Influence of Family Environment on Self-Esteem and Hostility

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Influence of Family Environment on Self-Esteem and Hostility

Angie D. Weber

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of abusive/nonsupportive and loving/supportive parental behaviors on college students’ self-esteem, hostility, and personality traits. Concerns of psychological maltreatment arise because it can restrict children in achieving their full potential as they approach adulthood (Garrison, 1987). It was hypothesized that those who report more emotional abuse would also exhibit lower self esteem, lower agreeableness, (i.e. greater hostility and interpersonal distrust) and greater neuroticism than their more fortunate peers. The participants involved in this study were 63 undergraduate psychology students attending Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. They volunteered for extra credit in an introductory psychology course or an upper level psychology course. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSE) was used to measure the subjects’ self-esteem. The Big Five Inventory (BFI) was used to assess the participants’ personality traits. The Exposure to Abusive and Supportive Environments Parenting Inventory (EASE-PI) was used to measure the level of psychological abuse participants were exposed to as children and as young adults. Hypotheses were generally supported for male participants only.
Influence of Family Environment on Self-Esteem and Hostility

Introduction

Parental behavior/style has an enormous impact on the outcome of children's lives. It affects their psychological well-being and their personality during childhood and adulthood (Gross & Keller, 1992; Garrison, 1987). Parental abusive/nonsupportive behavior and loving/supportive behavior and their effects will be examined in the present study. The latest focus in the child abuse area is psychological maltreatment/emotional abuse (Garrison, 1987). This form of abuse has received little attention from the public, psychologists, and researchers in the past (Hart & Brassard, 1987; Gross & Keller, 1992; Nicholas & Bieber, 1997). Society has recently become aware of and concerned about the destruction psychological maltreatment has on individuals (Hart & Brassard, 1987; Garrison, 1987).

Psychological maltreatment can restrict children in achieving their full potential as they approach adulthood (Garrison, 1987). Children cannot achieve their full potential if they are affected by emotional or mental disturbances that hinder their success. Children experiencing emotional abuse experience difficulties in adult adjustment. For example, these difficulties may consist of experiencing depression and having low self-esteem (Buri, Kirchner, & Walsh, 1987; Nicholas & Bieber, 1996; Hoglund & Nicholas, 1995; Hart et. al, 1987; Briere & Runtz, 1987; Gross and Keller, 1992; Rohner & Rohner, 1980). They
may have problems growing into a well developed, stable, and mature adult. Emotional abuse is “a major threat to children’s mental health” (Hart & Brassard, 1987). Psychological maltreatment is associated with many severe forms of behavior disorders and problems with psychological development in children (Hart & Brassard, 1987). By investigating abusive and supportive parental behaviors, we may begin to understand how childhood experiences relate to adult functioning (Nicholas & Bieber, 1997). Most important of all, research studying the effects of psychological maltreatment may provide psychologists with effective ways to intervene with psychologically maltreating families and ways to prevent it from occurring in the future.

Compared to physical abuse and sexual abuse, there has been only a small amount of research addressing psychological abuse (Nicholas & Bieber, 1997; Nicholas & Bieber, 1996). Little empirical research has been performed in the area of psychological maltreatment (Gross & Keller, 1992). The main limitation on the advancement of this research has been the absence of appropriate operational definitions of psychological maltreatment (Nicholas & Bieber; 1997). Psychological maltreatment is more difficult to define and to measure than physical and sexual abuse (Hart & Brassard, 1987; Garrison, 1987). Researchers are aware of the seriousness of psychological maltreatment, in that it is more predominant then any other form of maltreatment. It is often more destructive on the lives of young people especially when accompanied by another form of abuse (Hart & Brassard, 1987; Moeller, Bachmann, & Moeller; 1993). Many children who have experienced one form of abuse have also experienced another form of abuse (Briere & Runtz, 1990).

