Child-related cognitions and affective functioning of physically abusive and comparison parents

Mary E. Haskett*, Susan Smith Scott, Raven Grant, Caryn Sabourin Ward, Canby Robinson

Department of Psychology, North Carolina State University, P.O. Box 7801, Raleigh, NC 27695, USA

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Abstract

Objective: The goal of this research was to utilize the cognitive behavioral model of abusive parenting to select and examine risk factors to illuminate the unique and combined influences of social cognitive and affective variables in predicting abuse group membership.

Methodology: Participants included physically abusive parents (n = 56) and a closely-matched group of comparison parents (n = 62). Social cognitive risk variables measured were (a) parent’s expectations for children’s abilities and maturity, (b) parental attributions of intentionality of child misbehavior, and (c) parents’ perceptions of their children’s adjustment. Affective risk variables included (a) psychopathology and (b) parenting stress. A series of logistic regression models were constructed to test the individual, combined, and interactive effects of risk variables on abuse group membership.

Results: The full set of five risk variables was predictive of abuse status; however, not all variables were predictive when considered individually and interactions did not contribute significantly to prediction. A risk composite score computed for each parent based on the five risk variables significantly predicted abuse status. Wide individual differences in risk across the five variables were apparent within the sample of abusive parents.

Conclusions: Findings were generally consistent with a cognitive behavioral model of abuse, with cognitive variables being more salient in predicting abuse status than affective factors. Results point to the importance of considering diversity in characteristics of abusive parents.

Keywords: Physical abuse; Abusive parents; Social cognitive models of abuse

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Corresponding author.
Introduction

It is generally well accepted that single-factor etiological models of parenting style are inadequate to account for the individual, family, and community-level influences on parenting (Belsky, 1984). The etiology of abusive parenting, in particular, is highly complex, and understanding the development and maintenance of physical abuse will require a comprehensive, multidimensional model. Over the course of the past three decades of research on child abuse, several viable etiological models have been proposed. Cognitive behavioral/social cognitive models, in particular, have demonstrated significant utility as a foundation for the conceptualization and implementation of prevention and intervention efforts. Support for the utility of the cognitive behavioral model lies in the fact that behavioral and cognitive behavioral treatment strategies constitute the most often cited intervention approaches in the literature (Wolfe & Werkerle, 1993). Indeed, Lutzker (1998) states “The social/cognitive model is the best that we have to date, and it will probably be embellished in the 21st century” (p. 564). The goal of the present research was to utilize the cognitive behavioral model of abusive parenting to select and examine risk factors to illuminate the unique and combined influences of social cognitive and affective variables in predicting abuse group membership.

Overview of the cognitive behavioral model of abusive parenting

An early cognitive behavioral model was proposed by Twentyman and colleagues (Twentyman, Rohbeck, & Amish, 1984) and was subsequently expanded by Azar and Twentyman (1986). According to that framework, if parents’ expectations for their children’s abilities are developmentally inappropriate, children will be unlikely to meet their parents’ expectations. As a result, parents will view their children as inadequate and their children’s misbehavior as purposeful and thus worthy of harsh discipline. Such negative appraisals by parents, especially when combined with parenting skill deficits, increase the risk of inadequate parenting practices, including use of overly harsh discipline. Although Azar has acknowledged the importance of contextual stress and poor stress management skills in the etiology and treatment of abusive parenting (see Stern & Azar, 1998), other researchers consider parental stress to be a more central determinant of abusive parenting. Milner’s (1993, 2000) three-stage social information processing model of abusive parenting, for example, includes essentially the same cognitive components as Azar’s model, but the role of parental stress at each stage of social information processing is highlighted. Similarly, Hillson and Kuiper’s (1994) model of abusive and neglectful parenting focuses on parents’ strategies for coping with stress and on their cognitive appraisals of stressful situations. Each of these cognitive behavioral models (as opposed to purely cognitive models) includes a focus on poor child management skills as important in the etiology of child abuse. A focus on parenting behavior borrows from early behavioral models of abuse (e.g., Dubanoski, Evans, & Higuchi, 1978) and from social learning principles of the development of parent/child aggression (e.g., Patterson, 1982; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992).

The general parenting literature provides a solid foundation of support for cognitive behavioral etiological models of physical abuse, offering evidence that parents’ child-related cognitions and the contextual stress they experience as they care for their children are predictive of their disciplinary choices. Specifically, research shows that parenting behavior is
significantly related to parents’ beliefs regarding their children, including negative perceptions of their children’s adjustment (e.g., Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984) and attributions of hostile intent for children’s misbehavior (e.g., Dix, Ruble, & Zambarano, 1989; MacKinnon-Lewis, Lamb, Arbuckle, Baradaran, & Vollaing, 1992; Slep & O’Leary, 1998). A variety of stressors might also impact parenting, including depression (see Downey & Coyne, 1990), interpersonal stressors such as marital conflict (Holden & Ritchie, 1991), and sociodemographic stressors including unemployment (McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994) and economic disadvantage (McLoyd, 1990). Parents who experience multiple stressors and who are lacking adequate support structures (i.e., “buffers”) are likely to engage in harsh, controlling discipline combined with low nurturance (see Webster-Stratton, 1990).

In addition to support for the cognitive behavioral model within the general parenting literature, there is a body of research based on samples of abusive parents and those at risk of abuse that provides more direct support for individual components of cognitive behavioral models. As noted above, Azar (1991) suggest that a likely path to abusive parenting begins with unrealistic expectations for children’s emotional and social development. Research suggests that, although abusive parents’ knowledge of developmental milestones might not differ from that of nonabusive parents (Kravitz & Driscoll, 1983), their expectations for children’s abilities in areas such as self-care and responsibility for family members’ care and happiness appears to be unrealistic. In two separate studies, Azar administered a measure of expectations, the Parent Opinion Questionnaire (POQ), to small samples of abusive/neglectful and matched nonabusive mothers of preschool-aged children (Azar, Robinson, Hekimian, & Twentyman, 1984; Azar & Rohrbeck, 1986). In the initial study (Azar et al., 1984) maltreating mothers were found to hold more unrealistic beliefs regarding children’s abilities. In the second study, Azar and Rohrbeck (1986) compared the expectations of maltreating mothers to mothers whose spouses were the perpetrators of child abuse. Results showed that abusive mothers demonstrated more unrealistic expectations as compared to mothers with abusive spouses. Furthermore, a discriminant function analysis using scores on the measure of expectations correctly identified 83% of the 30 mothers into abusive or nonabusive categories (Azar & Rohrbeck, 1986).

