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Individual and contextual factors for the child abuse potential of Croatian mothers: The role of social support in times of economic hardship

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed mothers' risk for abusing their children in middle adolescence in relation to individual and contextual factors during the economic crisis in Croatia. Socioeconomic status of mothers, family economic pressure, and mothers' exposure to stress were measured. Special attention was given to the perceived availability of social support as one of protective factors potentially buffering the negative impact of risks of child abuse. The community sample included 746 mothers (Mage = 42.85; SDage = 5.319). The results showed that the risk of child abuse is higher for mothers with lower education, those who perceive themselves as suffering greater family economic hardship, those who have experienced a higher number of stressful events, and those with lower social support. When the mothers perceive a lower availability of social support, the effects of exposure to cumulative risk, namely the combination of socioeconomic status, economic pressure, and exposure to stress, are stronger. Since social support proved to be one of the key protective factors in the relationship between adverse life circumstances and parenting, the development of effective and non-stigmatized interventions aiming to increase social support, positive social relationships, and adequate parenting practices for parents facing economic hardship is an important direction for future family policy measures.

1. Introduction

The current body of research recognizes that child abuse is a complex phenomenon and that higher risk of abuse is related to the interplay between various risk and protective factors (Belsky et al., 1993; Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981). The concept of child abuse potential is crucial for early recognition and prevention of child abuse since it can provide information on the likelihood of the parent to engage in abusive behaviors (1994, Milner, 1986). Although various studies investigated factors predicting child abuse potential (for review, see Stith et al., 2009), the complexity of the issue warrants further studying of circumstances that can increase the risk of abuse. The current study focused on the relationship between different aspects of economic pressure and stress with risk of child abuse in mothers of adolescents. The topic of child abuse risk is rarely investigated in this population, since it is mostly used in research on early recognition and prevention (e.g., Begle, Dumas, & Hanson, 2010; Rodriguez, Smith, & Silvia, 2016; Rodriguez & Tucker, 2015). Measuring child abuse potential in mothers of adolescents can contribute to its understanding given the specific developmental challenges that adolescents and their parents face compared to younger children.

One theoretical framework for studying the risk of child abuse is the Family Stress Model (FSM; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, &

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Simons, 1994), which describes how economic hardship leads to family economic pressure that induces emotional distress in parents and may lead to relational instability, which, in turn, may lead to disrupted parenting as well as child and adolescent maladjustment (Belsky, Bell, Bradley, Stallard, & Stewart-Brown, 2007; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Grant et al., 2003; McCurdy, 2005). Specifically, family economic hardship induces more marital conflict, more hostility and violence in parent–child interactions, or less involved parenting than in better-off families while, at the same time, indirectly affecting parental handling of children’s emotional and social wellbeing through less available attention for children, less support for children’s problems, or less help with school work (e.g., Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Evans & Kim, 2013). It is important to differentiate socioeconomic status and economic pressure in studying this phenomenon. Namely, socioeconomic status is usually assessed using objective measures such as educational level, job status, and income level (see Bradley & Corwyn, 2002 for review). Economic pressure includes measures of the psychological manifestations of and responses to economic hardships, such as unmet material needs, inability to pay bills, and having to cut back on necessary expenses (Leinonen, Solantaus, & Punamaki, 2003; Neppl, Senia, & Donnellan, 2016). Studies have reported a direct relationship between objective measures of economic status and child abuse potential with higher potential for abuse by parents who did not finish high school or work full time and who have a lower income and live in disadvantaged communities (Merritt, 2009; Murphey & Braner, 2000). However, recent research has demonstrated that variables of economic pressure describe the relationship between family economic situation and parenting more adequately than socioeconomic variables (Lee & Lee, 2016; McConnell, Breitreuz, & Savage, 2010; Zilanawala & Pilkauskas, 2012).

