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# Can Nonoffending Mothers of Sexually Abused Children Be Both Ambivalent and Supportive?

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*Some nonoffending parents experience ambivalence in feelings, belief, and behavior toward their children after their children's disclosure of sexual abuse. Traditionally, it has been assumed that ambivalent nonoffending parents are not adequately supportive of their children after disclosure. In contrast, this study of 29 nonoffending mothers whose resident partners sexually abused their children tests a theoretical model of postdisclosure responses of nonoffending parents in which it is hypothesized that parental support and ambivalence can coexist. In a partial least squares analysis of this model, no relationship between postdisclosure support and ambivalence is found after controlling for variables related to ambivalence. These findings lend preliminary support to the hypothetical theoretical model, supporting a need for continuing research on the constructs of ambivalence and parental support.*

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**Keywords:** *ambivalence; child sexual abuse; parental support; maternal support*

**C**ontradictory or ambivalent feelings, thoughts, and behaviors have long been noted in some nonoffending parents as they respond to their children's disclosure of sexual abuse. Ambivalence is typically considered an indication of less supportive parents who are unable to consistently protect and support their children. As such, children of ambivalent parents are at great risk of removal from their homes (Everson,

Hunter, Runyan, Edelsohn, & Coulter, 1989). In a previous article by the authors (Bolen & Lamb, 2004), the construct of ambivalence was developed in depth. This article more closely explores the relationship between postdisclosure ambivalence and parental support and hypothesizes that ambivalence and support are unrelated after controlling for other factors associated with ambivalence.

## AMBIVALENCE IN NONOFFENDING PARENTS

Approximately one third of nonoffending parents are scored across studies as partially supportive or ambivalent toward their sexually abused children after disclosure of the abuse (Bolen, 2002). Even so, ambivalence in support is seldom discussed in the empirical literature. When it is noted, it is most often conceptualized as a middle level of parental support, with ambivalent parents vacillating in actions, thinking, or affect toward the victim and sometimes the perpetrator. For example, Faller (1988) scored parental protection of sexually abused children on a 5-point scale from *very unprotective* to *very protective*, with the mid-point indicating that the parent supported the victim and then the perpetrator. The Parental Response to Incest Disclosure Scale (Everson et al., 1989) assesses support and belief of the child and actions toward the perpetrator. Ambivalent parents are those who are inconsistently emotionally supportive, inconsistently believe their child's disclosure, inconsistently make active demonstrations of disapproval against the

perpetrator, or a combination of these. Thus, partial support or ambivalence has alternatively been captured as ambivalence toward the child or ambivalence between the child and perpetrator. Not surprisingly, one of the most important predictors of parental support is the closeness of the relationship between the parent and offender, with a closer relationship being related to lesser support (Bolen, 2002; Elliott & Carnes, 2001).

One important consideration of a conceptualization in which ambivalence is an indicator of partial parental support is the close relationship between parental ambivalence and the removal of the child (Everson et al., 1989). That these children are so frequently removed appears to rely on assumptions that ambivalence is a valid indicator of parental support and that ambivalent parents are not appropriately supportive. There are reasons to question these assumptions. First, no quantitative study has ever assessed whether ambivalence is actually an indicator of parental support or whether it might instead be its own unique and independent construct. Second, the qualitative literature suggests that ambivalence and parental supportive behaviors might coexist at times. For example, reacting to the abuse disclosure is better described in Hooper's (1992) qualitative study as a process that involves internally and externally motivated confusion and ambivalence, the latter of which is conceptualized as a spontaneous and defensive response associated with great conflict, stress, and distress. Hooper and Humphreys (1998) concluded,

While previous research had tended to describe women as either knowing or not knowing, believing or disbelieving, protecting or not protecting, our research suggested that these states were frequently not either/or, but often both/and, and that women's position in relation to them was often not fixed and stable but fluctuating. (p. 568)

Another consideration is that ambivalence is a normative expression of internal conflict. Indeed, parents frequently experience ambivalent feelings toward their children. For example, parents of older teenagers may look forward to and rue the day their children leave home. Parents may harbor negative feelings about their children in the midst of their overwhelming love for them. These ambivalent feelings tend to not be associated with inappropriate actions toward their children, even when the feelings are extreme.