Azar’s research suggested that parental expectations for children’s abilities were relevant for understanding group differences between abusive and nonabusive mothers. However, results of two subsequent studies indicated that the link between expectations and global measures of parenting quality, including abuse potential and home observations of parenting, might be less robust than Azar’s research suggested. First, Daggett and colleagues (Daggett, O’Brien, Zanoli, & Peyton, 2000) administered the POQ to a sample of nonabusive mothers and found a link between expectations and negative attitudes towards children. However, parental expectations did not explain variance in HOME scores, a broad measure of child rearing environment based on observations in the home setting. Second, Budd, Heilman, and Kane (2000) found no differences in POQ scores between adolescent mothers who obtained elevated scores on a measure of abuse potential and those with scores in the normal range. Given discrepancies in findings between Azar’s work and more recent research, the role of expectations in abusive parenting warrants further research.

A second cognitive factor implicated in maltreatment is negative perceptions of children’s adjustment. Although research exists in which differences between abusive and nonabusive
parents’ reports of their children’s adjustment have not emerged (Webster-Stratton, 1985), the preponderance of research indicates that abusive parents hold highly negative views of their children’s adjustment (Lau & Weisz, 2000; Mash, Johnston, & Kovitz, 1983). Given significant behavioral disturbance among abused children (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001), it is reasonable that their parents would report a high degree of child maladjustment. Indeed, some research groups have found that abusive parents’ reports of child behavior problems correspond to those of teachers and peers (e.g., Feldman et al., 1995). Although such concordance might be perceived as evidence that abusive parents’ perceptions of their children, albeit negative, are in fact “accurate” this contention has not been widely supported in the literature. Other researchers have found that reports of abusive parents are not consistent with actual observations of the children (e.g., Mash et al., 1983; Reid, Kavanagh, & Baldwin, 1987) or with teacher reports (e.g., Culp, Howell, Culp, & Blankemeyer, 2000). Whipple and Webster-Stratton (1991), for example, administered behavior checklists to abusive and nonabusive parents of children referred for treatment as a result of noncompliant, defiant behavior. Results showed abusive mothers rated their children as more disturbed than did nonabusive mothers, but independent observers noted that groups of abused and nonabused children did not differ in home observations of child defiance (e.g., whining, yelling, noncompliance). Based on those findings, the authors concluded that perceptions of abusive mothers might be negatively impacted by sociodemographic stress.

The influence of sociodemographic stress on the relation between parental perceptions and child abuse was also highlighted by findings of Bradley and Peters (1991), who administered a child behavior checklist to small groups (n = 8) of abusive and nonabusive mothers. Significant group differences were found for the number of child behavior problems reported as “problematic,” but only when abusive mothers’ reports were compared to reports of mothers with a significantly higher SES than the abusive mothers. There were no significant differences in perceptions of abusive mothers and comparison mothers who were matched on SES. Finally, Estroff and colleagues (Estroff et al., 1984) administered a child behavior checklist and a measure of parental emotional distress to maltreating mothers and mothers of children referred for psychiatric treatment. A significant relation between perceptions of children’s behavior and maternal psychopathology was found such that negative views of children were related to high levels of distress; the association between perceptions and distress was particularly strong for maltreating parents.

A third area of child-related cognitions implicated in the etiology of physical abuse is parental attributions for children’s misbehavior. A consistent body of evidence within the general parenting literature demonstrates that parental attributions of intent and causality for children’s misbehavior are related to parents’ disciplinary choices (e.g., MacKinnon-Lewis et al., 1992). Although an early examination of attributions of intent (Rosenburg & Reppucci, 1983) of abusive and nonabusive mothers referred for treatment showed no group differences, subsequent research has revealed that abusive mothers tend to hold more negative, hostile attributions for their children’s misbehavior (e.g., Larrance & Twentyman, 1983). Recently, Montes, De Paul, and Milner (2001) reported that parents at high risk of physical abuse were significantly more likely than matched low-risk parents to attribute hostile intent to hypothetical child misbehavior. In addition, Azar (1989) documented a link between ascribing negative intentions to children and using harsh disciplinary choices among mothers who were
abusive or at high risk of abuse. The role of stress as a moderating variable in the relation between attributions and risk of abusive parenting was investigated by Schellenbach, Monroe, and Merluzzi (1991), who found a positive relation between scores on a measure of child abuse potential and a measure of attributions for children’s misbehavior. Specifically, mothers with high abuse potential viewed hypothetical child behaviors as intentional and negative, but only under conditions of high situational stress.

Throughout this overview of research supporting the cognitive behavioral model of abusive parenting, the fundamental role of stress on parenting has been highlighted. It is clear that any viable model delineating the etiology of abusive parenting must include stress as a central feature. In fact, compared to nonabusive parents or those at low risk of abuse, abusive and high risk parents have been shown to experience higher levels of emotional distress including depression and anxiety (e.g., Culp, Culp, Soulis, & Letts, 1989; Dinwiddie & Bucholz, 1993), greater life stress (e.g., Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991) and higher levels of parenting stress (e.g., Rodriguez & Green, 1997; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991). If it is expected that research in the area of child maltreatment will inform intervention and prevention efforts, investigators must examine the potentially complex interplay of cognitive and affective variables as they operate individually and as they combine and interact to increase risk of abuse.

**Purpose of the current research**

Research designed to examine the contribution of multiple causative factors to parent behavior abounds in the general parenting literature, but a comparable level of sophistication generally has not extended to research in child abuse. Although results from the general parenting literature can be used to inform hypotheses regarding abusive parents, it cannot be assumed that the patterns of relations found among variables in samples of typical parents will be valid in samples with extreme characteristics such as abusive parents. Unfortunately there has been a substantial decline in recent years in the publication of empirically-based literature involving abusive parents. Indeed, in a review of characteristics of maltreating parents, Milner (1998) noted that extant literature included more publications related to methodological problems in child physical abuse research than articles based on empirical research on characteristics of abusive parents. Methodological problems noted by Milner (1998) and others (e.g., Wolfe, 1999) included the use of small nonrepresentative samples, convenience samples comprised exclusively of parents referred for treatment, omission of abusive fathers, and restriction in range of SES such that etiological models are probably “class bound” (Lutzker, 1998).

