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Parental acceptance-rejection, child maltreatment and community social support

Summary

This study examines parent-child relationships, both in abusive and non-abusive families, and the modulating effect of community social support on parental behavior. The sample consisted in 100 cases of suspected child maltreatment and a comparison group of 344 families. Parents were asked to complete the Community Social Support Questionnaire (Gracia et al., 1995) that measures social support in terms of community integration and satisfaction, membership in voluntary organizations and community participation, and use of community resources of social support; and the Parental Acceptance/Rejection Questionnaire (Rohner, 1984). The latter analyzes parental behavior in the following dimensions: Warmth/ Affection, Hostility/Aggression, Indifference/Negligence and Undifferentiated rejection. Results indicated an effect of two of the three community social support dimensions on parental behavior. Relations between formal and informal sources of support and implications for social intervention strategies are also considered.

Introduction

The social isolation of families has repeatedly been described as a risk factor closely related to child abuse. As Garbarino (1977) pointed out, studies which defined social isolation as an etiological variable have established the correlation between this variable and child abuse. Frequently, families in which child abuse occurs are isolated not only from institutions and formal systems of social support, but also from informal networks of social support, such as relatives, neighbors and friends. In this respect, many studies have been developed which confirm the close relationship between social isolation and child abuse (Justice and Duncan, 1976; Garbarino and Crouter, 1978; Egeland et al., 1980; Gaudin and Pollane, 1983; Salzinger et al., 1983; Howze and Kotch, 1984; Justice et al., 1985; Straus and Kantor, 1987; Gracia, 1995). The lack of social contact, the restricted or non-existing participation in groups and organizations, as well as certain attitudinal factors towards the neighborhood and the community have been recognized as variables clearly related to child abuse. According to these studies, abusive

parents prefer to solve their problems by themselves and tend to establish few relationships outside their homes, avoid activities which may involve contact with other adults, and even discourage their children from developing social bonds.

There are several mechanisms present in the negative influence of social isolation on parental behavior. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that families are surrounded by social networks which influence their behavior. These networks can influence the families' behavioral patterns as they provide emotional and material support, parental roll models and coping strategies. According to Kempe (1973), abusive families usually lack these resources and, as a result, have substantial difficulty in overcoming stressful situations as they cannot rely on friends, relatives or institutional services in order to obtain the necessary emotional and material support (Belsky, 1980; Cochran & Brassard, 1979).

Another explanation is based on Caplán's conceptualization of the support systems (Caplán, 1974). From this point of view, the support systems perform critical social functions which affect the dynamics of child abuse processes. According to Caplán (1974), 'people have a variety of specific needs that demand satisfaction through enduring interpersonal relationships, such as love and affection, for intimacy that provides the freedom to express feelings easily and un-selfconsciously, for validation of personal identity and worth, for satisfaction of nurturance and dependency, for help with tasks, and for support in handling emotion and controlling impulses' (p. 4). Social isolation implies the divorce from personal support systems, that is, from those social groups which provide the family with assistance, support and feedback. According to Caplán these systems 'tell the individual what is expected of him and guide him in what to do'. As a result, these support systems become feedback mechanisms which control the parents' behavior and provide them with alternative parental patterns. In this respect, since few people have access to abusive families, there are few opportunities to obtain information about the type of upbringing and discipline practices used by them, thus hindering the transference of correcting feedback when the standards accepted by the community are violated (Belsky, 1980; Garbarino, 1977). Research shows that child abuse tends to occur in families that endure situations of social, economic or psychological high risk. However, according to Garbarino and Sherman (1980), in order to fully understand the dynamics of child abuse it is important also to identify and analyze the high-risk environments. The idea underlying this view is that social environment is closely related to family climate. When the adjustment between a family and its environment fails, the risk of deterioration and negative interaction patterns within the family increases; a deterioration that may eventually express itself in child abuse.

