

# Worse than hitting your child: a cross-cultural analysis of the mother-child relationship\*

Peor que golpear a su hija/hijo: un análisis  
transcultural de la relación madre-hijo

*Pior do que bater no seu filho: uma Análise  
Intercultural da Relação Mãe-Filho*

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## Artículo de investigación e innovación

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\* The present study shows the findings from a research project collaboration between the University of Houston-Victoria (UHV) and the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (UNAL) in 2011. The author administered the surveys to both Colombian and American participants. From UNAL, Dr. Vera Weiler coordinated the participation of students from four more Colombian universities. For this effort, the author is very grateful to those participants, but especially to Dr. Weiler for making this work possible.

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## Abstract

Using the International Parenting Study (IPS) questionnaire, this study measures the effects of abusive levels of maternal discipline on child-to-mother violence in a cross-cultural sample of 469 Colombian and American freshman-level college students. The IPS assesses the respondents' childhood relationship with their mother, their parents' relationship toward each other, and their personality traits in adulthood. This instrument relies on the respondents' memories of experiences that occurred around the age of 10 regarding maternal disciplinary practices, their mother's reaction toward their misbehavior, parental domestic violence, and the child's verbal abuse and physical violence toward their mother. The correlation between the respondents' childhood experiences and their adult personality traits is also analyzed. The analysis shows similarities and differences between American and Colombian childrearing practices. For example, for most respondents, their mother was the most significant caretaker, and in comparison, to their father's forms of discipline, maternal discipline was perceived as fair and producing positive effects. This study shows that Colombian mothers use corporal punishment to discipline their children more often than their American counterparts, but both American and Colombian mothers use corporal punishment and severe physical child abuse more often toward boys than girls. However, maternal psychological aggression, rather than maternal use of physical violence to discipline the child, is the strongest predictor of a child's use of violence against the mother. This study contributes to the existent literature in that it provides support to cultural transmission through imitation and observation, learning, differential association, and power-control theories: that is, violent behavior is learned in the family, reinforced by attitudes favorable to that behavior, and transmitted from one generation to the next. The common use of violence by the mother (and her male partner) may become a "normal" pattern or way to interact with any or all family members. It also supports the hypothesis of the co-occurrence of various types of violence in a violent home, as domestic violence and child abuse. Finally, policy implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** aggression, child abuse, child rearing, parent child relationship, violence.

**Descriptors:** childhood, child rearing, domestic violence, family.

## Resumen

Utilizando el cuestionario de Estudio Internacional de Crianza (International Parenting Study-IPS) y una muestra de 469 estudiantes (colombianos y estadounidenses) de primer año de universidad, este estudio mide el impacto de la disciplina materna en la violencia del hijo o la hija hacia la madre. El IPS incluye indicadores acerca de las relaciones familiares cuando el o la participante tenía alrededor de 10 años. Por ejemplo, la disciplina materna, la reacción de la madre ante el mal comportamiento de su hija/o, la violencia doméstica entre los padres y el abuso verbal y físico del/la participante a su madre. También se analiza la correlación entre la experiencia de los participantes en su infancia y sus rasgos de personalidad en la adultez. Los hallazgos sugieren que la agresión psicológica por parte de la madre, no la violencia física, es el predictor más fuerte del maltrato del hijo o hija a la madre. Este estudio contribuye a la literatura existente, ya que provee evidencia empírica de algunas de las teorías sobre el comportamiento criminal o violento, según las cuales este se explica por la transmisión cultural por imitación u observación, el aprendizaje del comportamiento violento en la familia y en otros grupos de socialización temprana y la transmisión de inequidad de género. Es decir, el comportamiento violento se aprende en la familia, es reforzado por actitudes favorables a ese comportamiento y se transmite de una generación a la siguiente. El uso frecuente de la violencia por parte de la madre y su pareja masculina puede convertirse en un patrón de interacción o resolución de conflictos entre los miembros de la familia. La evidencia empírica también sustenta la hipótesis de la concurrencia de varios tipos de violencia en un hogar violento, como la violencia doméstica y el abuso infantil. Finalmente, se discuten algunas implicaciones en política pública.

**Palabras clave:** agresión, crianza del niño/a, maltrato infantil, relación padres-hijos, violencia.

**Descriptores:** crianza del niño, familia, infancia, violencia doméstica.

## Resumo

Utilizando o questionário International Parenting Study (IPS) e uma amostra transcultural de 469 estudantes de universidade do primeiro ano (da Colômbia e América do Norte), este estudo mede os efeitos da disciplina materna na violência infantil contra a mãe. O IPS inclui indicadores sobre as relações familiares quando o participante tinha cerca de 10 anos de idade. Por exemplo, a disciplina materna, a reação da mãe ao mau comportamento de seu filho, a violência doméstica entre os pais e o abuso verbal e físico da criança à mãe. A correlação entre a experiência infantil das pessoas entrevistadas e seus traços de personalidade adulta também é analisada. Os resultados sugerem que a agressão psicológica materna durante a infância, em vez do uso materno de violência física para disciplinar a criança, é o mais forte preditor do uso de violência infantil contra a mãe. Este estudo contribui para a literatura existente, fornecendo evidências empíricas para algumas das teorias do comportamento violento ou criminoso, segundo as quais este comportamento se explica pela transmissão cultural por imitação ou observação, aprendizagem do comportamento violento na família e em outros grupos de socialização precoce, e a transmissão da desigualdade de gênero. Em outras palavras, o comportamento violento é aprendido na família, reforçado por atitudes favoráveis a tal comportamento, e transmitido de uma geração para a próxima. O uso comum da violência pela mãe e seu parceiro pode se tornar num padrão de interação ou resolução de conflitos entre os membros da família. As evidências empíricas também apoiam a hipótese da co-ocorrência de vários tipos de violência em um lar violento, como a violência doméstica e o abuso infantil. Finalmente, algumas implicações na política pública são discutidas.