If nonoffending parents can simultaneously experience more supportive and less supportive states, then the assumptions that ambivalent parents are not

appropriately supportive and that ambivalence is an indicator of more unsupportive parenting cannot be supported. The purpose of this study is to test these assumptions. It is hypothesized that nonoffending parents can experience ambivalence after disclosure without a degradation of support. More specifically, it is hypothesized that parental support and ambivalence are unrelated when parental support and ambivalence are separately captured (i.e., when indicators of ambivalence are not used as indicators of parental support). This study tests this hypothesis and also considers precursors to ambivalence. A previous study by the authors tested hypotheses that ambivalence increases when the costs of disclosure to nonoffending parents increase, when disclosure of the sexual abuse is experienced by parents as more traumatic, and when nonoffending parents are more preoccupied in attachment (Bolen & Lamb, 2004). These hypotheses were supported in bivariate analyses. This study will enter these constructs as control variables when assessing the relationship between parental support and ambivalence.

To assess ambivalence, it must first be appropriately operationalized. The multidisciplinary literature informs this operationalization of ambivalence. The literature recognizes ambivalence as a phenomenon that occurs when one is conflicted, either consciously or unconsciously, in attitude or thought, as when someone simultaneously experiences both strong positive and strong negative feelings or thoughts about an object (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Ambivalence can be both internally motivated (e.g., because of one's values) and externally motivated (e.g., because the person's religion dictates a particular view; Priester & Petty, 2001). This conflict may be reflected in affective and cognitive ambivalence (Thompson et al., 1995) that is then hypothesized to precede behavioral ambivalence (Armitage & Conner, 2000). To measure ambivalence, two scales are used, with each representing either the positive or negative valence toward the object (Scott, 1969; Thompson et al., 1995). Higher scores on both scales indicate more ambivalence. Ambivalence is also composed of two components—intensity and magnitude (Thompson et al., 1995). Intensity is the elevation of the positive and negative valences, whereas magnitude is the similarity in elevation across valences. Persons are more ambivalent when they are higher on both intensity and magnitude. This study's operationalization of ambivalence utilizes this multidisciplinary conceptualization.

Previously, Bolen and Lamb (2004) used this multidisciplinary framework to conceptualize ambivalence in nonoffending parents after their child's disclosure of sexual abuse, as follows:

Postdisclosure ambivalence is defined as the experience of tension, or dissonance, in the parent's positive and negative valences between the perpetrator and child. Ambivalence may be motivated interpersonally (such as when the nonoffending parent has a close relationship with the perpetrator while also wanting to protect the child) or intrapersonally (such as when the parent is asked to choose between the child and perpetrator). Further, ambivalence may be experienced both cognitively (e.g., when the parent is unsure of whom to believe) and affectively (e.g., when the parent has conflicted emotions about the perpetrator and child). . . . Nonoffending parents who experience postdisclosure cognitive or affective ambivalence [may be] more likely to vacillate in their behavioral intentions or behaviors. (p. 194)

This is the conceptualization used throughout this article.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

Nonoffending mothers whose children consecutively entered a medical clinic for an outpatient sexual abuse medical or forensic examination were asked to participate if their resident partners (i.e., biological resident fathers, stepfathers, father figures, or live-in boyfriends) sexually abused the child. Although 100 respondents were anticipated, the study was prematurely terminated for reasons unrelated to the study. Thus, only 32 nonoffending parents participated, with 29 sufficiently completing questionnaires. Of the approximately 210 original items in the questionnaire, 11% of items were missing data of 5% or more. Fifteen items were missing 6.8% of data, 7 items were missing 10.3% of data, and 1 item was missing 13.8% of data. Mean substitution for these items was employed before subscales (i.e., the reflective indicators of the latent constructs) were created. This process minimized the effect on the latent constructs of the missing data.