The community, as a geographical and social system, is the connecting element between the family and the widest social structures and acts as a vehicle of socialization, social control, social participation and mutual help. As such, the community fosters family development and adjustment. However, when the community fails to perform these functions, a negative social climate arises, which prevents the positive influence of the social support systems. In addition, certain characteristics of the community and a negative social climate may favor conditions that nurture child abuse (Garbarino et al., 1986).

According to a sizeable body of research, social support can have a positive influence on family behavior. Indeed, social support has been proved to have positive effects on all of the following factors: parental attitudes (e.g. Crockenberg, 1981; Crnic et al., 1983; Cochran, 1993), socialization practices and parental styles of interaction (e.g. Colleta, 1981; Crockenberg, 1988; Jennings et al., 1991), the parents' attitudes and expectations about their children (e.g. Olds & Henderson, 1989; Cochran & Henderson, 1990), the family's adaptability to stress (e.g. Unger & Powell, 1980; McCubbin & Figley, 1983; Telleen et al., 1989), and child behavior, adjustment and development (e.g. Cochran & Brassard, 1979; Crnic et al., 1986; Homel et al., 1987).

Nevertheless, few studies have examined in detail the influence of social support dimensions on parental behavior. The aim of the present study is to analyze the relationships between the different sources of support in the community and the dimensions of parental behavior. We considered Rohner's dimensions of parental behavior to be particularly appropriate for this purpose. These dimensions were described in Rohner's 'Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory', which has been validated cross-culturally (Rohner, 1984, 1975, 1981).

Parental acceptance-rejection theory

In Rohner's theory, acceptance-rejection is conceived as a continuum of parental behaviors. At the one end of the scale are parents who express their love and affection to the child verbally or physically. At the other end are parents who dislike, disapprove of, or resent their children. Parental rejection may take the form of physical or verbal hostility and aggression or of indifference and neglect. There are three types of parental rejection, a) hostility and aggression, b) indifference and negligence, and c) undifferentiated rejection (Rohner, 1975, 1984, 1986).

The construct of parental acceptance-rejection is of a higher order than physical abuse and negligence. The different types of child maltreatment are regarded as specific types of rejection, whereas the notion of child abuse does not exhaust the definition of parental rejection (Rohner, 1986). In fact, when analyzing the relationship between parental rejection and child abuse, we may find that, in some cases, non-maltreated children perceive themselves as being rejected by their parents or, conversely, that maltreated children do not perceive themselves as being rejected (Herzberger et al., 1981).

As Kagan (1978) pointed out, parental hostility or affection cannot be determined by the sole observation of parental behavior, as neither affection nor rejection can be regarded as a permanent behavioral quality. Parental affection is a belief sustained by the children, and not by the actions of a group of parents. In this respect, the effect of the parents' behavior on their children does not depend on objective elements, but on the children's perceptive and inferential processes. Parents and children do not necessarily perceive parental love, demands and punishments in the same way, and parents frequently make incorrect inferences about their children's perceptions of their behavior. Therefore, in accordance with these phenomenological observations, our present work defines parental behavior by taking into consideration both the parents' and the children's points of view.

Community social support

As Veiel & Baumann (1992) note, the term social support, as it is currently used, commonly implies an abstract characteristic of individuals, behaviors, relationships, or social systems. In that sense, social support has been said to represent a metaconcept (Vaux et al., 1986) lacking specificity and definition (Barrera, 1986), rather than a definable and measurable entity. According to Laireiter & Baumann (1992), only multidimensional taxonomies seem adequate for solving the conceptual problems of social support. For example, House et al. (1988) argue for a theoretical subdivision into social integration, social networks and relational content, which would represent distinct concepts that operate in different ways and have to be measured separately. Vaux (1992) proposes a taxonomy that substitutes the term social support by three constructs: 'network resources', 'social support appraisal' and 'social support behavior'. In addition, Laireiter & Baumann (1992) have proposed a taxonomy that comprises five components: a) social integration (social embeddedness), b) potential and actual supporters (support network, network resources), c) support as a characteristic of the climate of social aggregates and social environments (supportive climate, supportive environment), d) received and enacted support, and e) the perception of being supported.

