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## Social isolation from communities and child maltreatment: a cross-cultural comparison<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The aim of this study is to determine: (1) the differences between Spanish and Colombian cultures in relation to community social support variables, and (2) the relationships between community social support variables and child maltreatment in both cultures.

**Method:** The study was based on 670 nonabusive families and 166 abusive families. The parents were asked to complete the Community Social Support Questionnaire. This instrument measures community social support in terms of Community Integration and Satisfaction, membership in voluntary organizations and community participation, and use of Community Resources of Social Support.

**Results:** Differences between both cultures were found in the pattern of community social support for the nonabusive groups. However, the relationships between community social support and child maltreatment were similar cross-culturally. Our results indicate that in both cultures abusive parents show lower levels of community integration, participation in community social activities and use of formal and informal organizations than the parents that provide adequate care.

**Conclusions:** The results largely support the literature that has repeatedly reported the link between social isolation and child maltreatment and they confirm this relation within two cultural contexts, Colombian and Spanish, quite different from the Anglo-Saxon context, where most of the previous studies have been carried out.

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*Keywords:* Child maltreatment; Social isolation; Community; Cross-cultural

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## Introduction

Research using different measures of social support show that maltreating parents have smaller peer networks (Starr, 1982); have less contact with their family of origin (Zuravin & Greif, 1989); receive less help from their family and other relatives (Polansky, Chalmers, Battenwieser, & Williams, 1981); feel lonely (Milner & Wimberley, 1980); and report more isolation (Whiple & Webster-Stratton, 1991). Although these results are not always obtained (e.g., Crittenden, 1985), or differences are not found on every measure of social isolation (e.g., Starr, 1982), according to Belsky's (1993) review, there is an abundance of evidence linking social isolation and limited social ties with elevated risk of both child abuse and neglect.

Maltreating parents are not only frequently isolated from informal networks of social support such as relatives, neighbors and friends, but also from institutions and formal systems of social support. Consistent with this view are findings that maltreating parents have few social contacts, do not belong to social groups or community organizations, are not involved in community activities, and do not use community resources that are available (Corse, Schmid, & Trickett, 1990; Garbarino & Crouter, 1978; Gaudin & Pollane, 1983; Gracia & Musitu, 1997; Howze & Kotch, 1984; Polansky et al., 1981; Vondra, 1990). According to Belsky (1993), these findings suggest the possibility that isolation and lack of social support is, at least in part, something that maltreating parents actively, even if inadvertently, contribute to, rather than something that simply happens to them (p. 422). For example, in their review on child physical abusers, Milner and Dopke (1997) conclude that although research provides substantial support for the view that child physical abusers have fewer social contacts, perceive less social support, and feel more isolated than matched nonabusive parents, it also appears that the abusive parent may actively seek social isolation while perceiving that support is not forthcoming from others (p. 41).

Furthermore, as Garbarino, Guttman, and Seeley (1986) have suggested, there seems to be a negative circular relationship between violent families and their communities. In this respect, Polansky, Gaudin, Ammons, and Davis (1985) found that neglectful parents perceived their community as a nonsupportive environment and isolated themselves from any type of social contact, and, more significantly, also other members of the community tended to avoid contact with abusive parents, thus strengthening the vicious circle of negativity and isolation (see also, Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980).

Social isolation involves, on the one hand, isolation from the social structures and networks which provide the family with behavioral patterns, feedback, material and emotional support, as well as opportunities and resources to cope with the negative effects of stress (Garbarino & Stocking, 1980; Tiejten, 1980); and, on the other hand, it also involves the frustration of certain individual needs such as affiliation, membership, respect, affection and social recognition (Aneshensel & Stone, 1982; Caplan, 1974; Turner, 1981). This social impoverishment and deprivation increases the risk of a deteriorated family environment. However, this does not necessarily mean that social isolation is a direct cause of child abuse. Although social isolation has been placed at the core of a complex etiology of intrafamilial violence (e.g., Garbarino, 1977; Korbin, 1995), as posited by Korbin "the purpose of giving centrality to social networks is not to suggest that social networks are the sole or primary agent contributing to family violence but to broaden the context in which family violence is viewed beyond that of the perpetrator, the victim/survivor, or the violent dyad" (1995, p. 128).

