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**FIERY WIVES AND ICY HUSBANDS: CHILDHOOD ABUSE AND  
MALADAPTIVE MARITAL COMMUNICATION PATTERNS**

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

Guided by life course and social learning theories, we examine the relationship between childhood abuse and two maladaptive marital communication patterns – hostile and withdrawing. Additionally, we test whether covenant marriage and premarital counseling buffer the effects of childhood abuse. Drawing on unique couple-level data, we use multiple measures of childhood abuse to address both the consequences of specific and general models of childhood abuse. We find that childhood abuse does affect hostile communication for both wives and husbands, but only increases wives' withdrawing patterns. Neither covenant marriage nor premarital counseling are associated with hostile communication for wives or husbands. But, we find that covenant marriage increases husbands' withdrawal from conflict. Premarital counseling reduces the use of withdrawing communication in both wives and husbands.

## INTRODUCTION

Research demonstrates that witnessing and experiencing abuse during childhood is associated with long-term negative life course and marital outcomes (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel 2001). Witnessing parents' marital violence during childhood increases the likelihood of one's own adulthood aggression and future partner violence (Doumas, Margolin, & John 1994; Straus & Gelles 1995). Childhood abuse has also been shown to influence adult union formation. Individuals who experienced childhood physical and/or sexual abuse are more likely to cohabit, abandon partners, and divorce compared to those who have not experienced childhood abuse (Colman & Widom 2004). Additionally, women who were abused during childhood are more likely to form multiple long-term cohabiting relationships rather than marriages (Cherlin, Hurt, Burton, & Purvin 2004). Experiencing childhood abuse may lead to a deficit of adaptive adult communication strategies and relationship skills. Adults with abusive childhoods simply may not have learned positive communication skills or may become too overwhelmed in high stress moments to properly enact them.

Our research will contribute to the literature on the intergenerational transmission of violence by exploring the gendered effects of exposure to childhood violence on corrosive marital communication patterns. We specifically examine whether newlywed wives and husbands experience the consequence of childhood abuse differently. We focus on two research questions. First, does childhood abuse increase the use of high conflict and withdrawing communication patterns? Second, are the effects of childhood abuse gendered, such that childhood abuse reinforces high conflict strategies among wives and encourages withdrawing strategies among husbands (Gottman 1993; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen 1993)?

A final contribution is the exploration of whether a marriage law reform and premarital counseling can mediate the effects of childhood abuse on corrosive marital communication styles. We use unique couple-level data from a study of newlyweds who could choose a marriage law reform in the form of covenant marriage. The sample includes couples who chose the standard marriage option, who were not required (though not prohibited) from undertaking premarital counseling, and couples who chose the covenant marriage option with required premarital counseling. The third and final goal of our study is to explore whether covenant marriage and premarital counseling mediate the effects of childhood abuse on negative communication.

## **BACKGROUND**

### *Life Course and Intergenerational Transmission Theories*

Life course theory posits that the history of an individual can influence her or his future life trajectory (Elder 1998). Furthermore, life course theory argues that within family structures, internal family norms are developed over time and passed from one generation to the next. Past research has found intergenerational transmissions of divorce (Amato & Cheadle 2005), marital quality (Feng, Bengston, & Frye 1999), and violence (Straus & Gelles 1995; Stith, Rosen, Middleton, Busch, Lundberg & Carlton 2000). Therefore, childhood experiences of physical or sexual abuse, whether as a witness or direct victim, are likely to have long term consequences.

One particular strain of intergenerational transmission theory is social learning theory. According to social learning theory, violence can be considered a learned behavior (Bandura 1973). Experimental research finds that children's exposure to adult aggressive behavior increases the probability of children's aggressive behavior (Bandura, Ross, & Ross 1961). Furthermore, Bandura and colleagues' (1961) results indicate that children learn aggressive

behavior by modeling; children expressed aggression in the same manner that was displayed by the adults in the experiment. More current research by Kalmuss (1984) finds two types of aggression modeling – generalized and specific. Generalized modeling is when childhood “family aggression communicates the acceptability of aggression between family members and thus increases the likelihood of any form of family aggression in the next generation” (Kalmuss 1984: 15). Specific modeling is when the type of aggression an individual was exposed to is reproduced in future relationships. Kalmuss’s (1984) results highlight the importance of the specific model, finding that observing marital violence rather than direct childhood physical abuse is associated with later marital aggression for both women and men. By learning to model aggressive behavior, individuals who grow up in a violent household may learn that aggression is a permissible action (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz 1980). Therefore, the experience of childhood abuse may socialize individuals to engage in negative behaviors once they form adult relationships by reinforcing the belief that negative behaviors are normative and acceptable.

Social learning theory provides a basis for examining the intergenerational transmission of violence. But, empirical research is mixed about the relationship between experiencing childhood abuse and future marital violence. Men with childhood histories of both physical and sexual abuse are more likely to be violent with their partners in adulthood (White & Widom 2003). Additionally, men who were exposed to parental aggression as children are more likely to experience future marital violence (Doumas, Margolin, & John 1994). However, other research finds that men’s exposure to parental violence has no influence on adult violence (Mihalic & Elliott 1997). A similar inconclusive pattern is true for women. On one hand, White and Widom (2003) find a significant relationship between childhood violence and women’s use of marital violence. On the other hand, Doumas and colleagues (1994) find no intergenerational

transmission of marital violence for women. Stith and colleagues' (2000) meta-analysis of the intergenerational transmission of spousal abuse indicates that experiencing childhood violence, both as a victim of abuse and as a witness to parental violence, raises the likelihood of adult perpetration of violence in men and victimization in women.

