

PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT OF MARITALLY ABUSED WOMEN AND THEIR CHILDREN'S GLOBAL SELF-WORTH

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationships among maritally abused women's educational level, their satisfaction with social support, their children's perceived maternal support, and their children's global self-worth (GSW; Harter, 1985a). The participants, 38 pairs of maritally abused women and their children (aged 7 to 13 years), were recruited through women's shelters and community counselling facilities. The study found that children who have a sense of being emotionally supported by their mothers have a positive sense of self-worth. The hierarchical regression analyses show that children's perceived maternal support has a unique contribution to children's GSW above and beyond their mothers' educational level and mothers' satisfaction with social support ($R^2 = .31$).

Behavioural scientists have long been interested in how parents' social support networks influence the networks of their children. Positive links have found among parents' educational level and the characteristics of parents' and children's social support networks (Cochran & Bø, 1989; Cochran & Brassrad, 1979; Tietjen, 1989). Can these links be applied also to maritally abused women and their children who have left their violent homes and are trying to rebuild their lives in a non-violent environment? The present study was designed to answer this question.

Effects of Marital Violence on Children

In Canada, from 1999 to 2000, a total of 96,359 women and their children were admitted to women's shelters providing residential services for victims of abuse (Statistics Canada, n.d.) According to Statistics Canada (1994), 78% of women in shelters reported that their children had witnessed violence against them at home.

A number of studies indicate that chronic victimization results in maternal stress negatively affecting women's parenting ability (Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; McDonald & Jouriles, 1991; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985). Women who had been physically abused described themselves as more stressed and reported less consistent parenting than that of a comparison group (Holden & Ritchie, 1991). Studies also found that decreased parenting ability of abused women appeared to be related to their children's negative adjustment (Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Kurdek, 1991; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2000; Moore &

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Pepler, 1998; O'Keefe, 1994; Wolfe et al., 1985). Numerous studies have documented that children from maritally violent homes have higher rates of behaviour that indicates both externalizing and internalizing of their problems and also have more academic problems (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Hurley & Jaffe, 1990; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985, 1986; McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995; Spaccarelli, Sandler, & Roosa, 1994; Wolfe et al., 1985).

Social Support for Maritally Abused Women and Their Children

Social support constructs, such as satisfaction with social support (Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987), have been found to have a positive impact on stressful life situations (Barrera, 1986; Wolchik, Beals, & Sandler, 1989). Studies that examine the social support of maritally abused women and their children are scarce. An examination of social support is particularly meaningful in a context where support is most needed, such as when women and their children are making a stressful transition from and to shelters. The few studies that exist found a significant link between institutional support and the positive adjustment of these families (Jouriles et al., 2001; Sullivan, Bybee, & Allen, 2002; Tutty, 1996).

How do supportive interactions within a family, as opposed to institutional supports provided by outsiders, impact the adjustment of maritally abused women and their children? The few empirical studies on this topic generally found that members of maritally violent families were less supportive of each other than were those in nonviolent families (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002; McCloskey et al., 1995). For example, in a study of 375 pairs of abused and non-abused women and their children, recruited from shelters and the community, McCloskey et al. (1995) found that there was less sibling and parental warmth in families that live with violence than families that do not and that even when a supportive interaction occurred within a violent family, it failed to protect the target child from negative effects of exposure to violence.

Harter's global self-worth (GSW) construct—"an overall judgement about one's worth as a person" (1985a, p. 1)—was used as an index of children's sense of well-being and the following hypothesis was formulated.

Hypothesis. Children's perceived maternal support will make a unique contribution to children's GSW above and beyond their mothers' educational level and mothers' satisfaction with social support. This hypothesis is based on the following findings from previous research: (a) the strongest predictor of perceived social support of both parents and their children is the educational level of the parents (Cochran & Riley, 1988; Tietjen, 1989), and (b) social support has positive impact on psychological adjustment of individuals under stressful situations (Wolchik et al., 1993).