From an ecological point of view, the social context largely affects many different areas of human development and, in particular, the relationship between parents and their children (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Indeed, there exists a close relationship between the quality of family life and a positive social environment (Belsky, 1980, 1993; Garbarino, 1977; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Gracia & Musitu, 1997; Simons & Johnson, 1996). In this respect, Garbarino (1977) has suggested that the social isolation of families from potential sources of social support becomes a significant element in the analysis of child abuse. The underlying principle is the great influence of the family social context—relatives, friends, neighbors, community, culture—on the parent-child relationship. Indeed, when the adjustment between the family and its environment fails, the risk of deterioration and negative interaction patterns within the family increases, and then there is the potential of child abuse (Garbarino et al., 1986).

The cross-cultural record also supports the position that social networks and support provide an important protection from child maltreatment (e.g., Johnson, 1981; Korbin, 1991, 1995; Poffenberger, 1981). In terms of Korbin: “Even if categories of vulnerable children can be identified cross-culturally, the potential for maltreatment can be mitigated by social networks. An understanding of the degree of embeddedness of child rearing in a larger community context can help to assess circumstances that prevent or promote child maltreatment. When child rearing is a shared concern within a supportive network, the consequences for children of having an inadequate or aggressive parent are diminished. Social networks serve multiple protective functions for children. First, they provide assistance with child care tasks and responsibilities. Second, networks provide options for the temporary and/or permanent redistribution of children. And third, networks afford the context for consensus, scrutiny, and enforcement of standards of child care. Embeddedness of child rearing in kin and community networks acts against the social isolation that has been linked with child maltreatment in industrialized nations” (Korbin, 1991, p. 72).

This study focuses on the most external layers of social relations, in order to examine the level of integration in the social structure of both abusive and nonabusive parents in two cultures. Being socially connected is a necessary condition in order to access and experience social support, and it is essential to “the psychological sense of community” (Sarason, 1974), which has been described as the opposite of social isolation (Gottlieb, 1983). Therefore, our main interest lies in the degree of the individual’s identification and participation in his or her social environment. The individual’s relation to his or her community, the active membership to formal or informal groups, as well as the use of the resources from institutions and organizations provided by the community are clear indicators of the level of social integration and sense of membership to one’s community, and they provide an accurate index of the community social support (Gracia, Garcia, & Musitu, 1995; Lin, Dumin, & Woelfel, 1986; Pearlin, 1985). A number of studies have assessed the significance of social isolation in the etiology of child maltreatment (see reviews by Belsky, 1993; Korbin, 1995; Milner & Dopke, 1997). However, few studies have examined in detail the relationship between the different dimensions of community integration and support and child maltreatment. The cross-cultural research also lacks studies in which the same definitions of community integration and the same instruments are used in the same research design. The aim of this study is to analyze, from a cross-cultural perspective, the relationship between the different dimensions of community integration and child maltreatment in Spanish and Colombian cultures. As Korbin (1991, p. 70) has pointed out,

for any factor to be implicated in the etiology of child maltreatment it must have explanatory power both within and between societies.

## Method

### *Procedure*

The objective of the study was to identify suspected cases of child maltreatment in Spain and Colombia, and compare their parents level of community integration with comparison groups of parents in each country where abuse was not suspected. Suspected cases of child maltreatment were identified mainly by teachers and other school personnel (psychologists, supervisors). Social services personnel collaborated also in identifying suspected cases of child abuse. Both school and social services personnel were recruited as research personnel for this study during a postgraduate course on Community Psychology in which they were taking part. After suspected cases of child abuse were identified, research personnel contacted parents to obtain the group of abusive parents and the comparison group of parents. Oral consent was obtained from parents participating in the study. No reference to the child maltreatment content of the study was made to parents or children. The research reported in this article was approved by the ethical standards unit of Valencia University.

To obtain the group of abusive parents, research personnel had to identify first suspected cases of child maltreatment in the schools where they worked. Research personnel had then to contact their parents in order to obtain their agreement to collaborate in the study and to complete the questionnaires. To obtain a comparison group of parents the same procedure was followed. For that purpose, a comparison group of children was drawn first from the same schools and same classrooms as the suspected cases of maltreatment (for each case of suspected maltreatment up to five children in the same classroom were selected for the comparison group). This allowed us to increase the ecological validity of the study as children not only went to the same school but in most of the cases lived in the same neighbourhood. At the same time this procedure ensured that parents shared a similar physical and socio-economic environment. Research personnel also contacted the parents of the comparison group of children. In both countries samples were collected from urban populations (Valencia in Spain, Armenia in Colombia). All the children were attending school at the time of the research and their ages ranged from 7 to 12 years. In no case did the suspected maltreatment produce injuries that needed medical attention, nor were these cases under supervision of child protection or social services. If evidence of maltreatment was disclosed, as in both countries there is a policy of mandate reporting, the child protective services would intervene. Although these cases fell into the theoretical concept of abuse and neglect, teachers did not consider them to fit the category of reportable abuse (Gracia, 1995; Tite, 1993).

