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EFFECTS OF PERSONALITY TRAITS AND NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS ON FATHERS' VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN[2]

Previous studies mostly explored the characteristics of mothers who showed tendency towards violence against children. However, there was a lack of research regarding the characteristics of abusive fathers. The aim of this study was to test the effects of fathers' personality traits and frequency of negative life events, as well as their interaction on violence against children. The study was conducted on a sample of 259 fathers from the general population from Serbia. Results showed that higher Aggressiveness and more presence of negative life events contributed to the prediction of violence against children. Furthermore, the interaction between Neuroticism and negative life events was also significant, showing that fathers with lower Neuroticism and more negative life events were more prone to violence against children. The results of this study confirm that personality traits could be important determinants of violent behavior toward children, but also add to the conclusion that some of them should be considered in the context of negative situational factors.

Key words: fathers, violence against children, personality traits, negative life events

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Introduction

Conflicts between parents and young children may take serious consequences and result in violence against children. Results of several meta–analytic studies in the USA and Europe have shown that 7–20% of children experience some form of maltreatment in a family context (e.g., Barth, Bermetz, Heim, Trelle, & Tonia, 2013; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & Alink, 2013). In Serbia, results show that 30–45% of all the victims of the family violence are children who have experienced some form of emotional or physical violence in their family before the age of 14 (Ignjatović, 2015; UNICEF, 2014, 2017, 2019). Due to very high prevalence of experienced violence, it is very important to identify the dispositional and situational factors which contribute to the parents' violence against their children.

The usual predictors of the occurrence of violence against children are related to the dispositional characteristics of the parents. Previous studies have been more focused on the specific characteristics of abusive mothers (e.g., Stith et al., 2009). More precisely, tendencies toward loneliness and isolation, impulsivity, becoming upset and angry, the fear of being controlled (Black, Heyman, & Slep, 2001), hostile attributions about infant's intentions signal (Berlin, Dodge, & Reznick, 2013), higher depression and anxiety, lack of empathy to children's needs (Mennen & Trickett, 2011), as well as lower self–worth in family relationships (Christensen et al., 1994) have been the risk factors of a child maltreatment by mothers.

However, there is a gap between research and practice when it comes to the role of fathers as perpetrators of violence against the children (e.g., Featherstone & Peckover, 2007). Thus, fathers have been perpetrators in 67% of cases where physical abuse is the dominant form of child abuse (Trocme et al., 2003). This is also evident in Serbia, showing that 45.9% of interviewed mothers who have experienced a family violence report that their husbands have been abusive to their children (Ignjatović, 2015), or that in 69.9% of child homicide cases (with evidence of physical abuse in almost 20%), the mothers have been only slightly more frequent perpetrators than fathers (Baralić et al., 2010). Research of the judiciary system of the family and criminal law in Serbia have confirmed that men are far more often the perpetrators of violence against children (Jovanović, Simeunović Patić, & Macanović, 2012; Petrušić & Konstatinović Vilić, 2010).

Characteristics of abusive fathers have been explored more systematically only in recent years. In the study in which abusive fathers are compared to non–abusive fathers, the results have shown that abusive fathers more often experience anger and report more mental health concerns (such as depression, hostility, and paranoid ideation), more stress in parenting, and less empathy for their children (Fransis & Wolfe, 2008). Moreover, fathers' depression is significantly related to a father–child conflict (Kane & Garber, 2004), and a greater use of corporal punishment along with parenting stress, heavy alcohol use, and drug abuse,

while there is no relation between generalized anxiety disorder and a greater use of corporal punishment (Lee, Perron, Taylor, & Guterman, 2010).

