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Comparing maltreating fathers and mothers in terms of personal distress, interpersonal functioning, and perceptions of family climate[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: This study compared perceptions of personal distress, interpersonal and marital problems, and aspects of family climate of maltreating fathers and mothers.

Methods: Subjects were 2841 offenders (1918 of whom were fathers or father-figures) who were identified and treated by the USAF Family Advocacy Program between 1988 and 1996. Independent variables for the analysis were parent sex (mother vs. father) as well as type and severity of maltreatment, history of repeat offenses, and history of abuse in childhood.

Results: Maltreating mothers were more distressed and reported more problems from individuals outside the family than maltreating fathers; fathers reported more rigid expectations for children, less cohesive families, and less organized families than did maltreating mothers. Regardless of parental sex, victimization in the family of origin was related to distress and unhappiness. Similarly, both victimization in the family of origin and history of repeated offenses were powerful predictors of a more negative family climate regardless of the offending parent's sex. No significant statistical interactions between parental sex and other independent variables were found when predicting personal and interpersonal distress, marital problems, or family climate.

Conclusions: Studies rarely examine maltreating fathers except in the context of sexual abuse. Fewer still compare maltreating mothers and fathers. This study identified meaningful, though generally small, differences between maltreating mothers and fathers. Patterns suggest that maltreating mothers may tend to cope more poorly with personal distress, whereas maltreating fathers tend to operate in a family climate that is both distant and rigid, while

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holding inappropriate expectations for children's behavior. The absence of interactions between parental sex and the other independent variables included in the analysis indicate that these patterns do not vary by the history of victimization in the family of origin, the type or severity of child maltreatment, or the history of prior maltreatment in the family.

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Since the initial identification of child abuse as a phenomenon (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962), research has overwhelmingly emphasized the abusive mother, while virtually ignoring physically and emotionally abusive or neglectful fathers. In 1996, Haskett, Marziano, and Dover reviewed 126 articles published between 1989 and 1994 in *Child Abuse & Neglect* and noted that male perpetrators were seriously under-represented in the research literature. From 1995 through 2001, *Child Abuse & Neglect* published 12 descriptive studies of offenders involved in abuse of a non-sexual nature, only five of which included fathers in their samples. Of these, two addressed abuse resulting in the death of a child (Mohd, Kasim, & Cheah, 1995), suggesting an assumptive bias that men/fathers who abuse do so in extreme fashion. The other three examined both maltreating mothers and fathers (Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996; Segal, 1995; Vargas et al., 1995) without making gender comparisons between them. The dearth of research describing these maltreating parents suggests a confidence in basic knowledge about their attributes that may exceed what is reasonable, especially given the under-representation of maltreating males.

The few empirical descriptions of physically abusive fathers tend to compare them with nonabusive fathers. For example, compared to nonabusive fathers, abusive fathers spank more (Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991), have fewer emotional and instrumental supports from friends, in-laws and other kin (Coohey, 2000), and are more likely to be alcoholic (Famularo, Stone, Barnum, & Wharton, 1986). Comparisons between maltreating and nonmaltreating fathers are certainly legitimate, and they parallel research comparisons of maltreating and nonmaltreating mothers. For this study, however, we frame our thinking with an ecological model (Belsky, 1993; Bronfenbrenner, 1989), a critical aspect of which is the notion that "social address" variables are linked to variation in behavior. One of the most widely considered social address variables in the social and psychological literatures is gender. Given how little is known of maltreating fathers relative to maltreating mothers, it would be useful to make a direct comparison between them. Thus, our principal research question asks whether and how maltreating mothers and fathers vary in terms of personal distress, interpersonal and marital problems, and perceptions of family climate. Variation in these perceptions by gender of maltreating parent would amplify the need to attend more closely to maltreating fathers as a group, because it would mean that maltreating mothers and fathers perceive a different personal and family context surrounding an incident of abuse. Milner and Chilamkurti (1991) and Belsky (1993) are clear that both the personal and family contexts are critical to an understanding of child maltreatment.

Maltreating parents vary in their personal exposure to maltreatment in their own youth (a known predictor of subsequent maltreatment), and the character of the maltreatment they perpetrate also varies. To ensure that differences noted for sex of offender are independent of these factors, we controlled the following variables in our gender-focused comparisons: (a) the offender's history of victimization in

childhood, (b) the type of maltreatment perpetrated in the current incident, (c) the severity of the current incident of maltreatment as assessed by clinical standards, and (d) the existence over time of a pattern of repeat maltreatment by the offender (i.e., recidivism). We reasoned that substantiated offenders, regardless of their sex, may, for example, report more personal distress if the maltreatment for which they were substantiated was more severe. A prime motivation for including these variables in the analysis, therefore, was to control their effects statistically while exploring differences between maltreating mothers and fathers in perceptions of personal and family contexts. A second motive for including these variables in the analysis, however, was to explore whether they would interact with, and thus qualify, any apparent differences between maltreating mothers and fathers in their perceptions of personal and family contexts.