**Palavras-chave:** abuso infantil, agressão, educação infantil, relação pais-filhos, violência.

**Descritores:** criação de filhos, família, infância, violência doméstica.

## Introduction

Child-to-parent violence (CPV), defined as a repeated behavior of physical, psychological (verbal or non-verbal), or economic violence directed toward parents or guardians (Pereira et al., 2017) is an understudied phenomenon (Cottrell, 2001). Unlike other types of victim-offender relationships, parental relationships are bound by a legal responsibility, meaning that a parent cannot terminate a relationship with their child, even if the child is abusive. Parents may be unwilling to report abuse from a child because either they are skeptical of authorities' ability to take any action, or fearful of the consequences if they do. The situation can be especially complex in cases of underage offenders (Holt, 2016).

Since the 1940s, the relationship between parents and children has been studied by scholars from various perspectives: social learning (Bandura, 1978; Sutherland, 1947), power-control (Hagan, 1989), cultural transmission (Schönpflug, 2008), and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Sutherland and Bandura assert that an individual's behavior is learned within their first socialization group, and the most frequent, earliest, most intense, preeminent, and longest relationships, as those between parents and children, are the ones that most significantly influence children's criminal behavior. Individuals' learning experiences within their primary socialization group also may influence levels of violence against women and attitudes that demonstrate gender inequality, as Hagan argues in his power-control theory. Sutherland, Bandura, and Hagan's perspective are aligned with Bourdieu's and his colleagues. They define and operationalize the concepts of culture as what is transmitted (e.g., power relationships, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, gender roles, and expectations) and explain its transmission from one generation to the next through the family or any other closely knit social group (Bourdieu, 1984; Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Schönpflug, 2008). When that knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next, it becomes cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Following Bourdieu's rationale, violence, as part of cultural capital, is intergenerationally transmitted. Within the primary socialization group, violence could take different forms and co-occur between multiple members of the group. The roles of victim or offender could be reciprocal, interchangeable, and transmitted from one generation to the next (Camargo, 2018). For example, exposure to intimate partner violence between one's parents, a type of child abuse, predicts violence against women and child abuse in adulthood (Camargo, 2009, 2018; Gage & Silvestre, 2010; Humphreys, Thiara, & Skamballis, 2011; Menon, Cohen, & Temple, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2010; Mitchell, Lewin, Rasmussen, Horn, & Joseph, 2011). Child abuse is also correlated to depression, aggression, delinquency (Morrel, Dubowitz, Kerr, & Black, 2003; Bluestone & Tamis-LeMonda, 1999), psychopathology, and functional impairment (Bayarri, Ezpeleta, & Granero, 2011).

Sense of responsibility, care, discipline, emotional and/or financial support, and affection are critical elements of parenting. However, there are cultural and generational differences among those who take care of children as well as differences in the ways individual parents or guardians relate to

their children. Often, especially in patriarchal cultures, the responsibility of the children's well-being falls on the mother or other female members (e.g., grandmother) of the mother's family (Camargo, 2009).

### **Gendered parenting and discipline**

Parenting and discipline influence children's behavior. Parents are strong transmitters of culture (Schönpflug, 2008). For example, the various tactics to make their children behave in a manner that meets their expectations is transmitted between generations. The variations in parenting are categorized under four types that combine parental responsiveness and the degree of parental demand: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and uninvolved (Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2013). Uninvolved parenting includes low levels of caring and warmth that may lead to low levels of supervision, increasing the chances of the child's engagement in risky behaviors, and consequently, increases the chances of unintentional injury (Keyes et al., 2014). Authoritative parenting includes disciplinary techniques as rewards and is correlated to children's feelings of being loved, accepted, and happy (Barton & Kirtley, 2011; Douglas, 2006; Driscoll, Russell, & Crockett, 2008; Morrel et al., 2003). This style of parenting has been found to prevent adolescent misbehavior (Ruiz-Hernandez, Moral-Zafra, Llor-Esteban, & Jimenez-Barbero, 2019) and callous, unemotional traits in adulthood (Parisette-Sparks & Bufferd, 2017; Schweizer, Olino, Dyson, Laptook, & Klein, 2018). Authoritarian parents are highly controlling and rely on corporal punishment. This type of parenting is linked to maladaptive behavior, the development of anxiety and depression in children (Asdigian & Straus, 1997; Calzada, Barajas-Gonzalez, Huang, & Brotman, 2017; Douglas & Straus, 2007; Rodriguez, 2003; Seeman et al., 1957), antisocial traits in adulthood (Gamez-Guadix, Straus, Carrobbles, Munoz-Rivas, & Almendros, 2010), bullying and aggression at school, and child-to-parent aggression (Calvete et al. 2014; Del Hoyo-Bilbao, Gamez-Guadix, & Calvete, 2018; Gomez-Ortiz, Romera, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2016). In addition, authoritarian maternal parenting is correlated to the mother's mental health (Besemer & Dennison, 2018; Giannotta & Rydell, 2017; Moilanen & Rambo-Hernandez, 2017; Schiff, Pat-Horenczyk, Ziv, & Brom, 2017) and their male partner's level of violent behavior toward them (Newland & Crnic, 2017; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017).

