

# The Role of Beliefs, Attitudes and Adverse Childhood Experiences in Predicting Men's Reactions Towards Their Spouses' Violence

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**Abstract** The purpose of the present article was to determine the ability of cognitive factors (beliefs and attitudes) and adverse childhood experiences to predict men's reactions towards their spouses' violence. To do so, 120 males who had referred to family court to seek divorce due to spouses' violence were randomly selected and an author's -made questionnaire containing 27 subscales was administered to them. Four of the 27 subscales comprised of 22 questions regarding "types of reactions towards spouses' violence", "attitudes towards spouse", and "experiencing family violence during childhood". Our results showed that witnessing violence during childhood could positively predict reactions such as "cessation of relationship" and "reprisal". Men's beliefs regarding "permission to use violence" could positively predict reaction such as "cessation of relationship". Furthermore, factors such as "Believing his wife is more knowledgeable" and "Wife's Physical Appearance" negatively predicted reactions such as "Cessation of relationship" and "Tolerance". Also "Man's perceived career success" positively predicted the reaction of "Attempts to Resume Relationship". These results are discussed in the context of the existing literature.

**Keywords** Beliefs · Attitudes · Reactions towards violence · Adverse childhood experiences

By definition, culture includes all values, attitudes, beliefs and patterns of behavior that a society holds and practices. Given that the family constitutes the smallest unit of a society and teaches children what to believe and how to

behave; therefore, such beliefs and attitudes can greatly impact the plight of a family. If these beliefs and attitudes endorse spousal maltreatment, then, they can contribute to the occurrence of aggressive and violent behaviors amongst family members. Bandura's (1979) social learning theory has been used to explain such link. Simply put, according to this theory, human's behaviors are learned through observation and imitation. Therefore, children can and, in fact, do learn by watching their parents behaving in aggressive manners early in life and, subsequently, try to imitate them later on in life. So, if the culture in which the individual is raised is one in which intimate partner violence is an accepted form of spousal treatment, then, he/she would develop a gender-based attitude towards his/her spouse. For example, in patriarchal societies, traditional gender role attitudes is directly associated with high levels of wife abuse (Finn 1986; Murnen et al. 2002). Also, Kaufman Kantor et al. (1994) have reported that in most general populations there is a positive association between wife abuse and men's approval of spousal violence. As such, individuals being raised in such families (cultures), by virtue of witnessing (observing) and being exposed to such practices, develop the belief that perpetrating violence towards the wife is the "normal" way (and in fact the only way) of dealing with her and, in effect, "internalize" such belief and attitude. Thus, exposure to violence early in life shapes the attitudes and beliefs of individuals which, in turn, affect their behaviors toward their spouse later on in life.

A large body of evidence suggests that early exposure to violence is directly related to spousal violence. For example, Jin et al. (2007), in a study of Chinese male immigrants, have shown that positive attitudes towards marital violence was strongly associated to early exposure to violence in family of origin amongst the batterers. In

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fact, they showed that the combination of the two risk factors, early exposure and positive attitudes towards spousal violence, was mostly responsible for the occurrence of partner violence. (see also Dutton and Hart 1992; Schafer et al. 2004; Whit and Widom 2003). Furthermore, inability to abandon the beliefs and attitudes developed during childhood regarding spousal abuse in more traditional societies is strongly related to spouse abuse. There are some reports indicating that within immigrant communities in North America where immigrants were less able to assimilate themselves to the Western culture, there was high levels of violence against women (Ganguly 1998). For example, Bhanot and Sen (2007), in a study on men and women of South Asian ancestry, have shown that there was a strong relationship between lower levels of assimilation with higher levels of wife abuse since lower levels of assimilation were related to more traditional beliefs on the roles of men and women. Additionally, Jasinski (1998) reported that Hispanic–American women experienced high levels of domestic violence because of lower levels of acculturation of their husbands ( see also, Ginorio et al. 1995).