Past research also examines whether multiple forms of family violence, using both parent to child violence and interparental violence, increase the likelihood of violent adult relationships. Using the National Family Violence Survey, Heyman and Slep (2002) find that women who are exposed to multiple forms of childhood violence are significantly more likely to be perpetrators and victims of violence in adult relationships. For men, multiple exposures to childhood violence increase the likelihood of victimization in adult intimate relationships but do not increase the likelihood of perpetration (Heyman & Slep 2002). The number of childhood risk factors is also associated with increased maladjustment in adulthood (Feerick & Haugard 1999; Henning et al. 1996). Feerick and Haugard (1999) find that the combined effects of experiencing abuse and witnessing marital violence increases the severity of traumatic distress.

#### *Long-Term Effects of Child Abuse*

The effects of living in a violent family are numerous and typically greater for women than men (Forsstrom & Rosenbaum 1985; Mihalic & Elliott 1997). Women with histories of childhood sexual abuse compared to women without histories of childhood sexual abuse are more likely to be socially maladjusted, have lower levels of trust in close relationships, have increased mental health symptoms, and have additional traumatic incidents (Banyard, Williams, & Siegal 2001; Feerick & Haugard 1999; Henning, Leitenberg, Coffey, Turner, & Bennett 1996). Women who witnessed violence between their parents are also more likely to have experienced childhood physical abuse, childhood sexual abuse, verbal conflict between parents

and physical assaults by strangers compared to women who did not witness marital violence (Feerick & Haugard 1999; Henning et al. 1996).

The interpersonal relationships of those who experienced childhood violence are typically of lower quality than those who did not experience violence while growing up. Children who were abused are often more aggressive (Haskett & Kistner 1991), more likely to withdraw from social interactions (Haskett & Kistner 1991), and have less intimate friendships (Parker & Herrera 1996) during childhood. Interpersonal difficulties often continue into adulthood. Women who were abused as children, especially those who were sexually abused, are more likely to form multiple, short-term relationships often in the form of cohabitation rather than marriage (Cherlin et al. 2004). Colman and Widom (2004) find that men who experienced child abuse are less likely to currently be in an intimate relationship than non-abused men. Sexually abused women who go on to marry are often less satisfied with their marriages (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison 1994) and are more likely to divorce (Colman & Widom 2004; Mullen et al. 1994).

More current research finds gender differences in the association between childhood abuse and adult relationship quality. Using data that followed both abused and matched non-abused children through adulthood, Colman and Widom (2004) examine the effects of childhood abuse and neglect on adult intimate relationship quality. They find that men with a history of child abuse are more likely to consider their current romantic relationship as high in warmth, supportiveness and communication. Abused women perceive their current relationships as poorer in quality compared to women who had not been abused in childhood (Colman & Widom 2004: 1140), even after controlling for family background characteristics, such as parental marital status and receiving welfare.

### *Negative marital communication patterns*

Straus (1979) defines verbal aggression as an act that intends or is perceived as having the intention of emotionally hurting someone. Couples who use verbal aggression, such as character attacks and threatening one's self-image, are also more likely to continue to use verbal aggression in disputes and verbal aggression often acts as a precursor to spousal violence (Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon 1990). Verbal aggression can be seen in conflict-based communication styles. Contempt, belligerence, and defensiveness are associated with destructive, hostile patterns of conflict resolution (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson 1998). Couples who use hostile, fiery communication are more likely to have higher levels of marital distress (Roberts 2000), lower levels of marital satisfaction (Holman & Jarvis 2003), and lower levels of marital stability (Gottman et al. 1998; Holman & Jarvis 2003; DeMaris 2000).

The demand and withdraw pattern of communication, where wives have a conflict-ridden, fiery style and husbands have a withdrawing, icy style, is common among couples (Heavey et al. 1993). Research indicates that the wife-demand/husband-withdraw communication pattern can be particularly detrimental to the formation of healthy marriages (Gottman & Krokoff 1989; Heavey et al. 1993). Contrary to the wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern, Roberts (2000) finds that husbands' hostile responsiveness is the strongest predictor of wives' marital distress, and wives' withdrawal behavior is the stronger predictor of husbands' marital distress. Although gendered communication patterns have been found to increase marital distress, Gottman (1993) argues that neither conflict engagement nor conflict avoidance is necessarily dysfunctional. He states that negative communication is only dysfunctional when it is not balanced by positivity or when complaining, criticizing, defensiveness, and disgust are at high levels.



### *Covenant marriage and premarital counseling*

Covenant marriage was created during great political and social ferment about the institutional meaning of marriage (Nock, Sanchez, & Wright 2008). Covenant marriage first appeared in 1997 in Louisiana, followed soon after in Arkansas and Arizona. Proponents cast covenant marriage as a more protective form of marriage for those who want security against the potential damages of divorce. Covenant marriage draws couples into much stricter premarital and marital counseling agreements and precludes divorce except for fault-based reasons after extended waiting periods of two-years compared to six-months for standard couples. Covenant marriage focuses on strengthening marital unions and is often selected by more religious individuals and more gender traditional couples. These characteristics of covenant marriage should act to reduce the negative consequences of childhood abuse.