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 38 pairs of maritally abused women and their children, recruited through nine women's shelters and community counselling facilities in British Columbia, Canada. The children were between 7 and 13 years of age, with an average age of 9.7 ($SD = 1.55$) years. There were 23 boys and 15 girls in the sample. The mothers were between 25 and 60 years of age, with an average of 36.9 ($SD = 7.02$) years. The average family size was 2.13 children ($SD = 1.65$). The mothers and their children had been/were receiving group or individual counselling services be-

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cause of marital violence. The term marital violence refers solely to husband-to-wife or male-to-female violence because the study's focus is the social support of women and their children who are receiving services in shelters and community counselling facilities for abused women. Physical abuse of the mothers was validated by the counsellors and shelter staff. Data were collected by the first author in a designated room at the women's shelters and at the community organizations. All the questionnaires were administered individually to participants.

Measures

Mothers' educational level. Mothers' educational level was assessed using the following categorization developed by Statistics Canada (1994): (a) less than high school diploma, (b) high school diploma, (c) some post secondary education, and (d) university degree. This yields a score ranging from 1 to 4 (low to high level of education, respectively).

Mothers' satisfaction with social support. Mothers' perceived social support was assessed using the Satisfaction subscale in the *Social Support Questionnaire* (SSQ, Short Form; Sarason et al., 1987). The SSQ Satisfaction (SSQ-S) scale consists of six items, each rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 6 (low to high satisfaction, respectively). The internal reliability of the SSQ-S is reported to range from .90 to .93 (Sarason et al., 1987). In the current study, the internal reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .86$.

Children's GSW. Children's psychological adjustment was measured using the GSW subscale in the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* (SPPC; Harter, 1985a). The GSW subscale contains six items, each scored on a four-point scale ranging from 1 to 4 (low to high perceived competence, respectively). Harter (1985a) found internal consistency reliability coefficients for GSW to range from .78 to .84. In this study the internal reliability coefficient for GSW was $\alpha = .64$.

Children's perceived maternal support. Children's perceived maternal support was measured using the maternal support subscale in the *Social Support Scale for Children* (SSSC; Harter, 1985b). The responses are scored on a four-point scale ranging from 1 to 4 (low to high level of support, respectively). The internal consistency reliability coefficients for the parent subscale are reported to range from .74 to .79 (Harter, 1985b). In this study, the internal consistency for the maternal subscale was $\alpha = .86$.

RESULTS

Twenty percent of the mothers had less than a high school diploma; 16.4% had a high school diploma; 29.1% had some post secondary education; and 3.6% had a university degree. Sixty-three percent of the sample were White; 13% were South Asian; 11% were East Asian; and the remaining 13% consisted of Latino, Persian, and African-Canadian families.

Table 1 displays means and standard deviations of the variables used in the analyses. Table 2 displays the intercorrelations among the variables. Findings shown in Table 2 indicate that children's perceived maternal support is related significantly and positively to GSW, and mothers' educational level is significantly, but negatively, related to their satisfaction with social support.

In order to test whether children's maternal support was a unique contributor to their GSW above and beyond their mothers' educational level and mothers'

satisfaction with social support, a hierarchical regression was performed, with children's GSW as the dependent variable and mothers' educational level, mothers' satisfaction with social support, and children's perceived maternal support as the independent variables. The first variable entered into the model was mothers' educational level. Mothers' educational level alone explained 7% of the variance in GSW, $F(1, 36) = 2.70$, $p = .11$. There was no increase in variance explained when mothers' satisfaction with social support was entered into the model. The third variable entered was children's perceived maternal support. Mothers' educational level, their satisfaction with social support, and children's perceived maternal support combined explained 31% of the variance in GSW, $F(3, 34) = 5.02$, $p = .01$. The proportion of variance of GSW that children's perceived maternal support accounted for above and beyond mothers' educational level and their satisfaction with social support was 24%, $t(34) = 3.41$, $p = .002$. Table 3 shows the summary information on the hierarchical regression on GSW.

