

**Fiery Wives and Icy Husbands: Childhood  
Abuse and Subsequent Maladaptive Marital Communication Patterns**

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Research demonstrates that witnessing and experiencing abuse during childhood is associated with long-term negative life course and marital outcomes (Banyard et al. 2001). Witnessing parents' marital violence during childhood increases the likelihood of one's own adulthood aggression and future partner violence (Domas et al. 1994; Straus and Gelles 1995). Childhood abuse has also been shown to influence adult union formation. Individuals who experienced childhood physical and/or sexual abuse are more likely to cohabit, abandon partners, and divorce compared to those who do not experience childhood abuse (Coleman and Widom 2004). Additionally, women who experience childhood abuse are more likely to form multiple, short-term cohabiting relationships (Cherlin et al. 2004).

We contribute to this research by exploring the gendered effects of exposure to violence in childhood on corrosive marital communication patterns. Specifically, we focus on whether newlywed wives and husbands experience the consequences of childhood abuse differently. Our research addresses two broad questions. First, we examine whether childhood abuse increases the use of high conflict and withdrawing communication styles and reduces positive interactions. Second, we additionally explore whether the effects of childhood abuse are gendered, such that childhood abuse reinforces high conflict strategies among wives and encourages withdrawing and "shutting down" strategies among husbands (Gottman 1993; Heavey et al. 1993). In short, we explore whether childhood experiences of sexual and physical abuse result in a gendered pattern of poor marital communication.

A last important contribution of our study is the exploration of whether premarital counseling and marriage law reforms can mediate the negative effects of childhood abuse on corrosive, marriage destabilizing communication styles. We have unique couple-level data from a study of newlyweds who faced the opportunity to choose the marriage law reform of covenant marriage. Thus, we have data from a natural social experiment. Our sample includes couples who chose the standard marriage option and therefore were not required (though not prohibited) from undertaking premarital counseling and couples who chose the covenant marriage option with required premarital counseling. Thus, a third goal of our study is to explore whether covenant marriage, and premarital counseling generally, mediate the negative effects of childhood abuse on negative communication.

The data include a host of measures about the couple's union and marriage histories, childhood family backgrounds, and socio-demographic information. Additionally, the data are extremely high quality with respect to multiple measures of the quantity and quality of premarital counseling and religiosity, so we can explore what dimensions of premarital counseling, if any, mediate childhood abuse effects, and whether any effects of covenant marriage accrue from selection effects (i.e., the greater religiosity of those electing covenant marriage) or some additional independent buffering effects.

### *Life Course Theory and Intergenerational Transmissions*

Life course theory posits that the history of an individual can influence his or her future life trajectory (Elder 1998). Additionally, life course theory argues that within family structures, internal family norms are developed over time and passed from one generation to next. For example, past research has found intergenerational transmissions of divorce (Amato and Cheadle 2005), marital quality (Feng et al. 1999), and violence (Straus and Geller 1995; Stith et al. 2000).

Thus, childhood experience of sexual or physical abuse, whether as a witness or direct victim, is likely to have a long arc in a person's life. The experience of childhood abuse may socialize individuals to engage in negative behaviors once they form adult relationships. Indeed, past experiences of abuse may reinforce the belief that negative behaviors are normative and acceptable. Another consequence of childhood abuse is potentially the short-circuiting of adaptive adult communication strategies and positive relationship skills. Adults from abusive childhoods may simply not have learned positive communication skills or may become too overwhelmed in high stress moments to deploy them effectively. Conversely, sharing a marriage with a spouse who has experienced childhood abuse may prove very difficult, regardless of one's own experiences, thus a partner's childhood abuse may provoke one's own negative communication styles.

Thus, we broadly use a life course theoretical framework to address the following hypotheses. *Hypothesis 1:* Individuals who experienced childhood abuse will be more likely to have negative communication patterns compared to those without a history of abuse. *Hypothesis 2:* Among those who experienced childhood abuse, we expect a gendered effect on newlywed communication styles: Wives may display a more demand/conflict based communication pattern and husbands a more withdrawn pattern. *Hypothesis 3:* Covenant marriage may mediate the negative effects of childhood abuse on marital communication, as compared to those in standard marriages. *Hypothesis 3A:* Any mediating effects of covenant marriage may simply be selection effects caused by the greater religiosity of covenant couples, and thus their greater likelihood of using counseling and other marriage-enhancing tactics to diminish the negative effects of childhood abuse. *Hypothesis 4:* Premarital counseling may mediate the negative effects of childhood abuse on marital communication, particularly for those who engaged in high quality counseling focused on addressing the partners' life histories and communication skills.