Premarital counseling should also temper the effects of childhood abuse on negative marital communication patterns. Premarital counseling is a requirement of covenant marriage and a large portion of standard married couples obtain premarital counseling as well. Although counseling can differ in intensity and focus, it may provide couples communication and conflict management skills. Premarital counseling may also provide couples the opportunity to discuss past childhood experiences in a safe environment.

### **Current Study**

We use unique data containing both covenant and standard married newlywed couples to examine the long-term consequences of both witnessing parental conflict and directly experiencing abuse as a child. Our research extends prior literature on the intergenerational transmission of violence by examining the extent to which childhood abuse influences future marital communication patterns. Mihalic and Elliott (1997) argue that a major limitation of

many studies using the intergenerational transmission of violence is neglecting to separate the differences between experiencing abuse versus witnessing abuse. Our research accounts for this limitation by using three measures of childhood abuse: extreme forms of abuse, any form of major or minor abuse, and specific forms of abuse, such as physical abuse, verbal abuse, and parental conflict. Additionally, we examine whether covenant marriage and/or premarital counseling mediates the relationship between childhood abuse and negative communication patterns. Two forms of negative communication patterns – conflict, hostile-based and withdrawal-based – are analyzed to determine if the occurrence of abuse differentially affects marital communication patterns.

Thus, we use life course and intergenerational transmission theories to address the following hypotheses. *Hypothesis 1:* Individuals who experienced childhood abuse will be more likely to have negative communication patterns, in the form of conflict and withdrawal, compared to those without a history of abuse. *Hypothesis 2:* Among those who experienced childhood abuse, we expect a gendered effect on newlywed communication styles: Wives may display a more conflict-based communication pattern and husbands a more withdrawing pattern. *Hypothesis 3:* Covenant marriage and/or premarital counseling may mediate the effects of childhood abuse on negative marital communication patterns, as compared to those in standard marriages.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The data are from a three-wave longitudinal study of newlywed couples funded by the National Science Foundation and a private foundation (Marriage Matters, University of Virginia). The sampling frame consisted of licenses drawn from 17 Louisiana parishes randomly selected proportionate to size. All covenant marriage licenses were selected, as well as standard

marriage licenses filed next to the covenant licenses. The initial recruitment rate from these licenses was 76%, with a subsequent first wave survey response rate of 59% (see Nock et al. 2008 for a more detailed description of the sampling and recruiting strategy). The current study uses couple-level data from the first wave, representing newlyweds interviewed within 3 months of their weddings. The data consist of 707 couples. Of these, 21 wives and 122 husbands did not complete surveys, reducing matched reporting couples to 564. Missing values on the communication indices further reduced the sample by 11 couples. Finally, 102 couples had missing information on the focal independent and control variables, leaving us with an effective sample size of 451 couples.

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

### **Dependent Variables**

*Hostile communication.* We measure the wife's and husband's hostile communication using a two item index. The items asked "Here are some statements about how people handle the disagreements and conflicts that come up in their marriage. For each of these statements, just indicate how true it is in your marriage right now: I get sarcastic (I say things intended to hurt my partner) and I get hostile (I act like we are enemies)." The responses for each of the items include very true (2), somewhat true (1), and not true at all (0). The hostile communication indices use the sum of each of these items, creating a range from 0-4 for both wives and husbands. Higher values indicate a more hostile style of communication when handling disagreements.

*Withdrawing communication.* Similar to the hostile communication measure, we use a two item index to measure wife's and husband's withdrawing communication from the same question asked for the hostile communication. The items included are "I withdraw to avoid a big fight" and "I just give in." The indices range from 0-4 for both wives and husbands, with higher values indicating a more withdrawing style of communication when handling disagreements.

### **Focal Independent Variables**

*Any abuse.* Any abuse measures whether the respondent experienced any abuse directly while growing up or witnessed physical or verbal violence towards her/his parents. This measure sums the responses of six items. Respondents were asked, "Were any of the following a problem or sources of conflict in your family when you were growing up: violence between your parents, violence directed at you, sexual abuse, foul and abusive language, high conflict between your parents, and name-calling and sarcasm?" Separate responses were given for each item. Responses were major problem (2), minor problem (1), and not a problem (0). Don't know responses were excluded from the analysis. Any abuse ranges from 0-12 for wives and husbands.

*Extreme abuse.* Extreme abuse measures the same problems in the *any abuse* indices, but counts only the major problem responses and ranges from 0-6 for wives and husbands.

*Specific measures of abuse.* To tap specific forms of abuse, we created three separate measures. *Physical abuse* measures violence directed at the respondent during childhood and includes two items, "violence directed at you" and "sexual abuse". *Verbal abuse* measures the amount of verbal abuse that the respondent witnessed during childhood and includes two items, "foul and abusive language," and "name-calling and sarcasm." *Parental conflict* measures the amount of interparental violence and includes two items, "violence between your parents," and

“high conflict between your parents.” Each measure sums the responses across the two items and range from 0-4 for both wives and husbands.

### **Control Variables**

*Other major childhood problems.* The other major childhood problems index assesses the amount of traumatic childhood problems, excluding abuse, for each spouse. We use self-reported responses across eight items. The question asked: “Were any of the following a problem or source of conflict in your family when you were growing up: Severe depression, other mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse, periods of unemployment, not enough money to make ends meet, serious physical illness, not enough love in the home?” The childhood major problems indices count the number of items that were reported as major problems, ranging in value from 0-7 for wives and 0-8 for husbands.

*Parents’ marital history.* Parents’ marital history measures the respondent’s parents’ marital history to each other. We use a set of dummy variables to represent the excluded category of parents who were continuously married to each other versus parents who had ever been divorced, separated, or never married to each other.