To advance this line of research, this paper uses a cross-cultural sample of Colombian and American freshman-level college students to examine the effects of the cultural transmission as it is illustrated by the correlation between child-to-mother violent or verbally abusive behavior, maternal parenting, and parental domestic violence. Child-to-mother violence, child's personality traits in adulthood, differences by nationality, and the gender of the child were also analyzed.

### **Child-to-Parent Violence (cpv)**

Child-to-parent violence has been identified in up to 22 % of single-parent homes (Armstrong, Cain, Wylie, Muftic, & Bouffard, 2018; Beckmann, Bergmann, Fischer, & Moble, 2017; Contreras, Bustos-Navarrete,

& Cano-Lozano, 2019), but it has been underreported and understudied (Simmons, McEwan, Purcell, & Ogloff, 2018; Williams, Tuffin, & Niland, 2017). The existent literature reports that CPV is correlated to domestic violence (Hong, Kral, & Espelage, 2012; Loinaz & De Sousa, 2020; Ulman & Straus, 2000) and is a gendered phenomenon regarding both offending behaviors and victimization. Parental physical aggression toward adolescents predicts adolescents' physical aggression toward their parents (Ibabe & Bentler, 2016; Lyons, Bell, Frechette, & Romano, 2015; Margolin & Baucom, 2014; Wang & Liu, 2013), but no differences by gender of the perpetrator were found when severe physical aggression was directed toward parents (Calvete et al., 2013).

However, both psychological and physical violence against the mother occurred more often than against the father. Additionally, adolescent girls psychologically and physically abuse their mothers more often than their male counterparts (Calvete et al., 2013; Calvete et al., 2014; Lyons et al., 2015), and mothers are more often victims of their children's aggression than fathers (Condry & Miles, 2014; Lyons et al., 2015; Stewart, Jackson, Wilkes, & Mannix, 2006). Not only gender but also race and ethnicity matter regarding aggression toward parents; Caucasian mothers experience more incidents of victimization than their Black and Latino counterparts (Lyons et al., 2015; Walsh & Krienert, 2007). Moreover, the type of violence toward one's parent, the gender of the perpetrator, and the gender of the victim are correlated (Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2013; Moulds, Day, Mildred, Miller, & Casey, 2016). Also, sociodemographic characteristics as single-parent, multigenerational household, family size, and family income may moderate the parent-child relationship since they are correlated to abusive behavior toward one's parents (Contreras & Cano, 2014). The severity of a child's maltreatment of their parents is correlated to restraining orders (Purcell, Mullen, & Mullen, 2014), juvenile domestic violence charges (Routt & Anderson, 2011; Snyder & McCurley, 2008), and family violence reports (Buzawa & Hotaling, 2006). Furthermore, child mistreatment could be explained by substance use and abuse (Calvete, Orue, & Gamez-Guadix, 2015).

### The current study

A vast body of empirical evidence has supported the reasoning provided by the learning and differential association theories, stating that an individual's behavior, including violent behavior, is learned (Bandura, 1978; O'Hara, Duschschere, Beck, & Lawrence, 2017; Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Sutherland, 1947); however, less evidence has been provided regarding the generational transmission of violence (Bourdieu, 1984; Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Hagan, 1989) and its contribution to a child's abusive behavior toward parents.

To fill that gap in the existent literature, the article has analyzed the potential patterns of the use of violence within the family and the effects of the exposure to violence during childhood as an explanation of the child's violence toward the mother within a cross-cultural sample of adult college freshman students (i.e., American and Colombian). The exploration focuses

on the respondents' memories of experiences that occurred around the age of 10 regarding maternal disciplinary practices, their mother's irritability and kindness, parental domestic violence, and the children's verbal abuse and physical violence toward their mother. At age 10, most children still engage in behaviors that justify parental disciplinary actions, and most individuals hold accurate memories from that stage of life (Straus & Fauchier, 2007). Patterns of abuse and violence within the family were hypothesized and a causal correlation between experiencing or witnessing violence during childhood and children's violent behavior toward their mother as well as their personality traits in adulthood. Differences in maternal disciplinary practices between Colombian and American mothers were also analyzed.

## Method

### Participants

The analyzed sample includes 469 freshman college students (182 Americans and 287 Colombians, 58 % women and 42 % men). Most of students (92 % Colombians and 50 % Americans, ages 18–24 years) at the age of 10 were living with their biological parents (94 % mother and 81 % father). The sample includes respondents who were single (75 % of Colombian and 40 % Americans), married or living together with their intimate partner (5 % Colombians and 20 % Americans), and had children (7 % Colombians and 36 % Americans). Educational attainment of the respondents' mother includes those who completed high school or less (56 % Colombians, 32 % Americans), attended some college or completed a 4-year college degree (27 % Colombians and 59 % Americans), and attended graduate school (17 % Colombians, 9 % Americans). Regarding race/ethnic identity, 25 % of American freshman students identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino.

### Study design

In 2011, researchers from a variety of fields, universities, and countries were authorized, through a consortium, to use the International Parenting Study (IPS) questionnaire (an extended version of the Dimensions of Discipline Inventory) to survey college students around the world (Morawska, Filus, Haslam, & Sanders, 2019). This effort facilitated the analysis of individuals' behavior toward their parents regardless of factors as economic development, culture, and religious or political beliefs. The sampling method was based on availability; freshman students who were attending either orientation or the first-day class session of fall 2011 were surveyed at six universities: five Colombian and one American. All but two were public universities, where the majority (86 %) of the respondents attended to. Classes or orientation sessions in which questionnaires were distributed were randomly selected in each participating university. All individuals' participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The analysis focuses on the respondents' memories regarding the use of violence in their childhood households when they were around 10 years old.