Early exposure to domestic violence can take two forms: witnessing and being the victim of violence. The link between early exposure to domestic violence and perpetrating violence towards the spouse later on in life is well established. For example, Jin et al. (2007) have indicated that being exposed to violence is significantly related to marital violence (see also Rosenbaum and O’Leary 1981; Dutton and Hart; 1992; Strauss et al. 1990). Furthermore, the results of many studies have shown that witnessing abuse during childhood can have negative impact children’s emotional and social functioning; namely, lack of emotional support and affection and poor parental supervision, both of which are closely associated with subsequent violent behaviors and aggression (Diamond and Muller 2004; Hindin and Gultiano 2006; Abrahams and Jeweks 2005; Lorber and O’Leary 2004; Capaldi et al. 2003; Stiles 2002;). In addition to witnessing domestic violence, being the victim of domestic violence can precipitate intimate partner violence later on in life. For example, Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (1995) have reported that an individual’s level of victimization during childhood in his/her family of origin is significantly correlated with his/her level of perpetrating violent behaviors later on as an adult in intimate partner relationship. Furthermore, Hughes and Vargo (1989) have reported that those children who were the victim of violence, committed intimate partner violence more frequently, compared to those children who were not (see also, McCloskey et al. 1995). Therefore, the aforementioned studies clearly show that early childhood experiences of domestic violence can be a strong precipitator of domestic violence and resorting to violent behaviors towards the spouse later on in life.

In terms of the reactions that men and women exhibit towards their partner’s initiated violence, Hamberger and Guse (2005), in a study investigating behavioral and emotional reactions of men and women towards intimate partner’s violence, have reported that despite the fact that there is no single and specific way of reacting (emotionally and behaviorally, towards the spouses’ violence, men were more likely to laugh and becoming amused in response to their partner’s violence whereas women felt angry, insulted and afraid. Along the same line of research Barnett et al. (1997) reported that, unlike women, men are less cognizant of the reasons of their use of violence towards their spouses and are unaware of their affective states when resorting to violent behaviors in times of troubles. Furthermore, Pournaghash-Tehrani (2007), in a study conducted among couples in Tehran assessing their types of reactions towards their spouse’s violence, showed that women mostly resorted to psychological reactions; namely “tolerating” their spouse’s initiated violence whereas men did not exhibit any particularly significant type of reaction. (see also, Phelan et al. 2005; Johnson and Ferraro 2000; Jacobson et al. 1994; Saunders 1986).

In light of the aforementioned discussion, the present study embarked on investigating the effects of attitudes, beliefs and early childhood experiences (witnessing and being the victim of domestic violence) on the types of behavioral reactions exhibited by men towards their spouses’ initiated violence.

## Materials and methods

*Participants* One hundred twenty men, seeking divorce due to wife abuse, were randomly drawn from those referred to family courts in Tehran by marriage councilors. The range of the men’s age was between 25 to 52 years old, with an average of 35.8 years. Twenty five percent of the men had less than a high school diploma, fifteen percent had a high school diploma, forty percent had education above a high school diploma, and twenty percent had above Bachelor’s degree. All men were informed of the purpose of the study and were told that they were free to discontinue their participation at any time during the study, should they decide to do so. Also, they were told that their information would be kept confidential.

## Procedure

### *Material*

The author-made questionnaire used in this study was constructed based on a comprehensive literature review which consisted of 27 scales which, in addition to

demographic information, included assessment of factors causing disagreements between couples, physical and psychological violence, reactions exhibited towards violence, men’s beliefs regarding violence towards their spouses, history of abuse by their parents during their childhood, types of violence perpetrated by their parents in times of troubles, individuals’ social, educational and familial adaptability, and their religious devotion. All participants answered these questions in strict confidentiality and away from his respective spouse. The validity of the entire questionnaire was assessed by co-administering it with the Conflict Tactic Scale (Strauss 1979) in a group of 50 couples and the obtained correlation between the two tests was +0.87, which is an indicative of high validity of the self-constructed questionnaire. Consistency of the self-constructed questionnaire measured by Cronbach’s Alpha was +0.81. (Pournaghash-Tehrani 2007). In order to maintain the reliability of the scale, the entire scale was administered to participants; however, the study focused on three specific subscales; beliefs, attitudes and history of abuse by parents. These three subscales were used because they address specifically individual’s beliefs about violence towards spouse, their perceived impression of their wives and their experiences during childhood in their family. The belief subscale contained six statements ( $\alpha=0.65$ ), the attitude subscale contained nine statements ( $\alpha=0.75$ ) and history of abuse by parents contained three statements ( $\alpha=0.67$ ). Participants’ responses were assessed based on a 4-item Likert-type scale with anchors of 4 = “Much” and 1 = “Not at all”. Examples of items from the belief subscale include “Men are permitted to use physical punishment against their wives” and “Men are permitted to curse at their wives”. Examples of items from the attitudes subscale include “I consider myself successful in my career”, “I think my wife and I are similar in terms of social class” and “I consider myself a devoted religious person”. Examples of items from the history of

abuse by parents’ subscale include “I witnessed my parents hitting one another during my childhood” and “My parents used to hit me when I was a child”.

