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Attitudes towards corporal punishment as a function of ethnicity and gender

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ATTITUDES TOWARDS CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AS A
FUNCTION OF ETHNICITY AND GENDER

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Psychology
in the College of Science
and in The Burnett Honors College
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Charles Negy

ABSTRACT

This study explores the topic of corporal punishment and examines the degree to which young adults have been subjected to corporal punishment, their attitudes about corporal punishment, the likelihood of them using corporal punishment on their children, and their propensity towards violence. Among African American participants, I also examine the correlation between their attitudes toward corporal punishment and their levels of acculturation toward the dominant culture. I predict that African Americans will have been subject to Corporal Punishment more than White Americans. I hypothesized that participants who have been subjected to corporal punishment will have a higher propensity towards violence and will continue to use corporal punishment on their children. I also hypothesized that African Americans who are relatively highly acculturated will be less likely to use Corporal punishment. Participants were asked to fill out a series of scales that tested for all of the research questions. Results for this study did support the hypothesis that African Americans did report receiving more Corporal Punishment than White Americans. Results did show that there is a negative correlation between levels of acculturation and likelihood to use Corporal Punishment for African Americans. . However, the direction of the correlation was consistent with the hypothesis, in that higher acculturation scores correlating with less desire to use corporal punishment on children. The results also did not support the hypothesis of a positive correlation between being subjected to Corporal Punishment and propensity towards violence. Finally the results did not support the hypothesis of a positive correlation between being subjected to Corporal Punishment and the likely to use Corporal Punishment on their own children.

DEDICATION

For my husband, Daron Johnson, thank you for your love, trust and understanding.

For my mother, Patricia Richardson, thank you for your love and tireless support.

For my thesis chair, Dr. Charles Negy, thank you for taking a chance on me.

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INTRODUCTION

How to rear children is a hot topic in today's society and has been for a long time. One way to keep children 'in line' that has been practiced by different cultures for centuries is corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is controversial but, remains popular. According to Strauss (1994, p.4), "Corporal punishment is the use of physical force with the intention of causing the child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior." What this means is that the child associates pain with the misbehavior and in theory will stop the misbehavior because of fear of experiencing the pain of being hit. In the United States about half of parents that have toddlers and more than half of the parents of preschoolers in the United States use corporal punishment as a regular method of disciplining their children (Socolar et al., 2007). By the time American children reach their early teens, 85% have been physically punished by their parents (Regalado et al., 2004). A survey of attitudes towards corporal punishment in Pennsylvania schools, conducted by Reardon and Reynolds (1975), represents one of the most extensive and adequate examples of survey research dealing with corporal punishment. Their research found there is between 70 and 80% agreement among different groups of adults that approve of the use of corporal punishment, suggesting that our society very much believes that corporal punishment is an effective means of discipline. It bears noting that there appears to be a steady decline in the use of corporal punishment in the U.S. (Zolotor et al., 2005).

BACKGROUND

The Law and Child Abuse.

Corporal punishment is currently legal in the United States. Child abuse is not legal in the United States. There is however a fine line separating corporal punishment and child abuse.

According to Florida Statute 827.03 child abuse entails: “(a) Intentional infliction of physical or mental injury upon a child; (b) An intentional act that could reasonably be expected to result in physical or mental injury to a child; or (c) Active encouragement of any person to commit an act that results or could reasonably be expected to result in physical or mental injury to a child.

Corporal punishment typically does not entail intentional injury to a child”. However, what constitutes as “intentional” and “injury” is debatable and is hard to discern often.