Previous to the selection of families, the criteria of identification of an abusive or a nonabusive family context were established separately for each culture in order to determine the common criteria shared by both cultures. To determine the common criteria used to define child maltreatment in both cultures, Spanish and Colombian research personnel were provided in a training seminar with different textbook definitions of different types of child maltreatment,

and with lists of indicators (behavioral and physical) for each type of child maltreatment. From these materials and their own definitions each team independently derived definitions for each type of child maltreatment that they felt was appropriate to their own culture. A high degree of consensus between Colombian and Spanish personnel was observed in the definitions. Finally, definitions of each type of child maltreatment (physical abuse, neglect, psychological abuse, and sexual abuse) were agreed between Spanish and Colombian research personnel. A global definition of child maltreatment agreed for both research teams was: “Nonaccidental physical or psychological harm, or threat of harm, to the child as a result of physical, emotional or sexual acts of commission or omission by their parents or caretakers.” The identification of suspected cases of child maltreatment and their distribution into the different categories of maltreatment (physical, neglect, and psychological) was completed by using, as shared criterion, this previously agreed list of definitions and main physical and behavioral indicators of the different types of child maltreatment. No suspected cases of sexual abuse were identified.

### *Participants*

Descriptive statistics of Spanish and Colombian samples are shown in [Table 1](#). In both countries, around 60% of suspected cases of child were classified as pure cases of physical, neglect or psychological maltreatment (31, 17, 13% in Spain; 29, 21, 12% in Colombia); in the rest of the cases more than one type of maltreatment was considered to be present. The comparison nonabusive samples were matched to the suspected abuse samples according to the categories of age, gender and socio-economic status. Information about the procedures and the instructions were read aloud at the moment of the administration. Parents’ questions were answered before, during or after administration of the questionnaires. Parents participated voluntarily in the study.

### *Measures*

The instrument used to assess social support was the Questionnaire of Community Social Support, ASC. This instrument has been designed to evaluate the most external layers of social relationships, and to obtain indicators of integration in the social network and sense of membership to the community ([Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht, 1987](#); [Granovetter, 1973](#); [Lin et al., 1986](#)). The final version of this questionnaire consisted of 20 items tapping three

Table 1  
Participants in the study: descriptive statistics of Spanish and Colombian samples

	Spain		Colombia	
	Nonabuse	Abuse	Nonabuse	Abuse
<i>N</i>	344	100	326	66
Mothers	77%	76%	79%	80%
Fathers	23%	24%	21%	20%
Mean age	38.4	37.7	35.6	37.2
Acceptance rate	65%	45%	69%	51%

dimensions of Community Social Support (the process of selection of items and the factorial structure of each scale is described below). The three scales of the questionnaire are:

*Community Integration and Satisfaction:* This 9 item scale measures social interaction with neighbors and members of the community, and satisfaction with social relations in the neighborhood and with the community as a whole (examples of items are: “I have excellent relationships with my neighbors,” “I would not mind moving to another neighborhood,” “I do participate frequently in the activities of my community.”).

*Community Association and Participation:* This scale consists of 4 items that measures membership and participation in community associations and social institutions (examples of items are “I participate actively in the activities organized by the school,” “I am an active member of social or civic groups of my community.”).

*Community Resources of Social Support:* This 7 item scale measures potential use of community services in case of need (examples of items are “In case of need I would go to the community mental health center,” “In case of need I would go to church seeking support,” “Social services are an important source of support in case of need.”). Parents are asked to rate all items on each scale on a 4-point Likert scale from (1) *strongly disagree* to (4) *strongly agree*.