**Results**

To test the hypotheses in the present study, in order to determine the relationship between variables and the ability of different variables to predict Men’s reactions towards their spouses’ violence, correlation and stepwise regression analyses were used, respectively.

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between beliefs and childhood experiences with Men’s reactions towards spouse’s violence. As illustrated, except for the variables “Believe in Repugnancy of “Hitting” and “Cursing”, there is a positive correlation between beliefs and childhood experiences with Men’s reaction of the type of reprisal. As for the variable, Cessation of Relationship, it was found that it was positively correlated with Believe in Men’s Permission to use Physical Punishment, Believe in Men’s Permission to Curse, Believe in Men’s Permission to Cease Relationship, Witnessing Parental violence during Childhood, Being Victimized to Parental Violence during Childhood and Being Verbally abused by parents; while having negative correlation with Believe in Repugnancy of “Hitting”, believe in Repugnancy of “Cursing” and Believe in Repugnancy of “Cutting off Verbal Relationship”. Similarly, the reaction “tolerance” had significant and positive correlation with “Believe in Repugnancy of “Cutting off Verbal Relationship”, while having significant negative correlation with “Believe in Men’s Permission to use Physical Punishment”, “Believe in Men’s Permission to Curse”, “Believe in Men’s Permission to Cease Relationship”, “Witnessing Parental Arguments during Childhood”, “Being Victimized to Parental Violence during Childhood” and

**Table 1** Correlation between men’s reactions to their wives’ violence with different variables

Variables	Reprisal	Cessation of relationship	Tolerance	Attempts to resume relationship
Believe in men’s permission to use physical punishment	0.69**	0.68**	-0.39*	-0.05
Believe in men’s permission to curse	0.51**	0.49**	-0.40*	-0.25
Believe in men’s permission to cease relationship	0.65**	0.67**	-0.54**	-0.07
Believe in repugnancy of “hitting”	-0.39**	-0.33**	0.26	0.01
Believe in repugnancy of “cursing”	-0.39*	-0.41*	0.31	0.24
Believe in repugnancy of “cutting off verbal relationship”	0.49**	-0.27*	0.36*	0.07
Witnessing parental violence during childhood	0.50**	0.67**	-0.34*	-0.08
Being victimized to parental violence during childhood	0.43*	0.63**	-0.32*	0.03
Being verbally abused by parents	0.58**	0.73**	-0.33*	0.05
Considering himself a successful parent	0.09	0.21	0.03	0.19
Considering himself a successful career-oriented parent	0.02	0.15	-0.14	0.21

\*\* $P<0.01$ , \* $P<0.05$

**Table 2** Stepwise regression for predicting “cessation of relationship” reaction

Steps	Predictors	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj.R <sup>2</sup>	R2 change	F	B	SE	Beta	t
1	Witnessing parental violence during childhood	0.18	0.17	0.18	18.30**	0.42	0.09	0.42	4.27**
2	Witnessing parental violence during childhood	0.27	0.25	0.09	14.87**	0.38	0.09	0.39	4.09**
	Believing his wife is more knowledgeable					-0.18	0.06	-0.29	-3.08**
3	Witnessing parental violence during childhood	0.30	0.28	0.03	11.67**	0.28	0.10	0.28	2.66**
	Believing his wife is more knowledgeable					-0.17	0.05	-0.28	-3.00**
	Believe in men’s permission to use physical punishment					0.23	0.11	0.21	2.03**
4	Witnessing parental violence during childhood	0.34	0.31	0.04	10.46**	0.27	0.10	0.28	2.69**
	Believing his wife is more knowledgeable					-0.12	0.06	-0.19	-1.99*
	Believe in men’s permission to use physical punishment					0.26	0.11	0.25	2.36*
	Belonging to the same social class					-0.14	0.06	0.22	-2.24*

\*\* $P < 0.01$ , \* $P < 0.05$

“Being Verbally abused by parents”. The reaction “Attempts to Resume Relationship” did not have any significant relationship with any of the variables.

As illustrated in Table 2, “Witnessing Parental violence during Childhood”, alone, accounted for 18% of variance in explaining Men’s reaction of “Cessation of Relationship” towards spousal abuse. In the next step, by entering the variable “Believing his wife is more knowledgeable”, the variance for explaining Men’s reaction “Cessation of Relationship” was increased to 27%. In total, 34% of the variance accounted for explaining Men’s reaction, “Cessation of Relationship”, following the entry of the variables, “Believe in Men’s Permission to use Physical Punishment” and “Belonging to the same social class”.