Previous results have shown that the risk factors are relatively comparable in abusive mothers and fathers, for example, positive attitudes about parental aggression, attribution of child responsibility for aggression, overreactive discipline, and anger expression (Slep & O'Leary, 2007). However, there are some specificities when it comes to the characteristics of abusive fathers. For example, social support could decrease a mother's aggression towards a child, what is not the case with the father's aggression (Schaeffer, Alexander, Bethke, & Kretz, 2005). Furthermore, high–risk fathers report less empathic perspective–taking ability and emotion recognition, which is not found in high-risk mothers (Asla, De Paúl, Perez-Albeniz, 2011; Perez-Albeniz & De Paul, 2004). In some research, empathy is indirectly connected to negative child attributions through reactivity, which in turn predicts the risk of aggression towards the child, but it is documented that this link is more prone in mothers compared to fathers (Rodriguez, Smith, & Silvia, 2016). Moreover, the increased risk of aggression towards the child is significantly predicted by more mental health symptoms in mothers that in fathers, while, significant predictors in both parents are negative child attributions, less knowledge of discipline alternatives, and lower support from the partner (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

Another frequently investigated group of the risk factors captures the external factors, such are stressful events related to a family and a social context, as well as to other life domains. Many studies have shown that the cumulative exposure to negative events, rather than single factors, are related to the child abuse and maltreatment (e.g., Begle, Dumas, & Hanson, 2010; MacKenzie, Kotch, & Lee, 2011). Previous results have shown that the most important fathers' external risk factors for the child maltreatment are those related to the socio–economic status, e.g. job loss (Berger, 2005; Paxson & Waldfogel, 2002), followed by negative events related to physical and mental health and stress (Kane & Garber, 2004; Steele, Forehand, & Armistead, 1997), conflicts with the spouse (Tajima, 2000), history of abuse within the nuclear family (Ellonen, Peltonen, Pösö, & Janson, 2017), and war circumstances (Ballet, Sirven, Bhukuth, & Rousseau, 2011). However, the role of stressful events could be more complex. For example, the results of a study have shown that mothers reporting a history of the family abuse see themselves as more effective parents. However, their level of life stress and social support mediate that relationship, resulting in the lower parenting effectiveness when high levels of stress and poor social support are present (Levendosky, Huth–Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003). Given the potentially complex role of the negative life events, this study aims to identify specific patterns of interactions between the father's personality traits and negative life events that contribute to the violence against children.

The role of fathers in the children's lives is culturally more variable than the role of mothers (Paquette, 2004). In the Serbian society, the dominant charac-

teristic of the role of the father is a financial support and authority, as opposed to closeness, which is attributed to the mothers. The fathers are consistently described as less functional in the parental role, while their influence on the child's development remains specific and less conspicuous when compared to the influence of the mothers (Mihić, 2010).

Considering the specific role of the father in the upbringing of children in the Serbian society, it seems important to identify the fathers' risk factors in violence against their children. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that link parents' basic personality traits to violence against children, but rather the specific traits. Based on the results of previous research in which anger and low empathy have emerged as the dominant characteristics of the abusive fathers (Francis & Wolfe, 2008; Slep & O'Leary 2007), it can be assumed that the dominant predictor of violence against children would be Aggressiveness, as well as a higher frequency of negative life events (e.g., Berger, 2005; Kane & Garber, 2004). In addition, Neuroticism is also related to aggression and violence, especially to affective and impulsive ones (e.g., Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). Previous research have shown mixed results regarding the effects of fathers' Neuroticism indicators on the child maltreatment. For example, a fathers' depression, but not problems with anxiety, is related to the use of corporal punishment (Kane & Garber, 2004; Lee et al., 2010). In another , more mental health symptoms, including depression and anxiety, do not predict aggression towards children in fathers (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Based on the previous studies, we cannot give clear expectations about the effect of Neuroticism, but considering the effect of Neuroticism on aggression, we assume that Neuroticism would have a positive effect on violence against children. In addition, since low Conscientiousness refers to high impulsivity and problems of self-control (e.g., Čolović, Smederevac, & Mitrović, 2014), we expect that Conscientiousness would have a negative effect on violence against children. Furthermore, we have tested the interaction between personality traits and negative life events on violence against children, assuming that negative life events could have a moderator role in relations between personality traits and violence against children. Thus, this research could give the first assumptions about father's personality determinants of a child abuse in the context of situational factors.

