Sweet, 1992). So probably we could expect similar consequences of witnessing parental verbal conflict as of witnessing parental physical conflict for children.

Only two articles dealt up to date directly with the consequences of children witnessing verbal parental conflict separately from witnessing parental physical violence. Fantuzzo et al. (Fantuzzo, DePaola, Lambert, Martino, Anderson & Sutton, 1991) isolated three groups of families: verbal-aggression, verbal-and-physical-aggression and non-aggression group. In both aggression groups children displayed more externalizing behavior problems than in the non-aggressive group, but did not differ in the level of externalizing problems in two aggressive groups. In other words, both verbal aggression and physical + verbal aggression perceived in parental behavior had the same harmful effects for children. The other study (Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, Vincent & Mahoney, 1996) correlated the level of children's externalizing and internalizing problems separately with two forms of parental conflict: (1) physical violence and (2) verbal conflict + kicking and throwing objects (i.e. verbal/symbolic conflict).. Both forms of parental conflict correlated positively with children's externalizing problems, while in the battered women sample they both correlated with children's externalizing and internalizing problems. This correlation was maintained even after controlling for the frequency of marital conflict.

It seems to us that the results of the Fantuzzo et al. (1991) and Jouriles et al. (1996) studies are the most significant data in the whole field of research in the consequences of abusive family relationships. If verbal/symbolic parental conflict is as much or nearly as much harmful to children's emotional reactions as more violent forms are, than the problem of family abuse is much more grave and more encompassing than the problem of "domestic violence". If the verbal family conflict is

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a normal occurrence in daily family life and especially so when they are under the stress of raising small children (Glenn, 1990) it means that most of the children, especially the young ones, are exposed frequently to it. As it is known from the emotional security theory, the high frequency will exacerbate the consequences for children (Davies & Cummings, 1994), and according to the cognitive-contextual framework theory, young children will not be able to understand the meaning of the conflict or even recognize its positive resolution (Grych & Fincham theory, 1990). The non-violent, i.e. verbal conflict poses thus as much threat to children as family violence does, and because of its probable greater frequency, it is maybe even more harmful. So, in our opinion, from the standpoint of the child's well-being, the study of the impact of verbal/symbolic parental conflict is a very important kind of study in this field.

In the present study we attempted to isolate families who reported the occurrence of verbal conflict. We wanted to assess the influence of verbal/symbolic parental conflict controlling for physical abusive relationship as we suppose that the verbal aggression is the most common form of aggression in most families, even in intact and generally "normal" families.

Also, in contrast to other studies which used aggregate (mother's and father's) or only mother's reports of abusive domestic behavior, we used separate reports from both parents. In our study we used two variables depicting parental conflict: 1. mother's report of being verbally abused by husband (man-to-woman verbal aggression) and 2. father's report of being verbally abused by wife (woman-to-man verbal aggression). There are several reasons to separate mother's and father's reports. First, the supposition that all the members of the family can be either the victims or the perpetrators (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998) leaves room for the possibility of husbands being abused by wives as much as the other way round. Second, as the research points to gender differences in expressing aggression (Loeber & Stouthame-Loeber, 1999), girls and women being more prone to verbal aggression, it could be possible that verbal abuse in the families could be started and maintained by wives as much as husbands, in opposition to physical violence that is probably more typical or easier for husbands.

The main aim of the study is to assess the pure effect of parental verbal/symbolic kind of conflict on emotional reactions of children, separately for the wife's verbal abuse of husband and husband's verbal abuse of wife.

## Hypotheses

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1. Parental verbal conflict of the woman-to-men type will affect child's emotional stability, i.e. children coming from fa-



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families where father is verbally abused by mother will achieve higher score on emotional instability scale than children from families where no conflict was reported.

2. Parental verbal conflict of the man-to-woman-type will affect child's emotional stability, i.e. children coming from families where mother is verbally abused by father will achieve higher score on emotional instability scale than children from families where no conflict was reported.