In 1993, the National Research Council recommended the use of multivariate models to improve understanding of child maltreatment and Ammerman (1998) subsequently echoed those recommendations. Unfortunately, research based on samples of parents identified as abusive continued to be restricted generally to attempts to identify main effects of singular correlates of abusive parenting. The unique and joint contributions of cognitive and affective factors have rarely been examined. To this end, the purpose of the present research was to employ a relatively sophisticated data analytic strategy to examine risk variables identified on the basis of the cognitive behavioral model of physical abuse. Social cognitive risk variables included parents’ expectations for children’s abilities and maturity, parental attributions of
intentionality for children’s misbehavior, and parents’ perceptions of their children’s adjustment. Affective risk variables included psychopathology and stress specific to the parenting role.

The primary aim of this research endeavor was to examine the degree to which cognitive and affective risk variables would predict abuse group membership. It should be noted that our use of the term “prediction” refers to the statistical approach employed; the study was not designed to predict future abuse. The contribution of risk variables to the prediction of abuse status was examined using two data analytic approaches to allow comparison of results across strategies, thereby enhancing the understanding of risks. The first approach was a traditional examination of the contribution of five individual risk factors to the prediction of abuse by testing a series of logistic regression models. The second approach, also utilizing a logistic regression analysis, involved a single predictor of abuse status based on a summary of risk factors present for each parent. The utility of a composite risk score has been demonstrated by researchers who have examined the impact of multiple risk factors on child outcomes (e.g., Burchinal, Roberts, Hooper, & Zeisel, 2000; Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Sameroff, Seifer, & Bartko, 1997), but this strategy has not been applied to investigations of abusive parents. Examination of models using both individual risk variables and a composite risk score can be highly informative.

Although the primary purpose of this research was geared toward analysis of data at the level of group differences, it was also our intent to describe the degree of within group differences among abusive parents on the five risk variables examined herein. Undoubtedly, the focus of past research on group differences has been valuable in elucidating characteristics of abusive parents and informing intervention; however, the search for “lawfulness” might have obscured meaningful variation within samples of abusive parents. The consideration of individual differences within this sample represented an attempt to move from an exclusive variable-level, group-oriented analysis to a more person-oriented approach to inform theory and prevention/intervention efforts.

Method

Participants

Participants were 118 parents selected from a group of participants in a larger study (N = 209) designed to examine the impact of parenting and social cognition on children’s social adjustment in the transition to kindergarten and early elementary school years. Two groups of parents were included in the larger study. Parents in the abuse group had a report of physical abuse of a child between the ages of 5–10 years or were a spouse of the alleged abuser, and the child lived with the parent and had no history of sexual abuse. Comparison parents had no history of perpetrating child abuse or neglect, and their 5- to 10-year-old child resided with them. For inclusion in the current sample of abusive parents, the report of physical abuse had to be substantiated, and nonabusive spouses were not included, which reduced the larger sample of 209 parents to 155. The sample of 155 was further reduced by the stipulation that data were available for every measure utilized in the current study. That restriction resulted in a loss
of 37 parents, most of whom were excluded due to missing data on the measure of parental perceptions (i.e., the ECBI), which was added to the research protocol later in the project.

The final sample of 118 parents included 56 parents with a recent (within 1 year prior to data collection) report of physical child abuse substantiated by child protective services professionals. Comparison parents \( (n = 62) \) were closely matched to abusive parents on parent and child age, gender, race, educational attainment, family size, intellectual functioning (using the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test; Kaufman & Kaufman, 1990), marital status, and socioeconomic status (Hollingshead, 1975). There was a statistically significant group difference in family size \( (p < .05) \), but the difference between 3.5 family members for the comparison parents and 4.0 for the abusive parents was probably not clinically meaningful. See Table 1 for a full description of the sample.

The definition of physical abuse in the state in which these data were collected (i.e., NC) requires explanation. To substantiate physical abuse, social workers were required to document serious injuries (e.g., broken bones, severe burns) resulting from the use of “cruel or grossly inappropriate” procedures or devices by the caretaker. Less serious injuries (e.g., bruises, lacerations) typically resulted in substantiation of “neglect involving improper discipline.” Because those cases of neglect were similar in typology to physical abuse substantiated in other states, research criteria for the current sample was inclusive of substantiated physical abuse and/or neglect involving improper discipline. In the current sample, approximately 35% of abusive parents were substantiated for physical abuse and 65% were substantiated for inappropriate discipline.

Abusive parents were recruited for participation in the larger study in two ways. Social workers were asked to give every eligible parent a recruitment packet containing a written description of the project and information about how to contact the project staff if the parent was interested in participating. Because every eligible parent might not have received the packet from their social worker, a periodic review of the child protective services register was conducted by the first author to identify eligible families. Over the course of 4 years, recruitment materials were mailed directly to 219 parents whose children were deemed eligible (based on the child’s age and type of abuse report). Recruitment of comparison parents into the larger study was done primarily by word-of-mouth and through distribution of flyers in community newsletters, agencies, childcare centers, and businesses in neighborhoods where abusive parents resided.

In order to verify group membership, all participating parents were screened for entry into the abuse or comparison groups. Parents recruited from social services signed a release for research staff to obtain information directly from the social worker; if the report of abuse was not substantiated, parents were omitted from the current sample. Comparison parents were screened for abuse status through a three-stage process. First, during a comprehensive psychosocial interview, potential comparison parents were asked whether they had ever been involved with child protective services. Second, a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Kaufman, Jones, Steiglitz, Vitulano, & Mannarino, 1994) was administered to each parent, followed by a series of questions related to severity of corporal punishment (e.g., “Have you ever left red marks/bruises/cuts on your child after slapping him/her?”). If parents acknowledged prior contact with child protective services or if they reported use of discipline methods on the CTS or follow-up interview that constituted excessively harsh discipline, they
Table 1
Demographic characteristics of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Comparison (n = 62)</th>
<th>Abusive (n = 56)</th>
<th>Significance tests</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent age (years)</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age (years)</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. of family members</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>K-BIT score</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>89.2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent</td>
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<td>Percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>College or more</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single</td>
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Note: Ns vary slightly due to missing data.

were excluded from consideration for the comparison group. A final level of screening was provided by the review of the child protective services register conducted by the first author to identify abusive parents. That review did not result in any comparison family being identified as eligible for the abuse group (i.e., none of their 5- to 10-year-old children’s names appeared in the registry during the 4-year period of data collection).