*Mother’s education.* Mother’s education is measured using a set of dummy variables representing the excluded category of less than high school, against the categories of high school graduate, some college attainment, and at least a college baccalaureate degree.

*Receipt of public assistance.* Receipt of public assistance is a dummy variable for whether the respondent’s family ever received public assistance or welfare while growing up (1) or did not receive assistance (0).

*Family history controls.* We use multiple measures of marital, cohabitation, and parenthood histories to measure the couples’ previous family histories. We measure cohabitation

history with three dummy variables representing couples in which the spouses cohabited only together or any other cohabitation experience, compared to the excluded category of neither spouse cohabitated before marriage. Marriage history is measured with two contrast-coded dummy variables representing either partner ever divorced or both divorced, as compared to the excluded category of neither spouse previously divorced. Parenthood history is captured with two contrast-coded dummy variables representing at least one child present at the start of marriage or more than one child present at the start of marriage, as compared to the excluded category of no children at the start of marriage.

*Premarital disadvantages.* We measure the wife's and husband's premarital disadvantages with summed indices of their self-reported problems before marriage. The items assess the amount of social, financial and medical troubles that each spouse brought into the marriage. The wife's and husband's premarital disadvantage indices were created by counting instances in which the spouse reported not having a job, a car, savings of more than \$1,000, an owned home or reported having a criminal record, a drinking or drug problem, more than \$500 in credit card debt, other significant debt, personal bankruptcy, and a medical (health) problem. The indices ranged from 0-7 with higher scores reflecting greater accumulated premarital disadvantages.

*Covenant status.* Covenant status is a dummy variable for whether the couple has a covenant marriage (1) or standard marriage (0).

*Religiosity.* Wife's and husband's religiosity are standardized indices of five items. The first item asks respondents how often do you attend religious services, with eight responses ranging from never to several times a week. The second item is whether you and your partner attend services together, having four responses of no, never; yes, from time to time; yes, usually,

and yes, always. How often do you pray is the third item in the index, having six possible responses ranging from never to several times a day. The fourth item asks respondents “how important is religious faith in your life,” with five responses ranging from not important at all to extremely important. The last item is “when you were first thinking about getting married, how important was it to you that you and your partner felt the same way about religion,” with five responses ranging from not important at all to extremely important.

*Traditional gender role attitudes.* We measure the wife’s and husband’s gender role attitudes with five Likert-scale items with responses ranging from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4). The items include: “all in all, family life suffers when the wife has a full-time job,” “a husband's job is to earn money, a wife's job is to look after the home and family,” “it works best when the man earns the money and the woman takes care of home and family,” “taking care of children should be mainly a woman's responsibility,” and “by nature, women are better than men at making a home and caring for children.” The summed indices range from 0-20 for both wives and husbands with higher values reflecting greater traditionalism.

*Husband’s income.* Husband’s income measures the husband’s reported yearly income ranging from no income to \$100,000 or more. This categorical measure ranges along the following 13 ranks: no income; less than \$5,000; \$5,000-\$9,999; \$10,000-\$19,999; \$20,000-\$29,999; \$30,000-\$39,999; \$40,000-\$49,999; \$50,000-\$59,999; \$60,000-\$69,999; \$70,000-\$79,999; \$80,000-\$89,999; \$90,000-\$99,999; and \$100,000 or more. We recoded this categorical measure to the midpoint of each category to create a continuous measure of income. If the husband refused to report an income, we used the wife’s report of her husband’s income.

*Wife employment status.* Wife's employment status is measured by three dummy variables representing whether the wife worked full time or worked part time, versus the excluded category of all other working statuses.

*Patriarchal husbands.* The patriarchal husbands measure is a dummy variable indicating whether the husband's gender role attitude score was one standard deviation higher than the wife's gender role attitude score (1) versus husbands who are not (0).

*High earning wives.* High earning wives is measured with a dummy variable representing wives who earn at least 80% of their husband's income (1) versus those who make less than 80% of their husband's income (0).

*Sociodemographic controls.* We use respondents' education, wife's age, and couples' race/ethnicity as sociodemographic controls. We measure the wife's and husband's self-reported education through a set of dummy variables, representing the excluded category of less than high school, against the categories of high school graduate, some college attainment, and at least a college baccalaureate degree. The couple's race/ethnicity is tapped with dummy variables for the excluded category of both spouses are white, non-Hispanic, as compared to both spouses are Black, and all other racial/ethnic combinations. We measure wife's age in years.

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for all variables in the study.

{Insert Table 1 about Here}

## **Results**

### *Descriptive Results*

We begin by highlighting differences in newlyweds' communication patterns both within marriages and between types of marriage. The mean value of wives' and husbands' hostile communication is 1.18 and 0.89, respectively. Paired t-tests indicate that wives are significantly



more likely to use a hostile communication style than husbands ( $t=-4.763$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). Mean values of withdrawing communication are 1.22 for wives and 1.41 for husbands. Paired t-tests indicate that husbands are significantly more likely to use a withdrawing communication pattern compared to wives ( $t=2.39$ ,  $p=0.02$ ). Covenant married couples are, on average, no different than standard married couples for either communication style.

### *Multivariate Results*

*Are individuals who experienced childhood abuse more likely to use negative marital communication patterns?*

Table 2 illustrates the final models for each type of abuse and all independent controls. Whether we measure abuse as any form of abuse, extreme abuse, or specific forms of abuse, childhood abuse increases wives' hostile communication style. We find significant positive relationships for husbands as well, except for the extreme abuse measure.

