



# The effects of domestic violence on children's behavior problems: Assessing the moderating roles of poverty and marital status

Jeong Ah Yoo\*, Chien-Chung Huang<sup>1</sup>

School of Social Work, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 536 George St., New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Using four waves across 5 years of a recent longitudinal dataset, this study examined whether the effects of domestic violence at Year 1 on children's behavior problems at Year 5 differed by poverty and marital status. Findings from multiple-group structural equation modeling revealed that children in poor families were less affected by domestic violence than those in non-poor families, for both externalizing and internalizing behavior problems. Children in unmarried-mother families were more affected by domestic violence for externalizing behavior problems, whereas they were less affected for internalizing behavior problems, compared to children in married-mother families. Findings from this study highlight that the effects of domestic violence on the behavior problems of children vary by socioeconomic categories, such as poverty and marital status, and, therefore, that children's and their mothers' needs in violent families may vary widely as well.

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## 1. Introduction

At least 1 in 4 women during their lifetime have been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused by an intimate partner (Coker et al., 2002; Straus & Gelles, 1986) and these women frequently suffer from mental health problems and parenting difficulties (Campbell & Soeken, 1997; O'Keefe, 1994). The mental health problems and parenting difficulties experienced by abused women have been considered as key factors that may mediate the effects of domestic violence on children's behavioral outcomes (Huang, Wang, & Warrener, 2010; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 1998; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003; Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007). Although the domestic violence is a problem affecting all women and children, research suggests that low-income and unmarried women are far more likely to experience domestic violence (Davis, Avison, & McAlpine, 1997; Fantuzzo, Boruch, Berlama, Atkins, & Marcus, 1997; Frias & Angel, 2007; Vest, Catlin, Chen, & Brownson, 2002), and that the risks of experiencing mental health problems and parenting difficulties associated with domestic violence may be greater for the women and their children (Brown & Moran, 1997; Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Goodman, Smyth, Borges, & Singer, 2009; Tolman & Rosen, 2001). However, the effects of domestic violence combined with socioeconomic categories such as poverty and unmarried-mother status, on women and children have not fully researched. Most studies in this area have commonly considered

poverty (or income) and marital status as control variables but have not focused on their moderating roles in the effects of domestic violence on children's behavioral outcomes (Goodman et al., 2009). Therefore, investigating the effects that domestic violence has on women and children across a variety of social categories is critical in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of domestic violence and to develop more adequate policies and services for supporting domestic violence victims and their children. Using the first four waves of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, this study examines whether the negative effects of domestic violence at Year 1 on children's behavioral outcomes at Year 5 vary depending on poverty and marital status and whether those effects more matter for poor families than for non-poor families, and for unmarried-mother families than married-mother families.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

Stress and resources theory suggests that domestic violence in the context of poverty or unmarried-mother status may increase the risk of lack of parental resources that may affect children's outcomes. This theory postulates that individuals' locations in the social structure expose them to various types of stressors (Avison & Gotlib, 1994; Conger et al., 2010; Farrington, 1980). Their mastery of stressors depends on the resources available to meet the demands imposed by the stressors. If the demands exceed the resources, stress levels can increase (Farrington, 1980). Within the theoretical perspective, low-income or unmarried mothers may often lack the economic and social resources of high-income or married mothers, which may increase psychological distress. When domestic violence combines with poverty or unmarried-mother status, the experience of having

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 82 010 4056 7276.

E-mail addresses: [jeongah@eden.rutgers.edu](mailto:jeongah@eden.rutgers.edu), [jeongah91@gmail.com](mailto:jeongah91@gmail.com) (J.A. Yoo), [huangc@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:huangc@rci.rutgers.edu) (C.-C. Huang).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 732 932 7520.

limited resources and the subsequent psychological distress can be especially intense (Goodman et al., 2009). This distress may further disrupt the mother's parenting functioning, which may increase the risk for poor behavioral outcomes of children.

On the other hand, resilient perspective suggests that not all children who are exposed to domestic violence and cumulative risk, such as poverty or unmarried-mother status, show poorer behavioral outcomes. Studies have demonstrated that, in the face of domestic violence and other adversities, there are some children who remain relatively resilient and unscathed from their experiences (Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007; Grych, Jouriles, Swank, McDonald, & Norwood, 2000; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Sullivan, Nguyen, Allen, Bybee, & Juras, 2000). Resilience is increasingly understood as a process in which protective environments decrease the negative influence of risk factors on individuals (Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007). Within the perspective, some children's functioning may become compromised during stressful environments, but they may recover quickly to normal functioning when there are protective factors or when they return to safe environments (Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007). On the basis of the perspective, the absence of serious developmental problems does not necessarily mean that children are unaffected by domestic violence but that some protective factors, such as competent parenting, social support, or easy temperament, may influence the extent of the impact of domestic violence on children's outcomes (Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008).