Following Laireiter and Baumann's taxonomy (1992), the construct of social integration refers to an individual's participation and involvement in his or her social life in the community and society. According to these authors, the criteria for defining a person's social integration include 'being in regular contact with neighbors', 'having friends or relatives in the neighborhood' and 'memberships in social groups'.

In the present study, a self-report questionnaire based on the definition and dimensions of community support proposed by Lin et al. (1986) was used to measure social integration (Gracia, Garcia & Musitu, 1995). According to Lin et al., measures of community support represents the outermost layers of social relationships, and allow us to 'capture integration into the larger social structure - a sense of belongingness' (p. 155). The concept of community support would correspond with what has been called 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973), a concept that covers a wide range of potential supporters located beyond the primary network of family and close friends (Adelman et al., 1987).

Method
Procedure

The sample in this study were suspected but unreported cases of child maltreatment (not known to CPS services, law enforcement agencies, medical or mental health services), and a control group in respect of which there were no such suspicions. Suspected cases of child maltreatment were identified by teachers from different urban schools, recruited during a postgraduate Community Psychology course. In none of the cases did the suspected maltreatment cause injuries that required medical attention. For the teachers, these cases, although they fell under the theoretical concept of abuse and neglect, did not fit the category of reportable abuse (see Tite, 1993; Gracia, 1995).

Teachers also contacted parents to obtain their agreement to collaborate in the study. The teachers also recruited the children and families for the control group, from the same schools. The acceptance rate for the parents in the suspected abuse group was 45%, compared with 65% in the control group. No reference to the child maltreatment content of the study was made to either the parents or the children.

Subjects

The group of suspected cases of child maltreatment (physical abuse, neglect and psychological maltreatment) consisted of 100 children and their parents. The children's age ranged from 7 to 13 (at this age children are mature enough to be able to respond to the self-report questionnaires with a minimum of external assistance). Of the children 64% were male and 36% female. In this group, 76% of parents' questionnaires were completed by mothers and 24% by fathers. The control group consisted of 344 children and their parents. 51% of the children were male and 49% female. The age interval for the children was the same as the maltreatment group. In this group, 77% of parents' questionnaires were completed by mothers and 23% by fathers.

Measures

Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire-Parent and Child Forms (PARQ). This self-report questionnaire (Rohner, Saavedra & Granum, 1978a) measures perceptions of parental treatment of the child in terms of four dimensions: a) Parental Warmth and Affection; b) Parental Hostility and Aggression; c) Parental Indifference and Neglect; d) Parental Undifferentiated Rejection. This study has made use of the perceived Warmth/Affection factor, and the perceived composite Rejection Factor (calculated by adding the scores for the hostility, neglect and undifferentiated rejection scales). The two forms used in this study allowed us to obtain three measures of parental acceptance-rejection: the parents' perceptions of their treatment of their children, and the children's perceptions of the way they are treated by their mothers and their fathers.

    Community Social Support Questionnaire (Gracia, Garcia & Musitu, 1995) - The 33-item questionnaire includes three scales tapping different dimensions of social integration (questions refer to the community in which participants live):

I. *Community Integration and Satisfaction*: This 10-item scale measures social interaction with neighbors and members of the community, and satisfaction with social relationships in the neighborhood and with the community as a whole. Alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.82.

II. *Community Association and Participation*: This scale consists of 10 items that measure individual membership and participation in voluntary organizations - such as church, clubs, civic groups, unions, etc. The internal consistency coefficient for this scale was 0.84.

IV. *Community Resources of Social Support*: This 8-item scale measures actual or potential use of formal and organized services in case of need - such as local social services agencies, drug and alcohol rehabilitative services, community mental health centres, counseling centres, church, etc. The alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.87.

Results

In order to assess the modulating effect of the community social support on the relations between parents and their children, high and low scores of this instrument were defined by scores above and below the median determined for the entire sample (Sarason et al., 1983). The mean of each parental behavior variable (parents and children) was obtained for the groups of high and low social support in every social support dimension. The analysis technique applied was the ANOVA. Likewise, the means of both levels of social support (high/low) in every social support dimension were compared in the abusive and non-abusive groups.