{Insert Tables 2 and 3 about Here}

Because we are interested in whether specific forms of childhood abuse differently influence marital communication patterns, we display the results of our models using physical abuse, verbal abuse, and parental conflict as our measures of childhood abuse. Table 3 presents the SUR models predicting hostile communication for both wives and husbands. For both wives and husbands, experiencing verbal abuse as a child increases the amount of hostile communication used during marital disagreements, even after controlling for a variety of family background and intimate relationship characteristics. Other childhood problems, such as alcohol usage or mental illness, do not appear to be related to the future use of hostile communication for wives. In contrast, other major childhood problems are associated positively with husbands' hostile communication.

We find support for our first hypothesis that those who had histories of childhood abuse will be more likely to have a hostile communication pattern compared to those without a history of abuse. Childhood experiences of verbal abuse increase both wives and husbands use of hostile communication. These findings are critical, given the robustness of the effect, net of a host of childhood background and adult intimate union history characteristics.

Table 4 shows the final models predicting withdrawing communication for each type of abuse with all independent variables and controls. Our results for withdrawing communication differ from the hostile communication results in two ways. First, only the specific forms of childhood abuse influence wives withdrawing communication style. Second, no measure of childhood abuse is significant for husbands.

Table 5 presents SUR models predicting withdrawing communication for both wives and husbands. Wives who experienced physical abuse in childhood are more likely to have withdrawing communication patterns, but wives who experienced verbal abuse are less likely to use a withdrawing pattern. Husbands' childhood abuse does not influence withdrawing communication. Other major childhood problems are not related significantly to wives or husbands withdrawing communication.

We find limited support for our hypothesis that childhood abuse would increase withdrawing communication. Only childhood physical abuse among wives is associated positively with withdrawing communication.

*Are the effects of childhood abuse different for wives and husbands?*

The advantage of using Seemingly Unrelated Regression Models with couple-level data is our ability to constrain coefficients to be equal across equations. Constraining the coefficients allows us to determine if the effects of childhood abuse differ for wives and husbands.

Constraints tests indicate that the effect of verbal abuse on hostile communication is the same for wives and husbands (results not shown). For withdrawing communication, both the effects of verbal and physical abuse can be constrained to be equal for wives and husbands. When we constrain the coefficients to be equal, we find that physical abuse in childhood does appear to increase withdrawing communication for both wives and husbands. Additionally, verbal abuse in childhood appears to decrease withdrawing from conflict for both wives and husbands.

Therefore we do not find support for hypothesis two, childhood abuse does not appear to have a greater influence on wives' hostile communication or husbands' withdrawing communication. We find no evidence of gender differences in the effects of childhood abuse on marital communication practices, when we constrain the coefficients to be equal.

*Does covenant marriage or premarital counseling mediate the effect of childhood abuse?*

To address our final question, we examine whether covenant marriage provides any buffering effect for experiencing childhood abuse. We find no support for our hypothesis that covenant marriage mediates the negative effects of child abuse. In analyses not shown here, we placed only the abuse and covenant marriage measures into the model and covenant marriage was not significantly associated with either hostile or withdrawing communication for wives or husbands. In our final model, we find that covenant marriage has no effect on either wives' or husbands' hostile communication. But, covenant marriage is associated positively with husbands' withdrawing patterns in the final model. This result may suggest that covenant marriage, in and of itself, does not increase withdrawing communication in husbands. Rather, the selection into covenant marriage by more traditional men may be the driving force behind this relationship.

Interaction tests between covenant marriage and childhood abuse were also examined (analyses not shown). Two interactions are significant. For hostile communication, covenant marriage provides some buffering against the harmful effects of childhood abuse. At higher levels of physical abuse, covenant wives have lower levels of hostile communication than standard wives. Additionally, higher levels of verbal abuse among covenant wives increases use of withdrawing communication compared to higher levels of verbal abuse among standard wives.

In addition to covenant marriage, we also tested whether premarital counseling buffered against the harmful effects of childhood abuse. We use three measures of premarital counseling: a set of dummy variables indicating whether counseling was very helpful and all other forms of helpfulness, versus the excluded category of no premarital counseling; a continuous measure of number of counseling hours; and a dummy variable indicating whether the couple discussed communication during counseling. For couples who found counseling very helpful, we would expect lower levels of maladaptive communication compared to those who did not find counseling helpful or those who did not receive premarital counseling. We use hours of counseling to determine if additional hours in counseling can reduce the use of negative communication. Because the focus of premarital counseling can vary, we examine if couples who discussed communication during counseling exhibit lower levels of hostile and withdrawing communication.

SUR models (analyses not shown) indicate that none of the premarital counseling measures are associated with hostile communication for wives or husbands. Interaction tests (analyses not shown) demonstrate that for husbands who discussed communication during counseling, higher levels of childhood physical abuse increased levels of hostile communication.

SUR results (analyses not shown) for withdrawing communication indicate that the number of counseling hours is associated positively with withdrawing communication styles for wives. In contrast, husbands who found premarital counseling very helpful were less likely to withdraw from conflict during disagreements than those who did not receive premarital counseling. Furthermore, husbands who discussed communication during counseling used withdrawing communication patterns more than husbands who did not discuss communication. We also tested for interaction effects between the counseling and abuse measures for withdrawing communication. Among wives who found premarital counseling very helpful, higher levels of physical abuse increased the use of withdrawing-based communication.

