Making Sense of Family Violence
Implications of Children’s Appraisals of Interparental Aggression for Their Short- and Long-Term Functioning

Gregory M. Fosco, Renee L. DeBoard, and John H. Grych
Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

Abstract. Children who are exposed to interparental violence are at risk for a host of adjustment problems, but little is known about the processes that explain why children from violent families develop different patterns of adjustment. In this paper, we examine the role that children’s perceptions and interpretations of aggression may play in shaping the impact of interparental violence on their short- and long-term functioning. Appraisals of interparental conflict have been linked to children’s emotional and behavioral responses to conflict as well as their adjustment more broadly and offer a mechanism for understanding diverse outcomes in children who witness violence in the home. We explore how the appraisal process may differ in violent versus conflictual but nonviolent interactions, consider contextual factors that may influence this process, and outline directions for research investigating how children perceive and make sense of violence in intimate relationships.

Keywords: domestic violence, child adjustment, appraisals, parental aggression, children’s coping

Much of the research on children living in violent families has focused on describing the nature and severity of their adjustment problems. This work clearly shows that this is a population at high risk for the development of psychopathology. Studies of children residing in battered women’s shelters indicate that approximately two-thirds exhibit significant levels of clinical symptomatology (e.g., Grych, Jouriles, Swank, McDonald, & Norwood, 2000). However, the type and severity of their symptoms vary widely. Some children display elevated levels of externalizing problems, others report symptoms of internalizing disorders, some exhibit both types of problems, and approximately one-third do not demonstrate any psychopathology. Witnessing family violence also predicts higher levels of abuse in dating, marital, and parent-child relationships later in life, though the majority of children exposed to violence do not appear to abuse their partners or children (for a review see Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, & Peters, 2001).

The challenge for researchers now is to identify the mechanisms that lead to these diverse developmental pathways in children from violent homes. There is a pressing need to build conceptual models that can explain why some children exhibit symptoms of psychopathology while others do not, and why some repeat the cycle of violence while others are able to break it. Various theoretical perspectives have been applied to the study of family violence, including ecological (e.g., Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003), trauma (e.g., Rossman, 1998; Wolfe, Wekerle, Scott, Straatman, & Grasley, 2004), attachment (e.g., Wolfe, Wekerle, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 1998), and social learning (e.g., Graham-Bermann, 1998; Riggs & O’Leary, 1996), and while each offers some insight into the sequelae of family violence, none has been able to account for the range of outcomes observed in children.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore how studying children’s perceptions and interpretations of family violence can contribute to understanding the short- and long-term problems observed in many of these children. Drawing on the cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990), we propose that children’s efforts to understand the causes and consequences of interparental aggression have important implications for their social and emotional functioning. Research on marital conflict indicates that children’s appraisals are related to their emotional and behavioral responses to conflict and serve to mediate the association between their exposure to parental discord and adjustment problems. We examine the applicability of this model to violent family interactions, suggest modifications to the model that better represent the experiences of children who witness interparental violence, and consider contextual factors that may influence the appraisal process.

Cognitive-Contextual Framework

The cognitive-contextual framework proposes that children’s appraisals, or subjective evaluations, mediate the effects of interparental conflict on their adjustment (Grych & Fincham, 1990). This model argues that when children...
witness a conflictual interaction they attempt to understand how it may affect them (perceived threat), why it is happening (attribution), and what they can do in response (coping efficacy). In short, their appraisals reflect the *meaning* of the interaction to them. Other models of the impact of interparental conflict on children similarly stress that children’s perceptions and interpretations of discord are important for shaping its effects (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994). These models consistently hold that the impact of conflict is magnified when children view it as a threat to themselves, their parents, or their family. Although constructs like “appraisal” and “meaning” often are viewed in purely cognitive terms, they are suffused with affect (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001). For example, appraising an interaction as threatening involves both the perception of danger and the emotion of fear, and self-blame reflects an attribution of responsibility and feelings like guilt and sadness. The cognitive-contextual framework, thus, is consistent with functional models of emotion that view emotion and cognition as inseparable in the process of making meaning from salient events (e.g., Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989).

