



# Racial variations in the link between domestic violence and children's behavioral outcomes



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## ABSTRACT

The link between domestic violence and children has been well documented, but little is known about racial variations in this relationship. Using multiple waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, this study examined whether the effects of domestic violence on children's behavior problems differed by race. Results from structural equation modeling revealed that domestic violence had negative effects on children in all racial groups; but the mechanisms through which domestic violence exerted its effects varied across groups. Whereas the effects of domestic violence on children's behavior problems were partially mediated through maternal functioning for White and Black families, only direct effects were found for Hispanic families. This study highlights wide racial variations in the mechanisms through which domestic violence affects children and the importance of cultural context in understanding those variations.

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## 1. Introduction

Domestic violence has received considerable attention as a serious social problem that impacts not only women, who are the most frequent victims, but also their children. For years researchers have studied the mechanisms or processes through which domestic violence affects children's behavior problems (Huang, Wang, & Warrener, 2010; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003; Levendosky, Leahy, Bogat, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006; Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007; Yoo & Huang, 2012, 2013). Many of these studies, largely based on ecological frameworks, suggested that mothers' responses to domestic violence may mediate the effects that the violence has on their children. In particular, disruptions in maternal mental health and parenting, which are mostly caused by domestic violence, have been considered key mechanisms that mediate the effects of domestic violence on children's behavioral outcomes. Although the impact of domestic violence on women and children has been well documented in the literature, much less attention has been given to racial variations in this relationship. Some researchers have suggested that women's responses to domestic violence may vary by their racial and cultural backgrounds (Kasturirangan, Krishnan, & Riger, 2004; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). They have found that the risk of experiencing psychological and parenting difficulties as a result of domestic violence may be greater for White women than for minority women (Campbell et al., 2008; Edelson, Hokoda, & Romos-Lira, 2007; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009; Torres & Han, 2000). These studies have suggested that cultural contexts may influence abused women's psychological resources and

parenting that are closely associated with their children's outcomes. However, no study has focused on the potential racial variations in the mechanisms through which domestic violence affects children's behavioral outcomes.

Ecological theory (Belsky, 1984; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) has been widely used to understand the effects of domestic violence on children's behavioral development. The theory suggests that children's behavioral outcomes can be influenced by children's characteristics (i.e., gender and temperament), parents' characteristics (i.e., maternal mental health and parenting), and contextual factors (e.g., domestic violence). The theory regards the mother's psychological resources and parenting functioning as the most influential determinants of children's outcomes because most children, especially young children, are completely dependent on their mother for all aspects of care. Ecological theory also posits that, as a contextual factor, domestic violence can have substantial effects on children's behavioral outcomes. Such effects can be direct, and they can also occur indirectly through the negative effects that domestic violence exerts on maternal psychological well-being and parenting functioning. That is, the ecological model assumes that domestic violence can impair maternal psychological well-being and quality of parenting and thus can have negative effects on children's behavioral outcomes. Previous studies have provided empirical support for the ecological framework, which explains the mechanisms through which domestic violence affects children (Huang et al., 2010; Levendosky et al., 2003, 2006; Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007; Yoo & Huang, 2012, 2013). For example, in a longitudinal study on high-risk young children, Huang et al. (2010) found that domestic violence at Wave 1 had a negative effect on maternal mental health and reduced parenting qualities at Wave 2, which in turn increased children's behavior problems at Wave 3.

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Ecological theory also suggests that the influence of family-level factors on children's outcomes may vary by their relationships to macro-environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which includes cultural context and the family's socioeconomic status. However, no study has focused on examining whether the mechanisms based on ecological theory apply to culturally diverse racial groups. Most existing studies have included race in their control variables but have not directly compared the effects of domestic violence on children across racial groups. Thus, this study explored whether the mechanisms linking domestic violence to children's behavioral problems in the ecological framework vary by race or cultural background.

Cross-cultural or multicultural domestic violence studies have suggested that women's responses to domestic violence are in part contingent on the cultural contexts in which they live (Campbell et al., 2008; Edelson et al., 2007; Kasturinrangan et al., 2004). In the United States, race represents a key factor that defines those contexts. The research has indicated that culture has an important influence on abused women's responses, such as mental health problems (Campbell et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2009; Torres & Han, 2000) and parenting difficulties (Edelson et al., 2007; Taylor et al., 2009). For example, Campbell et al. (2008) found that Black women who are abused tend to experience lower levels of mental health problems than do White women. Likewise, Torres and Han (2000) found that White women are more likely to experience psychological distress than do Hispanic women. In addition, several studies have reported racial differences in abused women's parenting difficulties (Edelson et al., 2007; Taylor et al., 2009). Edelson et al. (2007) reported that Hispanic women were more likely than White women to experience parenting stress. But Taylor et al. (2009) found that Hispanic abused women were less aggressive toward their children than Black or White women. These studies suggest that certain cultural contexts, particularly within minority communities, may moderate the negative effects of domestic violence on their mental health and parenting. Given the influence of cultural contexts on abused women's mental health and parenting – both of which are strong factors of children's outcomes – it does not seem reasonable to assume that minority children are affected by domestic violence through the same mechanisms or processes as White children.