Previous to the selection of items, we verified that the criteria for identifying the categories of community social support were very similar in both cultures. In doing that, we included the cultural perspective and did not get entangled in the ethnocentric position of considering our own set of cultural values and practices preferable and indeed superior, to any other (Korbin, 1981). The categories obtained served as a guide in the selection of items. The elaboration of the instrument was carried out by means of a process of item selection based on a comprehensive review of the literature presently available. The aim of this review was to define the community social support dimensions which determined the integration into a social network and to identify those common elements which could later be arranged into rational categories or dimensions of community social support. This procedure, previously applied by other researchers of social support (Barrera & Ainlay, 1983; Barrera, Sandler, & Ransay, 1981; Broadhead, Gehlbach, De Gruy, & Kaplan, 1988), provides a basis for developing a questionnaire that would have content validity (Barrera & Ainlay, 1983, p. 137).

This process was performed in three different stages: First, the categories which represented the concept of community social support were selected by a team of 9 Spanish students and 11 Colombian students who were attending a doctorate course delivered by the authors. This activity was carried out separately in Colombia and Spain, but within the same theoretical context. The three categories obtained, with a convergence index ranging from .90 to .99 in both groups, were as follows: (I) Community Integration and Satisfaction; (II) Community Association and Participation, and (III) Community Resources of Social Support. Second, both teams generated 36 items related to these three categories. And third, the items were assigned separately to the three categories by the different members of each group. Eleven items were excluded because of the low inter and intra agreement among raters. The convergence index of the assignment to the different categories by both groups was .93. The instrument elaborated with this procedure consisted of 25 items. In order to obtain the test-retest reliability, questionnaires were administered to a subsample of 30 subjects in each country 5 months later.

### Statistical analysis

Factor analysis with Varimax rotation was performed to analyze the factor structure of the scales, and to determine its similarity in both samples. In this analysis factor scores are normalized to have zero mean and unit variance (SYSTAT, 1992, p. 88; see also, SPSS, 1993, p. 73). These standardized factor scores were used to analyze differences between abuse and nonabuse groups of Colombian and Spanish cultures in terms of community social support factors. The statistical analysis performed was the ANOVA. The use of standardized scores is recommended in cross-cultural research. First, because findings may be confounded by response sets, cultural differences are better tested on standardized data (see Matsumoto, 1993, 1996). And second, because comparability between cultures is better achieved when variables are in the same scale—with a mean of 0, and a standard deviation of 1 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998).

## Results

### Factor structure

A highly conservative cutoff value of .50 was established to identify factor loadings that were used for interpreting each factor. As a result of these criteria five items were eliminated. The final factor solution for both samples was identical. The factors for each scale were as follows (see Table 2).

*Scale I—Community Integration and Satisfaction (9 items).* The first factor obtained for this scale, *Neighborhood* (4 items), refers to the social relationships with neighbors and neighborhood members. This factor includes elements such as interaction, attitudes and satisfaction

Table 2  
Factor analysis for the scales of the Community Social Support Questionnaire

Factors in each scale	Spain	Colombia
Scale I. Community Integration and Satisfaction (%)		
Factor 1. Neighborhood	22	26
Factor 2. Integration in the Community	24	25
Factor 3. Participation in the Community	19	21
Total for the scale	65	72
Scale II. Community Integration and Satisfaction (%)		
Factor 1. Participation in Social Institutions	33	36
Factor 2. Affiliation and Association	32	28
Total for the scale	65	64
Scale III. Community Resources of Social Support (%)		
Factor 1. Community Health Services	25	24
Factor 2. Social Institutions	18	16
Factor 3. Social Services	21	15
Total for the scale	64	55

Percentage of explained variance in Spain and Colombia.

with this type of relationships, and it conveys, in this respect, their qualitative components. The second factor, *Integration in the Community* (3 items), also examines qualitative elements such as attitudes and feelings towards the community, this being viewed in all its complexity and extension. The third factor, *Participation in the Community* (2 items), refers to the degree of interaction and active participation of the individual in social activities and it conveys the individual's level of social integration as well as his or her sense of membership to the community (see Table 2). Internal consistency coefficient for this scale was .87 in Spain and .89 in Colombia. Over 5 months, the test-retest reliability was .71 in Spain and .69 in Colombia.

*Scale II—Community Association and Participation (4 items)*. Factor 1, *Participation in Social Institutions* (2 items), refers to active participation in activities organized by social institutions, and factor 2, *Affiliation and Association* (2 items), measures membership to associations and formal organizations. Alpha coefficient for this scale was .87 in Spain and .82 in Colombia. Over 5 months, the test-retest reliability was .64 in Spain and .74 in Colombia.