The framework also describes factors that are proposed to shape children’s perceptions of threat, attributions, and coping efficacy. First, the way that the conflict is expressed is important. Not surprisingly, as disagreements become increasingly angry and aggressive, children report higher levels of threat, lower levels of coping efficacy, and are more likely to believe that they are responsible for causing or helping to stop the conflict (for a review, see Grych & Fincham, 2001). Disagreements that concern a child-related issue also lead to increased self-blame and greater coping efficacy, perhaps because children believe that they can help resolve conflicts that involve them in some way (e.g., Grych, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1993). Children’s appraisals also are influenced by contextual factors that include characteristics of the child and family, such as level of positive and negative affect expressed in the family (Fosco & Grych, in press) and children’s prior exposure to parental conflict (e.g., Grych, 1998). For example, several studies show that children who have witnessed high levels of interparental discord become sensitized to later conflictual interactions, exhibiting elevated levels of negative affect and perceived threat in response to parental disagreements (e.g., Cummings, Pellegrini, Notarius, & Cummings, 1989; Grych, 1998). Some studies have also found gender differences in children’s appraisals of conflict, with girls appearing to be more sensitive to the expression of discord and its potential implications for family relationships (see Davies & Lindsey, 2001). Finally, children’s age is also predicted to influence the way children perceive, evaluate, and cope with parental disputes (e.g., Jouriles, Spiller, Stephens, McDonald, & Swank, 2000). Most research on children’s appraisals has focused on children from 8 to 12 years old, but evidence supports the link between appraisals and adjustment in children as young as 6 years old (McDonald & Grych, 2006) as well as adolescents (Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums, & Lendich, 1999).

Appraisals are proposed to have both immediate effects on children’s response to conflict and on their functioning more broadly. Perceptions of threat, coping efficacy, and blame guide children’s coping efforts and, if conflict is frequent, affect their broader psychological adjustment. Moreover, there appears to be some specificity in the links between particular appraisals and particular kinds of adjustment problems. Studies of children from the US (e.g., Grych et al., 2000), Canada (e.g., Kerig, 1998), Australia (e.g., Dadds et al., 1999), and the UK (Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003) consistently show that children’s appraisals of threat are related to internalizing problems but not externalizing problems (Grych et al., 2003), whereas attributions of self-blame predict both internalizing and externalizing problems (e.g., Dadds et al., 1999; Grych et al., 2003). Most of this work is cross-sectional, but recent longitudinal data support appraisals as a pathway through which interparental conflict gives rise to child maladjustment (Grych et al., 2003).

The cognitive-contextual framework originally was developed to understand children’s responses to interparental conflict rather than violence. Empirical investigations of the framework typically have utilized community samples that report fairly low levels of interparental violence, what Johnson and colleagues have termed “common couple violence” (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). This type of domestic violence often results from the escalation of a verbal disagreement into mild forms of aggression (such as pushing and grabbing) and tends to occur more frequently than other forms of violence, such as those characterized by control and dominance (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). The generalizability of the cognitive-contextual framework to more severe and chronic forms of domestic violence rarely has been examined. These studies of violent families indicate that threat and self-blame appraisals mediate the association between interparental conflict and child maladjustment in severely violent families as well (Grych et al., 2000; Jouriles et al., 2000), but none has systematically explored the way that children perceive violent as opposed to conflictual interactions between parents. Violence clearly presents a more significant threat to health and safety, and any effort that children make to intervene carries much greater risk.

Another fundamental difference is the gendered nature of chronic domestic violence. Whereas both men and women may exhibit hostility and occasionally engage in mild forms of physical aggression during a disagreement, men usually are the perpetrators of repeated, severe forms of aggression (e.g., Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Moreover, even when men and women engage in what is nominally the same act, such as slapping or shoving their partner, there is much greater potential for men to harm women than vice versa, owing to gender differences in size and strength (Straus, 1990). These differences suggest that the cognitive-contextual framework requires some modification to
better capture the experiences of children from violent homes.

In the next section, we consider how children’s appraisals of threat, coping efficacy, and attributions of blame may differ in the context of domestic violence and describe another type of appraisal, perception of the justifiability of aggression, that we propose to be important in this context. Specifically, we examine how the occurrence of violence may affect each type of appraisal and discuss its potential impact on children’s functioning. In addition to guiding children’s immediate response to domestic violence, appraisals are proposed to shape their beliefs and expectations about aggression and about close relationships more generally, which in turn, are proposed to influence their interactions with peers and romantic partners. Depending on how they perceive and interpret violent family interactions, some children are expected to perpetuate aggressive behavior and behave in domineering, controlling, and abusive ways, whereas others may become anxious or depressed, and may avoid close relationships.