The questions inquired separately about the respondents' relationships with each parent. However, the focus of this study is the mother-child relationship, maternal parenting, and disciplinary practices and the children's abusive behavior toward their mother. The father's behavior is analyzed only in terms of his relationship with the respondent's mother. The respondents' personality traits as they are related to their childhood experiences are also analyzed.

### **Outcome measures**

Child-to-mother abuse may include verbal abuse and/or physical violence; both measures were analyzed.

#### **Child-to-mother verbal abuse**

This dimension measures a child's verbal abuse toward their mother at 10 years of age, as a) shouting at; b) insulting; or c) threatening the mother. The answers were codified into dichotomous (Y/N) categories.

#### **Child-to-mother physical violence**

This dimension measures a child's physical violence toward their mother at 10 years of age, whether they ever a) slapped or punched; b) hit; or c) kicked or bit their mother. The answers were codified into dichotomous (Y/N) categories.

### **Predictor measures**

All measures but the child's personality traits refer to the child's experience when they were 10 years old. In other words, these dimensions are measured based on the adults' memories of their childhood experiences.

#### **Corporal punishment**

This dimension measures the use of corporal punishment by the respondent's mother to discipline them at age 10, whether she ever used a) a shake or grab; b) a spank, slap, smack, or swat; or c) a paddle, hairbrush, belt, or another object. The responses were codified into dichotomous (Y/N) categories.

#### **Severe physical abuse**

This is a measurement of maternal severe physical abuse toward her child when they were 10 years old. Respondents were asked if their mother ever a) beat you up, that is, hit you over and over as hard as she could; b) hit you on some part of the body besides the bottom with something like a belt, hairbrush, stick, or some other hard object; or c) throw or knock you down. The answers were codified into dichotomous (Y/N) categories.

#### **Deprivation/Penalty**

This dimension measures the use of a combination of deprivation of privileges and/or the use of a penalty task assigned by the respondent's mother to make her child behave or comply with her expectations when her

child was 10 years old. Respondents were asked if their mother did any of the following: a) take away your allowance due to misbehavior; b) withhold your toys or other privileges due to misbehavior; c) give you extra chores as a consequence of misbehavior; or d) make you do something to make up for misbehaving. The responses were codified into dichotomous (Y/N) categories.

### **Psychological aggression**

This dimension measures a mother's psychological aggression toward her child when they misbehaved when they were 10 years old. The respondents were asked if their mother did any of the following: a) shout or yell at you; b) make you feel ashamed or guilty; c) hold back affection by acting cold or not giving hugs or kisses; d) call you lazy, sloppy, or thoughtless. The answers were codified into dichotomous (Y/N) categories.

### **Rewards**

This dimension measures a mother's attempt to change her children's behavior at 10 years by rewarding their good behavior. Respondents were asked if their mother did any of the following: a) praise you for behaving well; b) give you money to stop bad behavior; or c) check on you to be sure that you were doing a good job. The answers were codified into dichotomous (Y/N) categories.

### **Domestic violence (dv) against the father/mother's male partner**

This dimension measures the respondents' witnessing, at age 10, their mother's abuse of her male partner. The respondents were asked if their mother did any of the following to her male partner: a) insult, swear, shout, or yell; b) push, shove, or slap; c) punch, kick, or beat up. The answers were codified into dichotomous (Y/N) categories.

### **Domestic violence (dv) against the mother**

This dimension measures the respondents' witnessing, at age 10, the abuse of their mother by her husband or male partner. The respondents were asked if their father or stepfather did any of the following to their mother: a) insult, swear, shout, or yell; b) push, shove, or slap; c) punch, kick, or beat up. The answers were codified into dichotomous (Y/N) categories.

### **Mother's irritability**

This dimension measures the mother's negative responses to her child's misbehavior at age 10. Respondents were asked if their mother did any of the following when they misbehaved: a) get very angry; b) act on the spur of the moment; or c) seem to lose it. Three possible answers were codified: 1) never or almost never; 2) sometimes; 3) usually or always.

### **Mother's kindness**

This dimension measures the mother's positive reaction toward her child's misbehavior at age 10. Respondents were asked if, regardless of their mother's discipline, they still: a) felt like she loved you; and b) felt encouraged

and supported. They were also asked did she still c) check how your day went at school; or d) play and have fun with you. Three possible answers were codified: 1) never or almost never; 2) sometimes; 3) usually or always.

#### **Child's negative personality traits**

This dimension measures the respondent's adult negative personality traits as they are correlated to their mother's parenting. Respondents were asked if during the two previous weeks, they a) desired to beat, injure, or harm someone; b) felt easily annoyed or irritated; c) experienced spells of terror or panic; or d) had temper outbursts they could not control. This variable was codified using three categories: 1) no or very little; 2) moderately; and 3) quite a bit or extremely.

#### **Child's positive personality traits**

This dimension measures the respondent's adult positive personality traits as they are correlated to their mother's parenting. Respondents were asked if during the two previous weeks they a) felt calm and relaxed; and b) had been active and vigorous. This variable was codified using three categories: 1) no or very little; 2) moderately; and 3) quite a bit or extremely.

#### **Observed variables**

The respondents were asked about their experience at age 10 regarding fairness of maternal discipline, maternal responsibility and commitment, and the mother's reaction (irritability/kindness) to her children's misbehavior. The effects of the gender and nationality of the respondents also were analyzed.