Procedures

Direct contacts between parents and research staff were initiated by parents who voluntarily called the project office. Upon that phone call, a psychosocial interview was conducted, and
if parents met research criteria, they were invited to participate. To encourage participation, transportation to the data collection site and childcare were available. In addition, parents were invited to return for feedback about their family evaluation, and each parent in the family who participated received US $75 and was entered in a monthly drawing for a US $75 certificate to a department store. As a safeguard for parents who might not have participated due to fear of potential misuse of their data, a Certificate of Confidentiality was obtained from the federal Department of Health and Human Services in an effort to protect parents from use of research records in court proceedings. After completion of the psychosocial interview parents were scheduled for a 3- to 4-hour family data collection session, during which time informed consent was obtained and measures for the current research were administered by uninformed research staff. Data collection took place at a university family clinic in private, comfortable interview rooms. If parents had difficulty reading, test items were read aloud to them. Procedures were approved by the university institutional review board.

Measures of cognitive risk variables

Parental expectations. The Parent Opinion Questionnaire (Azar et al., 1984) consists of 80 brief descriptions of child abilities (e.g., “A 7-year-old is old enough to set his or her own curfew and meal times”). The POQ was designed to assess parental expectations of child behavior at varying developmental stages (items include children ranging from infancy to 16 years of age). Parents indicate whether they Agree or Disagree with each statement, and scores are generated for six subscales and a total score. The six subscales, comprised of 10 items each, include Self-care, Family Responsibility and Care of Siblings, Help and Affection to Parents, Leaving Children Alone, Proper Behavior and Feelings, and Punishment. A Total score is also derived from a sum of scores from the six subscales. Higher scores indicate greater levels of unrealistic expectations within each subscale and for the Total score. The Total score was used in the present study because a recent exploratory factor analysis (Haskett, Smith Scott, Willoughby, Ahern, & Nears, in press) using the larger dataset on which the current study is based did not support the subscale structure of the scale. Azar and colleagues provided evidence to support the discriminate validity of the POQ (Azar et al., 1984; Azar & Rohrbeck, 1986) using abusive mothers (60% African American; 60% single) with 12 years or less of education (age of children was not reported). The POQ has been recommended for clinical assessment of abusive parents and those at risk of child maltreatment (e.g., Budd, 2001; Hansen & MacMillan, 1990; Kolko & Swenson, 2002).

Parents’ perceptions of their children. The Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI; Eyberg & Pincus, 1999) was used to assess parents’ perceptions of their children’s adjustment. The ECBI is a 36-item brief parent rating scale appropriate for parents of children aged 2–16 years of age. To describe their child’s behavior, parents estimate the frequency with which their child exhibits each of the problem behaviors (on a 7-point scale) and they indicate whether or not they consider each behavior to be a problem for themselves. The total sum of frequency ratings comprises the Intensity scale. The total number of items the parent considers to be a problem (with a possible range from 0 to 36) comprises the Problems score. The Problem score was utilized in the current study. Problem scores of 15 correspond to a T score of 60,
and are considered to be within the clinical range. The Problem score can be considered an indication of parental tolerance for child misbehavior, with higher scores representing lower tolerance (Brestan, Eyberg, Johnson, & Algina, 1998).

The ECBI is a widely-used parent report measure of disruptive behavior problems that was normed on a nationally representative sample of parents. There is abundant and strong support for the convergent and discriminative validity of ECBI scores. For example, ECBI scores correlate more highly with the Externalizing scale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) than they do with the CBCL Internalizing scale. Numerous studies show that scores on the ECBI consistently differentiate groups of conduct disordered children from nonconduct disordered children and among groups of children with different diagnoses. Problem scale scores (but not Intensity scale scores) are associated with SES and child gender such that parents with lower SES and those with boys tend to have higher scores; in addition, high ECBI scores are associated with high parenting stress (see Eyberg & Pincus, 1999).

Attributions of intent. The Child Vignettes (CV; Plotkin, 1983) provides a measure of the degree to which parents attribute negative intentionality to child behavior. Eighteen vignettes describing child misbehavior are read aloud to the parent. Vignettes vary in the degree to which the child’s behavior is depicted as intentional. Some descriptions involved limited intentionality (“Soon after you place your 2-year-old in the next room you hear her/him crying”), and some involve more intentional misbehavior (“Shortly after you punished your 5-year-old, you tell her/him to play quietly with her/his toys. Very soon after this instruction, s/he stands up, looks at you in the eye, throws a toy at an expensive lamp, breaks it, and then laughs.”). Parents are asked to imagine that the child in each vignette is their own, and then to use a 9-point scale to rate the degree to which the child’s behavior was intended specifically to annoy the parent (the Attribution scale). Possible responses range from one (“My child had no intention of annoying me”) through nine (“My child did this specifically to annoy me”). In addition, parents use a 9-point scale to rate each item on the degree to which they would punish the child (the Punishment scale). Possible responses range from one to nine with higher scores indicating more severe punishment. Raw scores on the Attributions scale (possible range of 18–162) were used for the current research. Scores on the CV differentiated abusive from nonabusive mothers with young children (ranging from preschool to early elementary school) (Plotkin, 1983). High scores were related to unrealistic expectations, as measured by the POQ, among a sample of mothers with toddlers and preschoolers (Azar, 1989) and in a sample of physically abused and nonabused adolescents (Azar, 1990).

Measures of affective risk variables

Psychopathology. The Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1983) is a self-report inventory designed to assess current patterns of psychological symptoms experienced by parents. It consists of 90 items that are rated on a 5-point distress scale to indicate how much each symptom has bothered parents in the last 7 days. The SCL-90-R yields T scores for nine primary symptom dimensions (e.g., depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety) and three global indices. The Global Severity Index (GSI), utilized in the current research,
combines the number of symptoms reported and intensity of reported distress to yield the single best indicator of current emotional health. Derogatis (1983) reports a score of 63 represents clinical significance on the individual and summary scores. The psychometric properties of the SCL-90-R have been extensively examined, and it is widely accepted as a sound instrument.

Parenting stress

The Parenting Stress Index—Short Form (PSI-SF; Abidin, 1995) is a self-report instrument that measures stress directly associated with the parenting role. The PSI-SF consists of 36 statements, and parents respond to each statement using a 5-point scale to indicate the degree to which that item has been disturbing to them in the past week. This instrument yields scores for several factors in addition to a Total Stress score. The Total Stress score, utilized for purposes of the current research, is a composite score of the subscale scores. Parents who obtain a Total Stress score above a raw score of 90 are considered to experiencing clinically significant parenting stress. Internal consistency reliability for the composite Total Stress is reported by the author to be .91. Stability of the instrument was assessed by test-retest after a 6-month interval and yielded an alpha of .84 for the Total Stress. The PSI-SF has recently been validated by independent research efforts (Reitman, Currier, & Stickle, 2002) and its psychometric properties appear to be strong.