Perceived Threat

In the cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990), the initial step in appraising conflict is evaluating whether it is relevant or threatening to the child. Whereas many parental disagreements may engender relatively little concern or anxiety in nonviolent families, witnessing domestic violence is a frightening and confusing event for children. Violence presents a real and immediate threat to the health and safety of their mother (and possibly father*) and the child also may become a target of abuse (Appel & Holden, 1998). Accurately perceiving threat in the environment is adaptive because it motivates and guides coping behavior, and so elevated threat appraisals would be normative and functional in an objectively dangerous situation (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001). However, repeatedly experiencing high levels of threat may have adverse implications for psychological health and interpersonal functioning, and children’s vulnerability to the processes described below is expected to rise with continued exposure to domestic violence.

The threat that violence poses may be overwhelming for some children, producing a level of physiological and affective arousal that they cannot effectively manage. In addition to causing intense anxiety at the time, exposure to domestic violence may sensitize children to stress and undermine their capacity to regulate their affect; this sensitization effect has even been documented in infants (DeJonge, Bogat, Levendosky, von Eye, & Davidson, 2005). Difficulty regulating emotion in turn is likely to increase children’s risk of developing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Grych et al., 2000; Scheeringa & Zeanah, 1995). The mechanism underlying this effect is not clear. It may be that children from violent homes develop expectations that angry interactions will escalate into physical aggression, and they may feel anxious, helpless, or depressed as a result (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001). Davies and Cummings (1994) argue that increased emotional reactivity arises from perceived threats to children’s emotional security; if normative levels of parental conflict undermine children’s sense of stability and harmony in the family, violence is likely to be perceived as much more threatening, particularly if it results in injury, leads to mothers and children seeking shelter outside of the home, or results in the arrest of the perpetrator. There also may be a biological component to the mechanism underlying sensitization; evidence is accumulating from human and animal studies indicating that exposure to severe stress affects the development of neurobiological regulatory systems such as the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the limbic-hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (LHPA) axis (e.g., DeBellis, 2001), resulting in greater reactivity to later stressors.

Witnessing violence between parents also may lead children to become hypervigilant to signs of anger and conflict in relationships outside of the family and to appraise them as more threatening than the situation would warrant. This sensitivity may generalize to interactions with peers as well, and could lead children to perceive hostility and threat in ambiguous situations (Dodge & Crick, 1990). Misinterpreting the motives and behavior of peers, in turn, increases the likelihood of reactive aggression (Dodge & Crick, 1990). When they begin dating, highly sensitized youths similarly may be overvigilant to signs of anger from their partner and may respond aggressively or, alternatively, try to avoid conflict and discord in their relationships in an effort to prevent violence from occurring. Although the latter strategy may be effective for limiting their exposure to anger, it would make it difficult to resolve the disagreements that arise in any close relationship and undermine the development of intimacy.

Coping Efficacy

Because of the greater threat that violence poses relative to normative levels of conflict, children’s coping efficacy is likely to be particularly salient in violent homes. Whereas children often may be capable of responding appropriately to a parental disagreement, they may feel powerless to cope when violence occurs. They may have strong impulses to stop the abuse but lack the size and strength to physically intervene, and may put themselves at risk for being hurt if...
they try. The resulting anxiety is likely to be especially intense for children who have repeatedly seen their fathers abuse their mothers, who are confronted with a choice between protecting themselves by leaving the situation and protecting their mothers by trying to stop the violence. Intervention programs designed for children from violent families often address this dilemma by teaching children how to get help from appropriate adults, either by finding someone who could intervene or by calling emergency services (Peled, 1998).

If children are repeatedly exposed to domestic violence, the inability to respond effectively could promote continuing symptoms of anxiety or depression or lead to a pervasive sense of inadequacy or helplessness. This could manifest itself in later romantic relationships through avoidance of conflict or anger, or the failure to develop effective strategies for resolving interpersonal problems. Unlike threat appraisals, there has been relatively little research on children’s coping efficacy in response to interparental conflict and even less in response to violence; consequently, the implications of these appraisals for child functioning are not well understood. The lack of data arises in part because appraisals of threat and coping efficacy tend to be highly correlated and are often combined into a single scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). Recent data suggest that it is important to examine coping efficacy and threat separately (e.g., Gerard, Buehler, Franck, & Anderson, 2005), which may be particularly true in the context of domestic violence, where children’s ability to cope effectively may moderate the effect of threat appraisals on their adjustment.

**Attributions of Blame**

Understanding why a conflictual interaction is occurring can guide behavioral responses and help children predict when a similar disagreement may arise (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Nearly all of the research on children’s attributions for interparental conflict has focused on the extent to which children blame themselves for causing conflict, but in violent homes children may take on the responsibility to prevent violence from occurring. This may be particularly true in situations where violence is chronic and severe; even if children do not believe that they are the cause of their father’s behavior, they may blame themselves for failing to protect their mother. Although there is anecdotal evidence on this point, empirical research on children’s beliefs about the causes of family violence and their role in avoiding or ending it is needed to better understand its impact on their functioning.