A distinction between psychological abuse and emotional abuse has recently been made by O’Hagan (1995): emotional abuse is a “sustained
repetitive, inappropriate, emotional response to the child's experience of emotion and its accompanying expressive behavior” which “inflicts emotional pain upon the child (e.g. fear, humiliation, distress), inhibits the child from spontaneous, appropriate, positive, emotional feeling and emotional expression, and impairs emotional development” (Nicholas & Bieber, 1997). This definition is closely related to Garbarino and Vondra’s (1987) concept of psychological abuse consisting of “mental cruelty” with categories of rejecting, isolating, degrading, terrorizing, neglecting, ignoring, and corrupting children. No description or definition of psychological maltreatment has received total support by professionals in this area of study (Hart & Brassard, 1987). Psychological maltreatment has been discussed under many labels: emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and mental cruelty. The term “psychological maltreatment” is preferred because it considers all aspects, including cognitive, of mistreatment (Brassard, Germain, & Hart, 1987). Parental loving/supportive behavior consists of acceptance, support, promotion of independence, worth, and nurturance. The two parental behaviors discussed have different effects on the well-being of children. Self-esteem is one of the characteristics they influence.

Emotional Abuse Versus Loving/Supportive Behavior and Self Esteem

Rosenburg (1965) states that high self esteem consists of an individual respecting himself and considering himself worthy. Low self esteem consists of self-dissatisfaction, self-rejection, and self-contempt in an individual (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986). Parental behavior has been reported to relate to a child’s self esteem and is known to be as one of the reactions or consequences of psychological maltreatment (Gross & Keller, 1992). Hart and Brassard (1987)
suggest that psychological maltreatment is associated with many other consequences such as emotional maladjustment, dependency, depression, suicide, aggression, and conduct disorders. A discussion on several of these consequences will be discussed in a later section. Rohner and Rohner (1980) also agree that emotionally abusive behaviors will lower a child’s self esteem, self-adequacy, and sense of self-worth (Nicholas & Bieber, 1996). According to Gross and Keller (1992), children considered to be psychologically abused showed signs of depression and low esteem. The results of their study also indicated that children exposed to psychological abuse experience depression and lower self esteem in adulthood.

Evidence suggests that parental loving behaviors such as support, acceptance, and nurturance build a child’s self esteem and sense of competence (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Buri, Kirchner, & Walsh, 1987). Parental acceptance, approval, and support are significantly important in the development of American children’s self esteem. (Buri et al., 1987). Gender differences associated with these issues have been found. When a child is being abused either by a mother or father, the child will view the mother as being a failure in providing protection and nurturance. They will not view the father this way even if he is the perpetrator (Nicholas & Bieber, 1996). Boys’ self esteem has been found to mainly be affected by parental support, especially of the father. Girls’ self esteem seems to be most strongly affected by parental support, that of both the mother and the father (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986). It is surprising that self esteem of adolescent boys is more affected than girls by parental behaviors. Also the finding that fathers have a greater influence than mothers on adolescent self esteem is interesting (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986). Loving and emotionally abusive parental behaviors have also been found to influence the amount of hostility,
anger, shame, and aggression a child possesses (Hoglund & Nicholas, 1995; Rohner & Rohner, 1980).

**Emotional Abuse and Shame, Guilt, Anger, and Hostility**

Individuals who report high levels of emotional abuse, report higher levels of shame (Hoglund & Nicholas, 1995). Feelings of shame may consist of viewing the self as inferior or helpless. In their study, Hoglund and Nicholas (1995) found that even individuals experiencing low levels of emotional abuse experienced significant levels of shame. No significant relationship was found between guilt and emotional abuse. Emotional abuse was also found to be related to hostility, anger, and aggression. Individuals exposed to high emotional abuse scored higher on hostility and expressed their anger covertly: either physically or verbally (Hoglund & Nicholas, 1995). In contrast, Briere and Runtz (1990) did not find evidence that emotional abuse was related to aggression and anger. Even low levels of emotional abuse result in hostility (Nicholas & Bieber, 1995). A rejected or emotionally abused child tends to be more hostile and aggressive than an accepted child (Rohner & Rohner, 1980).