Method

Subjects

All study participants were substantiated for physical abuse, psychological abuse or neglect of a child in their family by the United States Air Force (USAF) Family Advocacy Program (FAP), the organization responsible for the investigation of, and intervention with, maltreating families in the USAF. FAP criteria for defining abuse are more inclusive than those typical of the civilian sector. For example, the designation of physical abuse in the civilian sector typically *requires* physical evidence, like bruising, welts, or more serious effects. This evidence is *not required* by the FAP for the substantiation of abuse. Although all cases that would be classified as maltreating in the civilian sector would also be so designated by the FAP, some low severity FAP cases would not be substantiated in a civilian sample. The data necessary to identify these cases in the current sample are not available and the inclusion of these cases may affect the pattern of results. We will attend to these potential influences in our discussion.

These data were collected between 1988 and 1996. During this time period, the FAP substantiated 29,863 incidents of child maltreatment perpetrated by approximately 22,560 offenders. (It must be noted that incidents of sexual abuse were explicitly excluded from this data set. Therefore, the population of offenders available to this analysis were substantiated for physical abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, neglect, or some combination of these.) To be included in the current study, offenders met three criteria. First, they were related as parent or step-parent to the victimized child. This criterion was met for 19,022 offenders (84.3% of the available population of FAP offenders). These cases will be considered the “eligible population” of offenders. Second, the offenders volunteered to participate. Only 4819 (25.3% of the eligible population) agreed to participate and completed the research instruments. Comparisons revealed that volunteers, compared to nonvolunteers, tended to over-represent fathers, offenders with a history of childhood victimization, and cases of neglect (all $ps < .001$). These differences were small ($\phi = .05, .04, \text{ and } .02$, respectively). More substantial group differences revealed that volunteers, compared to nonvolunteers, over-represented recidivists, cases of psychological abuse, and the more severe cases of maltreatment (all $ps < .001$; $\phi = .19, .08, \text{ and } .13$, respectively). The third criterion for inclusion pertained to the respondents’ scores on the validity scales measured by the Child Abuse Potential (CAP) inventory (Milner, 1986). These scores assessed whether respondents answered questions in an internally inconsistent, random, or exaggerated manner. Because the data collected for this study were also used for clinical purposes, this step was intended to minimize the inclusion of subjects motivated

to misrepresent themselves in their responses. Only cases with scores indicating low validity risk were included. With this exclusion, 2841 offenders remained (59.0% of the volunteers, 14.9% of the eligible population). Comparisons between cases retained and excluded in this last step indicated significant overrepresentation of fathers among the retained cases ($p = .000$, $\phi = .15$). Overall, then, the analysis sample included more fathers and relatively more serious cases of maltreatment than would be expected in the eligible population.

The final sample was 73.4% White and 19.2% Black. The mean age of offenders was 30.5 years ($SD = 6.4$ years), and the mean level of education was 2.48 on a 5-point scale ($SD = .7$), indicating that the average amount of education fell in a range between “high school graduate” and “some college.” Seventy-four percent of the sample was on active-duty in the military, and the remaining cases were the civilian spouses of active duty members. Approximately 95.5% of the sample belonged to the enlisted ranks of the military or were the spouses of such members. The majority of these, by greater than a 2-to-1 margin, belonged to the junior enlisted ranks. The great majority of offenders were married (88.6%), but a minority were either divorced or separated (8.8%) or never married (2.6%). The mean number of children per family was 2.2 ($SD = 1.1$).

Procedure

Every legitimate child maltreatment referral to a FAP affiliated with a USAF base anywhere in the world between 1988 and 1996 was eligible to be a participant in this study. Within weeks of the official substantiation of the incident of maltreatment that had brought a potential participant into contact with the FAP, an offer to participate in the data collection was extended. This offer was made by the clinician to whom participants were assigned. Prospective participants were informed that participation was strictly voluntary. No negative consequences would result from failure to participate and no specific benefits would accrue from participation. Those who agreed to participate completed an informed consent procedure approved by the USAF indicating that all identifiable data would be strictly confidential. Respondents completed a single battery of questionnaires containing all of the instruments utilized in this study. The dataset was compiled over time at the central office of the FAP at Brooks Air Force Base. Before the dataset was acquired by the current senior author, all identifiable information was filtered out so that the data were anonymous. The Institutional Review Board at Auburn University approved the use of the secondary dataset.

Measures

Independent variables.

Sex of offender. The offenders included 923 mothers (or mother-figures) and 1918 fathers (or father-figures). Fathers represented 67.5% of the offenders. In our analyses, mothers are coded 0 and fathers are coded 1.

Type of child abuse. Because three types of child abuse were included in this study, physical abuse, neglect, and psychological abuse, two dummy variables were constructed that compared the effects of neglect and psychological abuse, respectively, to physical abuse. (The dummy code for neglect coded all neglect cases 1 and all other cases 0. For the psychological abuse dummy code, psychological abuse cases

were coded 1 and all others 0.) There were 775 substantiated cases of neglect (27.3% of the offenders) and 312 substantiated cases of psychological abuse (11% of the offenders). The remaining 1754 cases (61.7% of offenders) involved physical abuse. Of these, 147 (5.2%) involved some combination of maltreatment including physical abuse.