Analytic strategy and procedures for missing data

The first step in data analyses was to estimate a series of logistic regression models using abuse status (abuse/comparison) as the dichotomous dependent variable and each individual independent variable, in turn, as a predictor. The next step was to test multipredictor models (some of which were nested) involving groups of independent variables as predictors of abuse status. The overall model fit is evaluated with Likelihood Ratio (LR) tests (loosely analogous to an F test in ordinary regression) and individual parameters are tested using the $\chi^2$ test. In logistic regression, an odds ratio (OR) serves as the indication of the strength of the association between dependent and independent variables (loosely analogous to $r^2$ in multiple regression) and provides the most practical interpretation of findings. An odds ratio provides an estimate of the increased likelihood of membership in a group (in this case, abuse/comparison) given a one-unit increase in the dependent variable(s). An OR of 1.0 indicates that there is an equal chance of being in either group; $p$ values associated with each OR indicate the probability that the OR is different than 1.0. Wright (1995) provides an articulate description of these concepts for those unfamiliar with logistic regression.

As noted above, 37 of the 155 parents who met the research criteria were not included in the final sample because they were missing data on one or more of the risk factors. Given that the 24% reduction in sample size resulted in a loss of statistical power, six complete data sets were generated using multiple-imputation procedures as described and implemented by Schafer (1997). All logistic regression models analyses based on the sample of 118 parents were replicated using those six complete data sets ($N = 155$). Instances where substantive conclusions differed for analyses based on imputed data are noted. Complete results
from analyses based on the multiply imputed data sets are available from the first author by request.

**Results**

**Univariate logistic regression models**

The overall goal of this research was to determine the extent to which a variety of social cognitive and affective risk factors accurately predicted abusive from comparison parents. To begin to address this question a series of univariate logistic regression models were estimated with abuse status serving as the outcome and each of the five risk factors serving as predictors. Among the social cognitive predictors, higher scores on the CV, odds ratio (OR) = 1.03, \( p = .035 \) and on the ECBI, OR = 1.09, \( p = .006 \), significantly predicted abusive from comparison parents. In contrast, the POQ did not differentiate abusive and comparison parents, \( \chi^2(1) = .5, p = .50 \). Among affective predictors, higher scores on the PSI-SF Total scale, OR = 1.02, \( p = .028 \), significantly predicted abusive from comparison parents. Although the SCL-90-R GSI scale did not significantly predict abuse status for abusive and comparison parents based on the sample of 118 parents, \( \chi^2(1) = 1.4, p = .23 \), higher scores did predict abuse status in analyses involving complete data, OR = 1.04, \( p < .05 \). See Table 2 for a summary of scores for abuse and comparison samples on each measure and on the Cumulative Risk Index (described below). Results of all univariate logistic regression models are summarized in Table 3.

**Relations among risk variables**

The next goal was to test the extent to which risk factors differentiated abusive from comparison parents when considered collectively. As a preliminary analysis, relations between individual risk factors were evaluated and all five risk variables were significantly and positively correlated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Descriptive statistics for predictor variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparison (( n = 62 ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual predictors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Vignettes(^a)</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POQ(^b)</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECBI Problems(^c)</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCL-90-R GSI(^d)</td>
<td>54.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSI-SF Total(^e)</td>
<td>77.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative Risk Index(^c)</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Raw scores (possible range = 1–5).
\(^b\) T scores (possible range = 1–5).
\(^c\) Sum of risks (possible range = 1–5).
Table 3
Univariate and multivariate correlations among risk and outcome variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Tolerance</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Vignettes</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.44***</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>.35***</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POQ</td>
<td>.37***</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.35***</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECBI</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.0006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSI</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.60***</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>1.02*</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSI</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>.52***</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Values below the diagonal are listwise correlations (N = 155). Values above the diagonal are pairwise correlations (N range 118–155). Tolerance is defined as 1 – R^2 when a predictor is regressed on other predictors and is based on the listwise deletion sample. OR = odds ratio for prediction of group status; p = probability that OR is different than 1.0.

* Effect of GSI was significant (OR = 1.04, p < .05) when analyses were replicated using multiple imputation procedures (N = 155).

*p < .05.
** p < .01.
*** p < .001.

correlated (see Table 3). However, the magnitude of the associations was modest, suggesting that individual risk factors carried unique information. To evaluate further this issue, we examined the multivariate relationships between predictors by regressing each risk variable on the remaining set of risk variables and evaluating the tolerance index from each of these models. Tolerance is a measure of the variance in an individual risk variable that remains after accounting for its relationship with other risk variables (i.e., 1 – R^2). The tolerance indices for the five models are summarized in Table 3 and indicate that between 19% and 40% of the variance in each risk variable was accounted for by the set of other risk factors. Taken together these analyses suggested that multicollinearity would not be a problem for models that incorporated all five risk variables in the prediction of abusive versus comparison parents.

Tests of prediction models using individual and blocks of risk variables

To examine the joint contribution of risk factors, four multiple logistic regression equations were estimated with abuse status as the dependent variable and different combinations of risk factors as predictors. Table 4 includes results of tests of each model. The first model (Model 1) regressed abuse status on the set of three cognitive risk factors. The second model (Model 2) regressed abuse status on the pair of affective risk factors. The third model (Model 3) regressed abuse status on all five risk factors, simultaneously. The fourth model (Model 4) regressed abuse status on all five risk factors, as well as all six possible two-way interactions between social cognitive and affective risk factors. Given that a number of these models were nested, likelihood ratio (LR) tests were computed to determine the extent to which different models improved the prediction of abuse status. Given strong theoretical support for the role of each risk factor as it pertains to child maltreatment, all risk factors were retained in each analysis regardless of whether they made significant unique contributions in the prediction of abuse status.