The Norm in African American Families

A problem with corporal punishment is that it is very much the norm in many African American families. Some research suggests that African American parents may spank their children more frequently than parents of other ethnic groups (McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Straus & Stewart 1998). Despite ample evidence of the correlation between corporal punishment and child maladjustment, corporal punishment seems to be commonplace in African American communities. A study done in the South measured African American parents’ attitudes toward corporal punishment (Taylor & Hamvas, 2011). It was found that most African Americans in the sample supported the use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline. The study broke down the main themes or reasons the majority of the participants offered for why they endorsed corporal punishment. The two major themes were: the perceived instrumentality of corporal punishment and the perceived norm of corporal punishment as a form of child discipline. Under

perceived instrumentality of corporal punishment, the participants gave several reasons. Some of the reasons included to love their children, to command respect, and to use corporal punishment because it is effective (Taylor & Hamvas, 2011). Under perceived norms of using corporal punishment, the participants provided other reasons. Some indicated that different ethnic groups have different ideas about how to best discipline children (as if to rationalize African Americans' tendency to rely on corporal punishment more than other ethnic groups). Others reported that corporal punishment is consistent with their religious values. Still, others reported that family tradition supported their usage of corporal punishment (Taylor & Hamvas, 2011). From these participants' point of view, corporal punishment is deeply rooted in the African American community, culture, and faith, which leaves little room for experimenting with other forms of discipline.

This form of physical violence is used to promote pain associated with a behavior. It is unlikely that children perceive being hit physically as love no matter what the intent of the parent. The participants in the study by Taylor and Hamvas (2011) did mention a few downsides of using corporal punishment on their children; including teaching children that violence in relationships is acceptable. Some expressed concerns that their children, after growing bigger, may retaliate against the parents (Taylor & Hamvas). Taylor and Hamvas noted that people who believe that infants intentionally misbehave may predict the use of corporal punishment.

An alternative: Sweden as an example

Sweden used to be a country where corporal punishment was legal until the ban in 1928 in public schools. In 1979, it was abolished throughout the country. This decision came after a

trial where a father had used harsh corporal punishment was acquitted. The ban had three primary objectives. The first objective was intended to alter the perception of using physical force with children as a first step toward eliminating its use. It was expected that the law would produce a shift in social pressure such that a “good” parent is one who does not use corporal punishment. Second, the ban was intended to set clear boundaries what to do and not to do for parents and professionals. Professionals now could state clearly to families that physical force was not permitted and could identify at-risk parents early in the cycle of abuse. It was also expected that Swedes would now act sooner upon witnessing or hearing of incidents of physical harm.

Third, it was expected that if people could identify physical harm sooner it would lead to earlier intervention of abuse. It was intended that more supportive and less coercive measures would be used than is the case where intervention occurs only after a child has been harmed (Durrant, 1998). According to the data analysis conducted by Durrant, all of these objectives that were intended by implementing the ban have been realized. I wish to add here that just because a behavior is not illegal does not make it acceptable. Moreover, laws are sometimes outdated based on archaic notions of what is acceptable behavior.

Research on the undesired effects of corporal punishment

Even though it may not be the intention of parents who use corporal punishment to cause any serious or long term physical injury or harm, this is something that can easily happen.

Parents may become caught up in the heat of the moment and cross the line from measured physical discipline to physical abuse. Parents are often in a state of frustration and possibly anger

when using corporal punishment. According to Kadushin and Martin (1981), “Interviews with physically abusive parents about the abusive events for which they were referred to child-protective services expose a startling and compelling theme: Nearly two-thirds of the abusive incidents began as acts of corporal punishment meant to correct a child's misbehavior” (p. 189).

Several empirical studies have concluded that the risk for parents to abuse their children stems from the frequent use of corporal punishment. Corporal punishment teaches children that by using violence others will comply or conform to others' expectations. It is not a stretch to reason that experiencing corporal punishment may adversely influence children's lives later in adulthood. For example, Gershoff (2010) reports that adults who remember receiving more corporal punishment from their parents also report more verbal and physical aggression with their significant others. Early experiences with corporal punishment may be a model for how to deal with issues and legitimize many types of violence throughout an individual's life (Strauss & White, 1981). Strauss (1981), who is a lead researcher in the area of family violence, supports the notion that corporal punishment leads to maladaptive behaviors in children through adulthood.

CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine African American and non-Hispanic White young adults' attitudes toward corporal punishment and various correlates of such attitudes. Specific research questions include: (1) Do African Americans, on average, report having been corporally punished significantly more than non-Hispanic Whites? (2) Irrespective of participants' race, do those who have experienced corporal punishment as children report that they intend to use corporal punishment on their prospective children? (3) Is there a correlation between having been corporally punished as children and current propensity to engage in violence? And (4) Is there a correlation between African Americans' reports of planning on using corporal punishment with their prospective children and their level of acculturation toward the dominant culture? The following hypotheses are made corresponding with the research questions: (1) It is hypothesized that African Americans, as a group, will report having been corporally punished as children significantly more than non-Hispanic Whites. (2) There is a positive correlation between having been corporally punished as children and anticipating using corporal punishment with prospective children. (3) There is a positive correlation between having been corporally punished and propensity to engage in violence. And (4) There is a negative correlation between African Americans' acculturation levels and their indication of using corporal punishment on their prospective children.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 31 African American (24 females, 7 males) and 31 White American (14 females, 17 males) undergraduate students attending the University of Central Florida. They were recruited from a single course (Cross-Cultural Psychology). The mean age for African Americans was 21.27 and $SD = 1.52$. On the Acculturation scales the mean was 3.51 and the $SD = .82$ for African Americans participants. The mean age for white American participants was 22.03 and the $SD = 2.77$. All participants volunteered to complete the study survey and received extra credit in the course.

Materials

Demographic questionnaire. On this sheet, participants will indicate their age, gender, race, and class standing (e.g., freshman, sophomore, etc.). They also will be asked to indicate if they currently have children or anticipate having children in the future.

Social Desirability. Because some attitudes generally are considered socially unacceptable, assessing such attitudes in the form of self-reports may be compromised by participants responding to such questions in a socially desirable manner (Cozby, 2003; Paulhus, 1991). Because of this concern, participants will complete the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale – Short Form (M-C SDS). The M-C SDS is a 13-item abbreviated version of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Reynolds, 1982), and is designed to measure attempts by participants to be perceived in a positive manner. Participants indicate their level of agreement with the statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale (from 5 = strongly disagree, to 1 = strongly agree). A sample item is “No

matter who I'm talking to, I'm always a good listener." Higher scores reflect a greater tendency to respond to test items in a socially desirable manner. Based on the current sample of participants, this scale obtained a Cronbach reliability estimate of .30.

Attitudes towards Violence Scale-Modified (Anderson, Benjamin, Wood, & Bonacce, 2006). To assess participants' views of violence, they will complete a modified version of the Attitudes toward Violence Scale. The original scale contained 39 numbers of items. For this study, I have extracted 27 items deemed most relevant to my study. Participants read each statement and indicate their level of agreement using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree. Based on the current sample of participants, this scale obtained a Cronbach reliability estimate of .88.

Beliefs about physical discipline scale. The degree to which participants endorse the use of physical punishment to control and correct children will be measured by a 3-item commitment to physical discipline scale developed by Simons, Whitbeck, Conger and Melby (1988; 1990). Respondents will indicate their level of agreement to the items using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Based on the current sample of participants, this scale obtained a Cronbach reliability estimate of .39.

History of Being Corporally Punished. To determine the extent to which participants have been corporally punished as children, I created a one-item question for this study to assess this. The question is "Please indicate how often you were corporally punished as a

child using the rating scale below.” Response options include: Never (0), occasionally (1), Often (2), and Very Frequently (3).

African American acculturation Scale-Revised (Landrine & Klonoff, 1994). African American participants also will complete the African American Acculturation Scale-Revised (AAAS-R). The revised version of this scale consists of 47 number of statements to which respondents indicate their level of agreement using a 7-point Likert-type scale, where 0 is I totally disagree not true at all, and 7 is I strongly agree absolutely true. The items originally were generated by asking African Americans to submit items that reflect various aspects of African American culture; any item that people frequently generated was retained to form part of the scale (Landrine & Klonoff, 1994). High scores on the scale (i.e., high agreement with the items) reflect a traditional cultural orientation (immersed in African American culture), and low scores (i.e., disagreement with the items) reflect an acculturated orientation (low immersion in African American culture). Based on the current sample of participants, this scale obtained a Cronbach reliability estimate of .87.