**Hypotheses and Analyses**

College students who report emotional abuse are expected to have a lower self-esteem than those who do not report emotional abuse. It is also expected that emotional abuse will be related to higher levels of hostility. Low self-esteem is
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associated with high neuroticism and high levels of hostility are associated with low agreeableness. Neuroticism and agreeableness are two of the big five factors of personality that will be measured in this study. Emotional abuse is expected to relate to higher neuroticism and lower agreeableness. Neuroticism and agreeableness have not directly been measured in association to emotional abuse in past research. A presentation of descriptive statistics will be given to show if my sample compares to related studies (See Table 1). A correlational analysis will be done to test my hypotheses by correlating the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSE) and the Big Five Inventory (BFI) with the Exposure to Abusive and Supportive Environments Parenting Inventory (EASE-PI).

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 63 undergraduate psychology students (34 men and 29 women) attending Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. They were students from an introductory psychology course who were given course credit for participating and a Psychology 323 course in which the students received extra credit for participating. The ages of the participants ranged from 18-45. Seventy-five percent of them were Caucasian/white, ten percent were African American/black, ten percent were Asian, and five percent reported other. The majority of the participants were juniors and seniors (38% juniors and 35% seniors).
Procedure and Instruments

The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the experiment at any time. Testing involving Psychology 102 students was given in group sessions of approximately six individuals per group. Questionnaire packets were distributed to Psychology 323 students by their professor who requested that they complete the forms during their own time and return them by the stated deadline. The total procedure took approximately thirty minutes. Participants were first asked to complete a questionnaire packet in which their identity and answers would be anonymous. The first questionnaire asked for demographic information including gender, age, race, current grade point average, educational level, major, current living situation (living with parents, with roommate(s), with relatives, alone, etc.), number of siblings, parents' occupation, and parents' education level.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) was used to measure the respondents' self-esteem. Rosenberg (1965) developed the 10 statement scale in which the participant indicated if he/she "strongly disagrees (1), disagrees (2), agrees (3), or strongly agrees (4) with each statement. A sample item is "On a whole, I am satisfied with myself." The RSE shows a test-retest reliability score of .85. Validity scores of the RSE have ranged from .56 to .67 when the results have been correlated with other tests and interviewers' ratings of self-esteem (Wylie, 1974; Gross & Keller, 1992).

Big Five Inventory (BFI). The Big Five Inventory (BFI) was used to measure the respondents' current personality traits (John, 1990). The Big Five dimensions of personality include: Extraversion (E), Agreeableness (A), Conscientiousness (C), Neuroticism (N), and Openness (O). They represent
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personality at the broadest level and each one includes numerous, more specific
personality characteristics. (Costa & McCrae, 1995; John, 1990). The Big Five
dimensions of personality also reveal a theoretical link to significant life
outcomes, such as performance in school and at work (Barrick & Mount, 1991;
John, Caspi, Robins, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1994), well-being (Costa &
McCrae, 1980), delinquency (John et al., 1994), and aspects of psychopathology
(Widiger & Trull, 1992). The BFI (John et al., 1991) consists of 44 items which
are arranged in short phrases. The participants rate each item on a 5-point scale
ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly). The participant’s scale
scores are then computed as a mean response score. A sample item listed under
neuroticism is “Worries a lot”. “Is sometimes rude to others”, is a sample item
under agreeableness. The alpha reliabilities of the BFI scale range from .75 to
.90 and average above .80. The test-retest reliabilities for the BFI range from .80
to .90 with a mean of .85 (Benet-Martinez & John, 1998).