#### **Statistical analyses**

Descriptive analyses were performed. Bivariate distributions were examined for outliers and deviations from normality. Since the analysis included uncommon skewed (Armstrong et al., 2018) behaviors, it was conducted using the Mplus estimator weighted least square mean and variance adjusted (Wlsmv) that does not assume normality (Muthen, 1983, 1984; Muthen & Muthen, 2009). The analysis included a total of 48 variables and was conducted using exploratory structural equation modeling (ESEM), which is a combination of exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). ESEM fits the data better and results in substantially fewer correlated factors than CFA (Mash et al., 2010; Asparouhow & Muthen, 2008). Three indicators were used to test the model for good fit to the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (Rmse; Arbuckle, 2006).

#### **Results**

##### **Descriptive Analysis**

First, for most respondents, their mother looked after them more often than their father did. Sixty-one percent of them said their mother was

more responsible for their discipline at age 10 than their father was, while 28 % said their parents shared responsibility equally. When asked about the effects of the use of physical violence to discipline them, 35 % said the effect of their mother’s discipline was positive or very positive, and 21 % said that the effect was negative or very negative. Twenty-seven percent said their mother’s discipline was hard or too harsh, 56 % said it was fair, and 17 % it was easy or too easy.

Second, the prevalence of abusive maternal disciplinary practices and differences by gender and nationality were calculated (see Table 1 for the prevalence of maternal abusive disciplinary practices and statistically significant differences by gender and nationality). Colombian mothers use corporal punishment to discipline their children more often than their American counterparts. More males suffered corporal punishment and severe child physical abuse than their female counterparts: Colombians: 24 % and 17 %, respectively; Americans: 7 % and 8 %. In addition, Colombian mothers psychologically abused their children more often than their Americans counterparts: 47 % of Colombian males and 37 % of Colombian females, compared to 23 % of American males and 31 % of American females. Colombian children verbally abused their mothers more often than their American counterparts: 32 % of Colombian males and 26 % of Colombian females, compared to 22 % of American males and 20 % of American females, but no differences were found regarding the perpetrator’s gender when physical aggression was directed toward parents (see table 1), which is consistent with previous studies (Calvete et al., 2013).

**Table 1.** Prevalence of Maternal Abusive Disciplinary Tactics by Gender of the Child

| Corporal punishment  | % Male              | % Female |
|--|---------------------|----------|
| Mother shook or grabbed you to get your attention                        |                     |          |
| American freshman students   | 14.90 %             | 12.80 %  |
| Colombian freshman students  | 37.00 %             | 26.60 %  |
| t-test (nationality)   | t=5.767,<br>p=0.000 |          |
| t-test (child’s gender)  | t=4.076,<br>p=0.000 |          |
| Mother spanked, slapped, smacked, or swatted you                         |                     |          |
| American freshman students   | 38.30 %             | 28.60 %  |
| Colombian freshman students  | 40.90 %             | 33.30 %  |
| t-test (child’s gender)  | t=2.712,<br>p=0.007 |          |
| Mother used a paddle, hairbrush, belt, or other object to discipline you |                     |          |
| American freshman students   | 29.80 %             | 18.90 %  |

| Corporal punishment  | % Male                | % Female |
|--|-----------------------|----------|
| Colombian freshman students  | 31.80 %               | 18.30 %  |
| t-test (child's gender)  | t=2.627,<br>p=0.009   |          |
| Severe physical abuse  |                       |          |
| Mother beat you up/hit you over and over as hard as she could  |                       |          |
| American freshman students   | 4.30 %                | 2.50 %   |
| Colombian freshman students  | 25.90 %               | 16.00 %  |
| t-test (nationality)   | t= -6.275,<br>p=0.000 |          |
| t-test (child's gender)  | t= 3.386,<br>p=0.001  |          |
| Mother hit you on some part of the body besides the bottom with something like a belt, hairbrush, stick, or some other hard object |                       |          |
| American freshman students   | 12.80 %               | 16.70 %  |
| Colombian freshman students  | 34.00 %               | 24.20 %  |
| t-test (nationality)   | t= -3.321,<br>p=0.001 |          |
| t-test (child's gender)  | t= 2.625,<br>p=0.009  |          |
| Mother threw or knocked you down   |                       |          |
| American freshman students   | 4.30%                 | 5.80%    |
| Colombian freshman students  | 12.80%                | 10.60%   |
| t-test (nationality)   | t= -2.062,<br>p=0.040 |          |
| Psychological aggression   |                       |          |
| Mother shouted or yelled at you  |                       |          |
| American freshman students   | 46.80%                | 57.50%   |
| Colombian freshman students  | 70.70%                | 56.20%   |
| Mother tried to make you feel ashamed or guilty  |                       |          |
| American freshman students   | 19.10%                | 24.40%   |
| Colombian freshman students  | 37.80%                | 27.50%   |
| t-test (nationality)   | t= -2.939,<br>p=0.003 |          |
| Mother held back affection by acting cold or not giving hugs or kisses   |                       |          |
| American freshman students   | 8.70%                 | 18.30%   |
| Colombian freshman students  | 30.80%                | 27.10%   |
| t-test (nationality)   | t= -3.767,<br>p=0.000 |          |

| Corporal punishment   | % Male             | % Female |
|---|--------------------|----------|
| When you behaved badly, your mother told you that you were lazy, sloppy, thoughtless, etc |                    |          |
| American freshman students  | 17.40%             | 25.00%   |
| Colombian freshman students   | 49.30%             | 38.90%   |
| t-test (nationality)  | t= -5.829, p=0.000 |          |

Note 1: t-test results shown only for statistically significant differences  
Note 2: country (1= United States; 2=Colombia); gender (1=male; 2=female)

Fuente: own elaboration.