Another important factor in the relationship between economic hardship and risk of child abuse is exposure to stress. Prolonged economic pressure produces strain on family functioning, which reduces family members’ psychological resources to cope with everyday stressful events, which, in turn, contributes to harsh and inconsistent parenting practices (e.g., Conger et al., 2010; Wadsworth, Raviv, Compas, & Connor-Smith, 2005). Similarly, it is well confirmed independently from economic conditions that mothers with potential for child abuse reported more stress due to unfavorable life circumstances or stressful life events, parenting, and emotional distress (e.g., Crouch & Behl, 2001; Guterman, Lee, Taylor, & Rathouz, 2009; Rodriguez & Green, 1997; Rodriguez & Richardson, 2007; TaylTaylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009; Tucker & Rodriguez, 2014). Moreover, interesting findings were reported by Tucker and Rodriguez (2014) showing that greater levels of stress due to the cumulative stressors are related to higher child abuse risk, confirming theoretical and empirical indications on cumulative effect of different factors related to elevated child abuse risk (Margolin & Gordis, 2003; Masten & Wright, 1998; Wekerle, Wall, Leung, & Trocme, 2007).

At the same time, not all parents experiencing various stressful events reach for abusive behaviors, which indicates the important role of buffering or protective factors in the relationship between cumulative stress and child abuse potential (Tucker & Rodriguez, 2014). In the context of studying resilience, protective factors represent the buffer or moderator of risk associated with better outcomes, particularly in high-risk situations (Masten, 2015). Protective factors for risk of child abuse are good family functioning, emotional support, concrete support in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, and nurturing and attachment (Counts, Buffington, Chang-Rios, Rasmussen, & Preacher, 2010; Geeraert, Van den Noortgate, Grietens, & Onghena, 2004; Lundahl, Nimer, & Parsons, 2006; McLoyd, 1998). All these factors have their unique contribution to decreasing the risk of child abuse, providing possibilities for prevention and intervention programs aiming at attenuating child abuse. Among them, social support is a well-recognized construct closely related to various aspects of mental health (e.g., Kessler, Price, & Wortman, 1985; Thoits, 2011; Thoresen, Jensen, Wentzel-Larsen, & Dyb, 2014) and parenting in times of adversity (e.g., Chan, 1994; Kalebić Jakupčević & Ajduković, 2011; Quittner, Glueckauf, & Jackson, 1990). It implies social relations that, if necessary, can provide needed resources, such as emotional reassurance; information and advice; and help with tasks, obligations, and skill acquisition (Thompson, 1995). There is a conceptual distinction between received and perceived social support. While received social support indicates actual support, perceived social support refers to one’s perception that emotional, cognitive, and instrumental support would be available if required (Joseph, 1999). Perceived support has repeatedly been positively associated with better mental and physical health (e.g., Leinonen et al., 2003; Thoits, 2011). Studies have found that perceived social support is positively associated with parents’ socio-emotional investment in children. Mothers who perceive a higher availability of social support from family and friends demonstrate greater sensitivity toward children’s reactions (Bradley, Whiteside-Mansell, Brisby, & Caldwell, 1997), show greater responsiveness in parent–child interactions, and provide environments that are more stimulating (Burchinal, Follmer, & Bryant, 1996). Attitudes toward parenting, particularly among parents in distress, appear to be more adequate if the adult has a strong social support network (McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994) while higher levels of parenting stress and ineffective parenting are associated with lower levels of parental social support (McLoyd, 1990). Furthermore, parents who report higher levels of social support communicate better with their children and show more involvement and greater confidence in their parenting (Lee, Anderson, Horowitz, & August, 2009).

Studies have found that perceived social support is negatively related to risk for abuse, even when social support is measured in different ways. Mothers show a higher risk of child abuse when they have fewer contacts in their social support networks and reported limited access or less contact with friends (Bishop & Leadbeater, 1999; Coohy, 1995; Tucker & Rodriguez, 2014). Similarly, high risk of child abuse has been found in mothers who perceive the social network to be less supportive or as providing low-quality social support (2007, Bishop & Leadbeater, 1999; Coohy, 2000; Ortega, 2002; Schaeffer, Alexander, Bethke, & Kretz, 2005).

Few studies focusing on how parents’ resources are linked to reduced risk of child abuse included the broader perspective on the interaction of social support with other factors. An exception is the comprehensive investigation of child abuse potential and parent–child aggression by Rodriguez et al. (2016), which shows that social support is one of personal resources (along with partner satisfaction and coping) that can decrease child abuse risk in the context of various personal taxes, such as parental psychopathology, substance use, or domestic violence. Similarly, in the Croatian context, Kalebić Jakupčević & Ajduković (2011) found that social support is an important protective factor against child abuse potential in the multivariate model of risk predictors such as mental

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