Severity. Severity of maltreatment was a clinical assessment made by professional FAP clinicians who, for the purposes of substantiation, evaluated the incident that brought the offender into contact with the FAP. The severity assessment referred to the maltreatment of that specific incident. The criteria used for this determination varied according to the type of maltreatment identified (physical vs. neglect vs. psychological). Severity assessments tend to be difficult to validate. Therefore, rather than utilizing a finely graded severity score, a dichotomy was constructed with 0 indicating low severity maltreatment ($n = 1765$, 62.1% of cases) and 1 indicating more severe maltreatment ($n = 1075$, 37.9% of cases). Low severity physical abuse involves such parental behavior as twisting or shaking a child, or such injuries as a minor cut, bruise, welt or some combination of these that do not constitute a substantial risk to the life or well-being of the child. Neglect or psychological abuse are rated as low in severity when the substantiated incident, following investigation, appears isolated, with no evidence of a repetitive pattern, and no readily apparent physical or emotional harm to the child. This severity classification was descriptive only of the incident that brought the offender into the FAP system. It should be understood that offenders classified as low in severity on the basis of this incident may have perpetrated more severe maltreatment at other times that was not reported or detected.

Recidivism. Based on knowledge of offenders' pattern of involvement with the FAP, a dichotomous variable was computed where 0 indicated offenders with only one known incident of maltreatment ($n = 2078$, 73.1%), and 1 indicated more than one known incident over time ($n = 763$, 26.9%).

Abuse in family of origin. This dichotomous variable indicated whether offenders self-reported the experience of abuse during their childhoods. This question was asked as a part of the clinical intake interview at the point of initial contact with the FAP. It was not an item on a questionnaire. A 0 indicated that no such experience was reported ($n = 2218$, 78.1%), while a 1 meant that they acknowledged it ($n = 632$, 21.9%). Because no further information regarding the abuse was recorded, nothing about the type or pattern of abuse experienced in the family of origin was known.

Education level. Many of the dependent variables to be examined for this study are known to vary with education level. Consequently, education level, assessed as a 5-level variable, was included as a covariate in the analyses. The categories used in this study included (a) less than high school, (b) high school graduate, (c) some college, (d) college degree, and (e) advanced degree beyond bachelors.

Dependent variables.

Personal distress and interpersonal problems. Five of the six sub-scales of the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAP; Milner, 1986) were utilized as indicators of personal distress and interpersonal problems.

These sub-scales measured personal distress ($M = 74.5$, $SD = 71.7$), unhappiness ($M = 15.6$, $SD = 14.1$), rigidity ($M = 13.7$, $SD = 13.1$), problems with family members ($M = 13.4$, $SD = 13.5$), and problems from others outside the family ($M = 8.8$, $SD = 8.0$). Coefficients of internal consistency for the sub-scales range from .60 to .97.

Marital problems. Hudson's (1982) Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS) registered marital problems. This scale has strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$) and provides a cut-score of 30 to designate "clinically significant" marital distress. Although about 14% ($n = 399$) of the offenders were unmarried (and therefore were excluded from analyses pertaining to marital problems), for the 2442 married cases, the mean for marital problems was 29.6 ($SD = 23.4$), indicating that marital distress was common.

Family climate. Six sub-scales of the Family Environment Scales (FES; Moos & Moos, 1986) were used to assess family climate. Cohesion ($M = 43.1$, $SD = 19.8$), expressiveness ($M = 49.6$, $SD = 12.7$), conflict ($M = 54.1$, $SD = 13.0$), independence ($M = 42.6$, $SD = 13.7$), organization ($M = 46.9$, $SD = 11.9$), and control ($M = 52.3$, $SD = 10.8$). Moos and Moos (1986) report coefficients of internal consistency ranging from .61 to .78. The scores used here were developed using the standardizing scoring procedure provided by Moos and Moos. The "norm" for each scale is 50 with a standard deviation of 10. Although our sample means fall relatively close to these norms, discrepancies from the norms lean in the less healthy direction. The average family in the current sample, as described by the maltreating offender, is somewhat less cohesive, but more conflictual and controlled, and places less value on independence within the family, or the organization of the family, than is normative.

Analysis strategy

The goal of this study was to compare mothers and fathers known to have maltreated a child in their own family. Two types of comparisons were made. First, using crosstabulation with χ^2 statistics, maltreating mothers and fathers were compared in terms of the type and severity of the incident of maltreatment for which they had been recently substantiated, their pattern of repeat offense, and their experience of victimization within their families of origin. Because the sample was large and χ^2 statistics are sensitive to sample size, phi statistics were also calculated. The phi statistic, calculated for a 2×2 contingency table (or Cramer's V for larger tables), can be interpreted like a correlation coefficient and thus offers an estimate of the size or strength of significant comparisons.