We find only limited support for our hypothesis that covenant marriage and premarital counseling would mediate the relationship between childhood abuse and negative communication patterns. Covenant marriage was not related significantly to hostile or withdrawing communication for wives and increased the use of withdrawing communication among husbands. Importantly, premarital counseling does not temper the effects of childhood abuse on hostile communication for either wives or husbands. But, premarital counseling is associated with increases in the use of withdrawing communication for both wives and husbands.

#### *Control Variables*

We conclude with our results from our control variables. Both wives and husbands who had parents that were either divorced, separated, or never married to each other use less hostile communication than those whose parents were continuously married to each other. Mothers' education is associated with husbands' hostile communication; as husbands whose mothers had at least some college are more likely to use hostile communication. For wives, cohabitation is related positively to hostile communication. Wives who had at least one child at the start of

marriage are more likely to use hostile communication compared to those who have no children at the start of marriage. Standardized religiosity is associated negatively with hostile communication for both wives and husbands. Both traditional gender role attitudes and husband's income increase the likelihood of using hostile communication for husbands. Furthermore, husbands who have more traditional gender role attitudes than their wives use hostile communication more often. Husbands with at least a high school education use hostile communication less frequently than husbands with less than a high school education. Wife's age is negatively associated with hostile communication for both wives and husbands.

We see different patterns of results for our control variables for withdrawing communication. Parents' marital history and mother's education were not associated with withdrawing communication for either wives or husbands. We find that husbands who received public assistance while growing up use withdrawing styles of communication less often than those who did not receive public assistance, but this relationship is not significant for wives. Cohabiting just together increases withdrawing communication compared to no cohabitation for husbands. For wives, all other forms of cohabitation increase withdrawing communication. Husbands in marriages in which both partners were previously divorced use withdrawing communication less frequently than husbands in marriages in which neither partner was previously divorced. Husbands with at least one child at the start of marriage are more likely to use withdrawing communication compared to husbands with no children at the start of marriage. Wives' traditional gender role attitudes increase withdrawing communication. Additionally, wives whose husbands have higher levels of gender role traditionalism than their wives also use withdrawing communication more frequently.

To conclude, we summarize our major findings. We find strong support for our hypothesis that childhood abuse would increase the use of hostile communication for wives and husbands. We find only limited support for withdrawing communication, as only wives are influenced by the occurrence of childhood abuse. Constraints tests reveal that there are no gendered differences in the effects of childhood abuse on communication patterns. Therefore, we find no support for our second hypothesis. Finally, we find mixed support for whether covenant marriage and premarital counseling temper the effects of childhood abuse on negative communication patterns. Covenant marriage did not reduce the use of hostile communication among wives or husbands. But, covenant husbands are more likely to withdraw from conflict during disagreements compared to standard husbands. Premarital counseling has no effect on wives' or husbands' hostile communication, but does increase the use of withdrawing communication among wives and husbands.

### **Discussion**

Our results find support for the intergenerational transmission of violence via marital dysfunction. We use multiple measures of childhood abuse and find that the experience of childhood abuse does influence maladaptive marital communication patterns. Consistent with Kalmuss (1984), we find support for using a specific model, rather than a generalized model when examining the effects of childhood abuse. For both wives and husbands, the occurrence of verbal abuse in childhood increases the likelihood of hostile communication. Witnessing aggressive, volatile communication in childhood does appear to increase the likelihood of using hostile communication during marital disagreements. For wives, physical abuse increases, while verbal abuse decreases withdrawing communication. Using the general model of childhood abuse (examining whether *any* abuse occurred during childhood), we found no significant.

Covenant marriage and premarital counseling are not related significantly to hostile communication for wives or husbands. However, covenant husbands are more likely to use withdrawing-based communication than standard husbands. Premarital counseling is associated with increased use of withdrawing communication for both wives and husbands, which might be a potentially positive strategy for managing conflict. Overall, our results indicate that legal efforts to strengthen marriage do not buffer against the negative interpersonal consequences of childhood abuse, in terms of marital communication. Covenant marriage, in and of itself, does not eliminate negative childhood experiences.

Future research needs to examine the specific mechanisms that lead to withdrawing from conflict. Future studies should determine when withdrawing from conflict is a positive behavior versus a negative behavior. Additionally, family practitioners and researchers need to explore the reasons why premarital counseling does not temper the negative effects of childhood abuse on hostile marital communication. Policy makers and practitioners may wish to focus more extensively on how to resolve the issues that couples bring into their newly-formed marriages.

A limitation of this study is the retrospective reporting of childhood abuse. Our results may be skewed because of recall bias within the childhood abuse measures. Using data from a longitudinal study that included a sample of girls seen in a hospital after a report of child abuse, Williams (1994) found that 12% of known childhood abuse victims did not report child abuse in later waves. Other research using prospective studies have also found patterns of not reporting child abuse in adulthood (Widom & Morris 1997; Widom & Shepard 1996). Because we use retrospective measures, we may not have captured all those who experienced child abuse.