The variable, “Believing his wife is more knowledgeable” was negatively correlated with the reaction, “Cessation of relationship”, meaning that the more knowledgeable the wife is, the less the reaction “Cessation of relationship” is exhibited; and the vice versa. Also, the variable “Belonging to the same Social Class” had negative correlation with the reaction, “Cessation of relationship”, meaning that the higher Spouses’ social class is perceived, the less the reaction “cessation of relationship” is exhibited.

As illustrated in Table 3, the predicting variable such as “Witnessing Parental violence during Childhood” accounted for 21% of variance in explaining Men’s reaction of “Reprisal” towards spousal abuse. Upon entering the next predicting variable “Believe in Repugnancy of

“Cutting off Verbal Relationship” into the regression model, the percentage of variance for explaining Men’s reaction of “Reprisal” was increased to 27%. The predicting variable, “Believe in Repugnancy of “Cutting off Verbal Relationship”, was negatively correlated with the reaction of “Reprisal” towards spousal violence implicating that if men consider cutting off verbal relations as a repugnant act, they resort less to exhibiting the reaction of “Reprisal”.

As illustrated in Table 4, the variable “Believe in Repugnancy of “Cursing” accounts for 18% of variance in explaining Men’s reaction of “Tolerance”. Upon entering the next predicting variable “Wife’s Physical Appearance” into the regression model, the percentage of variance for explaining Men’s reaction of “Tolerance” was increased to 21%. The predicting variable such as “Wife’s Physical Appearance” had negative relationship with the Reaction “Tolerance” meaning that the more men consider their wives “better looking”, the less they tolerate their violence.

As illustrated in Table 5, the variable “Man’s perceived career success” accounted for 7% of the variance for explaining Men’s reaction “Attempt to resume Relationship”. Upon entering the variables “Believe in Men’s Permission to Curse at wife”, “Wife’s perceived Social Class”, “Considering himself a devout Religious person” and “Perceived wife’s Similar Appearance”, into the regression model, the percentage of variance for explaining the reaction, “Attempt to resume Relationship”, was increased to 12%, 18%, 22% and 26%, respectively; i.e., the afore-

**Table 3** Stepwise regression for predicting “Reprisal” reaction

Steps	Predictors	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj.R <sup>2</sup>	R2 Change	F	B	SE	Beta	t
1	Witnessing parental violence during childhood	0.21	0.19	0.21	21.09**	0.48	0.10	0.45	4.59**
2	Witnessing parental violence during childhood	0.27	0.25	0.06	15.05**	0.47	0.10	0.44	4.60**
	Believe in repugnancy of “cutting off verbal relationship”					-0.23	0.08	-0.25	-2.70**

\*\* $P < 0.01$ , \* $P < 0.05$

**Table 4** Stepwise regression for predicting “Tolerance” reaction

Steps	Predictors	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj.R <sup>2</sup>	R2 change	F	B	SE	Beta	t
1	Believe in repugnancy of “cursing”	0.18	0.15	0.18	16.56**	0.55	0.13	0.41	4.07**
2	Believe in repugnancy of “cursing”	0.21	0.19	0.03	10.71**	0.57	0.13	0.42	4.29**
	Wife’s physical appearance					-0.17	0.08	-0.20	-2.05*

\*\*P<0.01, \*P<0.05

mentioned variables, collectively, account for 26% of the variance for explaining the reaction, “Attempt to resume Relationship” exhibited by men.

The predicting variables such as ‘Believe in Men’s Permission to Curse at wife’, “Considering himself a devout Religious person” and “Equal Similarity in Appearance” were negatively correlated with the reaction of “Attempt to resume Relationship”, meaning that the more men believe in their permission to curse, the more devotion to practicing religious duties and the more they perceive themselves better than their spouse, the less likely they would exhibit the reaction of “Attempt to resume relationship.”

**Discussion**

Recent research has categorized different types of reactions to domestic violence into physical, behavioral and emotional (Hamberger and Guse 2005). This study has embarked upon examining the prediction of four types of reactions towards violence that fall into the category of behavioral-emotional by cognitive variables including beliefs, attitudes and childhood experiences. The results of

this study showed that each one of the cognitive factors such as beliefs, attitudes and childhood experiences contribute to the prediction of the four behavioral-emotional reactions such as cutting of relations, reprisal, tolerance and attempts to resume relation. Similar research has been conducted in the past to determine the impact of each of the aforementioned variables, alone, on domestic violence (Bhanot and Sen 2007; Jin et al. 2007). However, no study has ever determined the effects of these variables in combination.