Integration and satisfaction in the community and parental acceptance-rejection
The results obtained from the analysis of the relationships between this dimension of social support and parental behavior variables in the group of non-abusive families assess its modulating effect on the Warmth/Affection variable (evaluated by parents) - F=17.135, p<.001 (see Table 1). Moreover, the tendency of the means shows that parents with high social support (high social integration and positive attitudes towards the community) perceive themselves as being more affectionate towards their children than the parents with low social support. Nevertheless, from the children's point of view, no differences were found between the groups of high and low social support in terms of their perception of parental warmth/affection. Furthermore, in the category of control families, there were no significant differences between the groups of high and low social support in relation to the parental rejection variable.

On the other hand, the analysis of these relationships in abusive families revealed a modulating effect of the dimension of community social support on the parental rejection variable. As shown by Table 1, significant differences between high and low social support groups were found in the parental rejection variable (evaluated by the children). Rejection (M)- F=5.551, p.=.002 - and rejection (F) - F=5.730, p.=.020 -. The means tendency shows that maltreated children from socially isolated families (poor social relationships, poor participation in community activities and negative feelings towards the community) perceive a higher level of rejection (from both mother and father) than children from the high social support group. Conversely, in the parents' evaluation of this dimension there were no significant differences between the high and low social support groups, and parents were less hostile, indifferent and negligent in their own perception than in their children's.

Furthermore, the means analysis of parental behavior variables showed significant differences between non-abusive and abusive families in both groups of social support. Thus, abusive families presented higher levels of warmth and affection and lower levels of parental rejection than abusive families (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Community integration and satisfaction and parental acceptance-rejection*

	Community integration and satisfaction			
	Low	*High*	*F*	*P*
Non-Abuse				
Warmth/Affection (M)	71.333	72.529	0.756	0.389
Warmth/Affection (F)	68.214	68.879	0.033	0.856
Warmth/Affection (P)	69.267	75.088	17.135	**<0.001**
Rejection (M)	74.667	72.765	0.081	0.777
Rejection (F)	73.786	77.333	0.309	0.581
Rejection (P)	75.933	67.324	3.304	0.076
Abuse				
Warmth/Affection (M)	53.487	62.450	3.032	0.088
Warmth/Affection (F)	54.405	60.941	1.863	0.178
Warmth/Affection (P)	61.154	69.150	3.415	0.070
Rejection (M)	111.103	93.350	5.551	**0.022**
Rejection (F)	108.027	91.529	5.730	**0.020**
Rejection (P)	101.205	87.400	3.123	0.083
	F	*P*	*F*	*P*
Warmth/Affection (M)	17.565	**<0.001**	14.260	**<0.001**
Warmth/Affection (F)	9.073	**0.004**	3.661	0.062
Warmth/Affection (P)	3.130	0.083	7.602	**0.008**
Rejection (M)	32.821	**<0.001**	18.037	**<0.001**
Rejection (F)	24.008	**<0.001**	4.830	**0.033**
Rejection (P)	15.109	**<0.001**	19.738	**<0.001**

Note: (M) =Child rating mother, (F) =Child rating father, (P) =Parents ratings

Association and community participation and parental acceptance/rejection
The analysis of the correlation between this dimension and the parental behavior variables also reveals some interesting results. In the group of non-abusive families, no significant differences were found between high and low social support groups in any of the parental behavior variables (see Table 2). However, the abusive families showed significant statistical differences between the low and high social support groups in all the parental behavior variables, except in the warmth/affection variable (M) (see Table 2). A review of the tendency of the means assesses the modulating effect of this social support dimension on the warmth/affection variable - adult affection and parental warmth perceived in the high levels of social support - as well as on the Rejection variable - lower parental rejection perceived in the high levels of social support.