The set of cognitive variables (Model 1) significantly predicted abuse status, LR(3) = 15.9, p = .001. Inspection of the individual predictors indicated that parental perceptions of child
misbehavior (ECBI) was the only variable to make a unique contribution in this prediction, $\chi^2(1) = 10.20, p < .001$. The odds ratio (OR) = 1.08 indicated that a 1-point increase on the ECBI was associated with an 8.2% increase in the odds of a parent’s membership in the abusive group. The set of affective risk factors (Model 2) was only marginally related to abuse status LR(2) = 5.1, $p = .08$. However, the apparent lack of prediction of abuse status by affective variables was due to low statistical power given listwise deletion (i.e., deletion of every case for which any measure was missing). When six complete data sets ($N = 155$) were constructed using multiple imputation procedures (see Schafer, 1997), the set of affective variables consistently predicted abuse status (minimum LR(2) = 10, $p = .007$) and the PSI-SF Total predictor consistently made a significant unique contribution to abuse status ($p < .05, OR = 1.02$). This is the only model in which substantive conclusions differed depending on whether analyses were based on listwise deletion ($N = 118$) versus multiple imputation data sets ($N = 155$).

Model 3, which included all five cognitive and affective risk variables as main effects significantly predicted abuse status, LR(5) = 16.6, $p = .005$. Inspection of the individual predictors indicated that the ECBI was the only risk factor to make a unique prediction, $\chi^2(1) = 7.9, p = .005, OR = 1.8$. Model 4, which included all five risk factors as well as all two-way interactions between cognitive and affective variables, also significantly predicted group status, LR(11) = 23.6, $p = .01$. However, none of the variables made unique contributions to this prediction.

In order to understand how different sets of risk factors predicted abuse status, a series of likelihood ratio tests was computed for nested models. Specifically, Model 3 did not improve in the prediction of group status beyond Model 1, LR(2) = .7, $p = .70$. In contrast, Model 3 did improve in the prediction of group status beyond Model 2, LR(3) = 11.5, $p = .009$. These results suggest that while cognitive predictors improved prediction beyond affective predictors, the reverse was not true. That result was consistent across both listwise deletion and multiple imputation data sets. Moreover, Model 4 did not improve in the prediction of group status beyond Model 3, LR(6) = 7.0, $p = .32$. This suggested that the interaction of cognitive and affective predictors did not improve prediction of group status beyond that associated with risk factors considered as main effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>LR</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$p$ value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive predictors</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective predictors</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive + affective</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive + affective + interactions</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Cognitive] vs. [cognitive + affective]</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Affective] vs. [cognitive + affective]</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Cognitive + affective] vs. [cognitive + affective + interactions]</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk index</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: LR: likelihood ratio. Cognitive models include CV, POQ, and ECBI problems; affective models include SCL-90-R GSI and PSI-SF Total.

a LR tests against an intercept-only model.
b LR tests between nested models.
Table 5
Distribution of risks for comparison and abuse samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Number of risks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tests of prediction models using composite risk scores

An unexpected finding from the previous analyses was that when considered together very few risk factors uniquely predicted group status. As such, a complementary strategy was adopted to understand more fully the relationship between risk factors and abusive parenting. Specifically, each risk factor was dichotomized, and a composite risk score was computed for each parent as the sum of variables on which the parent was considered to be at risk, with a possible range of 0 through 5. For three of the risk factors, published clinical cutoff scores were used to define the presence of risk (i.e., PSI-SF raw score of 90; GSI T score of 63; ECBI problem scale raw score of 15). For the CV and POQ, risk was defined as present if an individual’s raw score exceeded the 85th percentile score for the comparison group’s data (i.e., Child Vignettes raw score of 57; POQ raw score of 10). The risk index significantly predicted abuse status, LR(1) = 7.95, p = .004, b = .42, OR = 1.52 (95% CI: 1.1–2.1). Thus, the probability of being an abusive (vs. comparison) parent increased as more risk factors were present. For example, the model implied that whereas a single risk factor increased the probability of being in the abusive group by 45%, three and five risk factors increased the probability by 65% and 81%, respectively. The observed distribution for each group is summarized in Table 5.

Individual differences on composite risk

As is evident from Table 5, there was wide individual variability within the abusive and comparison groups with respect to composite risk scores. While 52% of comparison parents were not considered to be at risk on any variable, only 25% of abusive parents were “risk free.” Abusive parents were considered to be at risk on multiple factors. For example, less than one-fourth (24%) of comparison families reported two or more risks, but more than one-half (52%) of abusive parents reported two or more risks. The results in Table 5 emphasize substantial variability within both the comparison and the abusive samples.

Discussion

We found that the collection of social cognitive and affective variables included in this study, chosen on the basis of the cognitive behavioral model, was successful in prediction of abuse group membership within samples of closely-matched physically abusive and comparison parents. Moreover, results across the two statistical approaches yielded unique information;
the examination of both the individual risk factors and the composite risk scores were useful in relating the five risks to prediction of membership in the group of abusive parents.

Relations among risk variables

Findings that delineated significant interrelations among the five risk variables were consistent with the parenting literature and past research on abusive parents. For example, parents who manifested a high level of generalized psychological distress also tended to experience elevations in stress specific to the parenting role, and both measures of mental health were closely related to parenting cognitions. Specifically, a high level of parental distress (psychopathology and stress specific to the parenting role) was associated with a more negative pattern of child-related beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, there were significant associations among child-related cognitions. Parents who held unrealistically high expectations for children’s developmental abilities, for example, were likely to view their children as having many behavioral problems and to believe that their children misbehaved specifically to annoy them. The fact that relations among risk variables were consistent with theory and past research provides a degree of support for the validity of the measures utilized in this study. That support was particularly important for the two measures (i.e., CV and POQ) for which relatively little data existed regarding psychometric properties. It should be noted that, although measures were interrelated, the tolerance indices suggested that variables were not redundant.

Social cognitive risks in prediction of abuse

Consistent with past research, parents’ attributions for children’s misbehavior and parents’ perceptions of their own children’s adjustment were both significant predictors of abuse status when considered individually. When all social cognitive risk factors were considered in the same model, however, parents’ reports of children’s adjustment was the sole risk factor that provided unique prediction. As a further testament to the power of social cognitive factors in prediction of abuse status, the social cognitive risk factors were found to contribute to abuse status beyond the effect of the set of affective variables, but the reverse was not true. That finding was likely due to the strong predictive power of parental perceptions of their children’s adjustment, as measured by the ECBI. These results, combined with past research (e.g., Bradley & Peters, 1991; Feldman et al., 1995), indicate that the degree to which parents judge their child’s behavior to be problematic is a cognitive feature that strongly distinguishes abusive parents from nonabusive parents.