**Hypothesized Theoretical Model and ESEM Analysis**

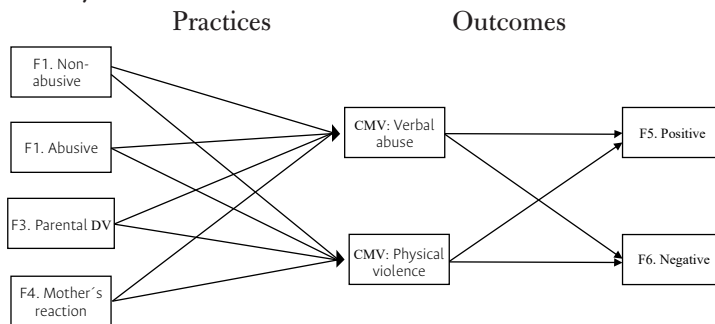
First, the hypothesized theoretical model follows the learning theory rationale (see figure 1); children’s behavior is learned from their parents (Bandura, 1978; O’Hara et al., 2017; Sutherland, 1947), and therefore, the correlation between maternal parenting and child-to-mother abuse is causal, as is the correlation between childhood experience and adulthood personality traits. Maternal child abuse and parental domestic violence are correlated and co-occurred as reported by the participants and is consistent with previous research (Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Moylan, 2008).

Second, the ESEM analysis resulted in 12 dimensions correlated to the two dimensions of child-to-mother abuse (child-to-mother verbal abuse and child-to-mother violence). Six aspects of family conflict were uncovered: a) non-abusive maternal disciplinary tactics—deprivation/penalty (3 items), rewards (4 items); b) abusive maternal disciplinary tactics—corporal punishment (3 items), psychological aggression (3 items), and severe physical child abuse (3 items); c) parental domestic violence—against the father (3 items) and against the mother (3 items); and d) mother’s reaction toward her child’s misbehavior—mother’s irritability (3 items) and kindness (4 items), as well as two dimensions of child’s personality traits—child’s negative traits (4 items) and child’s positive traits (2 items). A two-indicator factor is fine when the sample is greater than 100 (Kelloway, 2015).

The resulting model fit the data well, as is shown by the indicators of good fit—CFI=0.956, TLI=0.950, Rmse=0.028, CI (.025, 0.032), Chi-Square=1431.237 (df=1034, p=0.0000)—and the strength of the factor loadings (see table 2). There are also strong and statistically significant correlations between the factors (see table 3). On one hand, child-to-mother verbal abuse and physical violence are highly correlated (.80). Child-to-mother verbal abuse was predicted by corporal punishment (.30), penalty/deprivation (.26), psychological aggression (.50), domestic violence against the mother (.25), the mother’s irritability (.32), and child severe physical abuse (.31). It was also directly correlated to child’s negative traits (.27) and inversely correlated to child’s positive traits (-.28). On the other hand, child-to-mother

**Figure 1.** Hypothesized Theoretical Model

Dimensions: Maternal disciplinary Child-to-mother violence Child's personality traits in adulthood



Maternal disciplinary practices: F1. Non-abusive maternal disciplinary tactics deprivation/penalty (3 items), rewards (4 items).

F2. Abusive maternal disciplinary tactics corporal punishment (3 items), psychological aggression (3 items), and severe physical abuse (3 items).

F3. Parental domestic violence—against the father/mother's male partner (3 items) and against the mother (3 items).

F4. Mother's reaction toward her child's misbehavior—mother's irritability (3 items) and kindness (4 items).

F5. Child's personality traits—child's negative traits (4 items) and child's positive traits (2 items).

Outcomes: Child-to-mother verbal abuse, Child-to-mother physical violence

Fuente: own elaboration.

Physical violence was predicted by corporal punishment (.49), psychological aggression (.58), and child severe physical abuse (.53), and correlated to the mother's irritability (.41) and child's negative traits (.42). It was inversely correlated to the mother's kindness (−.38) and child's positive traits (−.35).

**Table 2.** Factor Loadings

| Factors/dimensions  | Factor |
|---|--------|
| <b>Corporal punishment</b>  |        |
| My mother shook or grabbed me to get my attention   | 0.876  |
| My mother spanked, slapped, smacked, or swatted me  | 0.852  |
| My mother used a paddle, hairbrush, belt, or other object to punish me  | 0.794  |
| <b>Severe physical abuse</b>  |        |
| My mother beat me up; hit me over and over as hard as she could   | 0.830  |
| My mother hit me on some part of the body besides the bottom with something like a belt, hairbrush, stick, or some other object | 0.860  |
| My mother threw or knocked me down  | 0.840  |