Children’s perceptions of the cause of domestic violence also may have significant implications for family functioning and beliefs about close relationships more broadly (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001). Children who blame one parent for causing violence may become more hostile toward or disengaged from that parent, and may side with the other parent when conflicts arise (Grych, 1998). Although it might seem intuitive that the aggressor would be blamed for violence, it is possible that children at times may blame the victim. Since children often are told that they are punished because they did something wrong, young children in particular might think that the victim did something to deserve the violence and blame them for instigating it (Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefer, & Klockow, 2002).

**Perceptions of the Justifiability of Aggression**

The appraisals described in the cognitive-contextual framework were intended to reflect children’s interpretation of interparental conflict and consequently may not capture dimensions that are more specific to violence per se. One dimension of appraisals that may be particularly salient in the context of violence is the degree to which it is perceived as justified or acceptable (Marcus, Lindahl, & Malik, 2001; Riggs & O’Leary, 1996). If children view a violent act as normative or acceptable, they may be less distressed by it and more likely to develop the belief that aggression can be appropriate or effective in close relationships. In contrast, perceiving violence as wrong may affect both children’s response in the situation and their relationship with the perpetrator. Judging violence to be acceptable runs counter to explicit messages children receive about their own behavior; from early in life, children are taught not to hit or hurt others, a message reinforced in children’s books, television programs, and movies. In cases where their mothers are victims of violence and the perpetrators are men that children are less close to (such as a boyfriend), there may be little reason to view it as anything other than hurtful and wrong.

However, there can be more subtle, implicit messages conveyed by violence as well. If violence results in the aggressor getting his way, the parent who is victimized is perceived as the cause of the violence, or the violence is viewed as an act of self-defence, it may be considered justifiable. Children also face a dilemma if violence is perpetrated by someone they love. The paucity of data on children’s perceptions of violent fathers makes it impossible to know how this relationship affects children’s understanding of violence, but a recent study provides an interesting perspective on this issue. Cater (2005) interviewed 10 children residing in a shelter for battered women in Sweden and asked them about their views of their father (who was the perpetrator), their beliefs about the acceptability of aggression, and why they think their father acted violently toward their mother. This study identified three ways children described reconciling the dissonance between their positive regard for their fathers and the belief that violence is wrong: Some children viewed their fathers in a positive light by downplaying their fathers’ violent behavior, other children concluded that acting violently made their fathers...
bad people, and some children described their fathers as generally good people who occasionally did bad things. Although the sample was too small to conduct statistical analyses, this study illustrates different ways that children can make meaning of domestic violence and may shed light on cognitive processes that lead some children to view violent acts as acceptable.

Children’s perceptions of the acceptability of violence also may affect their behavior in other interpersonal relationships. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1973) suggests that children who frequently witness violence in the home may come to perceive it as a normative way to resolve disagreements with others, especially if it results in some gain for the perpetrator, and argues that the behavior of the same-sex parent is especially salient to children (Goodman, Barfoot, Frye, & Belli, 1999; Marcus et al., 2001). Work by Marcus and colleagues (2001) supports this hypothesis, showing that perceptions of aggression as normative mediated the association between interparental conflict and teacher reports of aggressive behavior in elementary school-aged children. Beliefs about the justifiability of aggression also have been supported as mediators of abuse in adolescent dating relationships, especially for boys (Riggs & O’Leary, 1989, 1996). For example, Kinsfogel and Grych (2004) found that boys who had witnessed aggression between their parents were more likely to view aggression as justifiable in relationships, to regulate their anger poorly, and to report that their friends engaged in higher levels of abusive behavior in their romantic relationships; each of these factors, in turn, uniquely predicted higher levels of aggression toward their dating partners. Although this study is cross-sectional and did not examine specific links between adolescent gender and the level of aggression exhibited by their same-sex parent, it is consistent with the hypothesis that boys and girls may perceive interparental violence differently, and that these perceptions affect how they treat their romantic partners.

Attitudes about the justifiability of violence also provide an explanation for why some children do not perpetrate aggression in their own close relationships. Children who accurately perceive the harm caused by violence may “de-identify” with their family’s patterns of violence and be motivated to break the “cycle of violence.” Why some children would follow this path while others repeat the cycle is a critical question for further study. Perhaps these children are more attentive to or empathic with the suffering inflicted on the victim of the violence they witness or experience strong, supportive, and nonabusive relationships with a parent or other adult. The sources of resilience in children from violent homes are woefully understudied but have significant implications for prevention and intervention in this population.