## METHOD

### Participants

To verify the defined hypotheses we analysed two samples: the fathers' sample and the mothers' sample. Four hundred and two fathers with 592 children were included in the study. Average fathers' age was  $M=37.70$ ,  $SD=5.82$ . Out of 402 fathers, 6.39% had less than 8 years of schooling, 12.72% were graduates of apprentice school (3 years after elementary school), 47.13% were high school graduates (4 years after 8 years of elementary school) and 33.76% were college graduates. Out of 592 children 409 were first-born and 183 second-born, 304 were boys and 288 were girls. Average age of the child was  $M=8.17$  with  $SD=6.23$ .

Four hundred thirty eight mothers were included in the study. 12.72% of mothers had less than 8 years of schooling, 8.30 were graduates of apprentice school (3 years after 8-year elementary school), 55.46% were high school graduates (4 years after 8-year elementary school) and 23.52% were college graduates. Total number of the children in the sample was 640; 438 were first-born and 195 second-born, 330 were boys and 307 were girls. The average age of the child was  $M=7.61$ ;  $SD=5.04$ .

### Research variables and measures

Three groups of variables were defined: independent, control and dependent variables.

#### Independent variables

Three most common dimensions of abusive parental relationships were included in the study: physical, verbal and symbolic (non-verbal abuse). The relationship (comorbidity) of physical, verbal and symbolic (non-verbal) abuse in our sample, presented separately for woman-to-man and man-to-woman aggression, is presented in Table 1.

As seen in Table 1, the correlation between verbal and symbolic (non-verbal) abuse both for woman-to-man and man-to-woman aggression are high and positive, i.e. parents who are verbally abused, usually are symbolically abused also. As

far as physical abuse is concerned, the situation is different. Correlation between physical, verbal and symbolic abuse of mothers is positive and high, meaning that mothers who are usually verbally and symbolically abused are also physically abused. Correlation between physical, verbal and symbolic abuse of fathers is positive and low. It means that fathers who are verbally and symbolically abused tend to be physically abused also, but much less frequently than mothers do. We can say that physical abuse of fathers is relatively independent from their being verbally and symbolically abused.

TABLE 1  
Intercorrelations  
between reports  
of being verbally,  
symbolically  
and physically abused  
by spouse

Perception of being abused by spouse	Father's perception			Mother's perception		
	symbolically	physically	verbally	symbolically	physically	verbally
Father's perception						
physically	1.00					
verbally	.31*	1.00				
symbolically	.35*	.70*	1.00			
Mother's perception						
physically	.31*	.41*	.44*	1.00		
verbally	.22*	.48*	.48*	.58*	1.00	
symbolically	.30*	.48*	.52*	.55*	.77*	1.00

\*p < .05

As most of the previous studies were interested in the impact of physical abuse and only two of them tested separately the impact of physical and verbal abuse on child's reactions (Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Jouriles et al., 1996) we defined the perception of being verbally abused by the spouse as on independent variable.

As we have performed a study separately for fathers reporting being verbally abused by spouse and mothers reporting being verbally abused by spouse, two separate independent variables have been defined: (1) fathers' experience or perception of being verbally abused by spouse (woman-to-man aggression) and (2) mothers' experience or perception of being verbally abused by spouse (man-to-woman aggression). Fathers' and mothers' experience of being verbally abused was operationalized as the perceived frequency of spouse's verbal aggression (shouting, yelling, screaming, cursing).

To obtain measures of the fathers' perception of being verbally abused by spouse we asked fathers in the sample to answer how frequently they were physically, verbally or symbolically abused by their spouses on 4-point interval scales. The alternatives were: 1. never, 2. rarely, 3. frequently, 4. very often. After that we transformed results obtained on the 4-point scale into a 2 category scale: Fathers who claimed never to be verbally abused formed category 1 -never, (coded 1); fathers in category 2 (rarely) were excluded from further analy-

sis and fathers who claimed to be verbally abused often and very often were put together in category 2 (coded 2.) The same procedure was performed for mothers.