*Scale III—Community Resources of Social Support (7 items)*. This scale consists of three factors: Factor 1, *Community Health Services* (3 items), includes various community services related to health and it refers to their availability when these are needed. Factor 2, *Social Institutions* (2 items), refers to social institutions—such as churches and schools—as community resources of social support. Finally, factor 3, *Social Services* (2 items), refers to formal services of social support. Alpha coefficient for this scale was .93 in Spain and .91 in Colombia. Over 5 months, the test-retest reliability was .69 in Spain and .74 in Colombia.

In order to assess the multidimensionality of the construct community social support, the correlations between the three scales in both countries were calculated. The low levels obtained (scales 1  $\times$  2 = .19 in Spain and .13 in Colombia; scales 1  $\times$  3 = .08 in Spain and .14 in Colombia; scales 2  $\times$  3 = .19 in Spain and .16 in Colombia) indicate the multidimensionality of this construct, indeed, if community support were to be a unitary construct, the correlations should had been higher than they were in fact, and provided a solid empirical basis for the analysis of this construct in each one of its components or dimensions.

### *Community social support and child maltreatment*

Table 3 shows results of the *F* test with nonabusive parents from Spanish and Colombian samples. Significant differences were found between the nonabusive groups from both cultures in the following factors: Participation in the Community ( $F = 17.385$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Participation in Social Institutions ( $F = 49.358$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Social Institutions ( $F = 4.903$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and Social Services ( $F = 7.038$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The Colombian culture presented a higher degree of social interaction and participation in community activities than the Spanish culture, which seems to indicate a strong sense of community membership and involvement in the Colombian culture. Taking into account the differences found in the factor Participation in Social Institutions, it was reported a higher level of active participation in activities organized by social institutions—such as churches or schools—in the Colombian culture than in the Spanish culture. Moreover, in the Colombian culture, these institutions were more relevant as Community Resources of Social Support than in the Spanish culture. Finally, the differences obtained in the factor Social Services suggest that the formal systems and organized services play an important role in the Spanish culture as potential sources of social support.

Table 3

Comparison of Spanish ( $N = 344$ ) and Colombian ( $N = 326$ ) nonabusive parents on community social support variables

Factors	Mean <sup>a</sup>		<i>F</i>
	Spain	Colombia	
Neighborhood	.071	.205	2.109
Integration in the Community	.210	.123	.731
Participation in the Community	-.123	.293	17.385***
Participation in Social Institutions	-.389	.322	49.358***
Affiliation and Association	.222	-.000	3.823
Community Health Services	.008	-.053	.337
Social Institutions	-.114	.128	4.903*
Social Services	.160	-.130	7.038**

<sup>a</sup> Standardized values.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The same procedure was applied to analyze the differences between the abusive groups from each culture in all community social support variables. Previous differential analyses (Gracia, 1990; Gracia & Musitu, 1994) did not reflect significant differences between the various categories of child maltreatment—physical abuse, negligence and emotional abuse—in the community social support variables. Therefore, both cultures were grouped under one category—abusive group. As shown in Table 4, significant differences between the abusive groups from each culture were only found in two factors: Participation in the Community

Table 4

Comparison of Spanish ( $N = 100$ ) and Colombian ( $N = 66$ ) abusive parents on community social support variables

Factors	Mean <sup>a</sup>		<i>F</i>
	Spain	Colombia	
Neighborhood	-.738	-.385	2.126
Integration in the Community	-.674	-.486	.699
Participation in the Community	-.760	-.253	4.723**
Participation in Social Institutions	-.373	.031	3.350
Affiliation and Association	-.174	-.387	1.642
Community Health Services	.264	.012	1.099
Social Institutions	-.060	-.116	.071
Social Services	.604	-.246	19.205***

<sup>a</sup> Standardized values.

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 5  
Spain. Comparison of abusive ( $N = 100$ ) and nonabusive ( $N = 344$ ) parents on community social support variables

Factors	Mean <sup>a</sup>		<i>F</i>
	Nonabuse	Abuse	
Neighborhood	.071	-.788	17.558***
Integration in the Community	.210	-.674	2.885***
Participation in the Community	-.123	-.760	9.962**
Participation in Social Institutions	-.389	-.373	.009
Affiliation and Association	.222	-.174	4.097*
Community Health Services	.008	.264	1.385
Social Institutions	-.114	-.060	.080
Social Services	.160	.604	3.837

<sup>a</sup> Standardized values.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

( $F = 4.723$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and Social Services ( $F = 19.205$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, since the nonabusive groups also presented differences in these same factors, these results should be analyzed carefully in case these differences were due to cultural factors.