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Variables Used in Analyses

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Mothers' education	2.24	.94
Mothers' satisfaction with social support	5.14	.91
Children's perceived maternal support	3.48	.59
Children's GSW	3.15	.56

Note: $N = 38$

TABLE 2
Intercorrelations Among Variables Used in Analyses

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Mothers' education	—	-.33*	.15	.26
2. Mothers' satisfaction with social support		—	-.06	-.10
3. Children's perceived maternal support			—	.52**
4. Children's GSW				—

Note: $N = 38$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

TABLE 3
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Children's GSW

Step	Variable	Information about the final model			
		ΔR^2	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
1	Mothers' education	.07	.11	.09	.19
2	Mothers' satisfaction with social support	.00	.01	.09	-.01
3	Children's perceived maternal support	.24*	.46	.14	.49*

Note: $N = 38$ * $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationships among maritally abused mothers' educational level, their satisfaction with social support, children's perceived maternal support, and children's GSW. Children's perceived maternal support makes a unique contribution to the prediction of children's GSW above and beyond their mothers' educational level and mothers' satisfaction with social support.

The results are in contrast to studies illustrating women who have been abused as less warm and adequate parents than their non-abused counterparts (Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 1998; McCloskey et al., 1995). The results of the present study are, however, consistent with studies on children of divorce indicating the positive link between the quality of the mother-child relationship and children's psychological adjustment (Wolchik et al., 1993).

Another notable finding is that the more highly educated the abused women were, the less satisfied they were with the support they had been receiving. Thus, the findings from previous studies indicating positive links between educational level and perceived social support were not supported in the context of marital violence in this study. It is speculated that women with more education might have had higher socioeconomic status (Moore & Pepler, 1998) and had to give up many more things (e.g., house, car, pet) by leaving their abusive partners than did less educated women; this may lead them to be less satisfied with their situations in general. Another speculation is that highly-educated women might have higher expectations of support from both individuals and institutions than do their counterparts. The study also found that there was no positive relationship between mothers' satisfaction with support and their children's perceived maternal support. This finding is in contrast to the literature indicating significant links between parents' and their children's perceived social supports (Cochran & Brassard, 1979). In summary, evidence from the study suggests that some social support characteristics observed in general populations cannot be applied to individuals affected by marital violence.

Caution should be exercised in interpreting the relationship between the self-report measures of children's perceived maternal support and their GSW because method variance may have accounted for this relationship. It would have been ideal if the study had included additional methods of measuring these constructs such as observation and reports generated by others (e.g., mothers, teachers, siblings).

The findings of this study indicate the importance of perceived maternal support for children exposed to marital violence. If this study is to be replicated in order to identify additional factors contributing to children's well-being in the aftermath of marital violence, the following recommendations may be useful. First, sample size should be larger. Second, the types, intensity and duration of violence the families have been enduring should be assessed (Jaffe, Poisson, & Cunningham, 2001). These are important factors that may affect the level of stress the family is experiencing.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude examine la relation entre le niveau d'éducation de femmes victimes de violence conjugale, leur satisfaction face au soutien social, la perception qu'ont leurs enfants du soutien maternel et le degré d'estime de soi (*global self-worth*; Harter, 1985a) de leurs enfants. Les participants et participantes étaient 38 paires de femmes victimes de violence conjugale et leurs enfants (âgés de 7 à 13 ans) recrutées dans des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes et dans des services

communautaires de counseling. Cette étude démontre que les enfants qui ont le sentiment de recevoir un soutien émotionnel de leur mère ont une estime de soi positive. L'analyse de régression hiérarchique démontre que les enfants perçoivent le soutien maternel comme ayant une contribution unique à leur degré d'estime de soi et ce, au-delà du niveau d'éducation de leur mère ainsi que de la satisfaction de celle-ci face au soutien social ($R^2 = 0,31$).

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