### **Dependent variable**

Only one dependent variable was included in the study, i.e. the child's mood instability. The variable was measured by a 6-item 4-point scale with the response format from 1-never to 4-very often. The scale was constructed for the purposes of this study. A sample of items is: How often is the child moody, or ill-disposed; or: How often is the child restless. Individual score on the mood instability scale was obtained in the following way: We used mothers as informants to measure the child's mood instability as we assume that mothers are better informed about the child's behavior than anyone else. We believe that some critical views on mother as informant on child's behavior does not apply in our study, because there was no reason for mothers to be biased, as the purpose of the study did not have any consequences for the child or mother. All answers given by mothers/informants on 6 items were transformed into z-scores, constant 3 was added to avoid negative scores and then z-scores were summed-up. Internal consistency of standardized (was .70 for both – mothers and fathers samples. Factor validity of the scale was checked by using the Principal component factor analysis with orthogonal rotation. We have obtained high factor loadings on the same factor for each of the 6 items. The minimum loading was .50.

### **Control variables**

Four control variables were included in the study: child's gender, child's birth order, child's age and mother's or father's perception of being physically abused by spouse. We have included these control variables because we assumed that they could have impact on the child's mood instability independently of mother's and father's perception of being verbally abused.

*Child's gender.* We expected that children of different gender could react to parental marital crisis differently as in previous studies it was clearly demonstrated that girls reacted to parental marital crisis differently from boys and child's gender turned out to be important for predicting the emotional well-being of children i.e. mood instability. Data on child's gender were obtained by a question which was part of the Emotional Developmental Questionnaire (EDQ) and answered by parent. Boys were coded 1 and girls were coded 2.

*Child's birth order.* It is logical to assume that child's birth order might influence his/her mood instability. In the Croatian cultural setting, the younger child usually has special treatment, being given more parental protection. That is why in

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the situation of the parental conflict or crisis the second-born child in our opinion is bound to react emotionally more intensively than the first-born. Data on the child's birth order were obtained by parents answering EDQ. The first-born child was coded 1 and the second-born was coded 2.

*Child's age.* The emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994) predicted that children will react to parental conflict with emotional upset at any age, from 6 months to adolescence, but that the type of emotional reaction will vary with age. Cognitive-contextual theory (Grych and Fyncham, 1992) predicted that the child's age would be a very important variable for the child's ability to understand the real extent and threat of the parental conflict and so will influence his/her severity of emotional reaction. Both theories predict that younger children will be more negatively influenced by parental conflict, as they are more dependent on parents and less cognitively developed to be able to cope with the situation. To get as clear a picture as possible of the impact of parental perception of being verbally abused by spouse on mood instability of children, we have included the child's age as the control variable. The variable child's age was a continuous one, ranging from minimum 1 year to maximum 18 years. Data on this variable were obtained by the mothers answering EDQ.

*Parental experience of being physically abused by spouse.* Numerous studies of the relationship between parental physical abuse and children's behavior problems clearly indicate that children witnessing parental physical abuse are at risk for developing serious emotional problems (Jaffe, Suderman & Reitzel, 1992). As physical and verbal/symbolic abuse are highly comorbid, it is important to separate the influence of physical violence on child's reaction if we want to study the influence of only verbal forms of conflict. Because it is logical to expect that verbal abuse is more frequent than physical abuse in many families we should test for the impact of verbal abuse controlling for physical abuse. Fathers' and mothers' experience of being physically abused was operationalized as the perceived frequency of spouse's physical aggression (slapping, hitting, hair pulling, throwing to the floor, bruising, shaking).

Variable experience of being physically abused by the spouse was measured by a 1 item 4-point scale with alternatives: 1-never, 2-rarely, 3-often and 4-very often. We obtained data on this variable for both man-to-woman and woman-to-man physical abuse.