The second form of comparison examined gender-based variation in the perceived social and personal context of maltreatment. These comparisons consisted of a series of regression analyses testing relations between sex of offender and six measures of personal distress and interpersonal problems (using five CAP sub-scales and the IMS to assess marital problems) as well as six perceptions of family climate (using FES sub-scales). These regression analyses also accounted for variance attributable to any gender-based differences revealed in the first set of comparisons (i.e., with type of abuse, severity of abuse, recidivism status, and childhood victimization). Knowing that many self-assessments vary by education level, we controlled for education in all tests. Each dependent variable was subjected to a separate analysis whereby offender sex, the dummy variables for neglect and psychological abuse, and the dichotomous variables assessing severity (low vs. medium/high), recidivism (no vs. yes) and childhood victimization (acknowledged vs. unacknowledged) were entered simultaneously with education level. Only gender

Table 1
Associations between offender sex and type of maltreatment, severity, recidivism, and abuse in family of origin

	Offender sex				Row total		Cramer's <i>V</i>	
	Male		Female		<i>N</i>	%	<i>p</i>	Phi
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%				
Type of maltreatment								
Physical abuse	1206	69.2	393	50.8	1599	63.5	.000	.191
Neglect	348	20.0	288	37.2	636	25.3		
Psychological abuse	190	10.9	93	12.0	283	11.2		
Severity								
Low	1122	58.5	643	69.7	1765	62.1	.000	.108
Moderate-to-high	795	41.5	280	30.3	1075	37.9		
Recidivism								
No	1354	70.6	724	78.4	2078	73.1	.000	.083
Yes	564	29.4	199	21.6	763	26.9		
Abuse in family of origin								
None acknowledged	1512	78.8	706	76.5	2218	78.1	.158	-.027
Some acknowledged	406	21.2	217	23.5	623	21.9		

differences that were statistically significant controlling for these other variables were interpreted as reliable.

Results

Crosstabulations with χ^2 and Cramer's *V* or phi statistics revealed that fathers, compared to mothers, were more likely to have perpetrated physical abuse but less likely to have perpetrated neglect. The abuse perpetrated by fathers was more likely to be classified as moderate-to-severe, and fathers tended to be identified more often as a repeat offender (see Table 1). The phi coefficients, which may be interpreted roughly as correlation coefficients, tended to be small, with the largest being .19 for the type of abuse.

Results for the 12 regression models are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 reveals the constant and the unstandardized regression coefficients for distress, unhappiness, rigidity, problems with family, others, and in the offender's marriage. For these models, the covariate, education level, was significant in three cases. More education was associated with less distress, less rigidity in parenting attitudes, and fewer problems with people outside the family.

The first row of Table 2 presents the constants, or the mean for each dependent variable controlling for all variables included in the model. Unstandardized coefficients are interpreted in terms of the number of scale-points that the constant would be expected to change with a unit change in the predictor. Since most of the predictors are dichotomies, the coefficient can also be viewed as the mean difference between the two groups represented by the dichotomy. When these coefficients are considered relative to the standard deviation for the dependent variable, a sense of the effect size can be gauged. Four of the gender tests in Table 2 are significant. Controlling for all other variables in the model, maltreating mothers compared to maltreating fathers reported more distress, more unhappiness and more problems from people outside

Table 2

Regression results predicting measures of personal distress, interpersonal and marital problems by offender sex, type and severity of maltreatment, recidivism status, and childhood victimization and education level

	Distress <i>B (SE)</i>	Unhappiness <i>B (SE)</i>	Rigidity <i>B (SE)</i>	Problems with family <i>B (SE)</i>	Problems from others <i>B (SE)</i>	Marital problems <i>B (SE)</i>
Constant	98.15*** (6.36)	13.86*** (.91)	16.01*** (1.22)	11.97*** (1.22)	10.05*** (.73)	23.95*** (2.28)
Offender sex	−26.91*** (2.82)	−2.09*** (.57)	2.34*** (.54)	.42 (.54)	−1.95*** (.32)	.40 (1.03)
Neglect versus physical abuse	−8.16* (3.02)	−1.64** (.61)	−1.09 (.58)	−3.32*** (.58)	.07 (.35)	−3.32** (1.12)
Psychological abuse versus physical abuse	7.59 (4.19)	1.81* (.85)	−.12 (.80)	3.61*** (.81)	.64 (.48)	6.93*** (1.50)
Severity	11.36*** (2.67)	2.12*** (.54)	.06 (.51)	.94 (.51)	1.04** (.31)	2.04* (.97)
Recidivist	10.10*** (2.90)	2.32*** (.59)	1.49** (.55)	3.07*** (.56)	1.50*** (.33)	8.45*** (1.06)
Abuse in family of origin	31.84*** (3.11)	5.07*** (.63)	1.96** (.60)	3.78*** (.60)	2.43*** (.36)	4.54*** (1.12)
Education level	−12.03*** (1.78)	−.53 (.36)	−1.77*** (.34)	−.57 (.34)	−1.00*** (.21)	−.05 (.64)

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

the family, while maltreating fathers reported more parenting rigidity than did maltreating mothers. The size of these gender-based differences was moderate-to-small, ranging from about $2/5 SD$ to about $1/7 SD$.