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study included 259 male participants from the general population of Serbia, who are parents and have at least one child. The majority of fathers had two children (74.1%). Participants were aged from 26 to 76 (M = 48.61, SD = 0.59). The majority of participants were married (91.5%) and currently em-

ployed (73.8%). Most of the participants finished high school (56.8%) or had a university degree (32.2%). The sample characteristics were in accordance to the typical characteristics of male parents population in Serbia (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2017).

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. All participants signed an informed consent form before taking part in the study. The data were collected by trained undergraduate students as a part of their pre–exam activities. Instruments were distributed in a paper–pencil form, with guaranteed anonymity.

Instruments

Violent Behavior Questionnaire (VBQ: Kodžopeljić, Dinić, & Čolović, 2014). VBQ was developed as a self–report measure of the tendency towards adult forms of physical (severe or minor), verbal, and relational/indirect violence, aimed at various people such as parents, brothers/sisters and other relatives, intimate partners, friends, and unknown persons. Originally, VBQ comprised of 25 items (five per target group of people) with a 5–point Likert response scale (1 - *never*, 2 - *once or twice a year*, 3 - *several times per year*, 4 - *several times per month*, 5 - *several times per week*). In this study, five items were taken from the VBQ by indicating children as the target group. However, one item ("machinations and plotting against a child") showed a low corrected item-total correlation (.17) with only 9 participants who chose a response other than 1, thus this item was omitted (final α = .69).

Big Five Plus Two – Short Version (BF+2–70: Čolović et al., 2014). This instrument was used to measure basic personality traits based on psycholexical studies in Serbia. BF+2–70 assessed seven traits of which five were related to traits from the Big Five model: Neuroticism (which included anxiety, depression, and negative affect), Extraversion (which included warmth, positive affect, and sociability), Aggressiveness (which included anger, disagreeableness, and tough–mindedness), Conscientiousness (which included self–discipline, persistence, and cautiousness), and Openness (which included intellectual curiosity and novelty seeking). Two additional dimensions were evaluative: Negative Valence, which referred to self-blame and self-criticism, but also to exploitativeness and Positive Valence, which referred to a high sense of superiority and egocentrism. BF+2–70 consisted of 70 items (10 per trait) with a 5–point Likert response scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the scales were good, ranging from .75 to .86.

Life Events Questionnaire (LEQ: Smederevac, Mitrović, Kodžopeljić, Dinić, & Čolović, 2011). The LEQ included 50 events and it was designed to assess positive and negative life events which referred to different life aspects (health, love and marriage, parenting, job...), with a binary response scale (0 = *never* and 1 = *at least once in life*). Due lack of evaluative estimation of events, only 13 clearly negative events were included in this study based on the previous stud-

ies (e.g., Kane & Garber, 2004; Paxson & Waldfogel, 2002; Tajima, 2000). These events included conflicts with a partner about child upbringing, psychoactive substance abuse, lack of money, etc. (α = .94).

Results

Descriptives and Correlations

Frequency analysis showed that no father reported that he used a form of violence several times per week (the answer 5 on the scale, see Table 1). The majority of participants reported that they had never performed indirect violence and serious physical violence against their children, while the most frequent forms of violence were less serious physical violence followed by the verbal violence. Correlations between violence forms were in a range from .08 to .42 and it was noticeable that machinations and plotting against the child showed lower correlations with other forms. Since this item showed a low corrected item-total correlation, it was omitted from the total score. The remaining four items formed one factor which explained 51.97% of the total variance and showed high contributions to the factor (from .65 to .79).

Table 1
Frequency and descriptives of several forms of violence against children among fathers

Violence against children	never	once or two times	several times per year	several times per month	*M*	*SD*
Mocking and making a rough jocks	204 (78.8%)	44 (17%)	10 (3.9%)	1 (0.7%)	1.26	0.54
Machinations and plotting against a child	250 (96.5%)	8 (3.1%)	1 (0.4%)	-	1.04	0.21
Insulting and threatening	188 (72.6%)	54 (20.8%)	17 (6.6%)	-	1.34	0.60
Easier hitting, pushing	125 (48.3%)	109 (42.1%)	24 (9.3%)	1 (0.4%)	1.62	0.67
Beating with or without tools	208 (80.3%)	43 (16.6%)	8 (3.1%)	-	1.23	0.49

Note. M – mean; *SD* – standard deviation.