## Procedure

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The study was performed on 509 married couples who lived together and who never visited marital counselling services or who never asked for divorce. Eight counties in the city of

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Zagreb were included. We have performed field work in participants' work places or at home in cases when it was not possible to reach both partners at the work place. We have divided 509 couples in two samples, fathers and mothers, because we wanted to perform separate analyses for fathers' and mothers' perception of being verbally abused and its impact on their child/children's mood instability.

## RESULTS

To test our hypotheses about the impact of mother's and father's experience of being verbally abused by spouse on child's mood instability as dependent variable we have used ANOVA and ANCOVA statistical analysis.

### The impact of mother's perception of being verbally abused by spouse

We performed ANOVA or one-way analysis of variance to check for the differences between emotional reactions of children whose mother reported not to be verbally abused and children of mothers reporting being verbally abused often or very often. We have obtained a statistically significant difference between two groups of children in mood instability symptoms as presented in table 2 ( $M_{\text{nonabused}}=25.91$ ,  $SD=3.24$ ;  $M_{\text{abused}}=26.70$ ,  $SD=3.20$ ). According to our research design we have included 4 co-variates or control variables in the study. So after performing ANOVA we have performed 4 ANCOVA statistical procedures, adding each time a new co-variate to get net-effect of mother's perception of being verbally abused on child's mood instability. Contribution of the co-variates are presented in table 2.

TABLE 2  
Child's mood instability  
– summary  
of co-variates effects  
(mother's perception  
of being  
verbally abused)

Child's mood instability Co-variate effect	df <sub>1</sub>	df <sub>2</sub>	F	p
Child's age	1	630	90.52	<.001
Child's age + gender	2	629	46.87	<.001
Child's age + gender + birth order	3	628	31.74	<.001
Child's age + gender + birth order + mother's experience of being physically abused	4	627	24.30	<.001

As we can see in table 2 all co-variates contributed to child's mood instability independently from variable mother's perception of being verbally abused. In other words, to get net effect of mother's experience being verbally abused by spouse on child's mood instability it is indispensable to include in statistical analysis the before mentioned 4 co-variates. Net effect after co-variates were included on child's mood instability is presented in table 3.

Child's mood instability Co-variates	df <sub>1</sub>	df <sub>2</sub>	F	p
None	1	631	9.60	<.001
Child's age	1	630	7.34	<.005
Child's age + gender	1	629	7.62	<.005
Child's age + gender + birth-order	1	628	7.26	<.005
Child's age + gender + birth-order + mother's experience of being physically abused	1	627	1.59	>.05

**TABLE 3**  
The impact  
of mother's experience  
of being verbally abused  
effect on child's mood  
instability

As we can see in table 3, F-ratio was changing after a number of co-variates was included in the analysis successively. The greatest value of F-ratio was obtained when no co-variates were included in the analysis. The more co-variates were added, the F-ratio was more decreasing, but it was still statistically significant until we introduced the last co-variate, i.e. mother's perception of being physically abused. After this co-variate was introduced, there was no significant difference between children of mothers who reported being and those who reported not being verbally abused by spouse. Adjusted means were obtained:  $M_{\text{nonabused}}=26.11$ ,  $SD=4.74$ ;  $M_{\text{abused}}=26.50$ ,  $SD=5.34$ . The results obtained inform us that mother's experience of being physically abused by spouse was the main contributor to the variable child's mood instability.

### The impact of father's perception of being verbally abused by spouse

**TABLE 4**  
Child's mood instability  
– summary of  
co-variates effects  
(father's perception of  
being verbally abused)

We also performed ANOVA or one-way analysis of variance to check for the differences between emotional reactions of children whose father reported not to be verbally abused and children of fathers reporting being verbally abused often or very often. We have obtained statistically significant difference between these two groups of children as presented in table 4 ( $M_{\text{nonabused}}=23.17$ ;  $M_{\text{abused}}=25.11$ ). After that we performed a series of ANCOVA statistical analyses to check for the impact of co-variates on dependent variable child's mood instability. The results obtained are presented in Table 4.