The type and severity of abuse were also related to many of the dependent variables shown in [Table 2](#). Compared to physically abusive parents, regardless of their sex, neglecting parents reported less distress, less unhappiness, fewer problems with family and fewer problems in their marriages. Alternately, compared to physically abusive parents, psychologically abusive parents reported more unhappiness, more problems with family and more problems in their marriages. These differences by type of abuse tended to be small, ranging from $1/10 SD$ to $1/3 SD$. Four significant differences were also noted for the severity of maltreatment. Independent of their gender, the moderate-to-high severity offenders, compared with the low severity offenders, reported more distress, greater unhappiness, more problems from others outside the family and more marital problems. These differences, however, were uniformly small, falling between $1/10 SD$ and $1/7 SD$.

Comparisons between offenders with and without a history of repeat offenses within the FAP system revealed small-to-moderate differences for each of the personal distress and interpersonal problem variables shown in [Table 2](#). Repeat offenders (recidivists), regardless of gender, reported more distress and unhappiness, greater rigidity, and more problems with family members, others outside the family and in their marriages than did one-time offenders. These differences ranged in size from about $1/10 SD$ to $2/5 SD$.

Having a history of victimization in the family of origin also was consistently related to personal distress and interpersonal problems. Again controlling for gender and the other variables in the model, offenders with a history of victimization in the family of origin reported more distress and unhappiness, greater rigidity, and more problems with family members, individuals outside the family and in their marriages compared with offenders without such a history. These differences tended to be moderate in size. For personal distress, the comparison was substantial (exceeding $2/5 SD$), while for other variables the differences ranged from $1/7 SD$ to greater than $1/3 SD$.

[Table 3](#) presents the regression results for the six variables assessing perceptions of family climate. Significant associations for the control variable, education, indicated that more educated offenders described their families as somewhat more independent, more organized, and as placing a greater emphasis on control.

Three small differences were noted between maltreating mothers and fathers in terms of perceived family climate, and a fourth approached statistical significance. Compared to maltreating mothers, maltreating fathers reported less family cohesion, less expressiveness in the family, and less family organization. These differences ranged in size from about $1/10 SD$ and $1/7 SD$. The nonsignificant trend was consistent with these patterns and suggested that maltreating fathers may also place more emphasis on control in the family compared to maltreating mothers.

Although severity of maltreatment was not related to any perceptions of family climate examined for this study, the type of maltreatment was significant in every model. Controlling for the sex of the offender and the other variables in the model, neglecting parents, compared to physically abusive parents, reported more cohesive and expressive families, less organization, control and conflict in the family, and more interpersonal independence in the family. Psychologically abusive parents presented a profile very nearly the opposite of this. Compared to physically abusive parents, psychologically abusive parents reported less cohesion and expressiveness in the family, a greater emphasis on control, more conflict, and less interpersonal independence in the family. The only exception to this opposite profile was noted for family

Table 3

Regression results predicting perceptions of family climate by offender sex, type and severity of maltreatment, recidivism status, and childhood victimization

	Cohesion <i>B (SE)</i>	Expressiveness <i>B (SE)</i>	Conflict <i>B (SE)</i>	Independence <i>B (SE)</i>	Organization <i>B (SE)</i>	Control <i>B (SE)</i>
Constant	44.53*** (1.80)	50.16*** (1.17)	53.43*** (1.17)	40.08*** (1.27)	46.37*** (1.10)	51.07*** (1.01)
Offender sex	-1.58* (.80)	-1.08* (.52)	-.12 (.52)	-.26 (.56)	-1.71*** (.49)	-.77† (.45)
Neglect versus physical abuse	6.31*** (.86)	3.45*** (.55)	-4.41*** (.56)	2.44*** (.61)	-1.10* (.52)	-1.94*** (.48)
Psychological abuse versus physical abuse	-4.28*** (1.19)	-2.26** (.77)	3.47*** (.77)	-1.76* (.84)	-2.51** (.72)	1.63* (.67)
Severity	-1.21 (.76)	-.61 (.49)	-.01 (.49)	-.12 (.53)	.18 (.46)	-.65 (.42)
Recidivist	-4.22*** (.82)	-2.20*** (.53)	3.85*** (.53)	-1.47* (.58)	-1.32** (.50)	1.40** (.46)
Abuse in family of origin	-4.72*** (.88)	-2.74*** (.57)	3.73*** (.57)	-1.84** (.62)	-2.21*** (.54)	1.58** (.49)
Education level	.95 (.51)	.63 (.32)	-.15 (.33)	1.28*** (.36)	1.16*** (.31)	.93** (.28)

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.† $p < .10$.

organization. For this aspect of family climate, both psychologically abusive and neglecting offenders reported less emphasis on family organization than did physically abusive offenders. These comparisons vary in size from small to moderate (ranging from $1/10$ *SD* to $1/3$ *SD*).

A history of recidivism was a consistent predictor of perceived family climate, controlling for the sex of the offender and other variables in the model. Offenders with such a history reported less cohesion and less expressiveness, more conflict and greater emphasis on control, but less family independence and less family organization than offenders without it. Although small-to-moderate in strength (between $1/10$ *SD* and $1/3$ *SD*), these differences nevertheless suggest a disturbed affective climate in families where child abuse has been repeatedly identified.