Of mothers, 86% stated that their predisclosure relationship with their child was good or excellent, whereas only 24% stated that their relationship with their partner was good or excellent. A total of 66% stated that their partner at some time in the past had physically abused them. The average length of the partnership was 8.7 years ( $SD = 4.6$ ). Half of the mothers made less than \$10,000 per year, whereas 31% of offenders made more than \$30,000 per year (refer to Bolen & Lamb, 2004, for more detailed information regarding the sample and methods).

### *Procedures*

After giving consent, mothers were interviewed by the physician and social worker, after which mothers were given a packet containing measures for the study, along with a large envelope. After completing the questionnaire, mothers placed the packet in the envelope and sealed it. Mothers were assured that (a) the envelope would not be opened at the clinic but would be mailed to a researcher in another state, (b) no information would be placed in the child's medical record, and (c) no individual information would be released to the clinic. The study and its informed consent were reviewed and accepted by the institutional review board at the hospital with which the clinic was associated.

### *Measurement of Constructs*

*Ambivalence.* To operationalize ambivalence, dual scales with parallel items representing valences toward the perpetrator and victim were constructed. For example, one item said, "I believe that my partner is at fault for the abuse." The parallel item said, "I believe that my child is at fault for the abuse." Items were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Three sets of items captured cognitive and affective ambivalence, and two sets of items captured behavioral ambivalence. Items in the affective ambivalence category reflected feelings such as love, hate, and anger toward the perpetrator and child. Items in the cognitive ambivalence category reflected whether mothers believed that the child or perpetrator was at fault for the abuse and whether mothers believed that the needs of the child or partner should be placed first. Items in the behavioral ambivalence category related to whether mothers thought the child or perpetrator should continue living in the house and whether the child or perpetrator should be punished. To score the measure for each of these groups, Thompson et al.'s (1995) method of scoring ambivalence was used, as follows:  $Ambivalence = ((P + N) \div 2) - |P - N|$ , where  $P$  = the positive (child) valence and  $N$  = the negative (perpetrator) valence.

*Parental support.* The Needs-Based Assessment of Parental Support (NAPS-C; Bolen, Lamb, & Gradante, 2002) has 26 items rated by the interviewing clinician on a Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). After training on the NAPS-C, the measure was completed by either the physician or master's-level social worker who interviewed the mother. This measure captures parental support along four hierarchical dimensions—basic needs, safety issues, love and

belonging, and esteem—reflecting Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs. In a factor analysis, all factors loaded within a single higher order factor, with factor loadings of .347, .536, .889, and .859, respectively. The alpha coefficient for the NAPS-C was .94 in the psychometric study, with subscale alphas of .82 for necessities, .83 for safety, .91 for love and belonging, and .93 for esteem. The correlation between the NAPS-C and the Parental Response to Incest Disclosure Scale (Everson et al., 1989), a frequently used measure of parental support, is .526.

*Attachment security and type.* The Relationship Scale Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) consists of 30 phrases from which the four attachment prototypes—secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing attachment—are scored. Items are scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from *not at all like me* to *very much like me*. Multiple studies have found the measure's underlying structure to be valid and reliable (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1997).

*Distress.* The SCL-90-R (Derogatis & Cleary, 1977), a widely used, valid, and reliable measure composed of 90 items to capture general psychopathology, assessed symptom presentation. Three global scales of distress were utilized: (a) the Global Severity Index, which combines both number of symptoms and intensity of distress; (b) the Positive Symptom Distress Index, which is the average level of distress reported; and (c) Positive Symptom Total, which is the number of symptoms. For each subscale, standardized *T*-scores are assigned. In this study, Cronbach's alpha for the full measure was .98.

*Predisdisclosure stressors.* This latent variable had a single indicator—the weighted, summative score of the Parenting Stress Inventory (PSI; Loyd & Abidin, 1985), Life Stressors scale, which captures 19 different stressors occurring outside the parent-child relationship in the past 12 months. The PSI has been used in numerous studies and has established validity and reliability.