Procedure

Students enrolled in a course on cross-cultural psychology were invited to participate in a study about attitudes toward child discipline. All students (400+) were provided a set of study questionnaires and were instructed to complete the questionnaires outside of class and return the completed questionnaires to their instructor the following week. Because of this study’s focus on African Americans, questionnaires from all students ($n = 31$) who self-identified as African Americans were retained for data analyses. To form an equal sample size of Whites, 31

questionnaires were randomly chosen from questionnaires completed by students who self-identified as Whites and their data were retained for data analyses.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the study variables as a function of ethnicity. To test the first hypothesis—that African Americans, as a group, would report having been corporally punished as children significantly more than Whites, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on the data. Ethnicity (African American and White) and gender served as the independent variables (IVs). Although gender was not part of the hypothesis, it was included in this analysis due to my interest in examining if women and men differed in their history of being corporally punished. The dependent variables (DV) was the single-item question assessing respondents' history of being corporally punished (with scores ranging from zero (never) to 3 (very frequently)). Due to an unacceptable reliability coefficient for the construct of social desirability, I could not control for socially desirable responding to the study items. Using Wilks' Lambda, it was found that, on average, African Americans did report being corporally punished significantly more than Whites (M history of corporal punishment scores = 2.05 and 1.34 [SD s = .18 and .15], respectively), $F(1, 58) = 9.30, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$. Gender was not associated with a significant effect on history of corporal punishment, $F(1, 58) = 3.32, ns$. There was a significant ethnicity X gender interaction, $F(1, 58) = 4.74, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$. The two ethnic groups differed significantly in history of being corporally punished as a function of being male (African American males' $M = 2.14$ [$SD = .31$] vs. White males' $M = .82$ [$SD = .20$]).

The second hypothesis was that there would be a positive correlation between having been corporally punished as children with anticipating using corporal punishment on participants' prospective children. Although the reliability estimate for the Beliefs about Physical Discipline Scale was unacceptable, I elected to retain the scale due to several considerations. Assessing this construct was a critical component to my study. Also, the scale only contained 3 items, and it is not uncommon for very short scales to obtain reduced reliability estimates. The data did not support this hypothesis. To the contrary, the more participants were corporally punished as children, the less they reported in anticipating using corporal punishment with their future children ($r = -.25, p = .05$). I note that although the correlation only approached statistical significance, it likely would have achieved statistical significance with a larger sample size. It also bears noting that the inverse relationship between history of being corporally punished and anticipating using corporal punishment with prospective children was observed among both African Americans and Whites, although not achieving statistical significance ($r_s = -.24$ and $-.11, ns$, respectively).

The third hypothesis was that there would be a positive correlation between history of corporal punishment and propensity to engage in violence. The data did not support this hypothesis, as there was no significant correlation between the two variables among the participants overall ($r = -.02, ns$), nor among African Americans or Whites ($r_s = -.31$ and $.08, ns$).

Finally, it was hypothesized that there would be a negative correlation between African Americans' acculturation level (toward the dominant, White culture) and their anticipation of using corporal punishment with their prospective children. The data did not support the hypothesis ($r = -.17, ns$).

DISCUSSION

My study focused on examining attitudes toward corporal punishment, including history of being corporally punished, between African American and White American college students. I deemed this study as important because ample research exists indicating that children who are corporally punished are at increased risk for suffering higher levels of anxiety, symptoms of depression (Cohen & Brooks, 1995; Luby & Morgan, 1997), and for engaging in delinquency as adolescents (Egeland & Erickson, 1987). Moreover, there is some research suggesting that African Americans may tend to prefer corporal punishment on children, relative to White Americans (McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Straus & Stewart 1998; Taylor & Hamvas, 2011).