Exposure to Abusive and Supportive Environments Parenting Inventory
(EASE-PI). The Exposure to Abusive and Supportive Environments Parenting
Inventory (EASE-PI) was used to measure how the respondent’s father and/or
mother treated him/her. Nicholas and Bieber (in press) developed this 70-item
inventory to measure the level of exposure to abusive and supportive
environments the respondent’s parents provided. Factor analysis revealed that the
EASE-PI contained six scales: three abusive factors (emotional, physical, and
sexual abusiveness) and three supportive factors (love/support, promotion of
independence, and positive modeling/fairness). A sample item under the
emotional abusiveness scale is “Was cold or rejecting”. “Said things to make you
feel good,” is a sample item under the love/support scale. Each item is rated on a
5-point Likert scale (1-5) ranging from “never” to “very often”. Their answer
revealed how frequently each behavior was displayed by the mother and the father while the respondent was growing up. Nicholas and Bieber reported the mean test-retest reliability scores for each of the six scales: EA=.84, PA=.92, SA=.96, L/S=.83, t=.79, and M/F=.87. Concurrent validity was demonstrated by high correlations with parts of other instruments considered similar to particular scales of the EASE-PI. The present focus, again, was the emotional abuse scale (EA) as reported about mother (EA-M) and father (EA-F). Physical abuse (PA) scales were included to see if results were specific to emotional abuse or more generalized abuse.

Results

My first hypothesis was that individuals who experience abuse will have lower self-esteem. Table 3 reveals the results pertaining to the first hypothesis. As shown in Table 3, correlations for men were routinely significant whereas those for women were not. Men who experienced either emotional or physical abuse by either their mothers or their fathers reported significantly lower self-esteem. Table 3 also shows that women whose mothers were physically abusive reported significantly higher self-esteem. This result is surprising and not consistent with previous research reviewed.

My second hypothesis was that abuse would relate to higher neuroticism, higher hostility, and lower agreeableness. Table 4 reveals the results pertaining to the second hypothesis. Examination of Table 4 shows that men’s neuroticism was a correlate of emotional and physical abuse. Specifically, men with more emotional or physical abuse from mothers or fathers reported higher neuroticism than men with lower levels of abuse. Table 4 also reveals that abusiveness in
fathers (either emotionally or physically) related to less agreeableness in women. That is having an abusive father was associated with hostility or antagonism in women. This is keeping with predictions.

Supplementary Results

We also examined the relationship between stressful life events in the family and EASE-PI abuse scores. Stressful life events included having moved three or more times (yes/no), parent drinking problem, divorce, death of parent or sibling, financial problems, and sibling emotional, behavioral, or substance problem. Thus, scores could range from 0 (no problems) to 6 (all 6 were problems experienced in that family). Actual scores on this events scale ranged from 0 to 4, mean= 1.2, standard deviation= 1.2. This total stress score in fact correlated significantly with the Emotional Abuse-Mother scale, r=.29, p< .05, and Physical Abuse-Mother scale, r=.26, p<.05. Inspection of the individual stressors shows that they particularly involved parental drinking (p< .01) and divorce (p< .05). In addition, financial problems related to Emotional Abuse-Father, r=.26, p<.05. In other words, a divorce and/or a parent with a drinking problem often existed when emotional abuse from the mother was occurring. Divorce also highly correlated with physical abuse from the mother. When the father was emotionally abusive, financial problems often existed.

Principal components analysis of the EASI-PI scales suggested that there were three main factors to be considered: negativity of mother (with factor loadings of emotional abuse-mother, physical abuse-mother, mother-support,
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and mother-fairness of .91, .83, .81, and -.74 respectively); negativity of father (with loadings for emotional abuse-father, physical abuse-father, fairness, and support of .89, .88, -.78 and -.72 respectively) and independence-promoting (mother .92; father .73). The variables in each cluster were summed in appropriate directions to create three new scores, nicknamed "badmom," "baddad," and "independence."

Next the three main variables of self-esteem, neuroticism, and agreeableness/antagonism were submitted to regression analyses where the three new scores, along with gender and number of life stressors were treated as the predictor variables. The regression analysis for self-esteem was not significant: F(5,57) = 1.15, ns. The regression analysis for neuroticism was statistically significant, F(5,57) = 2.44, p < .05, with Multiple R = .42. However, a significant beta weight in this analysis was obtained just for gender (.32) with women reporting higher neuroticism than men. Finally, the regression analysis for agreeableness/antagonism was also significant, F(5,57) = 3.55, p < .01, Multiple R = .49. Significant beta weights indicated that women reported higher agreeableness than did men (beta=.31) and participants with more abusive fathers reported less agreeableness (beta=-.38). In other words, those with "bad-dads" were more hostile-suspicious-antagonistic toward others.