*Postdisclosure stressors.* Because no known measure of postdisclosure stressors was available prior to the study, a 28-item Likert-type scale was developed. This measure had five types of postdisclosure stressors: concerns about protecting the child, concerns with law enforcement, preoccupation with the abuse, concerns with relationships, and others. Cronbach's alpha was .81.

### Analysis

The sample size being smaller than expected necessitated an analysis designed for small samples—partial

least squares (PLS)—specifically designed to test latent constructs. PLS is considered a soft modeling technique, meaning that it can “examine the relationships among a complex set of ideas” (Falk & Miller, 1992, p. 4). This analysis was used to inspect processes relating to the mother's response after disclosure and to generate a testable, hypothetical model that can in the future be tested with a larger sample.

PLS blends multiple regression, canonical correlation, redundancy analysis, multivariate analysis of variance, and principal components analysis to summarize interrelationships among a large number of variables (Chin, 2000; Ketterlinus, Bookstein, Sampson, & Lamb, 1989). It computes sample coefficients that, in turn, can assess relationships between observed variables and latent variables. Sample size requirements are for approximately 10 respondents per path (a minimum of 5 respondents) for the dependent latent variable with the most paths going to it. In this model, no dependent variable had more than three independent latent variables.

PLS does not automatically estimate statistical significance. Doing so uses jackknife statistics taken from a blindfolding resampling procedure that omits a portion of the data matrix, a problem with small samples. As such, this article will not present tests of significance and will interpret the findings in terms of preliminary support or lack of support for a hypothetical, testable model.

### RESULTS

The optimized PLS model is shown in Figure 1. Path coefficients can be interpreted similarly to those of regression coefficients. As hypothesized, maternal support was unrelated to ambivalence ( $b = .012$ ).

Other relationships were as follows. Greater security in attachment was related to more predisdisclosure stressors ( $b = .194$ ) and greater maternal support ( $b = .316$ ) but to less ambivalence ( $b = -.574$ ). Attachment security was also related to attachment type ( $b = .525$ ). Nonoffending mothers who were more preoccupied in attachment were more likely to experience distress ( $b = .231$ ) and ambivalence ( $b = .591$ ). Predisdisclosure stressors were related to decreased maternal support ( $b = -.353$ ), whereas postdisclosure stressors were related to greater maternal support ( $b = .610$ ) and distress ( $b = .633$ ), which in turn was related to greater ambivalence ( $b = .530$ ) and less maternal support ( $b = -.509$ ). Overall, the latent variables in the model accounted for 38% of the variance in maternal support, 48% of the variance in distress, and 62% of the variance in ambivalence.