A history of victimization in the family of origin was also a consistent predictor of perceptions of family climate. Offenders reporting this history described their current families of procreation as less cohesive and less expressive, but more conflicted than their counterparts without such histories. Furthermore, these offenders with a history of childhood victimization indicated that their current families placed a lower value on interpersonal independence or organization in the family but a higher value on control than did offenders without such history. Again, the differences identified, controlling for the other variables in the model, ranged from small to moderate (from about $1/9$ *SD* to $1/3$ *SD*).

The regression analyses reported thus far addressed the goals of identifying differences between maltreating mothers and fathers in the sample while controlling for variables that were also related to the dependent measures examined. The results for each grouping factor can be interpreted as independent of the results for other factors and additive. So the “effect” on a dependent variable of the type of abuse, for instance, would be effectively the same for both maltreating mothers and fathers. The final step in the planned analysis was taken to satisfy the empirical question of whether type or severity of abuse, recidivism, or childhood victimization interact with the sex of the offender in the prediction of personal distress, interpersonal problems, or family climate. If interactions were found, it would mean that, depending on the sex of the maltreating parent, these additional factors work differently in predicting outcomes. To test this possibility, each regression was re-run with a second step. Interaction terms were constructed for this step by multiplying the dichotomous variable for sex of offender with each of the other five dichotomies (neglect, psychological abuse, severity, recidivism, victimization in family of origin). The critical test for this analysis was whether a significant variance contribution was added by the second step to the explained variance already accounted for in step one of the model. Only when such added contributions were found would it be appropriate to proceed to an examination of specific interactions. In each of the 12 tests, no significant additional variance was added (no tabular results shown). *F* tests for these analyses ranged from .16 to 1.15 (all *p*, *ns*).

Discussion

In this study we offered a comparison between maltreating fathers and maltreating mothers using a dataset large and diverse enough to detect even modest differences. We examined patterns of maltreating behavior, self-reported psychological states, interpersonal problems, and perceptions of family climate. Differences between maltreating mothers and fathers were noted in terms of the level of their self-reported personal distress and unhappiness, the rigidity of their parenting attitudes and the degree to which they experienced problems from people outside the family. In addition, there were also differences in perceived qualities of the family climate, including the affective climate as registered in measures of cohesion and

expressiveness, and in terms of the emphasis on family organization that maltreating mothers and fathers perceive in their families. As confidence in and understanding of these gender differences increase, researchers may gain new insights into the etiology of child abuse, and clinicians may be able to tailor interventions better to maltreating fathers versus mothers.

Compared to maltreating mothers, maltreating fathers used more severe forms of abuse and revealed a greater likelihood of a history of repeat abuse. These differences are significant but small and should not be over interpreted. In terms of severity, well over half of the fathers were identified with low severity abuse while almost a third of mothers were identified with moderate-to-severe abuse. Thus, it cannot be assumed that severe abuse is a male phenomenon, even if average severity is greater among men. Similarly, in terms of repeat abuse, the great majority of both mothers and fathers were not identified as repeat offenders. Nevertheless, these differences are not trivial and point to potentially important differences between maltreating mothers and fathers that deserve further research. It is interesting that maltreating mothers and fathers did not differ in terms of a history of abuse in the family of origin.

The present analyses revealed that maltreating fathers reported less psychological distress than maltreating mothers. This difference was the largest gender-based difference detected, and suggested that, for fathers, psychological distress may be a less salient factor in abuse than it is for mothers. This pattern also supports the value of comparing maltreating fathers with maltreating mothers rather than only comparing maltreating and nonmaltreating parents within gender. Whipple and Webster-Stratton (1991), for instance, note that maltreating mothers, compared to nonmaltreating mothers, report more life stress, but Coohy (2000), in a comparison of maltreating and nonmaltreating fathers, found no such difference. Current analyses also found that maltreating fathers had more rigid attitudes than did maltreating mothers about appropriate child behavior and parenting practices. This difference suggests that inappropriate parental expectations may play an even stronger part in fathers' maltreating behavior than mothers'. Maltreating mothers and fathers also differed modestly in their tendencies to report difficulties with individuals outside the family, with mothers reporting more difficulty of this type than fathers. Whipple and Webster-Stratton (1991) show that maltreating mothers are more socially isolated than are nonmaltreating mothers. Although having trouble with nonfamily members is, at best, a proxy for social isolation, this difference is consistent with a pattern of general social distress for maltreating mothers. Coohy (2000) notes that compared with nonmaltreating fathers, maltreating fathers have fewer emotional and instrumental supports and weaker ties to social networks. Taking these findings together, the pattern suggests that, although maltreating fathers may have disturbed social linkages outside the family, they may be less troubled in their social relationships than maltreating mothers. Certainly, this is a pattern that deserves future research. Literature comparing maltreating mothers with nonmaltreating mothers has suggested an abuser profile involving affective and psychological distress combined with low social competence in interpersonal roles (Milner & Chilamkurti, 1991; Milner & Dopke, 1997). The present comparison between maltreating mothers and maltreating fathers, although fully consistent with this interpretation, further suggests that distress and social as well as parental (in)competence may vary by the gender of the maltreating parent.