In summary, we argue that children’s appraisals of threat, coping efficacy, attributions about why violence occurs, and perceptions of the justifiability of aggression are central to their efforts to make sense of domestic violence. Further, the meaning that they derive from this violence is proposed to have long-term effects on their psychological and interpersonal functioning. In the next section, we consider two related processes that also may help to explain the enduring effects of domestic violence on children’s development.

Beliefs About Close Relationships

The meaning that children derive from their experiences with violence in the family may have broader effects on the way that children perceive close relationships. Two studies using narrative tasks with young children suggest that exposure to violence can affect how they view family relationships. Shamir, Shudlich, and Cummings (2001) found that children exposed to hostile parental conflict were more likely to portray marital and parent-child interactions as negative. Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefer, and Klockow (2002) reported that children from violent families exhibited less positive representations of themselves and their mothers and portrayed interparental conflict as more likely to escalate into aggression than children from nonviolent homes (Grych et al., 2002). These data suggest that children in violent families perceive their home environment as unstable and their mothers as less nurturing and supportive (Grych et al., 2002), a perception that may in fact be accurate (Holden, Stein, Ritchie, Harris, & Jouriles, 1998).

Children’s representations or perceptions of both their mothers and fathers require further exploration, and longitudinal research is needed to determine if these perceptions change over time as violence either continues or ends. Further, it will be important to explore whether children’s perceptions of their parents are linked to behavior such as seeking support and responding to discipline.

The hypothesis that children develop representations regarding family relationships dovetails with work on attachment security in children from violent homes, which indicates that exposure to interparental aggression and violence is related to greater insecurity in parent-child attachment (e.g., Zeanah et al., 1999). The mechanism underlying this association is not well understood, but may be a result of the effects of violence on parenting quality. For example, Huth-Bocks and colleagues (2004) recently reported that environmental stressors, including domestic violence, predicted mothers’ prenatal self-representations as caregivers, which in turn predicted mother-infant attachment quality (Huth-Bocks, Levendosky, Bogat, & von Eye, 2004). However, as we discuss below, the extent to which domestic violence disrupts mothers’ parenting is not clear. Alternatively, domestic violence may have direct effects on children’s attachment, which are not mediated by parenting. Witnessing violence between caregivers may undercut children’s belief in their own safety and security and raise doubts about whether their needs will be met (e.g., Grych et al., 2002). Consequently, domestic violence may shape children’s attachment quality and working models though multiple channels.
Emotion Regulation

Attachment theory also proposes that the development of emotion regulation is an important component of a secure attachment (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1980). Over time, children who experience sensitive, responsive caregiving develop the capacity to self-soothe when they are distressed, whereas insecurely attached children have difficulty managing their emotions and may exhibit poor control over or avoidance of emotions. The potential for family violence to disrupt the development of secure attachment, therefore, also has significant implications for children's emotional functioning.

Jenkins and Oatley (1997) offer another perspective on the possible impact of domestic violence on affective processes. They propose that interactions early in life can lead to the development of emotion "organizations," or patterns of emotional responding that dominate individuals' affective experiences. For children living in violent homes, exposure to high levels of hostility and aggression may organize their emotions around anger, making it the default response to upsetting stimuli even in situations when anger is not typically elicited (Jenkins, 2000). These children may also find that expressions of anger are the most effective means of getting their needs met, and, over time, develop automatic anger responses to conflicts with others (Jenkins & Oatley, 1997). When children's reactions to others are organized by anger responses, they may be less competent at regulating them, and consequently may be at greater risk for externalizing problems (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002; Jenkins, 2000).

The few studies that have investigated affective processes in children from violent homes provide evidence for a link between interparental aggression and emotional functioning. Children who are repeatedly exposed to hostility between their parents appear to be more emotionally reactive, suggesting that these experiences undermine their ability to regulate their emotions (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1998). Emotional reactivity, in turn, has been linked to externalizing and internalizing problems (Davies & Cummings, 1998; Jenkins, 2000). The ability to regulate affect also has important implications for close relationships, and two studies have found that the experience and expression of anger mediates the association between interparental aggression and abusive behavior in adolescent romantic relationships (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; Wolfe et al., 1998). Both of these studies focused specifically on anger, and it is unclear from existing theory or research if problems in children's regulation affect all emotions or are specific to particular emotions, such as anger.