### *Current Research*

The data are from the Marriage Matters project (Nock et al, 2008). These couple-level data allow us to explore both the consequences of one's own and one's partner's experience of childhood sexual abuse on communication styles in newlywed marriages. We use three measures of communication patterns, one positive and two negative (Heavey et al, 1993). Positive communication includes looking at things from the other partner's viewpoint and trying to find middle ground. The first negative communication pattern is "fiery" individuals who are demanding, hostile, sarcastic, or even violent when handling disagreements. Alternatively, "icy" individuals often withdraw from disagreement, ignore their partners, change the subject, or use nonverbal tactics (such as eye rolling) to distance themselves from the disagreement.

*Data.* The Marriage Matters data are a three-wave longitudinal study, funded by the National Science Foundation, following newlywed couples married in Louisiana in the first 5-7 years of their marriages (Marriage Matters, 1998-2004). The study used probability proportionate to size to select 17 parishes in Louisiana and sampled all of the covenant marriage licenses and standard marriage licenses filed by them in the first months after the covenant marriage law passed in August 1997. The sampling frame consisted of 1,704 licenses of which 1,310 were confirmed. Our current study focuses on the first wave of data collected when the couples were in their first 3 to 6 months of marriage. The data represent approximately 707 couples.

*Dependent Variables.* The communication measures include self-reported items which ask how the spouses handle disagreements and conflict that arises in marriage, with response categories ranging from very true, somewhat true, and not true at all. Each dependent variable sums the responses across the separate items. The *positive* communication measure includes two items: “I look at things from my partner’s viewpoint” and “I try to find the middle ground.” The *fiery negative* communication measure includes three items: “I get physically violent,” “I get sarcastic,” and “I get hostile.” The *icy negative* communication measure includes two items: “I withdraw to avoid a big fight” and “I just give in.”

*Focal Independent Variable: Childhood Abuse.* The childhood abuse measure is the summed response to six items which address whether specific forms of abuse in childhood were sources of problems. The response categories were “major problem,” “minor problem,” and “not a problem at all.” The six items are: “violence between your parents,” “violence directed at you,” “sexual abuse,” “foul and abusive language,” “high conflict between your parents,” and “name-calling and sarcasm.” Additionally, we plan on performing analyses with a global measure of abuse and breaking down abuse to target differences among those experiencing harmful physical and/or sexual abuse and those whose parents’ used corrosive communication.

*Other controls.* We will include measures of marital status to determine whether they are covenant or standard married. We will also include multiple dimensions of *religiosity* and *premarital counseling*. Our controls will also include race/ethnicity and age, family and marriage histories, and socioeconomic status for both the wife and husband.

## **Preliminary Results**

Our very basic descriptive analyses demonstrate that wives report experiencing significantly more childhood abuse than do their husbands, for both covenant and standard couples. Wives also use a significantly more fiery communication style than their husbands, while husbands use a significantly more icy communication style. We find no gender differences in positive communication styles, and no marital status differences for icy or positive communication styles. However, both covenant wives and husbands are significantly less likely to use fiery communication styles than their standard counterparts.

Although preliminary, our zero-order regression models indicate that childhood abuse is positively associated with fiery communication patterns for both husbands and wives ( $p=0.000$ ). It is likely that experiencing childhood abuse promotes negative communication patterns, with wives and husbands expressing more hostility and anger when resolving disagreements. Both icy and positive communication patterns are not significantly related to childhood abuse for either husbands or wives.

For our multivariate analyses, we intend to use Seemingly Unrelated Regression techniques which allow for paired data and simultaneously regressed models. This technique allows for constraints of coefficients across equations to see, for example, whether the effects of childhood abuse can be constrained to be equal for wives and husbands.

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