Although skewness and kurtosis were in recommended range (+/-2, see Gravetter & Wallnau, 2014), the scores on negative life events formed binominal distribution, thus they were normalized by using Tukey's formula. Correlations between violence against children and personality traits, and negative life events were generally low, but it could be due to small variance of scores on violence against children scale (Table 2). Among personality traits, the highest correlations with the tendency towards violence showed Aggressiveness and Negative Valence in a positive direction, and Conscientiousness in a negative direction. Negative life events were positively related to violence against children, indicating that the experience of more negative life events was related to a higher tendency towards violence against children. Correlations between negative life events and personality traits were in a range from -.20 (with Conscientiousness) to .20 (with Negative Valence).

Table 2

Descriptives and correlations between violence against children and personality traits and negative life events

	Violence against children	*M*	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis
Violence against children	1	5.44	1.66	1.38	1.85
Neuroticism	.13*	21.59	7.63	0.38	-0.66
Extraversion	-.15*	38.16	5.74	-0.55	0.64
Aggressiveness	.19**	21.75	7.49	0.50	-0.39
Conscientiousness	-.20***	40.28	5.80	-0.37	-0.39
Openness	-.06	34.76	6.92	-0.25	-0.03
Negative Valence	.19**	14.86	4.51	0.93	0.45
Positive Valence	-.07	27.87	5.97	0.29	0.96
Negative life events	.20***	5.74	4.69	0.62	-1.15

Notes. Scores of Negative life events were normalized in the analysis, but raw scores were presented in the Table. The score of violence against children comprised of 4 items and theoretical range was 4-16, it was 10-50 for personality traits, and 0-33 for negative life events. *M* – mean; *SD* – standard deviation.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Prediction of Violence against Children

In order to test the prediction of violence against children, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Before the analysis, all scores were centered,

and skewness and kurtosis of standardized residuals were checked for normality (Sk = 1.15 and Ku = 1.54 which suggested that distribution could be considered as normal). Due to a large age range among participants, the age was entered in the first step as a control, personality traits were entered in the second step, negative life events were entered in the third step, and interaction between personality traits and negative life events were entered in the fourth step. The results showed that the model with interaction between personality traits and negative life events was significant, which explained 16% of the criteria, $F(16,242)$ = 2.88, p < .001, and archived a significant incremental prediction of the violence against children, $\Delta F(7,242)$ = 2.12, p < .05. In the final model, Aggressiveness and Negative life events showed significant positive effects on violence against children (Table 3). Furthermore, the interaction between Neuroticism and Negative life events was also significant, showing that fathers with lower Neuroticism and more Negative life events were more prone to violence against children (Figure 1).

Table 3

*Prediction of violence against children based on personality traits and negative life even*ts among fathers

	ΔR^2	p	Predictors	β	p
Step 1	.01	.206	Age	.01	.84
Step 2	.07	.008	Neuroticism	-.07	.34
			Extraversion	-.07	.34
			Aggressiveness	.17	.03
			Conscientiousness	-.07	.31
			Openness	.16	.06
			Positive Valence	.10	.22
			Negative Valence	-.06	.44
Step 3	.03	.004	Negative life events	.19	.01
Step 4	.05	.041	Neuroticism x Neg. life events	-.18	.03
			Extraversion x Neg. life events	-.02	.82
			Aggressiveness x Neg. life events	.13	.10
			Conscientiousness x Neg. life events	-.05	.54
			Openness x Neg. life events	.07	.40
			Positive Valence x Neg. life events	.04	.61
			Negative Valence x Neg. life events	.09	.24

Note. ΔR^2 – change of multiple determination coefficient; p – significance level; β – standardized regression coefficient.