Again, significant differences in parental behavior variables between abusive and

non-abusive families were obtained in the two groups with respect to this social support dimension (p<.001), in all the Acceptance/Rejection variables for the low social support groups and in four Acceptance/Rejection variables for the high social support groups (see Table 2). Along with results observed in the high social support group, this suggest that abusive families with low social support are more prone to present low levels of warmth and affection and high levels of parental rejection.

Table 2. *Community association and participation and parental acceptance-rejection*

	Community association and participation			
	Low	*High*	*F*	*P*
	Non-Abuse			
Warmth/Affection (M)	71.708	71.652	0.002	0.962
Warmth/Affection (F)	68.522	69.000	0.018	0.893
Warmth/Affection (P)	73.750	73.652	0.027	0.870
Rejection (M)	71.708	71.217	0.076	0.785
Rejection (F)	70.435	74.652	0.539	0.467
Rejection (P)	70.125	71.391	0.047	0.830
	Abuse			
Warmth/Affection (M)	54.733	62.387	3.051	0.086
Warmth/Affection (F)	51.700	62.414	6.209	**0.016**
Warmth/Affection (P)	61.900	70.774	8.454	**0.005**
Rejection (M)	110.700	95.194	5.600	**0.021**
Rejection (F)	111.567	92.000	9.590	**0.003**
Rejection (P)	99.767	83.677	9.030	**0.004**
	F	*P*	*F*	*P*
Warmth/Affection (M)	26.150	**<0.001**	7.566	**0.008**
Warmth/Affection (F)	16.267	**<0.001**	2.708	0.106
Warmth/Affection (P)	13.445	**0.001**	1.717	0.196
Rejection (M)	50.134	**<0.001**	21.855	**<0.001**
Rejection (F)	46.035	**<0.001**	7.463	**0.009**
Rejection (P)	32.980	**<0.001**	6.410	**0.015**

Note: (M) =Child rating mother, (F) =Child rating father, (P) =Parents ratings

Institutional and community resources of social support and parental acceptance-rejection
The relation between this dimension and the parental behavior variables did not present significant differences between non-abusive and abusive families, either with high or low social support (see Table 3). On the other hand, like in the other social support dimensions, significant

differences have been obtained in all parental behavior variables for both abusive and non-abusive families with high and low social support, although, again, these differences are more obvious in the low than in the high social support groups (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Community resources of social support and parental acceptance-rejection*

	Community resources of social support			
	Low	*High*	*F*	*P*
Non-Abuse				
Warmth/Affection (M)	71.968	72.067	0.013	0.910
Warmth/Affection (F)	69.900	64.133	2.689	0.108
Warmth/Affection (P)	74.323	74.600	0.009	0.924
Rejection (M)	69.645	71.867	0.181	0.672
Rejection (F)	70.733	77.933	1.667	0.204
Rejection (P)	65.129	67.467	0.221	0.641
Abuse				
Warmth/Affection (M)	56.826	60.974	1.066	0.306
Warmth/Affection (F)	54.130	61.212	3.001	0.089
Warmth/Affection (P)	63.652	68.359	3.168	0.081
Rejection (M)	106.609	101.026	0.480	0.491
Rejection (F)	106.174	100.182	0.753	0.389
Rejection (P)	94.174	89.487	0.591	0.445
	F	*P*	*F*	*P*
Warmth/Affection (M)	22.543	**<0.001**	8.222	**0.006**
Warmth/Affection (F)	18.595	**<0.001**	0.467	**0.498**
Warmth/Affection (P)	14.622	**<0.001**	4.977	**0.031**
Rejection (M)	46.093	**<0.001**	22.446	**<0.001**
Rejection (F)	31.285	**<0.001**	10.855	**0.002**
Rejection (P)	37.418	**<0.001**	12.499	**0.001**

Note: (M) =Child rating mother, (F) =Child rating father, (P) =Parents ratings

Discussion

The results of the present work largely support the close relationship between the social isolation of families and child abuse already established in previous studies, and also add new elements, which help to better understand the dynamics of this relationship.