Our measure of parental perceptions of child adjustment, the Problems score of the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory, was carefully chosen to provide an indication of parent perceptions because it is purported to capture parental tolerance for misbehavior (Brestan et al., 1998) which may or may not reflect actual child disturbance. The Problems score, therefore, can be viewed as a social cognitive variable rather than a reflection of actual child behavior. The current data do not allow us to determine the degree to which child adjustment contributed to abuse group status. Although it is generally believed that disruptive child behavior places children at risk of abuse, studies designed to separate the relative contribution of child behavior and parent characteristics (including perceptions of children) are inconclusive (e.g., Ammerman & Patz,
It would be difficult to separate these influences on parenting without extensive in-home observations of typical day-to-day interactions between family members. Thus, whether abusive parents’ perceptions are determined primarily by actual characteristics of the children or by characteristics of the parent remains an empirical question (see Mash & Johnston, 1990).

Parental expectations for children’s abilities were not found to be a significant predictor of abuse status, even when the full set of 155 parents was utilized in the regression analyses. Among the risk factors examined in the current study, this aspect of parental cognitions has received the least empirical support in extant literature for relevance in etiology of abusive parenting. Nonetheless, parents’ expectations for their children are considered important in terms of evaluating parenting competence (e.g., Budd, 2001). Perhaps differences between the sample employed herein and the samples used in prior research can account for the failure of expectations to predict abuse status in this study. Based on descriptions of prior samples (Azar & Rohrbeck, 1986; Budd et al., 2000), it is likely that parents involved in earlier studies using the POQ were under greater socioeconomic and/or emotional distress compared to the current sample. Our sample included parents who represented the full range of SES and educational attainment and who were not referred to the study for treatment. Because expectations and parenting stress are interrelated, our sample might have manifested lower scores on the POQ as a result of lower stress than that experienced by parents in prior research.

Affective risks in prediction of abuse

In terms of the contribution of affective functioning to the prediction of abuse status, parenting stress was a significant predictor of abuse status when considered alone, but did not contribute to prediction when combined with other risk factors. Parental psychopathology was only a significant predictor when considered individually and using the full data set of 155 parents. There was insufficient statistical power to detect the effects of psychopathology with the reduced sample of 118 parents. Thus, of the two affective variables, parenting stress was relatively more salient in prediction of abuse status. That finding is consistent with Wolfe’s (1987) conclusions more than a decade ago regarding mental health of abusive parents. In a review of literature available at that time, Wolfe concluded that there was limited evidence for distinctions between abusive and nonabusive parents on the basis of personality disturbance or psychopathology; rather, abusive parents were characterized by increased symptoms of stress linked specifically to the parenting role. Wolfe’s conclusions and the current findings call into question a simple psychiatric explanation of child abuse, and support etiological models and intervention approaches that incorporate a focus on contextual stressors.

The importance of psychopathology in abusive parenting should not be dismissed prematurely, however. In spite of results of logistic regression analyses in this study, which demonstrated that psychopathology did not make a strong unique contribution to the prediction of abuse, the relevance of psychopathology in prediction of abuse was evident in analyses involving composite risk scores. Those analyses indicated that the addition of each variable, including psychopathology and stress specific to the parenting role, was related to a substantial increase in risk of abuse group membership. The current sample of abusive parents might have been less distressed, as a group, than samples included in prior research in which significant group differences in mental health functioning were noted. Past research relied heavily on abusive
mothers who were characterized by many psychosocial stressors and who were referred for parenting interventions. In addition, abusive parents in this study were closely matched to comparison parents on variables associated with psychological distress (e.g., SES, education), thereby maximizing similarities in level of distress between groups. Finally, because parents were required to have custody of their children in order to participate in the current research, the most highly disturbed abusive parents might have been excluded inadvertently from the sample.

**Cumulative risks in the prediction of abuse**

In a seminal study, Rutter (1979) argued that, rather than any single risk factor being important in prediction of psychiatric disorder among children, it was the number of risk factors present in the child’s background that was most relevant to outcome. The current research was the first to make use of a cumulative risk score in the context of understanding abusive parenting. As previously mentioned, although most of the risk factors examined in the current research were predictive of abuse status when considered individually, the level of statistical significance was modest for all but one variable (i.e., parental perceptions of their child’s adjustment). Perhaps, as demonstrated by Rutter (1979) and others subsequent to him (e.g., Sameroff, Seifer, Barocas, Zax, & Greenspan, 1987), the specific risk factors were less germane to the understanding of outcomes—in this case, abusive parenting—than was the accumulation of several risks. Results of analyses based on composite risk scores indicated a substantial increased chance of parents being identified as members of the abusive group with the accumulation of risks. Thus, although every variable did not make a significant unique contribution to prediction of abuse status in the logistic regression models, these variables are clearly relevant to the understanding of abusive parenting.

**Individual differences among abusive parents**

Heterogeneity in social cognition and mental health functioning among the abusive parents in this study was evident in two sources of data. First, standard deviations on most measures for the abuse group were large relative to the standard deviations obtained by the comparison group. A second source of data that indicated diversity among the abusive parents was the composite risk scores. There was wide variability in the degree to which abusive parents were “at risk” on the social cognitive and affective risk variables. Perhaps most surprising, 25% of abusive parents were not identified as at risk on any variable, and the majority of the abusive parents were at risk on only one or two variables.

The finding that many abusive parents did not obtain elevated scores on measures of several components of the cognitive behavioral model of abuse argues against a linear progression for all abusive parents from unrealistic expectations to other negative child-related cognitions, and ultimately to abusive parenting. Instead, the concept of equifinality is relevant to the abusive parents’ composite risk scores; that is, there were likely to be varied pathways for individual parents that eventuated in a similar outcome—identification as an abusive parent by child protection professionals. To acknowledge and investigate the individual differences apparent among abusive parents, we propose that researchers add a “person-oriented” approach to the
more commonly used “variable-oriented” approach to the study of abusive parents (for a discussion, see Cairns, Bergman, & Kagan, 1998).