The results of the present study showed that men’s beliefs constitute a significant part of the variance for all four behavioral-emotional (cutting of relations, reprisal, and tolerance and attempts to resume relation). The new finding in the present study was that men’s reactions, depending on the type of belief, can vary; i.e., men’s belief in “permission to use violence” could not only predict but was significantly and positively related to cutting off relations and reprisal while being significantly and negatively related to tolerance. One way to explain these findings is that perhaps by cutting off relationship and reprisal men intended to express their emotions in an instrumental way, a term characterized by Campbell and Muncer (1987) which connotes teaching the

**Table 5** Stepwise regression for predicting “attempts to resume relationship” reaction

Steps	Predictors	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj.R <sup>2</sup>	R2 change	F	B	SE	Beta	t
1	Man’s perceived career success	0.07	0.06	0.07	6.69*	0.18	0.07	0.27	2.58*
2	Man’s perceived career success	0.12	0.09	0.05	5.47**	0.21	0.07	0.31	2.98**
	Believe in men’s permission to curse at wife					-0.23	0.11	-0.21	-2.00*
3	Man’s perceived career success	0.18	0.15	0.06	5.93**	0.20	0.06	0.30	2.09**
	Believe in men’s permission to curse at wife					-0.28	0.11	-0.26	-2.48*
	Wife’s perceived social class					0.16	0.06	0.25	2.48*
4	Man’s perceived career success	0.22	0.18	0.04	5.67**	0.17	0.06	0.26	2.56*
	Believe in men’s permission to curse at wife					-0.27	0.11	-0.25	-2.41*
	Wife’s perceived social class					0.17	0.06	0.27	2.67**
	Considering himself a devout religious person					-0.28	0.13	0.20	-2.04*
5	Man’s perceived career success	0.26	0.21	0.04	5.61**	0.16	0.06	0.25	2.48*
	Believe in men’s permission to curse at wife					-0.32	0.11	-0.29	-2.86**
	Men’s perceived social class					0.28	0.08	0.43	3.44**
	Considering himself a devout religious person					-0.28	0.13	-0.20	-2.10*
	Perceived wife’s similar appearance					-0.17	0.08	-0.26	-2.09*

\*\*P<0.01, \*P<0.05

spouse a lesson. Also, beliefs such as “belief in the repugnancy of violence (psychological and physical)” were related to increasing tolerance and decreasing reprisal and cutting off relations, respectively. These results are consistent with the findings of other studies (Bhanot and Sen 2007) and reflect the impact of beliefs on the occurrence of violence among couples. To this extent, Bhanot and Sen (2007) in a study performed on men of South Asian ancestry to determine the role of beliefs towards violence against wives showed that those men who abandon their cultural and traditional beliefs endorsing abusive treatment of wives are more likely to develop beliefs supporting a non-abusive treatment of their spouses. As such, in case of our results, it can be stated that men’s belief that “perpetration of violence against spouse is a hideous act” can ultimately result in increased tolerance of their spouses’ violence which, in turn, can bring about less acts of reprisals and cessation of relationship. Another reason for men’s tolerance of their spouses’ violence could lie in men’s lack of recognition of their spouses’ violence as threatening. Interestingly, these results did not support the findings of a study by Hamberger and Guse (2005) in which they reported men have a tendency to use force in response to their spouse-initiated violence. However, in terms of the emotional responses, our findings were similar to those of Hamberger and Guse’s (2005) who reported emotional responses by men towards spouses’-initiated violence namely anger and insult.

In terms of attitudes towards the “self” or the wife in predicting behavioral–emotional reactions, our results revealed that attitudes can predict reactions such as cutting of relations, reprisal and attempts to resume relation. One of the interesting findings in this study was that, in men, increasing positive attitudes towards social status and success in career was related to attempts to resume relations and its prediction. Previous studies had also shown that deficiency in some aspects of personality such as that of in self-esteem can potentially lead to an increase in violent behaviors towards the spouse (Pournaghash-Tehrani 2007) while having a healthy self-esteem can increase the probability of the individual to seek and initiate the attempt to resume relation.

With regard to adverse childhood experiences; specifically, experiencing intraparental violence and having been its victim, our results showed that such experiences were important in terms of predicting reactions including cessation of relations and reprisal. This shows that such reactions could have largely being acquired during parental arguments, a finding consistent with previous research underscoring the importance of experiencing violence in the family of origin and its facilitating impact on the occurrence of violence on the victims own life later on (Jin et al. 2007). Although the relationship between early exposure to domestic violence and perpetrating violence towards the spouse later on in life is well established, the findings of the present study are the first to delineate the specific types of

reactions exhibited by men towards their spouses’ initiated violence which can contribute to the literature on the typology of reactions to intimate partner violence.

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