In this study, we have obtained three main findings: 1) a differential effect of the different dimensions of community social support on the parental behavior variables, 2) a positive

modulating effect of the dimensions of 'Community Integration and Satisfaction' and 'Community Association and Participation' on the parental behavior variables, mainly in abusive families, and 3) the lack of modulating effects of the dimension of 'Community Resources of Social Support' on both groups of families. These results lead us to a number of considerations.

Firstly, research into the relationship between social support and child abuse has underestimated the complexity of this topic and overlooked certain important aspects, such as the distinction between the structural and functional components of social support (Seagull, 1987). According to Barrera (1986), the term 'Social Support' does not convey a specific clear concept, since most of its definitions are too vague for research purposes (Heller & Swinde, 1983; Shunmaker & Brownell, 1984; Laireiter & Baumann, 1992; Vaux, 1992). Thus, our results confirm the need to avoid general descriptions of social support. This points to the importance of using specific terminology which can reflect the complexity of this concept and enable the understanding of the effects of social isolation on child abuse (Gracia, García & Musitu, 1995).

Secondly, the differential modulating effect of the dimensions of social support on abusive families is, from our point of view, highly relevant. We have found that abusive families are, in general terms, more socially isolated than non-abusive families. Therefore, an increase in social support levels can lead to the attainment of 'normal' levels of social integration in abusive families, whereas low levels of social support lead to 'abnormal' low levels of social integration (i.e. 'abnormal' high levels of isolation). If we take into account that results in the parental behavior variables significantly improve in abusive families with high social support (higher level of warmth/affection and lower level of parental rejection than abusive families with low social support), then the substantial influence of certain aspects of social integration - such as networks of social relationships established with the neighborhood and the community, participation in social activities and the connection with informal systems of social support - on family behavior becomes evident. Furthermore, no relationship between the social support dimension of 'Community Resources of Social Support' and the parental behavior variables has been found, which confirms the potential of informal systems of social support in the improvement of the family climate and parent-child relationships.

The absence of a connection between 'Community Resources of Social Support' and parental behavior may be explained by the fact that support given by formal and organized care services usually lacks the dimension of reciprocity (with the exception of self-help groups), and tends to be based on the use of authority. Also, having to request help from formal systems of support may constitute a threat to self-esteem in the sense that it involves a public admission of failure and inferiority (Fisher et al., 1982). As Tiejten (1980) has pointed out, when people need support and assistance, they look to sources that will increase their feelings of competence and control over their own lives. Friends, relatives and neighbors offer relationships based on esteem rather than authority, and on reciprocity rather than on unidirectional aid, and are more likely to enhance feelings of competence and control over one's own life than support from many formal support systems. This raises the question of the extent to which formal systems of support can meaningfully substitute informal support networks and represent a notion of social service provision that combines the efforts of the professional service providers with those of informal helpers in a more planned and articulated way (Froland et al., 1981).

Nevertheless, the problem of child maltreatment demands the intervention of the community social services and other formal systems of social support. The results in our study suggest a new approach in the present formal social support systems and the search for an appropriate combination of formal and informal systems of social support in the prevention and intervention programs of child abuse. Family support programs are a good example of this new approach to prevention and intervention in the field of child maltreatment.

The many different programs labeled 'family support programs' share a common objective and a common set of defining characteristics. These programs take into account the negative effects of many stressing factors (unemployment, poverty, social mobility and isolation, single parenthood, parenthood during adolescence, etc.) the family life, as well as the relationship between family rupture and dysfunction, an impoverished and disjointed social environment and many social problems. Therefore, a central idea in these programs is that the problem cannot be restricted to the narrow limits of an individual family, but must be related to the deterioration of relationships between families and the formal and informal sources of support in the community (Gracia, 1997).

To sum up, the results obtained in the present study confirm that certain aspects of family behavior and practices can be altered and improved by processes of social support (Seitz et al., 1985; Dunst & Trivette, 1988; Garbarino, 1987). As Cameron (1990) pointed out, social integration, the access to positive networks of social resources and social interaction improve the adjustment and well-being of families and individuals. Social support should become an essential element in family intervention programs.

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