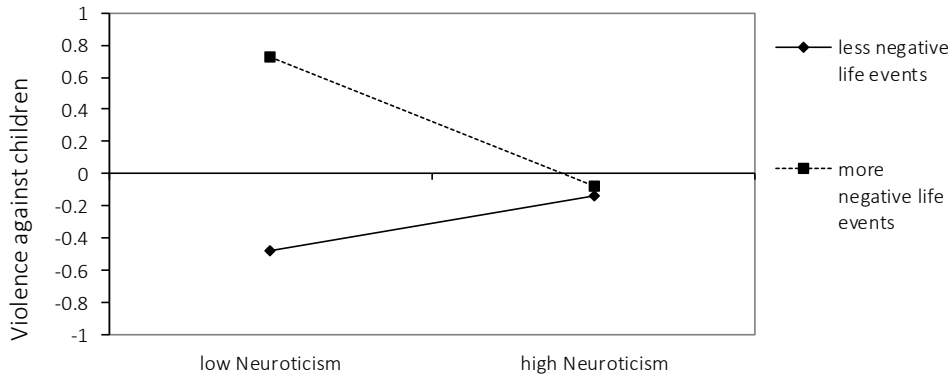*Figure 1.* Interaction between Neuroticism and Negative life events on violence against children among fathers (cut off was made as *M +/-* 1*SD*).

Discussion

Previous studies regarding the explanation of violence against children were more focused on the characteristics of the mothers. In this study, we explored the role of fathers' characteristics in the explanation of various forms of violence against children. In line with the frequency of violent forms in other countries (UNICEF, 2014) as well as in the previous report on violence against children in Serbia (UNICEF, 2019), verbal violence was the most frequent in our study as well, followed by the less serious physical violence, while serious physical violence was the least frequent.

Although emotional and physical violence could be distinguished, due to the low presence of various violence forms in this study, all violent forms contributed to the one factor. This finding was in line with the results showing that the differentiation between emotional and physical violence could be very problematic, as these two forms usually coincided (e.g., Vachon, Krueger, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2015).

Results showed that correlations between personality traits and negative life events on the one side, and violence against children on the other hand, were generally low. Among personality traits, somewhat higher correlations showed Conscientiousness in a negative direction, and Aggressiveness and Negative Valence in a positive direction. Furthermore, Negative life events showed a correlation with violence against children in the same range as dominant correlates among personality traits. However, in hierarchical regression analysis, only Aggressiveness, among personality traits, showed significant prediction in the final model. Thus, frequent experience and expression of anger, roughness, and tough–mindedness in father contributed to the higher preparation of violence against children. This was in line with the previous studies in which fathers' frequent anger

experience and expression, as well as low empathy, were related to aggression and violence against children (Francis & Wolfe, 2008; Slep & O'Leary 2007). It could be assumed that antagonism, poor anger control, and stubbornness were linked to poor emotion regulation and overreaction in parent-child conflict situation, in which aggression and violence against children could be used as the unadaptive strategy for conflict resolving. Other studies also supported relation between poor emotion regulation and elevated child abuse potential (Rodriguez, Russa, & Kircher, 2015). Furthermore, more presence of negative life events related to various life domains contributed to the prediction of violence against children. The effects of stressful and negative life events were reported as a risk factor of the occurrence of violence against children in both mothers and fathers (e.g., Begle, 2010; Paxson & Waldfogel, 2002). Negative life events are mostly stressful for an individual. Some stressors can exhaust an individual's resources, resulting in maladaptation, such as depression or behavior problems (e.g., Ngo & Le, 2007), but also different kinds of violence (e.g., Lila, Gracia, & Murgui, 2013; ten Have, de Graaf, van Weeghel, & van Dorsselaer, 2013). It seems that manifestation of violence, partially influenced by negative and stressful life events, can also be directed towards one's own children in case of the fathers. It could be explained by conclusions that men, in comparison to women, are more prone to perceive stressors as more intense, and have more dysfunctional behavior reactions on stressors (Hamaideh, 2010), which also include violence towards children.