| Deprivation/Penalty  |       |
|--|-------|
| My mother took away my allowance because of my misbehavior                             | 0.731 |
| My mother withheld my toys or other privileges until I did what she wanted me to do    | 0.897 |
| My mother gave me extra chores as a consequence of my misbehavior                      | 0.676 |
| My mother made me do something to make up for my misbehavior                           | 0.586 |
| Psychological aggression   |       |
| My mother shouted or yelled at me  | 0.815 |
| My mother tried to make me feel ashamed or guilty                                      | 0.648 |
| My mother held back affection by acting cold or not giving me hugs or kisses           | 0.583 |
| When I behaved badly, my mother told me that I was lazy, sloppy, thoughtless, etc      | 0.743 |
| Rewards  |       |
| My mother praised me for avoiding bad behavior or for behaving well                    | 0.811 |
| My mother gave me money or other things for avoiding bad behavior or for behaving well | 0.596 |
| My mother checked on me so that she could tell me that I was doing a good job          | 0.896 |
| Mother's irritability  |       |
| My mother tended to act on the spur of the moment when I misbehaved                    | 0.678 |
| My mother got very angry when I misbehaved   | 0.756 |
| My mother seemed to "lose it" when I misbehaved  | 0.967 |
| Mother's kindness  |       |
| When my mother corrected misbehavior, I knew she still loved me                        | 0.750 |
| When my mother corrected misbehavior, I still felt encouraged and supported            | 0.816 |
| My mother asked me about my day in school  | 0.688 |
| My mother played games or did other fun things with me                                 | 0.749 |
| Domestic violence against the father/mother's male partner                             |       |
| My mother insulted, swore, shouted, or yelled at my father                             | 0.912 |
| My mother pushed, shoved, or slapped my father   | 0.960 |
| My mother punched, kicked, or beat up my father  | 0.938 |
| My mother destroyed something belonging to my father or threatened to hit him          | 0.889 |
| Domestic violence against the mother   |       |
| My father insulted, swore, shouted, or yelled at my mother                             | 0.990 |
| My father pushed, shoved, or slapped my mother   | 0.873 |
| My father punched, kicked, or beat up my mother  | 0.933 |
| My father destroyed something belonging to my mother or threatened to hit her          | 0.829 |
| Child's negative personality traits  |       |
| I have urges to beat, injure, or harm someone else                                     | 0.636 |
| I feel easily annoyed or irritated   | 0.772 |
| I have spells of terror or panic   | 0.741 |
| I have temper outbursts that I cannot control  | 0.899 |



| Child's positive personality traits |       |
|-------------------------------------|-------|
| I feel calm and relaxed             | 0.996 |
| I feel active and vigorous          | 0.528 |

Note: All factor loadings at  $p=0.000$   
 Chi-square=1431.237(df=1034);  $p=0.0000$   
 Rmse=0.028; CI (.025 and .032); CFI=0.956; TLI=0.950  
 Fuente: own elaboration.

Third, the analysis shows correlations between the dimensions of family conflict.

### Non-abusive maternal disciplinary practices

The use of deprivation of privileges or the imposition of penalty tasks to make children comply with the mother's expected behavior was highly correlated to rewards (.59). It was also correlated to abusive disciplinary practices, that is, corporal punishment (.48), severe child physical abuse (.37), and psychological aggression (.52).

### Abusive disciplinary tactics

Corporal punishment was correlated to the use of psychological aggression (.80) and severe physical child abuse (.88). It was also correlated to the mother's abusive behavior toward the father/male partner (.29) and the father's abusive behavior toward the mother (.30). The mother's psychological aggression toward her child was correlated to the mother's abusive behavior toward the father/male partner (.33) and the father's abusive behavior toward the mother (.39), as well as her severe physical abuse of her child (.85; see Table 3).

**Parental domestic violence.** Violence against the father and against the mother were highly correlated (.98). Both domestic violence against the father and against the mother were correlated to the mother's irritability due to her child's misbehavior (.27 and .30, respectively) and severe physical child abuse (.40 and .42, respectively), and inversely correlated to the mother's kindness (-.35 and -.33, respectively).

**Mother's reaction to her child's misbehavior.** Irritability was correlated to corporal punishment (.65), psychological aggression (.75), severe physical child abuse (.71), and deprivation of privileges or the imposition of penalty tasks (.38). It was inversely correlated to mother's kindness (-.58). **Mother's kindness** was correlated to rewards (.62) and the use of deprivation or imposition of penalty tasks (.59), and inversely correlated to corporal punishment (-.40), severe physical child abuse (-.51), and psychological aggression (-.55).

Fourth, exposure to violence in childhood was correlated to the child's personality traits in adulthood. A child's **positive personality** traits were inversely correlated to corporal punishment (-.35) and to a child's negative personality traits (-.61). A child's **negative personality traits** were correlated to the mother's psychological aggression toward her child (.44) and severe child physical abuse (.29), while inversely correlated to mother's kindness (-.31).

Table 3. Factor Correlations

|  | Outcomes |       |       | Predictors |       |       |       |       |       |      |       | Correlates |        |  |
|--|----------|-------|-------|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|------------|--------|--|
|  | F1       | F2    | F3    | F4         | F5    | F6    | F7    | F8    | F9    | F10  | F11   | F12        | F13    |  |
| Mother's and Child's Behavior                  |          |       |       |            |       |       |       |       |       |      |       |            |        |  |
| F1 Child-to-Mother Verbal Abuse                |          |       | 0.3   | 0.26       | 0.5   | 0.28* |       |       |       |      |       |            |        |  |
| F2 Child-to-Mother Physical Violence           | 0.8      |       | 0.49  | 0.58       |       |       |       |       |       |      |       |            |        |  |
| F3 Corporal punishment                         |          |       |       |            |       |       |       |       |       |      |       |            | -0.18* |  |
| F4 Sever physical abuse                        | 0.31     | 0.53  | 0.89  | 0.37       | 0.85  |       | 0.41  | 0.42  |       | 0.7  | -0.51 |            |        |  |
| F5 Deprivation/Penalty                         |          |       | 0.48  |            |       |       |       |       |       |      |       |            |        |  |
| F6 Psychological aggression                    |          |       | 0.80  | 0.52       |       |       |       |       |       |      |       |            |        |  |
| F7 Rewards                                     |          |       |       | 0.59       | .27*  |       |       |       |       |      |       |            |        |  |
| F8 DV against the father/mother's male partner |          |       | 0.29  |            | 0.33  |       |       |       |       |      |       |            |        |  |
| F9 DV against the mother                       | 0.25     |       | 0.30  |            | 0.39  |       |       | 0.98  |       |      |       |            |        |  |
| F10 Mother's irritability                      | 0.32     | 0.41  | 0.65  | 0.38       | 0.75  |       | 0.27  | 0.3   |       |      |       |            |        |  |
| F11 Mother's kindness                          |          | -0.38 | -0.40 |            | -0.55 | 0.62  | -0.35 | -0.33 | -0.58 |      |       |            |        |  |
| F12 Child's negative personality traits        | 0.27     | 0.42  |       | 0.29       | 0.44  |       | .18*  | .21*  | -0.31 |      |       |            |        |  |
| F13 Child's positive personality traits        | -0.28    | -0.35 |       | -.20*      | -0.35 | -0.26 | -0.3  |       |       | 0.23 | -0.61 |            |        |  |