### 3. Empirical background

Numerous studies suggest that the effects of domestic violence on children behavioral outcomes may be partially mediated by mother's response to the violence; in particular, the levels of maternal mental health problems and poor parenting, resulted from domestic violence, may be associated with the levels of behavior problems of children (Huang et al., 2010; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 1998; Levendosky et al., 2003; Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007). For example, drawing from longitudinal data on high-risk young children ( $N=905$ ), Huang et al. (2010) found that domestic violence at Year 1 disrupts mother's mental health and some of parenting functioning at Year 3 and that poor mental health and parenting are in turn associated with increased behavior problems of children at Year 5. Schoppe-Sullivan (2007) also found from a three-wave study of 283 families that marital conflict at Wave1 impairs mothers' parenting at Wave 2 and thereby can increase children's behavior problems at Wave 3.

Prior research suggests that the negative effects of domestic violence may matter more for poor- and unmarried-mothers and their children. Numerous studies indicate that poor women and their children are more likely to experience domestic violence (Conger et al., 2010; Fantuzzo et al., 1997; Frias & Angel, 2007; Vest et al., 2002). For instance, Vest et al. (2002) found in their study of about 19,000 women in a pooled multistate sample, that women with incomes below \$25,000 were almost twice as likely to experience abuse as women with higher incomes. Some researchers have conjectured that domestic violence in the context of poverty may increase the consequences of abuse for mothers and children (Conger et al., 2010; Frias & Angel, 2007; Goodman et al., 2009; Tolman & Rosen, 2001). They suggest that poor mothers often suffer from a lack of financial and social resources and associated strain or pressure, which can increase psychological distress. The distress may heighten the risk of harsh, uninvolved, and inconsistent parenting and thereby children's behavior problems. When domestic violence and poverty co-occur, their negative effects on women and children may magnify each other by increasing psychological distress, poor parenting, and social isolation (Goodman et al., 2009). However, Krishnakumar and Buehler (2000) in their meta-analytic review of 39 studies found no evidence to support the common perception that domestic violence in the context of poverty decreases mother's parenting quality.

Rather, their investigation found that the negative effect of domestic violence on parenting behaviors was stronger for middle-income families than for low-income families. Across the literature, research on the effects of domestic violence combined with poverty on women and children remains inconclusive. In particular, it is not clear whether domestic violence matters more for parenting quality in low-income families. Gewirtz and Edleson (2007) suggested that many protective factors, such as social support and easy temperament, can influence the impact of domestic violence on parenting for such socioeconomically disadvantaged mothers and their children's development.

Unmarried mothers are also more likely than married mothers to experience domestic violence (Brown & Moran, 1997; Davis et al., 1997; Fantuzzo et al., 1997; Vest et al., 2002). For instance, among 404 mothers with a child, unmarried mothers were 3 times as likely as married mothers (45 vs. 13%) to experience domestic violence (Brown & Moran, 1997). Specially, unmarried women were about 36 times more likely to be victims of domestic violence if they were in poverty (Vest et al., 2002). Some researchers suggest that unmarried mothers and their children may be more influenced by domestic violence (Brown & Moran, 1997; Davis et al., 1997; Thomson, Hanson, & MaLanahan, 1994). They suggest that unmarried mothers often experience financial hardship, working full time, and associated strain and exhaustion but they have less access to psychological and social support from an intimate partner or close ties, which may increase psychological distress and disrupt parenting quality. When domestic violence and unmarried-mother status co-occur, the combination of these factors can intensify their negative effects on women and children by increasing the risks of psychological distress and constraining resources. However, other researchers have pointed out that the outcomes for unmarried mothers are not always bleak (Brown & Moran, 1997; Sullivan et al., 2000). They suggest that although unmarried mothers are far more likely to have experienced domestic violence and live in marked financial hardship compared to married mothers, many of them reported competent parenting and social supports from close ties. Gewirtz and Edleson (2007) summarize that the impact of domestic violence on children in unmarried- mother families may vary depending on how the unmarried mothers respond to the negative effect of domestic violence and its related mental health problems or how such mothers and their children may be supported by social support from close ties or communities.

Although domestic violence and certain social categories, such as low-income and unmarried-mother families, have been highly correlated in the literature, little research has been done to illuminate whether domestic violence combined with such social categories, increases abuse consequences of mother and children. Throughout the literature, domestic violence has been commonly studied as a separate issue from socioeconomic factors such as poverty and unmarried-mother status. More research is required to investigate whether the effects of domestic violence on children's behaviors vary by poverty and marital status and whether domestic violence matters more for children in certain socioeconomic categories, such as low-income and unmarried-mother families.

### 4. Data and methods

#### 4.1. Data

The current study used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth cohort study that began in 1998 with a baseline sample of 4898 births in 20 U.S. cities. Unmarried parents were oversampled by design with a 3:1 ratio in the study. The baseline sample contains 4898 births (3711 unmarried parents and 1187 married parents). Follow-up phone surveys were conducted when the child was 1, 3, and 5 years old. A total of 2404 mothers completed all data collections across 5 years. The 402

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