Qualitative Results

We chose to examine more closely those participants who scored one standard deviation above the mean on total emotional abuse (mean = 19; standard deviation = +/-24). The mean score for self esteem was 3.3. The purpose was to understand emotional abuse in the participants' own words. Subject #60, a 21
year old, white, single, female, reported the highest total emotional abuse (97.0). She experienced more abuse from her mother (66.0) than her father (31.0). Interestingly, she also reported the highest self esteem (4.1) out of those selected and the third highest in the entire sample. Stressors she experienced while growing up were: parent had a drinking problem, parents divorced/remarried, and a sibling had a emotional, behavioral, or substance abuse problem. She also mentioned that she ran away from home on several occasions and associated with people that her parents disapproved of. She feels “very dissatisfied” when thinking about her childhood and her relationship with her parents. In the open-ended question, she stated “My mother and I now are friends, even after the abusive childhood relationship. When you get older and understand how to communicate well and strive for a good relationship, you can have one but it takes time.”

Subject #72, a 22 year old, white, single, male, reported the second highest total emotional abuse (89.9) but he did not offer any comments on the open-ended section.

A 39 year old, white, married, female, experienced the third highest total emotional abuse (76.0). Almost all of the abuse she experienced was at the hands of her mother (75.0). Her self esteem was average (3.2). She reported many of the stressors listed while growing up. In fact, she tied with two other participants from the entire sample in reporting the highest life stress. Her family moved three or more times, a parent had a drinking problem, her parents divorced/remarried, and her parents had financial problems. She also wrote “sexual abuse of a sibling” as a stressor. When thinking about her childhood and relationship with her parents, she feels “very dissatisfied”. In the open-ended question she stated, “My mother knew that a succession of her husbands (7) and
boyfriends-countless, had attempted or succeeded in sexually abusing my sisters and myself and did nothing to intervene. I was sent to live with relatives at different times because I was the one who stood up for us and 'caused trouble'."

Subject #10, a 19 year old, mixed race, single, female, also reported very high emotional abuse (75.0). More abuse was experienced from her mother (50.0) than her father (25.0). She reported fairly high self esteem (3.9). Her parents divorced/remarried and had financial problems. Listed also as a stressor while she was growing up was "abuse". When thinking about her childhood she feels "very dissatisfied". She stated "You should ask more questions about if the parents are split up" in the open-ended question.

High levels of emotional abuse (70.0) were reported from a 20 year old, white, single, female but she also did not provide any additional information in response to the open-ended question.

Subject #14 was a 20 year old, Asian, single, male, who reported a high amount of total emotional abuse (63.0). He experienced similar amounts of abuse from both his mother (32.0) and father (31.0). His self esteem was one of the lowest out of those selected (2.8). When viewing the entire sample, this score places him at the 17th percentile on self esteem. A parent had a drinking problem while he was growing up. He feels neither dissatisfied nor satisfied when thinking about his childhood and his relationship with his parents. In the open-ended question he stated, "Differences of relationships between children and parents are based on culture and family backgrounds, I think. I'm a Japanese. Most Japanese parents don't say "I love you" to their children. This is the Japanese culture. Japanese people are shy to say what they love, anger, criticize, and so on. Thus, this questionnaire seems to be for general family or person in the world and the U.S.".
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Subject #65, a 27 year old, white, married, male, was another participant who reported one of the highest levels of total emotional abuse (59.1). His father was more abusive (42.2) than his mother (16.9). Of those selected, he reported the lowest self-esteem (2.1). The stressors he experienced while growing up were, his family moved three or more times, parents had financial problems, and a sibling had emotional, behavioral, or a substance abuse problem. He also wrote, “Constant abuse (physically and emotionally) towards me, siblings, and mother,” as another stressor. When thinking about his childhood and his relationship with his parents, he feels “dissatisfied”. In response to the open-ended question, he stated, “My father had an affair and told me when I asked if he ever loved my mom, said ‘no’.”