Turning to gender differences in perceived family climate, we found that maltreating fathers reported less cohesive and less expressive families than did maltreating mothers. Perry, Doran, and Wells noted a similar pattern in 1983. Although maltreating families in general likely have lower levels of cohesion, apparently the affective climate in families containing maltreating fathers is even less comfortable or connected. Interestingly, although the maltreating fathers in this sample were more rigid in their expectations of children, they emphasized family organization less than maltreating mothers. Combining low cohesion

and expressiveness, both important indicators of the affective quality of the family, with less organization suggests a family climate that is relatively disengaged and random. This combination presents an image of maltreating families consistent with the literature on maltreating mothers. However, the fact that fathers are more extreme than mothers on these variables in the current study suggests that this family climate may be even more prevalent and relevant to abuse for fathers.

Overall, these findings suggest a subtle difference in the relative association of certain factors with the maltreatment perpetrated by fathers compared to mothers. For maltreating fathers, the interpersonal context in the family is somewhat more distant and disorganized. Fathers' more rigid and unrealistic expectations for their children's behavior may contribute to a more volatile, unpredictable family context. The father's pattern also suggests a stronger element of discipline gone awry. For mothers, on the other hand, the preeminent elements appear to be personal distress combined with disturbed interpersonal interactions with individuals outside the family. In other words, maltreating mothers may be coping poorly with personal and interpersonal stress.

Implied in such a conclusion is the question, "Do the current findings suggest the need for a different model of etiology for maltreating fathers?" Although our study focuses on a limited number of variables, and is neither longitudinal nor advantaged with a control group of nonmaltreating parents, we suggest answering "No" for two reasons. First, the theoretical models that explain the etiology of abuse (e.g., Belsky, 1993), although based almost entirely on research with maltreating mothers, are not inconsistent with current findings for fathers. The current differences suggest, rather, that some factors may be weighted differently for the two genders. Second, both maltreating mothers and fathers scored as would be predicted if, rather than being compared to each other, they were compared to same-sex, nonmaltreating parents. Specifically, the norms for the Family Environment scales (Moos & Moos, 1986) and the Index of Marital Satisfaction (Hudson, 1982) indicated that both genders were "troubled" in the spheres assessed. Thus, consistent with current thinking, maltreatment may be the result of multiple-causality whether the perpetrators are fathers or mothers. Nevertheless, the current findings suggest that the differences between maltreating mothers and fathers deserve attention.

The analysis incorporated several additional variables primarily for two reasons. First, they were statistical controls. We wanted to ensure that differences noted for the sex of offender controlled for the effects of the type and severity of abuse, a pattern of repeat offense, and a history of childhood victimization in the family of origin, as well as the education level of offenders. This statistical control seemed a reasonable precaution since maltreating fathers were over-represented among cases of moderate-to-severe abuse and were more likely to be repeat offenders than were maltreating mothers, while maltreating mothers were more likely to report a history of abuse in the family of origin. Second, we wanted to test interactions between the control variables and sex of offender that would mean variation in personal history or experience with abuse have differing implications for maltreating mothers versus fathers. The findings for sex of offender, although never more than low-to-moderate in size, were nevertheless sufficiently strong when using appropriate statistical control. Furthermore, given that no significant interactions were revealed, the differences found between maltreating mothers and fathers are not limited to special conditions but rather operate for the current sample in an independent, additive fashion.

Limitations

Our study had the distinct advantage of a data set containing large numbers of maltreating fathers, a rarity in the child abuse literature. Consequently, this study permits an important comparison between

maltreating mothers and fathers. This study is not without limitations; however, an important one is that the data analyzed for this study were originally collected for clinical rather than research purposes. Thus, as in any secondary analysis, the investigators were unable to tailor measures to the research questions. In addition, although reliability data are extensively reported on the measures used in this study in other samples, the data required to estimate reliability coefficients in the current sample were not available. Finally, subject participation followed identification as a maltreating parent and a formal investigation by a service system. We would like to interpret assessments as direct reflections of offenders' personal, interpersonal and family-level experience, but the processes associated with being identified and investigated may have affected responses. It was out of concern for how such an investigation might affect responses that the decision was made to eliminate cases on the basis of the validity index (Milner, 1986) that should capture both faking-good and faking-bad.

A second limitation is the absence of a nonabusing control sample of mothers and fathers. This limitation makes it difficult to place the findings into an appropriate context that is more readily comparable with the literature that tends to compare offenders within gender but with like-gender nonoffenders. The differences reported here appear generally small, but perhaps this should not be surprising given that the respondents are all known offenders. Substantially larger differences would be expected between either gender and their counterparts in a normative sample of nonmaltreating parents.

Although the analysis sample was large, it was only 14.9% of the eligible population of cases. Comparisons of the analysis sample and the excluded sample revealed that the analysis sample contained more male offenders, more recidivists, more psychological abuse cases, and more severe abusers than would have been expected based on the total population. In addition, the analysis sample was slightly younger than the population, and slightly under-represented African Americans. Given the number of offenders in the population and the sensitivity of statistical procedures to sample size, we were not surprised by the existence of these significant differences. The differences were uniformly quite small, giving rise to confidence that the results could generalize reasonably well to the population from which it was drawn. Another important aspect of this sample is the fact that the type of abuse considered is heterogeneous, including physical and psychological abuse as well as neglect. Although type of abuse was incorporated into the analysis and thus statistically controlled, it may not be a simple thing to interpret these specific findings for any subtype of abuse/neglect.