Additionally, respondents may have inaccurate accounts of their parents' conflict. Despite these



limitations, we find a robust relationship between the occurrence of childhood violence and the future use of negative marital communication patterns.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics - All Variables (N=451 Couples)

	Wife Mean	Std. Dev	Husband Mean	Std. Dev
<b>Communication Styles</b>				
Hostile Communication	1.18	1.26	0.86	1.00
Withdrawing Communication	1.23	1.12	1.40	1.11
<b>Childhood Abuse</b>				
Any Abuse	2.34	3.11	1.78	2.58
Extreme Abuse	0.77	1.41	0.46	1.10
Physical Abuse	0.33	0.80	0.21	0.54
Verbal Abuse	1.07	1.44	0.83	1.24
Parental Conflict	0.94	1.33	0.74	1.15
<b>Childhood Problems</b>				
Major Childhood Problems Index	0.69	1.16	0.44	0.97
<b>Family Background</b>				
Parents Continuously Married	0.60		0.60	
Parents Divorced, Separated or Never Married to Each Other	0.40		0.40	
Mother Less than High School	0.12		0.14	
Mother High School Graduate	0.53		0.49	
Mother Some College	0.14		0.13	
Mother College Graduate	0.21		0.25	
Received Public Assistance	0.12		0.11	
Did Not Receive Public Assistance	0.88		0.89	
<b>Marital, Cohabitation, and Parenthood Histories</b>				
Cohabited Just Together	0.14		0.14	
All Other Cohabitations	0.49		0.49	
Neither Partner Cohabited	0.37		0.37	
Either Partner Previously Divorced	0.38		0.38	
Both Partners Previously Divorced	0.20		0.20	
Neither Partner Previously Divorced	0.62		0.62	
At Least One Child at Marriage Start	0.31		0.31	
More than One Child at Marriage Start	0.11		0.11	
No Children at Marriage Start	0.69		0.69	
Premarital Troubles	2.48	1.35	2.41	1.41
Covenant Marriage	0.47		0.47	
Standard Marriage	0.53		0.53	
<b>Traditional Behaviors and Attitudes</b>				
Standardized Religiosity Index	0.14	3.96	0.07	4.10
Traditional Gender Role Attitudes	7.84	4.37	8.55	4.03
Husband's Income	32224	20766	32224	20766
Wife Full Time Employment	0.62		0.62	
Wife Part Time Employment	0.15		0.15	
Wife Other Working Status	0.23		0.23	
<b>Power Differentials</b>				
Patriarchal Husbands	0.15		0.15	
Non-Patriarchal Husbands	0.85		0.85	
Wife Earns at Least 80% of Husband's Income	0.38		0.38	
Wife Earns Less than 80% of Husband's Income	0.62		0.62	
<b>Sociodemographic Controls</b>				
Wife's Age	28.90	8.22	28.90	8.22
Less than High School	0.03		0.05	
High School Graduate	0.32		0.36	
Some College	0.25		0.22	
College Graduate	0.39		0.37	
Both Partners Black	0.09		0.09	
Both Partners Other Race	0.11		0.11	
Both Partner White	0.80		0.80	

Table 2. Wives' and Husbands' Childhood Abuse Measures Predicting Hostile Communication, Net of All Controls in Final Nested Model

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	Wives		Husbands		Wives		Husbands		Wives		Husbands	
	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error
<b>Childhood Abuse</b>												
Extreme Abuse	0.20 ***	0.05	0.08	0.05								
Any Abuse					0.11 ***	0.02	0.04 †	0.03				
<b>Specific Forms:</b>												
Physical Abuse									0.06	0.08	0.09	0.10
Verbal Abuse									0.16 **	0.06	0.09 †	0.06
Parental Conflict									0.07	0.06	-0.03	0.06

Note: N=451

†=0.10, \*p=0.05, \*\*p=0.01, \*\*\*p=0.001

Table 3. Seemingly Unrelated Regression Model for Predictors of Hostile Communication, All Controls

	Wife $\beta$	Std. Error	Husband $\beta$	Std. Error
<b>Intercept</b>	1.73 ***	0.50	1.11 **	0.37
<b>Childhood Abuse</b>				
Physical Abuse	0.06	0.08	0.09	0.10
Verbal Abuse	0.16 **	0.06	0.09 †	0.06
Parental Conflict	0.07	0.06	-0.03	0.06
<b>Childhood Problems</b>				
Major Childhood Problems Index	-0.02	0.06	0.10 †	0.06
<b>Family Background</b>				
Parents Divorced, Separated or Never Married to Each	-0.28 *	0.12	-0.24 *	0.10
Mother High School Graduate <sup>b</sup>	-0.28	0.18	0.20	0.14
Mother Some College	-0.31	0.22	0.41 *	0.17
Mother College Graduate	-0.22	0.21	0.33 *	0.16
Received Public Assistance	0.10	0.17	-0.10	0.15
<b>Marital, Cohabitation, and Parenthood Histories</b>				
Cohabited Just Together <sup>c</sup>	0.40 *	0.18	0.22	0.15
All Other Cohabitations	0.55 ***	0.16	0.00	0.13
Either Partner Previously Divorced <sup>d</sup>	-0.26	0.19	-0.15	0.15
Both Partners Previously Divorced	0.40 †	0.21	0.18	0.17
At Least One Child at Marriage Start	-0.06	0.15	0.10	0.12
More than One Child at Marriage Start	-0.10	0.21	-0.07	0.17
Premarital Troubles	0.06	0.04	0.04	0.03
Covenant Marriage	0.01	0.13	0.11	0.11
<b>Traditional Behaviors and Attitudes</b>				
Standardized Religiosity Index	-0.03 †	0.02	-0.04 **	0.01
Traditional Gender Role Attitudes	0.01	0.01	0.03 *	0.01
Husband's Income	0.00	0.00	0.00 †	0.00
Wife Full Time Employment <sup>e</sup>	-0.06	0.14	0.08	0.12
Wife Part Time Employment	0.16	0.19	-0.06	0.15
<b>Power Differentials</b>				
Patriarchal Husbands <sup>f</sup>	0.21	0.16	0.24 †	0.13
High Earning Wives <sup>g</sup>	0.05	0.14	0.17	0.11
<b>Sociodemographic Controls</b>				
High School Graduate <sup>h</sup>	0.36	0.31	-0.40 †	0.21
Some College	0.24	0.32	-0.52 *	0.22
College Graduate	0.44	0.32	-0.60 **	0.22
Wife's Age	-0.05 ***	0.01	-0.03 **	0.00
Both Partners Black <sup>i</sup>	0.01	0.21	-0.12	0.17
Both Partners Other Race	-0.19	0.18	0.00	0.14
F Statistic	3.09 ***		2.76 ***	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.18		0.16	