Child's mood instability Co-variate effect	df <sub>1</sub>	df <sub>2</sub>	F	p
Child's age	1	580	39.30	<.001
Child's age + gender	2	579	21.40	<.001
Child's age + gender + birth order	3			<.001
Child's age + gender + birth order + mother's experience of being physically abused	4	577	10.95	<.001

As we can see in table 4 the four co-variates were good predictors of child's mood instability. So again it was impor-

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TABLE 5  
The impact of father's  
experience of being  
verbally abused on  
child's mood instability

Child's mood instability Co-variates	df <sub>1</sub>	df <sub>2</sub>	F	p
No co-variates	1	581	21.40	<.001
Child's age	1	580	18.05	<.001
Child's age + gender	1	579	17.33	<.001
Child's age + gender + birth-order	1	578	16.99	<.001
Child's age + gender + birth-order + mother's experience of being physically abused	1	577	17.25	<.001

tant to include these co-variates into statistical analysis if we want to get net effect of independent variable father's reporting of being verbally abused by spouse on child's mood instability. According to the obtained results the best co-variate predictor was child's age. This variable proved to be relevant and predictive for child's behavior and especially for emotional reactions to parental marital distress or divorce and to witnessing physical or verbal parental conflict (Jouriles et al., 1996; Grych, 1998). In the present study child's age proved to be also predictive for the variable child's mood instability, therefore for further analysis child's age and other 3 co-variates should be included as controls to get net effect of father's perception of being verbally abused on child's mood instability. We have performed a series of ANCOVAs and the obtained results are presented in table 5.

Results presented in table 5 show that after a series of ANCOVAs when at each step more and more co-variates were included, the F-ratio was decreasing. But nevertheless, after all the co-variates were included, F-ratio remained statistically significant, meaning that father's perception of being verbally abused affected child's mood instability above and beyond the effects of all the co-variates. Adjusted means for two groups of children were:  $M_{\text{nonabused}}=23.30$ ;  $M_{\text{abused}}=24.98$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The results presented in Table 1 show that comorbidity of three kinds of abuse is different for fathers than it is for mothers. Intercorrelations between reports of three kinds of being abused are positive and very high for mothers ( $r=.55 - .58$  for physical-symbolic and physical-verbal comorbidity and  $.77$  for verbal - symbolic comorbidity), meaning that mothers who claim being symbolically and verbally abused are also physically abused. The situation is different for fathers. There is a positive and high correlation between reports of being symbolically and verbally abused ( $r=.77$ ), but not so between reports of being verbally and physically abused fathers ( $r=.31 - .35$  for physical-verbal and physical-symbolic comorbidity and  $.70$  for

verbal-symbolic comorbidity). It means that men are abused both verbally and symbolically, but not so often physically also. This difference might be explained in terms of mere differences in physical strength between sexes.

The results presented in tables 2 and 3 show how mother's experience of being verbally abused affects child's mood instability. The results presented for mothers' reports (table 2) clearly demonstrated the necessity to introduce co-variates in research design because all four co-variates entered separately and together had a significant impact on child's mood instability. So only if we take out the influence of these co-variates on the dependent variable it would be possible to see the impact of mothers reported being verbally abused on child's mood instability. These results are presented in table 3. Although there was a significant difference in mood instability between two groups of children whose mothers claimed being or not being verbally abused before co-variates were introduced, the net-effect of mother's experience of being verbally abused on the variable child's mood instability, after all co-variates were introduced in the analysis was not significant (table 3). It means that all four co-variates, and primarily the experience of being physically abused contributed to the difference between two groups of children on variable child's mood instability. These results are not in accordance with the data obtained by previous studies of the impact of mother's being verbally abused on children's emotional well-being which found no substantial difference in harmfulness of physical compared to verbal abuse of mothers. (Jouriles et al., 1996; Fantuzzo et al., 1991). The conclusion that "verbal/symbolic aggression is not a mild replacement for physical aggression and that in intent and consequences it is the same as the physical one" (Strauss & Sweet, 1992) does not hold for our sample. Consequences of mothers being verbally abused did not seem to be the effect of mere verbal abuse, but of its comorbidity and high coincidence with other forms of abuse, especially violent ones.