These empirical studies provide initial support for the hypothesis that children's beliefs about relationships and emotional regulation are processes by which violence may lead to long-term effects on children's functioning, but clearly much work still is needed to understand their role. In particular, longitudinal studies that can track these processes over time have the potential to illuminate the developmental sequelae of exposure to domestic violence.

Contextual Factors

The meaning of a violent interaction is influenced by more than the behaviors and affect that occur during the interaction; broader contextual factors are proposed to shape how particular behaviors are perceived and understood (Grych & Fincham, 1990). In the cognitive-contextual framework, context includes characteristics of children that affect how they view an interaction as well as family and environmental factors that provide a backdrop for the interaction. In the next section, we consider how children's age, gender, and temperament may influence their appraisals and the impact of parent-child relationships, exposure to violence in the community, and culture on their perceptions of family violence.

Child Characteristics

Child Age

As noted above, research on children from ages 6 to 18 provide evidence that conflict appraisals are linked to adjustment in children and adolescents. However, age differences in the mean levels of particular appraisals have been found. Specifically, younger children tend to experience greater threat and self-blame, and lower coping efficacy in response to parental conflict (Grych, 1998; Jouriles et al., 2000). None of these studies were conducted with samples of children from violent homes, but there is no compelling reason to believe that children exposed to family violence would exhibit different age-related patterns.

Perceiving interparental conflict as more threatening and feeling less able to respond to it effectively may reflect the fact that younger children have more limited coping resources and depend to a greater extent on their caregivers. Older children are better able to understand that they are not the cause of domestic violence and to regulate their emotions, and are more capable of leaving the home to escape conflicts (Mahoney, Jouriles, & Scavone, 1997). Young children also have a greater tendency to view aggression as an acceptable means of resolving disagreements than older children (Graham-Berman & Brescoll, 2000), and become more skilled at social problem-solving and resolving conflict with socially acceptable means as they get older (e.g., Maccoby, 1980). Living in a family characterized by domestic violence may hinder this normal developmental process because these children are faced with examples of aggressive behaviors at a time when they are learning to manage their own aggression.
Gender

Gender differences in children’s understanding of and response to interparental conflict and domestic violence have been inconsistent (e.g., Davies & Lindsey, 2001; Jouriles et al., 2000). There is some evidence that girls are more sensitive to the potential threat posed by conflict (e.g., Grych, 1998), but not all studies support this conclusion (Cummings, Davies, & Simpson, 1994). A more consistent finding is that the association between exposure to parental aggression and perceiving aggression as justifiable holds true only for boys (Kinslfoel & Grych, 2004; O’Keefe, 1997; except see Riggs & O’Leary, 1996), though again, not all studies have reported this gender difference (e.g., Marcus et al., 2001).

In evaluating the role of children’s gender in shaping their responses to domestic violence, it is important to consider the gender of the perpetrator. Children may react differently to acts of physical aggression between their parents based on whether their mother, father, or both are violent and also which parent initiated the violence. Children may be less likely to assign blame to one parent when violence between parents is reciprocal, compared to families with one aggressive parent. In addition, children may perceive a disparity in power between their parents and feel more threatened when aggression is perceived as dangerous to the less dominant parent. Children may feel less threat if aggression is more reciprocal, or if the less dominant parent initiates the violence. Thus, it is important to examine the role mothers and fathers play in the aggression that children witness to better understand how children’s gender shapes their appraisal processes.

Understanding the potential role of gender in this context will be best served by examining child and parent gender simultaneously. Given that most chronic, severe violence is perpetrated by men, it is possible that boys and girls will attend to or identify with the perpetrator and victim of violence in different ways. If so, a tendency for boys to identify with the aggressor could explain why boys who witness interparental aggression are more likely to develop the belief that aggression is justifiable in relationships than are girls, who would be expected to identify with the victim. Alternatively, both boys and girls who are repeatedly exposed to male-perpetrated domestic violence may come to perceive close relationships in terms of male power and control, view men as dominant figures in the household and believe that it is acceptable for parents to use physical violence with their children (Graham-Bermann & Brescoll, 2000). Whether they accept this state of affairs in their own relationships is another matter, however. In fact, exposure to violence in childhood could lead some women to attempt to actively control their relationships so that they do not become victims of violence. Thus, it may be necessary to investigate children’s views of power and dominance in relationships to better understand sex differences associated with interparental violence.