The most interesting result was about the effect of interaction between Neuroticism and Negative life events on violence against children. Thus, fathers with lower Neuroticism and the more frequent presence of Negative life events were more prone to violence against children. In previous studies, anxiety, depression, and stress, which captured trait neuroticism, were considered as risk factors for mothers in the preparation of aggression towards children (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2016). However, results about the role of those characteristics in fathers were mixed. For example, in one group of studies, depression was the characteristic of abusive fathers (Fransis & Wolfe, 2008), or it was related to a father-child conflict, but not to the anxiety-related problems (Kane & Garber, 2004). However, in another group of studies, there were no significant relations between mental health symptoms (including depression and anxiety) and the risk of aggression towards the child (Rodriguez et al., 2016). The difference in these results could be due to the presence of a moderator variable, such was cumulative negative life events included in this study. Thus, the presence of more negative life events made the family dynamic more stressful, which influenced the quality of relationships with the partner, as well as with children (e.g., Tajima, 2000). It could be assumed that the presence of more negative life events was positively related to Neuroticism, and in this study that was confirmed ($r = .24$, $p < .001$). However, low Neuroticism in the presence of more negative life events could indicate unconcern and unaffection by these events, and not the resilience. Thus, low Neuroticism in this context could be interpreted as emotional coldness and lack of care, even a denial of the

problems. Furthermore, an emotionally cold and distant father is still a prototype of the father figure in Serbian culture (Mihić, 2010) in which higher tolerance towards physical punishment exists, because this type of punishment is still considered as normative (see Isaković, 2017).

There are several limitations of this study. First, the obtained effects are relatively small, thus further research need to explore the interaction between personality traits and situational stressful factors. Second, as this is a cross–sectional design, no causal explanation could be provided. Third, all variables are self–report measures, thus social desirability should be taken into account when considering the sensitivity of the measurement topic. Fourth, the number of children per parent have not been analyzed in this study, given that most of the fathers have two children. Fifth, the age of the children has not been collected, so future studies should include these characteristics as well. Further research should also include a more in-depth measure of violence against children.

In spite of these limitations, the current study offers some important implications. Considering the results of the research, it appears that the treatment of anger management and prevention programs focused on constructive strategies of conflict resolution in the parent-child interaction are needed in working with fathers. Thus, education about alternative parental discipline acts is also important. Hence, whilst working with fathers, it is necessary to pay extra attention to the development of adaptive mechanisms of coping with stressful situations.

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EFEKTI OSOBINA LIČNOSTI I NEGATIVNIH ŽIVOTNIH DOGAĐAJA NA VRŠENJE NASILJA NAD DECOM OD STRANE OČEVA

U dosadašnjim studijama su uglavnom istraživane karakteristike majki koje su imale sklonost ka vršenju nasilja nad svojom decom. Međutim, karakteristike očeva koji ispoljavaju nasilje nad decom su manje istražene. Cilj ovog istraživanja je bio ispitivanje efekata osobina ličnosti i učestalosti negativnih životnih događaja kod očeva, kao i njihove interakcije, na vršenje nasilja nad decom. Istraživanje je sprovedena na uzorku od 259 očeva iz opšte populacije iz Srbije. Rezultati su pokazali da veća agresivnost i veća učestalost negativnih životnih događaja značajno doprinose predviđanju nasilja nad decom od strane očeva. Nadalje, interakcija između neurotizma i negativnih životnih događaja se takođe pokazala značajnom, u smeru u kojem su očevi sa nižim neurotizmom i većom učestalošću negativnih životnih događaja više skloniji ispoljavanju nasilja nad decom. Rezultati ovog istraživanja potvrđuju da osobine ličnosti očeva mogu biti važne odrednice nasilničkog ponašanja prema deci, ali da je pojedine personološke karakteristike potrebno razmotriti u kontekstu negativnih situacionih faktora.

Ključne reči: nasilje nad decom, negativni životni događaji, očevi, osobine ličnosti