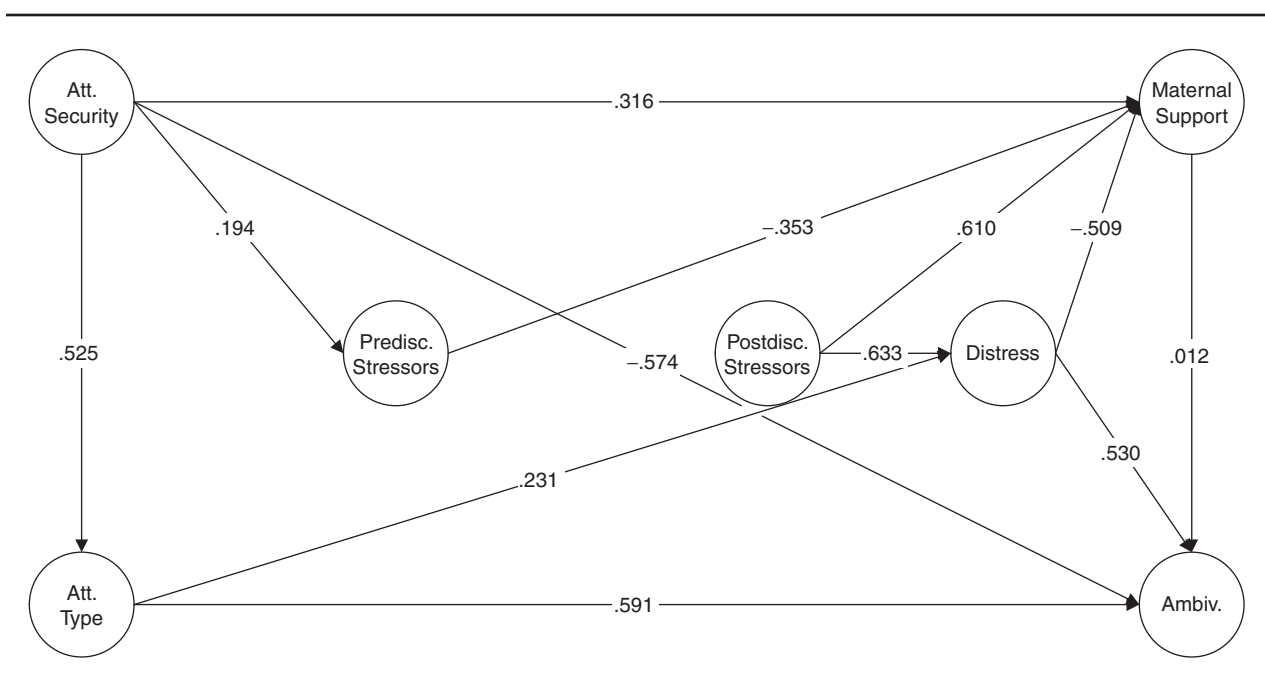


Figure 1: Partial Least Squares Model of Ambivalence in Nonoffending Mothers of Sexually Abused Children

## DISCUSSION

Because no tests of significance were used, the interpretation of findings must be limited. Further studies with larger samples will need to test this hypothetical model before more definitive statements regarding relationships among variables can be made.

The most important finding in this study was that maternal support and ambivalence were unrelated, suggesting the possibility that nonoffending parents can be both ambivalent and supportive after disclosure of their child's sexual abuse. If further studies find that these two constructs are indeed independent, researchers and clinicians may need to consider whether children of ambivalent nonoffending parents should routinely be removed from their homes. In the meantime, the findings of the study suggest the need for continued research on the constructs of ambivalence and perhaps parental support.

Issues regarding the conceptualization of ambivalence are discussed in depth in a previous article (Bolen & Lamb, 2004), including (a) whether ambivalence is better captured as the parent's conflict in affect, cognition, and behavior between the perpetrator and child or perhaps just toward the child; (b) how best to operationalize ambivalence; (c) how best to capture and score ambivalence; (d) whether cognitive and affective ambivalence should be conceptualized as precursors to behavioral ambivalence; and (e) possible

treatment implications for nonoffending parents experiencing ambivalence.

What is less clear is whether the construct of parental support also needs to be reconsidered. Although the study is too small to support such a conclusion, there are other reasons to consider further research on the conceptualization of parental support. First and most obvious, the assessment of the relationship between ambivalence and parental support can only occur if indicators of ambivalence are not included in the study's operationalization of parental support. Thus, some attention must be paid to determining a valid definition of parental support that does not also capture ambivalence.

Another reason to consider the construct of parental support is that unlike other important constructs, there is an almost total lack of discussion in the literature regarding how parental support should be defined, operationalized, captured, and analyzed. It has been previously argued (Bolen, 2002) that this is because of the influence of the child welfare system on the construct of parental support. As with so many of the early responses to child sexual abuse, professionals had to make important clinical decisions without the necessary theories or studies to guide those decisions. As such, Bolen (2002) argues that the definition and operationalization of postdisclosure parental support might have been more greatly influenced by child welfare policies than by the psychological literature. The influence of child welfare may be most clearly

reflected in the operationalization of parental support. For example, the most frequently used indicators of parental support across studies are belief in the child's disclosure, emotional support, and actions taken against the offender. In contrast, the sexual abuse literature is clear that postdisclosure responses of nonoffending parents are complex and that they are nested within a complex environment (Elbow & Mayfield, 1991; Hooper, 1992), suggesting the need for a more complex conceptualization of parental support. That parental support is a psychological response suggests that its conceptualization also needs to be embedded within the psychological literature.