In order to examine the relationship between social support and child maltreatment, the differences between abusive groups and nonabusive groups in both cultures were analyzed in the three scales (Table 5). The Spanish sample presented significant differences between the abusive and nonabusive groups in the following factors: Neighborhood ( $F = 17.558$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Integration in the Community ( $F = 20.885$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Participation in the Community

Table 6  
Colombia. Comparison of abusive ( $N = 66$ ) and nonabusive ( $N = 326$ ) parents on community social support variables

Factors	Mean <sup>a</sup>		<i>F</i>
	Nonabuse	Abuse	
Neighborhood	.205	-.385	22.117***
Integration in the Community	.123	-.486	21.364***
Participation in the Community	.293	-.253	18.687***
Participation in Social Institutions	.322	.031	4.139*
Affiliation and Association	-.000	-.387	7.987**
Community Health Services	-.053	.012	.253
Social Institutions	.128	-.116	3.000
Social Services	-.130	-.246	.988

<sup>a</sup> Standardized values.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

( $F = 9.962$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and Affiliation and Association ( $F = 4.097$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Compared with the nonabusive group, the mean scores suggest that abusive parents have lower levels of interaction with neighbors, and lower levels of social integration and participation in the community. No significant differences were found in the other factors.

In the Colombian sample, the results were very similar to the results from the Spanish sample (Table 6). In fact, the significant differences between the abusive and nonabusive groups were found in the same factors and in the same direction for both Colombian and Spanish samples: Neighborhood ( $F = 22.117$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Integration in the Community ( $F = 21.364$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Participation in the Community ( $F = 18.687$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Affiliation and Association ( $F = 7.987$ ,  $p < .01$ ); however, in the Colombian sample, significant differences were also found in the factor of Participation in Social Institutions ( $F = 4.139$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

Overall, these results suggest that, in both cultures, abusive parents tend to be more socially isolated and their attitudes and feelings towards their neighborhood and community are more negative than nonabusive parents. Moreover, the abusive parents from both cultures have a lower degree of interaction and participation in community activities, as well as a lower level of implication and affiliation to voluntary groups, associations and organizations than nonabusive parents, which suggests that they were hardly integrated in the social structure and isolated from these potential sources of social support. Also, a low level of interaction and active participation in activities organized by social institutions, such as churches or schools, was found to be a variable related to child maltreatment in the Colombian culture, but not in the Spanish culture. Finally, the Spanish abusive group used social services more frequently than the Colombian abusive group, probably due to the fact that, in Spain, these formal systems of social support have been better implemented than in Colombia (Arango, 1996).

The degree of participation in social activities in the Colombian sample has been found to be higher than in the Spanish sample, which conveys a lower sense of membership and involvement with the community in the Spanish sample than in the Colombian sample. Moreover, there is a closer relationship between people and social institutions, such as churches and schools in Colombia than in Spain, and these institutions play a more significant role in the Colombian society as potential sources of social support than in the Spanish society. However, despite the differences in community participation and the use of informal networks of support between Spanish and Colombian samples, the cross-cultural analysis of the relation between social isolation and child abuse presented very similar patterns in both cultures.

In this respect, to understand better the lack of social support and social isolation of abusive parents more attention to individual factors (social skills, social cognition, emotional disorders, etc.) may be needed. For example, as Polansky et al. (1981) suggested, troubled developmental histories may teach maltreating parents not to get too close to others, for fear of being emotionally hurt, while at the same time failing to provide for the development of social skills needed to be effective neighbors. Another way in which personality factors may be related to maltreatment is in the disruption of social relations. Depression, anxiety, and antisocial behavior have been shown to be disruptive to social relations, to increase social

isolation, and to contribute to social support inadequacies (Crittenden, 1985; Wolfe, 1985). Also, a cognitive-behavioral perspective (Azar & Twentyman, 1986) may help to understand the role that contextual factors such as social support play in determining the nature of the quality of parents' interpretative and behavioral responses to children.

