ELSEVIER

# Multimethod prediction of child abuse risk in an at-risk sample of male intimate partner violence offenders☆

Christina M. Rodriguez [a],[*], Enrique Gracia [b], Marisol Lila [b]

[a] University of Alabama at Birmingham, Department of Psychology, 1720 2nd Ave South, Birmingham, AL 35294-1170, USA
[b] University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain

### A B S T R A C T

The vast majority of research on child abuse potential has concentrated on women demonstrating varying levels of risk of perpetrating physical child abuse. In contrast, the current study considered factors predictive of physical child abuse potential in a group of 70 male intimate partner violence offenders, a group that would represent a likely high risk group. Elements of Social Information Processing theory were evaluated, including pre-existing schemas of empathy, anger, and attitudes approving of parent-child aggression considered as potential moderators of negative attributions of child behavior. To lend methodological rigor, the study also utilized multiple measures and multiple methods, including analog tasks, to predict child abuse risk. Contrary to expectations, findings did not support the role of anger independently predicting child abuse risk in this sample of men. However, preexisting beliefs approving of parent-child aggression, lower empathy, and more negative child behavior attributions independently predicted abuse potential; in addition, greater anger, poorer empathy, and more favorable attitudes toward parent-child aggression also exacerbated men's negative child attributions to further elevate their child abuse risk. Future work is encouraged to consider how factors commonly considered in women parallel or diverge from those observed to elevate child abuse risk in men of varying levels of risk.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Men remain relatively understudied in the physical child maltreatment literature (Behl, Conyngham, & May, 2003) despite widespread recognition that identifying abuse risk factors for men is critical (Guterman & Lee, 2005). Yet father-figures represent at least half of all physical child abuse in the U.S. (Sedlak et al., 2010). The nascent research contrasting mothers and fathers suggests they demonstrate comparable abuse risk profiles (e.g., with community samples, as in Rodriguez, Smith, & Silvia, 2016a; Rodriguez, Smith, & Silvia, 2016b, or Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2007).

Nonetheless, certain groups are particularly likely to demonstrate increased physical child abuse risk, such as those engaged in other family violence like intimate partner violence (IPV). Although male IPV perpetrators appear to be a high risk group for child maltreatment (Herron & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002; Margolin, Gordis, Medina, & Oliver, 2003; Rumm, Cummings, Krauss, Bell, & Rivara, 2000), remarkably little work has pinpointed the factors that would elevate child abuse

risk in such men. Some efforts to classify IPV offenders suggest three subtypes, wherein one Family-Only category would involve violence within the family differing from those who are Borderline-Dysphoric or Antisocial/Generally Violent beyond the family (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). If we hope to prevent high-risk groups from perpetrating abuse toward children in the first place, we must identify factors that increase their *child abuse potential*–the likelihood of engaging in parent-child aggression (PCA) that can culminate in physical abuse (Milner, 1994). Consequently, evaluating child abuse risk with theoretically grounded models applicable to at-risk men, like IPV offenders, continues to be an important research direction.

### 1.1. Theoretical issues

One theory that has been proposed to describe how physical child abuse occurs is known as Social Information Processing (SIP) theory (Milner, 2000). According to SIP theory, before a discipline situation arises, a parent enters that situation with preexisting schemas that will influence their discipline approach. Such preexisting schemas in SIP theory can include cognitive belief structures (e.g., child and discipline specific beliefs) as well as affective schemas that ensue from previous social interactions. In other words, a parent would carry these schemas into a given discipline situation when four stages commence. The parent must first accurately perceive what is occurring in the discipline situation (Stage 1) and interpret the situation (Stage 2). The parent also must integrate all relevant information from the situation to select a discipline strategy (Stage 3). Those who select PCA then experience difficulty monitoring its application in the final cognitive-behavioral stage (Stage 4). The SIP model implies that the preexisting schemas collectively influence each stage, potentially activating the processes in each of the stages (Milner, 2000). In fact, preexisting schemas may exert these influences by actually compromising SIP stage processing, implying potential moderation of the stages by the preexisting schemas.

Thus far, research supports the application of several elements of SIP theory to predicting physical child abuse risk (e.g., with mothers in Spain, as in de Paúl, Asla, Pérez-Albéniz, & de Cádiz, 2006, and Montes, de Paúl, & Milner, 2001; with expectant mothers and fathers in the U.S., Rodriguez, Smith, & Silvia, 2016a,b; with a community sample of parents in the U.S., Rodriguez & Richardson, 2007). In terms of evidence for preexisting schemas, one cognitive belief structure, approval of parent-child aggression as a discipline strategy, has been connected to child abuse risk (Bower-Russa, Knutson, & Winebarger, 2001; Crouch & Behl, 2001; Rodriguez, Bower-Russa, & Harmon, 2011; Rodriguez, Gracia, & Lila, 2016). In terms of preexisting positive affective schemas, empathy has been proposed in the SIP model to reduce abuse risk (Milner, 2000). Indeed, low empathy has been observed in abusive mothers (Mennen & Trickett, 2011) and in high abuse risk parents (Pérez-Albéniz & de Paúl, 2004). Alternatively, preexisting negative affective states, such as greater dispositional propensity toward expressing anger, has been implicated in child abuse risk (Ammerman, 1990; Hien, Cohen, Caldeira, Flom, & Wasserman, 2010; see also Stith et al., 2009 for review). For SIP Stage 2, negative interpretations regarding children's behavior has been linked to greater child abuse risk (Rodriguez, Smith, & Silvia, 2016a,b). Hostile attributions about children are observed in abusive mothers (Haskett, Scott, Willoughby, Ahern, & Nears, 2006) and such negative child attributions in pregnant mothers predict their later harsh parenting and maltreatment (Berlin, Dodge, & Reznick, 2013).

Conversely, minimal work has explored moderators of child abuse risk although, theoretically, affective components could exacerbate SIP cognitions (Milner, 2000). Although not evaluated as part of the SIP model with regard to abuse risk, parents who report more intensely angry negative attributions of children's hostile intent were more likely to report reacting more strongly in hypothetical discipline situations (Pidgeon & Sanders, 2009). Another study suggests greater anger may complicate perceptual processes in Stage 1 to elevate abuse risk (Rodriguez, 2016). But the extent to which different preexisting schemas interact with and thereby compromise SIP stage cognitive processes is still unclear. Those who have more adverse preexisting schemas (low empathy, higher anger propensity, and more favorable attitudes toward PCA) may be particularly inclined to adopt negative child attributions (Stage 2) that magnifies their child abuse risk.

### 1.2. Methodological issues

Ideally, multiple aspects of such theoretical models are evaluated simultaneously. Adopting a multimethod approach is optimal as this strategy minimizes the reliance on single methods and measures (Eid & Deiner, 2006). Incorporating multiple indicators can balance the weaknesses of a given single indicator, shortcomings that include potential item overlap between measures of predictors and the identified outcome measures. Moreover, our multimethod approach incorporated analog approaches to address concerns regarding the reliance on self-report questionnaires that can be affected by social desirability biases in assessing abuse risk (DeGarmo, Knutson, & Reid, 2006). Implicit assessments assess constructs indirectly, where the intent or scoring is less obvious to the participant, complicating the respondent's ability to distort their responses (Fazio & Olson, 2003). Indeed, one of the few studies evaluating factors associated with child abuse potential among IPV offenders found few contrasts from a community sample of men which they attributed in part to methodological limitations (Holden, Barker, Appel, & Hazlewood, 2010). Therefore, our multimethod approach includes both multiple indicators as well as analog tasks to strengthen our confidence in analyzing the role of selected constructs in abuse risk.