The question of generalizing beyond the USAF is a separate one. Two concerns are relevant. First, as already noted, the definition of maltreating in the military differs somewhat from that in the civilian setting including some cases in the current sample that would be ineligible in the civilian sector. Unfortunately, data were not available to the current researchers that would permit identifying these cases. Any effect on our results of including them would likely be to compress (lower) group differences and to increase estimates of standard errors. In the current analyses, therefore, these potential problems seem to raise the risk of Type II error rather than call into doubt the findings presented. Nevertheless, this limitation is an important one.

A second concern about generalization arises because, compared to the general population, military samples typically over-represent youth and males, and the current sample is no exception. Yet, the perpetration of child abuse is largely a phenomenon of youth and, given the serious under-representation of maltreating fathers in the research literature on child abuse, the availability of a sample that over-represents males may actually be an advantage. Only replication in nonmilitary samples will answer this empirical question.

Conclusions

Research on the attributes of offenders who perpetrate physical and emotional child abuse and neglect has historically under-studied maltreating fathers. In recent years, moreover, descriptive research on these offenders has declined, meaning there has been little effort to bring more attention to maltreating fathers, despite calls for such research (Haskett et al., 1996) and acknowledgments of the imbalanced coverage (Milner & Chilamkurti, 1991; Milner & Dopke, 1997). The current study directly compared maltreating mothers and maltreating fathers in a relatively large dataset collected over an 8-year period by the Family Advocacy Program of the USAF. Several statistically significant, but generally small, differences were found between maltreating mothers and fathers. Mothers appeared to be more personally distressed and seemed to cope more poorly with interpersonal stressors than maltreating fathers. The fathers, on the other hand appeared to perceive a distant family climate within which inappropriate parental expectations for children's behavior may lead to maltreating disciplinary practices. Practice implications appear to arise from these differences. Maltreating mothers may benefit more from interventions addressing interpersonal coping skills, stress management, and therapy to address their personal distress and unhappiness. Fathers, on the other hand, with their more rigid expectations for children, may need greater emphasis on child development in parenting groups for men. As these practice implications are considered, however, it must not be overlooked that the gender differences found in this study were generally small. They do not support the conclusion that maltreating mothers and fathers have nonoverlapping needs.

Although the personal distress, interpersonal problems, and family climate factors examined in this study were also related to the type and severity of abuse, recidivism status of the offenders and their history with victimization in childhood, no interactions were noted between these variables and sex of offender. Thus, the gender differences found are independent and work additively with other patterns revealed.

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Resumen

Spanish-language abstract not available at time of publication.

Résumé

Objectif : Cette étude a comparé des mères et de pères qui maltraitent leurs enfants, au niveau de leurs perceptions de leur détresse personnelle, leurs difficultés interpersonnelles et maritales et certains aspects du climat familial.

Méthode : Les sujets de l'étude étaient 2.841 parents maltraitants (dont 1.918 étaient des pères ou qui faisaient figure de père) connus du programme d'aide aux familles de l'armée américaine, entre 1988 et 1996. Les variables indépendantes étaient le sexe du parent ainsi que la nature et la gravité de la maltraitance, des incidents de maltraitance répétés et une anamnèse de mauvais traitements subis en enfance.

Résultats : Les mères maltraitantes étaient plus détressées et avouaient vivre un plus grand nombre de difficultés interpersonnelles hors-famille que les pères maltraitants. Les pères se disent avoir des attentes plus rigides vis-à-vis de leurs enfants, un milieu familial moins cohésif et moins bien organisé que ceux des mères. Peu importe le sexe du parent, le fait d'avoir été maltraités eux-mêmes en enfance occasionne de la détresse et une absence de bonheur. De même, une anamnèse de maltraitance et le fait d'avoir maltraité fréquemment constituent des facteurs importants pouvant prédire un climat pénible, tant chez les mères que chez les pères maltraitants. Aucune interaction statistique importante n'a été notée entre le sexe du parent et d'autres variables indépendantes, lorsqu'il s'agissait de prédire la détresse personnelle et interpersonnelle, les difficultés conjugales et le climat familial.

Conclusions : Il est rare de trouver des études qui examinent les pères maltraitants, sauf dans le contexte de l'agression sexuelle. Encore plus rares sont celles qui comparent les pères et les mères maltraitants. Cette étude a noté de légères différences, bien qu'importantes. Il semblerait que les mères ont tendance à conjuguer pauvrement avec la détresse personnelle tandis que les pères semblent pouvoir fonctionner dans un climat familial impersonnel et rigide et favorisent des attentes irréalistes vis-à-vis le comportement de leurs enfants. L'absence de liens entre le sexe du parent et autres variables indépendantes qui ont fait l'objet de cette étude dénote que l'anamnèse, la nature et la gravité des mauvais traitements et les incidents antérieurs de maltraitance n'affectent pas ces tendances.