Note: N = 451

†p&lt;0.10 \*p&lt;0.05 \*\*p&lt;0.01 \*\*\*p&lt;0.001 (two-tail test)

Excluded categories are (a) mother less than high school, (b) parents continuously married to each other, (c) neither partner ever cohabited, (d) neither partner ever divorced, (e) wife other work status, (f) husband's gender role attitudes are less than one standard deviation away from wife's gender role attitudes, (g) wife earns less than 80% of husband's income, (h) less than high school education, (i) both partners white

Table 4. Wives' and Husbands' Childhood Abuse Measures Predicting Withdrawing Communication, Net of All Controls in Final Nested Model

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	Wives		Husbands		Wives		Husbands		Wives		Husbands	
	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$	Std. Error
<b>Childhood Abuse</b>												
Extreme Abuse	0.07	0.05	0.04	0.06								
Any Abuse					0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.03				
<b>Specific Forms:</b>												
Physical Abuse									0.23 **	0.08	0.05	0.12
Verbal Abuse									-0.11 †	0.06	-0.08	0.07
Parental Conflict									0.04	0.06	0.03	0.07

Note: N=451

†=0.10, \*p=0.05, \*\*p=0.01, \*\*\*p=0.001



Table 5. Seemingly Unrelated Regression Model for Predictors of Withdrawing Communication, All Controls

	Wife $\beta$	Std. Error	Husband $\beta$	Std. Error
<b>Intercept</b>	0.84 †	0.49	1.66 ***	0.44
<b>Childhood Abuse</b>				
Physical Abuse	0.23 **	0.08	0.05	0.12
Verbal Abuse	-0.11 †	0.06	-0.08	0.07
Parental Conflict	0.04	0.06	0.03	0.07
<b>Childhood Problems</b>				
Major Childhood Problems Index	-0.02	0.06	0.04	0.07
<b>Family Background</b>				
Parents Divorced, Separated or Never Married to Each	0.16	0.12	-0.20	0.12
Mother High School Graduate <sup>b</sup>	0.05	0.18	-0.15	0.17
Mother Some College	0.21	0.22	0.00	0.21
Mother College Graduate	0.07	0.21	-0.26	0.19
Received Public Assistance	-0.05	0.17	-0.32 †	0.18
<b>Marital, Cohabitation, and Parenthood Histories</b>				
Cohabited Just Together <sup>c</sup>	-0.12	0.17	0.39 *	0.17
All Other Cohabitations	-0.36 *	0.15	0.17	0.16
Either Partner Previously Divorced <sup>d</sup>	0.32 †	0.18	-0.21	0.18
Both Partners Previously Divorced	0.04	0.20	-0.36 †	0.20
At Least One Child at Marriage Start	-0.06	0.14	0.29 *	0.14
More than One Child at Marriage Start	0.00	0.20	0.04	0.20
Premarital Troubles	0.00	0.04	0.03	0.04
Covenant Marriage	0.00	0.13	0.23 †	0.12
<b>Traditional Behaviors and Attitudes</b>				
Standardized Religiosity Index	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.02
Traditional Gender Role Attitudes	0.02 †	0.14	0.01	0.02
Husband's Income	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Wife Full Time Employment <sup>e</sup>	-0.08	0.14	-0.21	0.13
Wife Part Time Employment	-0.06	0.18	-0.01	0.18
<b>Power Differentials</b>				
Patriarchal Husbands <sup>f</sup>	0.31 *	0.16	0.03	0.16
High Earning Wives <sup>g</sup>	0.16	0.13	-0.04	0.12
<b>Sociodemographic Controls</b>				
High School Graduate <sup>h</sup>	0.16	0.31	-0.13	0.26
Some College	-0.07	0.32	-0.15	0.27
College Graduate	-0.19	0.32	-0.23	0.27
Wife's Age	0.01	-0.01	0.00	0.01
Both Partners Black <sup>i</sup>	-0.20	0.20	0.20	0.20
Both Partners Other Race	-0.07	0.17	0.11	0.17
F Statistic	1.18		1.45 †	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.08		0.09	

Note: N = 451

†p&lt;0.10 \*p&lt;0.05 \*\*p&lt;0.01 \*\*\*p&lt;0.001 (two-tail test)

Excluded categories are (a) mother less than high school, (b) parents continuously married to each other, (c) neither partner ever cohabited, (d) neither partner ever divorced, (e) wife other work status, (f) husband's gender role attitudes are less than one standard deviation away from wife's gender role attitudes, (g) wife earns less than 80% of husband's income, (h) less than high school education, (i) both partners white