Several explanations are possible for this difference of our results. One explanation could be found in cultural factors. In the society which is traditional in many aspects, with clear differences in gender roles, wives or mothers are more frequently symbolically and verbally abused than their spouses. Even in the situation of nondistressed marriages mothers' or wives' abuse tends to be present, and according to the hypothesis of cognitive-contextual framework they do not perceive mother's verbal abuse as a serious threat. It seems as if the hypothesis of desensitization (Davies & Cummings, 1994) is indeed confirmed here. Some methodological explanations could be



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also offered. For instance, an important variable here could be the frequency of verbal abuse episodes in the family, another would be the content which in case of man-to-woman verbal abuse would probably be less connected with child issues and more with finding faults with wife, a kind showed to be less threatening to the child (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Also, the complex dyadic or triadic situation could be of great importance, passive mother's reaction to abuse being quite a different conflict context from her active response in verbal aggression. Another explanation could be offered in terms of specific gender factors in witnessing the conflict. Namely, it could be the case that "children are more likely to attend to and identify with the same-sex parent, making that parent's behavior and affect more salient (Crockenberg and Forgays, 1996), so that man-to-woman aggression could be perceived as threatening only to girls (Grych, 1998). These problems could be an interesting topic for the next study of this issue.

The results presented in tables 4 and 5 show how father's experience of being verbally abused affects child's mood instability. Again, it was clearly demonstrated that it was justified to include four co-variables into analysis if we wanted to get net effect of the variable father's experience being verbally abused on child's mood instability. All four co-variables separately and together have significant impact on child's mood instability (table 4) so the necessity to introduce these co-variables in research design was obvious. These results are presented in table 5. Even after adding one co-variate after another and including all four co-variables into the analysis, the F-ratio was still statistically significant, meaning that the independent variable father's experience of being verbally abused by spouse does affect child's mood instability over and beyond the impact of all four co-variables, including experience of being physically abused. These results are in accordance with previous research (Jouriles et al., 1996; Strauss & Sweet, 1992). Although, it is difficult to compare our results with previously obtained ones, because most previous studies were based on mothers' reports of being abused only.

The explanation could include cultural factors again. In a society with many traditional elements still being present, any kind of abuse of pater familias represents a serious family crisis and threat to child's security (emotional security hypothesis). Also the perception of the gravity of the situation (cognitive-contextual hypothesis) might be heightened (1) if children perceive the more powerful family figure being abused, or (2) if woman-to-man abuse occurs mostly as the consequence of already started man-to-wife abuse, so that the conflict becomes more complicated to understand, more vio-

lent and more threatening to the child. Maybe some other factors could explain the differences we obtained between harmfulness of mother or father being abused. For instance, it might be the difference in content, which in case of woman-to-man verbal abuse could be often connected with child issues and sharing of responsibilities in the home, and this proved to be more threatening to the child (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Then, the mother responding to spouse's verbal abuse opens greater possibility of both partners beginning a more intense conflict, the situation threatening the child (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Finally, there is a strong possibility that woman-to-man verbal aggression could be perceived especially threatening to boys (Grych, 1998). All these hypothetical explanations represent study limitations.

In any case, it would be important to repeat the research with some of these variables controlled. Also the research design should be allowed to test for the effects of interaction between mother's and father's experience of being verbally abused on child's behavior. We assume that these improvements in research design would give better insight into the importance of specific cultural context as one of the main effects on child's perception of parental verbal abuse harmfulness.