Temperament

Child temperament has been identified as a potential contextual factor in shaping conflict appraisals (Grych & Fincham, 1990), yet with limited data available, little is known about its role. One study provides evidence that temperamental characteristics are correlated with infant distress reactions to parental conflicts, although this relationship was not found for infants who had been exposed to domestic violence (DeJonghe et al., 2005); whereas studies with older children and adolescents have not supported a direct association between temperament and children’s reactions to interparental conflict (e.g., Davies & Windle, 2001; Rossman, Bingham, & Emde, 1997). It is possible that temperament may play an indirect role with older children, potentiating the stressful effects of interparental violence. For example, Davies and Windle (2001) found that both task orientation and rhythmicity dimensions moderated the relationship between interparental conflict and adolescent depression and delinquency. Whether temperament has a direct association with mediating processes that shape children’s adjustment to interparental violence or serves as a moderator of these intervening processes is presently unknown. Future research examining how temperament is related to children’s emotional reactivity to parental disputes will help clarify its role as a contextual factor in their resulting adjustment.

Parent-Child Relationships

The nature of children’s relationships with their parents is proposed to influence how they appraise and make meaning of domestic violence (Grych & Fincham, 1990). The degree to which parents are supportive, emotionally available, and consistent in their discipline practices may play a formative role in children’s coping responses to parental violence. However, parents’ capacity to provide this kind of care may be compromised in violent families. Interparental violence is related to child maltreatment, but its associations with other dimensions of parenting are less clear (Appel & Holden, 1998; Levendosky & Graham-Berman, 1998; Sullivan, Nguyen, Allen, Bybee, & Juras, 2000). Mothers in abusive relationships tend to report higher levels of parenting stress (Holden et al., 1998), feel less warm and effective as parents (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001) and experience problems with depression, self-esteem, and psychological distress (e.g., Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky et al., 2003), all of which have been related to poorer parenting (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 1998, 2001). However, other research indicates that mothers in abusive relationships are no more likely to engage in abusive behaviors or corporal punishment with their children than nonabused mothers (Holden et al., 1998), and in fact may exhibit high levels of positive parenting (Sullivan, Nguyen et al., 2000) and
may compensate for violence by forming more secure attachments to their children (Levendosky et al., 2003).

Fathers’ parenting in violent families rarely has been examined because studies of domestic violence typically exclude fathers for practical or ethical reasons (e.g., fathers may not be living in the home; to reduce the risk of violence to mothers). The limited evidence indicates that father maltreatment and lack of involvement with their children add to the impact of interparental violence for children (Holden et al., 1998; Holden & Ritchie, 1991), and that children’s self-concept is poorest when the perpetrator of violence is a child’s father rather than step-father or non-father-figure (Sullivan, Juras et al., 2000). Little more is known about fathers’ parenting and more research is needed to address this gap in the literature.

Regardless of how domestic violence shapes parenting behaviors, there is little doubt that parents’ ability to respond sensitively to their children is critical in tempering children’s coping with parental violence. Unfortunately, there is little empirical research on the role of parenting in shaping children’s appraisals of interparental conflict. GRYCH (1998) found that children reporting more conflictual relationships with their fathers were more likely to blame fathers for causing arguments presented in standardized interparental disagreements presented on audiotape. Further, children reported the highest levels of threat and distress in response to conflict vignettes when both interparental and father-child conflict were elevated in the family. These findings suggest that children’s own interactions with their parents influence their expectations and responses to interparental interactions and indicate that the effects of violence may be compounded for children who directly experience abuse in addition to witnessing it. Children who themselves are victims of maltreatment may correctly believe that any attempt to intervene in a parental conflict could result in harm to them. In addition, parent-child abuse may foster self-blaming attributions for domestic violence if children believe that their bad behaviors warranted physical discipline and caused marital problems. Similarly, when children are the victims of violence, they may be more likely to view violence as an acceptable form of emotional expression or conflict resolution (O’Keefe, 1997).

Parents who are sensitive and responsive to their children’s emotional needs may help children develop resources for coping with parental conflict. One way parents can do this is through emotion coaching (Katz & Gottman, 1997). Parents who use children’s negative affect as an opportunity for teaching, who validate and label their children’s affect, and help their children deal with upsetting situations successfully can buffer children from maladjustment associated with domestic violence (Katz & Wind-ecker-Nelson, 2006). It may be that emotion-coaching enhances children’s skills at regulating their emotions, making them better able to cope with stressful situations (Katz & Gottman, 1997). In another vein, children who are able to form secure attachments to their caregivers early in life have the greatest likelihood for experiencing their parents as emotionally available and feeling able to seek comfort when they are feeling distressed throughout their childhood (Fraley, 2002). Maintaining a positive, emotionally nurturing relationship with at least one parent may help diminish the degree to which children feel threatened, anxious, or unable to cope.