It is recommended that the ambivalence and parental support constructs be considered together. Several knowledge bases could potentially influence the understanding of these constructs, including the psychological literature on ambivalence; normative and nonnormative parenting as influenced by class, gender, culture, and race/ethnicity; parenting under extreme stress; traumatization and its effect on parenting; parenting traumatized children; and normative gendered coping under stress. Allowing literature bases on normative parenting under stress and within cultural environments to affect the understanding of postdisclosure responses of nonoffending parents might allow for a more strengths-based understanding of these responses as nested within the unique circumstances of the disclosure. This more complex understanding of parental support may also be more compatible with findings from qualitative studies on postdisclosure responses of nonoffending parents (Hooper, 1992; Plummer, 2004).

Although the implications deriving from the current study must of necessity be quite muted given the preliminary nature of the findings, multiple other literature bases can potentially inform a broader understanding of postdisclosure parental support that is more firmly nested within the psychological literature. Using this literature to conceptualize postdisclosure parental support might also fundamentally change researchers' orientation. It might be said that the current conceptualization of parental support asks the research question *What must nonoffending parents do to support their sexually abused children after disclosure?* A definition of parenting support influenced by the psychological literature might instead ask the question *What are normative responses of parents of sexually abused children as nested within the competing responding systems and given the extraordinary circumstances and stresses of the disclosure?* This different orienting question would seem to better allow for the possibility of ambivalence or other reactions as coexisting with parental support, as researchers would

not presuppose a nebulous criterion that must be met for appropriate support but rather possibilities that distinguish different parenting responses after disclosure. It would then be the responsibility of researchers to determine those specific responses that are related to more optimal outcomes in children. In this conceptualization, the most appropriate responses after disclosure would be those most closely related to the children's well-being.

Thus, although this preliminary study cannot support a reconceptualization of parental support, it does suggest a need for research that may lead to a broader understanding of postdisclosure responses of nonoffending parents that includes ambivalence and parental support as separate constructs. In the meantime, it might be informative for researchers to consider how various psychological knowledge bases might inform the understanding of postdisclosure responses of nonoffending parents.

Finally, this study has obvious limitations, the most important being sample size and analytic issues. Furthermore, even though effect sizes of many path coefficients lend strength to the interpretation of these findings, no test of significance was used because of sample size limitations. Path coefficients will likely decrease with larger samples. Another issue is the validity of the measures. The NAPS-C is a recently developed measure. Although its psychometric properties are strong and it shows convergent validity with the Parental Response to Incest Disclosure Scale (Bolen et al., 2002), further analysis of this measure is needed. The ambivalence measure was also constructed specifically for this study. It is not known at this time whether its conceptualization of ambivalence—the conflict in the positive and negative affect, cognition, and behavior between the victim and perpetrator—is the most valid method of capturing the nonoffending parent's postdisclosure ambivalence. Furthermore, because this was an exploratory analysis, the purpose of which was to generate a hypothetical model for guiding research, inferences drawn from the model can only be considered possibilities until and unless future research supports the model. Yet it is hoped that the possibility that the field's current conceptualization of parental support is too narrow, that ambivalence may be a normative response to disclosure in some cases, and that parental support and ambivalence may be independent will generate further research and dialogue regarding current methods of assessing parental support and making decisions about removing children.

In summary, this preliminary study suggests that nonoffending parents' postdisclosure ambivalence may be different than parental support, bringing into

question the current method of conceptualizing and assessing postdisclosure responses of nonoffending parents. Despite limitations, these findings are intriguing and hopefully will lead to further discussion and research about how to best understand the complex postdisclosure responses of nonoffending parents.

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