There are several limitations of this project. First, comparison parents were recruited from the community and closely screened for a history of abusive parenting; however, the possibility remains that the three-phase screening was insufficient to rule out abuse for all comparison parents. If there were in fact abusive parents in the current sample of comparison parents, the findings can be viewed as a conservative estimate of the relation between social cognitive and affective variables and physically abusive parenting. Second, fathers or father surrogates are identified as the abusive parent in approximately one-half of all physical abuse cases, yet past research has been based almost exclusively on abusive mothers (Haskett, Marziano, & Dover, 1996). The number of participating fathers in this study was insufficient to test models separately by parent gender. Many attempts were made to recruit fathers, including collecting data in the evenings and on Saturdays, obtaining a Certificate of Confidentiality, offering substantial payment for each parent who participated, and providing transportation and childcare for data collection sessions. In spite of these measures, few fathers agreed to participate. Researchers must strive to develop creative methods to encourage abusive fathers to participate in research endeavors, because continued nonparticipation by fathers severely limits the generalizability and interpretation of research findings and restricts our knowledge of treatment needs of abusive fathers.

The design of this study was not prospective. Data were collected up to 1 year after the abuse had been substantiated, and it is possible that the process of substantiation might have impacted parents’ responses to the measures of child-related cognitions and affective functioning. Optimally, the degree to which social cognitive factors and emotional distress contribute to abuse would be determined in large-scale prospective studies of parents.

Final factors to consider in interpretation of findings concern measurement. All data were based on parent self-report, and although this is a common feature of research in the field of child maltreatment, a multimethod assessment of constructs would have strengthened the conclusions. The possibility of measurement error also should be considered; that is, the instruments might not have yielded optimal indicators of the constructs they were employed to measure. Although the ECBI was validated with parents who were nationally representative, and the POQ and CV have been used with parents similar to those in our study, the PSI and SCL-90-R were validated with samples of primarily White adults. In addition, some measures (e.g., SCL-90-R) have more substantial support for basic psychometric properties than others (e.g., CV).

There are several suggestions for future research directions. First, the fact that 25% of abusive parents were not found to be “at risk” on any variable highlights the complexity of the determinants of abusive parenting and the fact that there must be a multitude of relevant variables not included in the risk index employed in this research. Future research must investigate a broader range of risk and protective factors, including factors associated with multiple levels of functioning (e.g., biological, sociocultural, intrafamilial, and psychological) in the context of day-to-day parenting. Additional structural factors, such as religious affiliation, might also be considered. Future research must progress to inclusion of child characteristics that could influence parenting, particularly given the findings of parental perceptions of child’s adjustment being so central to prediction of abuse status in the current study. Understanding the
contribution of child characteristics is essential within a transactional model of child abuse (e.g., Cicchetti & Toth, 1997).

Acknowledgments

The authors extend appreciation to Team Leaders (Emily Bradshaw, Blanca Cobb, Eva Dover, Sara Little, and Michelle Whichard) and to PACT team members for their dedication to this project. We thank Michael Willoughby for his assistance with data analyses and conceptualization of this manuscript. We are indebted to the families who participated in this project and to Wanda Jenkins and Gaye Styron of the Wake County Department of Human Services for their assistance in participant recruitment.

References


Résumé

Objectif: Cette recherche avait pour but de se servir du modèle behavioral pour choisir et examiner des facteurs de risques chez des parents abusifs, afin de mettre en lumière les influences individuelles et combinées des variables socio-cognitives et affectives qui servent à prédire les comportements abusifs.

Méthode: Les participants comprenaient des parents qui ont agressé physiquement leurs enfants (n = 56) et un groupe comparatif apparié de parents (n = 62). On a mesuré les variables socio-cognitives suivantes: (a) les attentes des parents vis-à-vis des capacités et de la maturité de leurs enfants; (b) comment ils percevaient les intentions de leurs enfants lorsque ceux-ci étaient désobéissants; et (c) leur perception à savoir si leurs enfants étaient bien adaptés ou non. Les variables affectives de risques étaient: (a) la psychopathologie; et (b) le stress des responsabilités familiales. On a conçu une série de modèles axés sur la régression logistique pour tester les effets individuels, combinés et interactifs des variables par rapport à la probabilité qu’ils maltraiteront leurs enfants.

Résultats: L’ensemble des cinq variables prédit les mauvais traitements. Toutefois, prises individuellement, toutes les variables ne sont pas utiles pour prédire les comportements abusifs, et les interactions entre les variables non plus. Un score du risque a été obtenu pour chacun des parents, axé sur cinq variables de risques, et ce score a su prédire de façon importante les comportements abusifs. Dans le
contexte de l’échantillon de parents, on note des différences individuelles remarquables pour les cinq variables de risques.

Conclusions: Les constats s’apparentent au modèle béhavioral cognitif visant les comportements abusifs. Les variables cognitives sont plus importantes pour prédire les comportements abusifs que les facteurs affectifs. Les résultats soulignent combien il faut prendre en considération la diversité des caractéristiques propres aux parents abusifs.

Resumen

Objetivo: El propósito de esta investigación fue utilizar el modelo cognitivo-conductual del maltrato para seleccionar y examinar los factores de riesgo que ayudan a esclarecer las influencias únicas y combinadas de las variables afectivas y socio-cognitivas en la predicción de la pertenencia a un grupo de sujetos maltratadores.

Método: La muestra estuvo compuesta por un grupo de padres maltratadores físicos \((n = 56)\) y un grupo comparación de padres no maltratadores emparejados \((n = 62)\). Las variables sociocognitivas de riesgo medidas fueron (a) las expectativas de los padres sobre las habilidades y la madurez de los niños/as, (b) las atribuciones parentales de intencionalidad sobre las conductas negativas de los hijos/as y (c) las percepciones de los padres sobre la adaptación de sus hijos/as. Las variables de riesgo afectivas incluyeron (a) la presencia de psicopatología y (b) el estrés parental. Se construyeron una serie de modelos de regresión logística para evaluar los efectos individuales, combinados e interactivos de las variables de riesgo en la pertenencia al grupo de maltrato físico.

Resultados: El bloque conjunto de las cinco variables de riesgo tuvo efecto predictivo en la pertenencia al grupo de maltrato. Sin embargo, no todas las variables fueron predictivas cuando se consideran individualmente y tampoco las interacciones contribuyeron significativamente a la predicción. Una puntuación de riesgo computada para cada padre y basada en las puntuaciones en las cinco variables de riesgo predijo significativamente la pertenencia al grupo de riesgo. Fue patente la presencia de importantes diferencias individuales dentro de la muestra de padres maltratantes en las cinco variables estudiadas.

Conclusiones: Los hallazgos son en general consistentes con el modelo cognitivo-conductual del maltrato. Las variables cognitivas tienen más influencia en la predicción de la condición de maltratador que las variables afectivas. Los resultados señalan la importancia de tener en consideración la diversidad de características de los padres maltratantes.