Community Violence

An ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) highlights the importance of considering contextual factors that extend beyond the family. Of particular relevance is the degree to which children and adolescents are exposed to violence outside of the family. A growing body of research demonstrates an association between exposure to community violence and a host of psychological problems, such as depression (Martinez & Richters, 1993), trauma symptoms, anger, and anxiety problems (Eckert, Schumante, & Haden, 2006; Singer, Anglin, Song, & Lungthofer, 1995), and externalizing problems (Scarpa et al., 2006). Community violence may affect children’s perceptions and responses to domestic violence in two primary ways. First, it may provide further support for the belief that aggression is a normative part of interpersonal relationships. Second, it may contribute to children’s sensitization to violence in the family by further undermining their ability to regulate affect.

Culture

Perhaps the least studied dimension of context concerns cultural beliefs and values regarding violence in relationships. It is impossible to sufficiently address cultural factors within the limits of this paper, but it is critical to consider its importance (for a review, see Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004). A family’s culture, religious values, and personal and community conceptions of violence and discipline contribute not only to children’s, but also parents’ opinions of what is normal and justifiable behavior and, therefore, the very definition of abuse (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004). A child who is part of a community that is more accepting of physical punishment of children may be less likely to feel that they have been abused because the behaviors they have experienced may not be uncommon or regarded as unacceptable. Considering the differences in views of abuse, children of different cultural backgrounds may perceive interparental violence as more or less normative, affecting the degree to which it is upsetting or necessary to engage in attributional processing. Cultural and community views of violence may also influence children’s propensity to develop beliefs that aggression is justified and acceptable within relationships. Finally, different cultures may have different display rules for emotional expression (Sue & Sue, 2003). Particular display rules may shape the way children view the emotional expressions that
occur during parental conflicts. Children may find their parents’ expressions of emotions that are regarded as less acceptable in their culture to be particularly distressing.

Children’s cultural background is a variable that is expected to contribute to the meaning domestic violence has for children; however, the ways in which this is true are relatively unknown. The few studies that have given consideration to cultural factors have been limited to multicultural group comparison designs and have produced inconsistent results (O’Keefe, 1998). This form of analysis conceptualizes culture as group membership and does not account for how people view aggression, the different base rates of exposure to aggression, or the degree of acculturation in one’s cultural group. These factors will undoubtedly shape the relationship between witnessing aggression and forming normative beliefs about aggression within cultural groups and are a necessary component to understanding the cultural contribution to beliefs about violence.

**Conclusion**

Given the diverse range of adverse outcomes for children exposed to domestic violence, it is important to develop models that facilitate understanding of why children develop specific adjustment problems. We believe that progress in studying these processes will be best advanced through an integrative, theory-based approach that considers how cognitions, emotions, and behavior are interrelated. Focusing on the meaning that violence holds for children offers one such integrative approach. We suggest that children’s immediate and enduring evaluations of violence provide insight into the short- and long-term sequelae of living in violent homes. Appraisals such as threat, self-blame, coping efficacy, and justifiability of parental aggression may shape children’s immediate responses to parental violence, and, over time, children may develop more stable beliefs about aggression in relationships, patterns of emotion regulation, and representations of their families that guide their behaviors. Further, this paper highlights the need for understanding the context in which children witness parental violence to develop a more complete understanding of these appraisals. Perhaps the most prominent gap in the literature is found in the scarcity of knowledge about the interrelation between children’s appraisals and parent-child relationships, cultural factors, and gender. It is our hope that questions posed in this paper serve to provoke further research investigating the complex nature of children’s appraisals of interparental violence.

**References**


Gerard, J.M., Buehler, C., Franck, K., & Anderson, O. (2005). In the eyes of the beholder: Cognitive appraisals as mediators of


Martinez, P., & Richters, J.E. (1993). The NIMH community vi-

About the authors

Gregory Fosco, M.S., is a graduate student in clinical psychology at Marquette University. His research interests focus on the role of family dynamics and emotional processes that shape the impact of interparental conflict and family violence on children’s development.

Renee DeBoard, B.A., is a graduate student in clinical psychology at Marquette University. Her research interests focus on factors that help children demonstrate positive adaptation despite exposure to domestic violence.

John Grych, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Psychology at Marquette University. His primary research interests focus on the impact of interparental conflict and family violence on children’s socioemotional development.

John H. Grych

Department of Psychology
Marquette University
P.O. Box 1881
Milwaukee, WI 53201-1881
USA
Tel. +1 414 288-7460
E-mail john.grych@marquette.edu