Note 1. Statistically significant at p=0.000  
Note 2. Statistically significant at p\*=0.005  
Chi-square=1431.237; p=0.000  
Rmse=0.028; CI (.025 and .032); CFI=0.956; TLI=0.950  
Fuente: own elaboration.

## Discussion

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This study analyzes the relationship between the mothers and their children using a sample of American and Colombian freshman college students, and as hypothesized, it provides support to the cultural transmission, learning, differential association, and power-control theories: that is, information in the form of behaviors is passed from one generation to the next. Violent behavior is learned in the family, reinforced by attitudes favorable to that behavior, and transmitted from one generation to the next in the form of cultural capital (Bandura, 1978; Bordieu & Passeron, 1977; Hagan, 1989; Sutherland, 1947). With regard to the theoretical framework, children learn aggressive behavior as they learn any behaviors: from observation or imitation. The term “cultural” applies to a process of nongenetic transmission (Schönpflug, 2008). Children develop “different modeled patterns” and “can evolve new forms of aggression” (Bandura, 1978, p. 14). These patterns could harm the mother-child relationship since the pain caused by her behavior in the past may have lifelong effects on her child (Thiara & Humphreys, 2017, p. 138). The causal correlation between the mother’s abusive parenting, her reaction to her children’s misbehavior, and later, the child-to-mother abusive behavior illustrate those effects.

Moreover, Sutherland’s differential association theory agrees with Bandura, but goes further by suggesting that individuals’ violent behavior is learned through their interaction with other violent individuals, especially those within their primary group of socialization. Violent behavior, Sutherland states, is the result of an equation-type calculus that computes the number of attitudes favorable to criminal behavior versus those unfavorable to it. In other words, individuals learn violent behavior from others, but that learning process depends on the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of their relationship with those violent individuals. The mother-child relationship scores high in all of those characteristics: it is experienced on a daily basis, lasts for the child’s lifetime, is intense, and takes priority over other relationships with friends or other relatives. Therefore, the common use of violence by the mother (and her male partner), may become a “normal” pattern or way to interact with any or all family members.

Additionally, this study provides empirical evidence for Hagan’s power-control theory. Violence and gender inequality are learned within and perpetuated by the family. Often the mother, not the father, becomes responsible for the well-being of the children, regardless of cultural background or nationality. Consistent with previous studies, the present study shows that individuals’ behavior is affected by their childhood experiences. Specifically, this study shows that abusive maternal disciplinary practices (e.g., mother-to-child physical abuse and psychological aggression), the mother’s reaction toward her child’s misbehavior, and domestic violence against the mother by her male partner predict child-to-mother abusive behavior. However, the gender of the child was not statistically significant in the abuse toward the mother, suggesting that both males and females who experienced violence themselves and witnessed violence toward

their mother later used violence toward her. This study also demonstrates a differential childrearing treatment by the mother based on her child's gender: physical violence is used more often to discipline boys than girls, which may suggest an effort to reinforce traditional beliefs of strength and masculinity. The respondents' upbringing also predicted their personality traits in adulthood.

This process of learning by observation and imitation has been discussed by Bordieu and his colleagues. Culture, they argued, applies to traits that are acquired, especially within the family. Those traits are passed from one generation to the next in the form of cultural capital. And cultural capital impacts social structure and power relationships, and may become the basis of exclusion, inequality, male domination, and violence against women (Bourdieu, 1984; Bordieu & Passeron, 1977).

### Policy implications

This study provides empirical evidence of different forms of child abuse and violence against women, regardless of the country's level of development. It examines the child's abusive behavior toward the mother, which is a type of violence against women. It also identifies child psychological aggression as the stronger predictor of abuse against the mother. These findings show the need to create or strengthen programs to promote non-abusive disciplinary practices and to promote, protect, and defend a woman's right to live free of violence.

These programs also may be crucial to unveil the multiplicity of trauma inflicted on individuals during their childhood (Schiff et al., 2017) and may provide a better understanding of the complexity and prevalence of violence in the family and its transmission from one generation to the next. Any programs' design must include institutional readiness (Humphreys, Thiara, & Skamballis, 2011), and organizations and social workers (e.g., family counselors) must be trained to improve their understanding, ability, and willingness to offer a safe environment where changes in the mother-child relationship are seen as a logical step forward. Additionally, since these workers are part of our communities, they must be aware of their implicit bias based on cultural and religious beliefs, and how those biases, contrary to the science-based evidence, could become obstacles themselves to the implementation of the urgently needed changes or the speed with which they can be enacted.

Finally, future research on the transmission of violence must include cross-cultural, multi-country comparisons to better understand the role of culture on child-to-mother violence and its correlation to violence against women, gender inequality, and patriarchal beliefs.

### Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted in the context of three limitations. First, the data were based on information provided by adults using self-report measures. Second, the data rely on memories of those

adults from their childhood. Third, the results of this study apply to college students. Despite that this is a diverse sample, college students' characteristics may differ from those of the general population. Therefore, future studies must be conducted with samples from the general population.

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