Some researchers have suggested that racial variations in women's and children's outcomes may be attributable not only to racial or cultural backgrounds but also to differences in socioeconomic status across racial groups, such as income, education, or marital status (Campbell et al., 2008; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; Yoo & Huang, 2012). In their qualitative research, Campbell et al. (2008) suggested that the relatively weak effect of domestic violence on minority families can be in part attributable to racial differences in socioeconomic characteristics. They also found that domestic violence was often not the most salient psychological stressor for Black women and that lack of financial resources or social stressors (i.e., racism) was equally or more important. This finding suggests that comparisons among racial groups could be invalid if socioeconomic status is not taken into account.

Few empirical studies have examined how race or culture plays a role in the links between domestic violence, women's psychological and parenting functioning, and their children's behavioral outcomes. The paucity of empirical evidence is unfortunate because such information could be critical to better understand the complex effects of domestic violence on children and to develop more culturally sensitive services for supporting children and their mothers. Therefore, the present study addressed this gap in the literature by analyzing the potential racial variations in the effects of domestic violence on women's functioning and thereby their children's behavioral outcomes while controlling for socioeconomic characteristics. This study paid special attention to whether the mechanisms linking domestic violence's effects on children in ecological frameworks apply to culturally diverse children and whether there are culture-specific mechanisms through

which domestic violence affects children. Three racial groups – Black, White, and Hispanic families that live in the United States – were compared in this study. Within-group differences were not considered in this study because the sample sizes were not sufficient for separate analyses. Although minority communities are heterogeneous in terms of cultural backgrounds (e.g., country of origin, immigration status, or acculturation level), it is expected that minority women do share common influences (e.g., racism or sexism) in their experiences of domestic violence within a sociopolitical context (Kasturinrangan et al., 2004, p 320).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data

Data for this study were drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth cohort survey of 4898 mothers of newborns in 20 cities in the United States. This study oversampled children born to unmarried parents by design with a 3:1 ratio (3711 unmarried and 1187 married), which resulted in a larger number of low-income children and Black or Hispanic children than would be the case in a nationally representative sample (Reichmann, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). The baseline core interviews were conducted with parents in the hospital at the time of the focal child's birth between 1998 and 2000. Follow-up surveys were conducted when the child was 1, 3, 5, and 9 years old. Because the present study focused on behavioral outcomes of preschool children, the first four waves of the surveys were used: baseline, Year 1, Year 3, and Year 5. Of the eligible mothers at baseline, 4365 were interviewed at Year 1, 4231 were interviewed at Year 3, and 4139 were interviewed at Year 5. After the age-3 and age-5 core interviews, mothers were asked to participate in an in-home assessment of parenting and child development. For the in-home assessments, 3254 mothers participated at Year 3, and 2977 participated at Year 5. This study used the two in-home assessments, which provided valuable information on the observer's evaluations of parenting but resulted in substantial loss of data. A total of 2404 mothers completed all six data collections across the 5 survey years. The 402 mothers who were not involved in a relationship with the child's biological father at baseline and Year 1 were not included in the current study. An additional 768 mothers were dropped from the analysis due to incomplete information on the explanatory and dependent variables. Finally, 37 mothers who identified their race as something other than White, Black, or Hispanic of Mexican descent were excluded from the analysis. The final sample included 1197 mothers, who had complete information on all variables across four waves. Approximately 55% of the final sample of mothers were Black ( $n = 659$ ), 22% were White ( $n = 265$ ), and 23% were Hispanic ( $n = 273$ ). The mean age of the sample was 25. About 32% of the sample mothers did not have a high school diploma, 32% had graduated high school, and 36% had more than a high school education. At Year 1, almost 69% of the mothers were unmarried, and 43% had an income below the poverty line. About half of the children in the sample were boys (51%). Demographic differences were explored between mothers who did ( $n = 180$ ) and did not report experiencing ( $n = 1017$ ) any type of domestic violence at the Year 1 survey. Compared to mothers who did not report domestic violence, mothers who reported domestic violence were more likely to be unmarried and to be in poverty at Year 1. No significant differences were found for other background characteristics. To examine the influence of sample attrition on the findings, baseline characteristics of the final sample and the dropped cases were also examined. The results revealed no significant differences between the final sample and the dropped cases for most of the background characteristics, such as age, education, income, and marital status. However, the dropped cases was less likely to be Black and more likely to be Hispanic than the final cases.

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