On the other hand, the more frequent use of social services and other organized services of support in the Spanish sample can be interpreted as a result of a higher economic development. Also, it suggests that, since socio-economic conditions in Spain are better than in Colombia, people's needs can be more individually satisfied, thus not requiring informal support systems. These differences on organized services of support between Spanish and Colombian samples may also speak to family expectations of both assistance and intrusiveness by, for example, social services. In this respect, these expectations, as variables mediating potential abuse, is a research area that deserves further exploration.

These cultural features bear a major part in what Triandis (1994) described as cultural syndromes, which characterize each particular community and distinguish it from the rest. According to the collectivism/individualism theory (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Triandis, 1994), collectivism stands for societies with relational networks and institutional contexts which reflect people's interdependence among themselves. Most material resources are communal, thus strengthening the social and reciprocal networks.

A cross-cultural analysis of the relationships between social support and child maltreatment would benefit therefore from the inclusion of the individualism and collectivism dimensions. Cultures have been described as varying along the global dimensions of individualism and collectivism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993; Triandis, 1989, 1990). According to Hofstede, Kolman, Nicolescu, and Pajumaa (1996), "Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family only. Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (p. 200). Since involvement and participation in the community present a prevalence of collectivist values over individualist values (Newbrough, 1989), we should expect in the Colombian samples a higher level of participation in the community than in the Spanish samples. Nevertheless, more research on the systems of values, maltreatment and the social support networks is needed.

Our results largely support the literature that has repeatedly reported the close relationship between social isolation and child maltreatment and, from our point of view, they are of special importance as they confirm this relation within two cultural contexts, Colombian and Spanish, quite different from the Anglo-Saxon context, where most of the previous studies have been carried out. Our data would also confirm Korbin's assertion: "if a variable or a constellation of variables are associated with intrafamilial violence, then they should hold both across and within cultural contexts" (1995, p. 115). However, our results do not imply a causal relationship between these variables and child maltreatment in both cultures. Also, the study tried to establish a common criteria shared by both cultures to define child abuse. The search for this convergence is particularly important in cross-cultural studies because, as Korbin (1981) pointed out, "in assessing the cultural implications of child abuse and neglect, the first task is to employ culturally appropriate definitions.

Conventional wisdom suggests that child maltreatment would be easily identified across cultural boundaries. However, it becomes clear that there is no universal standard for optimal child rearing or for child abuse and neglect. At the same time, a stance of extreme cultural relativism, in which all judgments of human treatment of children are suspended in the name of cultural sensitivity, would be counterproductive to promoting the well-being of the world's children" (p. 3).

A limitation of this study is that it did not draw on officially reported and substantiated cases of child maltreatment. It draws on suspected cases of maltreatment: cases that are visible to professionals who are close to the children (teachers, psychologists, community workers) but are unreported, in many cases because they have been considered as "not serious enough cases of child maltreatment" (Gracia, 1995). Research drawing on officially reported cases of abuse tends to represent the severe end of child maltreatment, since in many instances they come to the attention of professionals and public agencies when the abuse could not be disguised or was serious enough to require an intervention referral by a protection agency (Gelles, 1975). Research with suspected and unreported cases of child maltreatment has also limitations, but taken together with research drawing from officially reported cases of child maltreatment can help to increase the understanding of the etiological factors of child maltreatment, and to identify, before the maltreatment reaches more serious stages, deficits and needs for both parents and children, thus facilitating early interventions.

To acknowledge that child maltreatment is a problem not only related to individuals and their victims, but also to the social environment where they live, represents a step forward in the prevention and intervention programs of child maltreatment. Although community social services, and in general the formal systems of social support, can play an important role in the prevention of family social isolation, the results of this study suggests also the potential of informal systems of social support and networks of social relations in the neighborhood and community have for the prevention of family problems such as child maltreatment in many cultures. The results from our study point to the need of a different approach in the present formal systems and services of social support, and the search for an appropriate combination of formal and informal systems of social support in child maltreatment prevention and intervention programs. The family-support programs are a good example of this new approach to prevention and intervention in the field of child maltreatment (Thompson, 1995). A central idea in these programs is that the solution of prevention efforts cannot be restricted to the narrow limits of an individual family, but it must be related to the deterioration of relations between families and the formal and informal sources of support in the community. Here the family preference for seeking a social network needs also to be addressed. The social isolation of families is not only a personal or family question, it also reflects the will of a community to share the responsibility for the care of its children.

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