A 39 year old, white, divorced, female tied another participant in reporting the lowest amount of total emotional abuse (58.0) of those selected. Her father was slightly more abusive (33.0) than her mother (25.0). Her self esteem was average (3.2). Stressors she experienced while growing up included a parent having a drinking problem and a sibling having an emotional, behavioral, or substance abuse problem. She feels “satisfied” when thinking about her childhood and her relationship with her parents. Written in response to the open-ended question was, “In my circumstance (and the fact that I’m 39 years old), I now know how much my folks love me, but their “indifference” towards me while I was growing up translated to me that I was unworthy, unloveable. Physical or emotional displays of love were not part of their make up, but hurt me profusely. As a young female, I was very permissive—always looking for approval, especially male. Children need to feel the love and that they’re important.”
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Subject #67, a 19 year old, white, single, male was the other participant reporting the lowest total abuse (58.0). His father was also slightly more abusive (35.0) than his mother (23.0). Of those selected, he reported the second lowest self esteem (2.4). His parents had financial problems while he was growing up. He feels “neutral” when thinking about his childhood. Written in response to the open-ended question was, “My relationship with my parents is decent but my father is often hypocritical (yelling for stuff he has done) and very critical of myself and my siblings. My mom seems to be on the verge of an emotional breakdown. But this is the most depressing survey I’ve ever taken. Thanks a bunch.

Discussion

As seen in the results, perception of abuse depends on the gender of both the parent and the child. Men and women seem to be affected in different ways when they experience abuse. Men’s level of self-esteem and neuroticism are shown to strongly correlate with emotional and physical abuse by either their mother or father. This agrees with the previous finding that the self-esteem of men is more strongly affected by parental behavior (Gecas et. al, 1986). Girls’ levels of agreeableness/hostility correlate strongest with abusive behaviors of fathers. As stated in past research, women may be more sensitive to abuse from fathers than from mothers.

To restate the present findings, the clearest summary comes from the regression analysis, namely that abusive parenting by fathers seems to correlate more clearly with low agreeableness pooling across genders. That is, having a "bad dad" seems to promote interpersonal hostility, mistrust and antagonism in
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children. (It should be kept in mind that this is a correlational finding so we cannot attribute causality to the father.) Having stated this finding, it should be noted that the zero-order correlations qualify the result to women more than men. However, correlations for men are actually more in keeping with the initial hypotheses: men with abusive mothers or fathers reported lower self-esteem and higher neuroticism than men with less abusive mothers or fathers.

Limitations such as self report, small sample size, and possible bias questionnaires may have influenced the results found. Self report limits this study because of the sensitive information that was requested in the questionnaires, especially the EASE-PI. Some individuals are more disclosive than others. The small sample size limits how much we can speculate that similar results would be found across the majority of individuals. Other sources of obtaining information, such as interviews or computer based questionnaires, may have been more successful in this study. With interviews, the researcher can establish trust with individuals before asking sensitive information. A "vibe" can be sensed whether or not the individual is ready to disclose personal information. Computer based questionnaires would allow participants to "feel" more anonymous. Even though their name nor identification was connected to the information they provided, many still may be suspicious when handing in the packet; Faces are remembered. Further research is needed to understand the relationship between abuse from both mothers and fathers and the direct effects it has on both men and women.
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References


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189-198.


considerations and measuring instruments." Vol. 1. Lincoln: University of
Nebraska Press.
Table 1

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<th>Std Dev</th>
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Table 2

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<td>Love/Support</td>
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<td>Promotion of Independence</td>
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Table 3

Correlations of Self-Esteem with Emotional and Physical Abuse

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<th>Physical Abuse</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Men N=34</td>
<td>Women N=29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
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<td>+0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>-0.49**</td>
<td>+0.12</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
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<td>+0.39*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>-0.48**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
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*p<.05  **p<.01  ***p<.001
Table 4

Correlations of Neuroticism and Agreeableness with Emotional and Physical Abuse

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<th></th>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>+0.01</td>
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<tr>
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<td>+0.08</td>
<td>+0.22</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.59***</td>
<td>-0.33**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05  **p<.01  ***p<.001