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## Zlostavljanje u obitelji. Djetetove reakcije na roditeljske sukobe slabijeg intenziteta

Mira ČUDINA-OBRAĐOVIĆ  
Učiteljska akademija, Zagreb

Josip OBRAĐOVIĆ  
Filozofski fakultet, Zagreb

Provedeno je istraživanje na uzorku 402 oca i 438 majki s ciljem da se provjeri kako doživljaj roditelja da su u braku verbalno zlostavljani djeluje na djetetovu emocionalnu nestabilnost. U uzorak očeva uključena su 592 djeteta različite dobi, redosljeda rođenja i spola, a u uzorak majki 640 djece različite dobi, redosljeda rođenja i spola. Definirane su tri skupine varijabla: nezavisna (roditeljev doživljaj verbalnog zlostavljanja od bračnog partnera), kontrolne (djetetov spol, djetetov redosljed rođenja, djetetova dob i roditeljev doživljaj fizičkog zlostavljanja od bračnog partnera) i zavisna varijabla (djetetova emocionalna nestabilnost). Primijenjeni su ANOVA i ANCOVA statistički postupci. Prema dobivenim rezultatima, majčin doživljaj verbalnog zlostavljanja od bračnog partnera nije utjecao na djetetovu emocionalnu nestabilnost nakon što su u analizu uvedene kontrolne varijable. Suprotno tome, očev doživljaj verbalnog zlostavljanja od bračnog partnera proizveo je drukčiji rezultat. Naime, nakon što je provedena statistička kontrola, očev doživljaj verbalnog zlostavljanja od bračnog partnera značajno je utjecao na djetetovu emocionalnu nestabilnost. Interpretacija i rasprava rezultata provedene su u skladu s postojećim teorijama i prijašnjim istraživačkim rezultatima, a osobito se naglašava moguć utjecaj čimbenika specifične kulture.

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## Mißhandlung in der Familie – Die Reaktionen von Kindern auf Elternkonflikte geringerer Intensität

Mira ČUDINA-OBRADOVIĆ  
Lehrerakademie, Zagreb

Josip OBRADOVIĆ  
Philosophische Fakultät, Zagreb

Vorliegende Arbeit beruht auf einer Untersuchung, die unter 402 Vätern und 438 Müttern durchgeführt wurde und ermitteln sollte, wie sich die subjektive Erfahrung der Eltern, voneinander verbal mißhandelt zu werden, auf die emotionale Stabilität des Kindes auswirkt. Zur Untersuchungsgruppe der Väter wurden 592 Kinder unterschiedlicher Altersstufen und beider Geschlechter herangezogen, zur Untersuchungsgruppe der Mütter 640 Kinder, ebenfalls unterschiedlichen Alters und beider Geschlechter. Es wurden drei Variablengruppen definiert: 1. unabhängige Variablen (die subjektive Erfahrung eines Elternteils, von seiten des Ehepartners verbal mißhandelt zu werden), 2. Kontrollvariablen (Geschlecht des Kindes, die jeweilige Reihenfolge seiner Geburt /im Verhältnis zu Geschwistern/, sein Alter und die subjektive Erfahrung eines Elternteils, von seiten des Ehepartners körperlich mißhandelt zu werden) und 3. abhängige Variablen (emotionale Instabilität des Kindes). Angewandt wurden die statistischen Verfahren ANOVA und ANCOVA. Laut Ergebnissen hatte, nach Einführung von Kontrollvariablen in die Analyse, die subjektive Erfahrung der Mutter, von ihrem Ehepartner verbal mißhandelt zu werden, keinerlei Auswirkung auf die emotionale Stabilität des Kindes. Im Gegensatz dazu zeigte die Erfahrung des Vaters, verbaler Mißhandlung von seiten der Ehepartnerin ausgesetzt zu sein, ein anderes Resultat. Nach Durchführung einer statistischen Kontrolle erwies sich, daß die väterliche Erfahrung die emotionale Stabilität des Kindes wesentlich beeinflusste. Die Untersuchungsergebnisse wurden im Einklang mit den bestehenden Theorien und vorher erzielten Resultaten interpretiert und diskutiert, wobei der mögliche Einfluß der jeweils spezifischen Kulturzugehörigkeit ganz besonders beachtet wurde.