As hypothesized, African Americans, as a group, did report having been corporally punished significantly more as children compared to Whites. These results are consistent with previous research that has found African Americans to use corporal punishment for disciplining children more than Whites (Heffer & Kelley, 1987; McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Straus & Stewart 1998; Taylor & Hamvas, 2011). Using response options as a guide for assessing the extent to which parents used corporal punishment on children, African Americans, on average, reported that their parents used corporal punishment sometimes, whereas Whites reported that their parents rarely used corporal punishment. I speculate that these relatively low reports of history of

corporal punishment may be due to the selective sample of participants (college students) in this study. Stated differently, I speculate that frequency of corporal punishment may be higher among community samples for both ethnic groups, and particularly for African Americans. Nonetheless, given the associated pejorative effects of corporal punishment on children, community leaders—across ethnic groups, but particularly among African Americans—ought to be more proactive in raising awareness of the deleterious effects of corporal punishment while simultaneously educating parents and prospective parents on alternative forms of discipline that do not entail physical punishment (e.g., removing privileges, grounding, etc.). Raising awareness of the disadvantages of corporal punishment holds the promise of yielding better adjusted children, psycho-emotionally, as well as reducing delinquency among adolescents.

Although history of corporal punishment did not differ significantly across genders, the data indicated that African American males reported being hit physically as children the most, especially compared to White males. Given the association between corporal punishment and delinquent behavior among adolescents, and given the relatively high rates of acts of violence and incarceration among Black male juveniles and young adults (Freeberg, 1995; Hall & Barongan, 2002; Hammond & Yung, 1994; Kennedy, 1997), I speculate that history of being punished physically may be one among other factors that might be related causally to the current situation with African American males and incarceration. My data do not provide causal information about this speculation, but possibly highlight the recommendation that more efforts are needed to curb corporal punishment in traditional Black communities.

It was hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between having been corporally punished as children with anticipating using corporal punishment on participants' prospective children. This hypothesis was made based on the notion that parents' attitudes tend to pass on to their children as many people behave in accordance with the models they had as children (Bandura, 1973; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). The data, however, did not support this hypothesis. Somewhat unexpectedly, participants in my study who reported being physically punished as children the most expressed that they would be less likely, relatively speaking, to use corporal punishment on their future children. The first comment worthy of making is that this finding is refreshing; if these young adults stay true to their aspirations, it would demonstrate that "cycles of violence" are not necessarily destined to repeat themselves. This finding also suggests that those who are physically punished as children may be more determined than the typical person who was not physically punished as children to refrain from using corporal punishment on their own children.

In the same vein, it was found that those who were punished corporally as children did not obtain high scores on a scale designed to detect a proclivity for violence. Again, this finding suggests that childhood experiences may not be destiny. Assuming these young adults adhere to their parental aspirations, these findings bode well for their prospective children and even conjugal partners.

Finally, I had hypothesized that the more African Americans were acculturated toward the larger, dominant society, the less they would report anticipating using corporal punishment on their prospective children. The observed correlation did not achieve significance, likely due to

the small sample of African American participants. However, the direction of the correlation was consistent with the hypothesis, in that higher acculturation scores correlating with less desire to use corporal punishment on children.

Limitations of Study

This study has four limitations that should be kept in mind when considering the findings. The first limitation is I was unable to control for socially desirable responding due to the unacceptable reliability of the social desirable scale that was used with this sample of participants. Thus, responses about corporal punishment—especially the anticipation of using corporal punishing on future children—may have been slanted to portray participants in a desirable manner. This problem is further exacerbated by the low reliability of the beliefs about physical discipline scale. The second limitation is the sample consisting of college students. Consequently, it is difficult to know if the present findings generalize to non-college student adults in the community. The third limitation is the correlational nature of the data. They do not shed any light on causal relations between the variables of interest. The fourth limitation is the retrospective and prospective nature of the data. Views expressed retrospectively, and certainly views expressed prospectively, may not be accurate, may be distorted, and may even be fabricated. All of the findings reported herein must be viewed with caution as a result of these various shortcomings of this study.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables as a Function of Ethnicity

Variable	Ethnicity	
	African Americans ^a	White Americans ^b
History of Corporal		
Punishment <i>M (SD)</i>	2.05 (.18)	1.34 (.15)**
Attitudes toward		
Corp. Punishment	3.01 (.16)	3.56 (.13)*
Attitudes toward		
Violence	3.67 (.11)	3.57 (.09)

Note: ^a *n* = 31; ^b *n* = 31. **p* < .05; ***p* < .01

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