Spanking and the Making of a Violent Society

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Most of the world’s societies are violent in the sense that they have high rates of physical assault, homicide, and war. The United States (US) is the most violent of the advanced industrial societies. The current US homicide rate of 8.5 per 100,000 is three times the Canadian rate of 2.3 per 100,000, and about eight times the rate of Western European countries. Nevertheless, many societies are even more violent. The Mexican homicide rate of 19.4 is more than double that of the US, and the rate for the cities of Columbia (110.4 per 100,000) is more than ten times higher.

Most of the world’s societies also bring up children violently through the use of corporal punishment. Perhaps the correspondence between the preponderance of violence and that of corporal punishment is just a coincidence. Obviously, corporal punishment and assaults and murders differ in severity, and also in the cultural definition that makes one legitimate and the other criminal. However, there is also a correspondence between the behavior involved in corporal punishment and the behavior involved in criminal assaults and homicides that is seldom perceived. Everyone understands that corporal punishment is carried out to correct or control misbehavior. What is not understood is that almost all assaults by adults and about two thirds of homicides are also carried out to correct what the offender perceives as misbehavior. Typical examples include a confrontation between two men over a loan of $50 that is to be paid back in 1 week. Now it is 3 months later. They get into a fight, and one ends up dead. Fights between adults almost always occur over what the aggressor thinks are moral transgressions, such as welshing on a promise to pay back a loan; an insult, or making a pass at another person’s girlfriend or boyfriend. Thus, both corporal punishment and criminal violence occur in response to what the parent who spanks or the man who throws a punch consider outrageous or persistent misbehavior. Moreover, corporal punishment, like most assaults and homicides, is usually impulsive, done in anger, and often regretted. In an as yet unpublished study of a random sample 1003 mothers in two Minnesota cities, I asked about the circumstances connected to the times they had used corporal punishment in the last 6 months. I found that 44% said that, in half or more of the times they used corporal punishment, it was because they had “lost it” and 54% said that spanking was the wrong thing to have done in half or more of the instances. Durant’s study of a Canadian sample revealed similar misgivings about spanking.

Although corporal punishment may share key elements with criminal assaults, that is hardly evidence that corporal punishment is one of the factors making our society so violent. This article examines that issue more systematically by reviewing evidence from research that has investigated the links between corporal punishment and societal violence. Two types of research will be examined: studies that compare the level of violence in societies characterized by differences in use of corporal punishment; and studies that compare the level of violence during adulthood of individuals who have been exposed to different levels of corporal punishment.

COMPARISON OF SOCIETIES

Anthropological Studies

Societal Case Studies. More than 50 years ago, the anthropologist Ashley Montague argued that “Spanking the baby may be the psychological seed of war” (Boston Sunday Globe, January 5, 1941). He later invited eight anthropologists who had studied one of the relatively few nonviolent societies to contribute chapters to a book called Learning Non-Aggression: The Experience of Non-Literate Societies. Although those eight societies differed tremendously, they had in common nonviolent child rearing, ie, they did not span children.

Montague did not argue that nonspanking alone will produce a nonviolent society. On the contrary, the eight societies described in his book show that a great deal more is required, especially a high level of attention to a child’s needs and safety, and positive rather than punitive modes of dealing with misbehavior. If spanking is a risk factor for societal violence, it is only one of many risk and protective factors. Consequently, rather than a one-to-one relationship between spanking and societal violence, the cross-cultural evidence suggests only that corporal punishment is associated with an increased probability of societal violence. A probabilistic relationship is typical of most disease vectors. Heavy smoking, for example, does not guarantee lung cancer. Rather, it increases the risk of death from smoking-related diseases to about one out of three. This is a large risk,
but it also means that two thirds of heavy smokers do not die of these diseases. Just as most heavy smokers will not die of a smoking-related disease, most people who have been exposed to corporal punishment will not be violent adults.

**Human Relations Area Files Data.** Although in-depth analyses of child rearing in nonviolent societies are highly informative, they do not provide statistical evidence. One approach to obtaining a statistical test of the idea that corporal punishment is associated with societal violence is through use of the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF). The HRAF is an archive of anthropological data on over 300 societies. Levinson found that corporal punishment is used in about three quarters of the world's societies, and that the frequency of use varies greatly. Levinson also coded the data on violence between adults and found a correlation of .32 between the extent to which corporal punishment is used and the extent of wife-beating. Although this is a strong association, and one that persists when a number of other variables have been statistically controlled, it is the only aspect of societal violence that Levinson found to be strongly associated with corporal punishment. Thus, analyses of the HRAF data provide only limited evidence for a link between corporal punishment and societal violence.

**Attitudes Favoring Corporal Punishment in Ten Nations**

Nancy Burns and others used data from Edfeldt on the degree to which parents and teachers in ten European countries approved of corporal punishment to examine the relationship between corporal punishment and societal level violence. We found that the greater the degree of approval of corporal punishment, the higher the overall homicide rate and also the homicide rate for infants. When multiple regression was used to control for variables such as the gross national product, and educational and military expenditures, the relationship between endorsement of corporal punishment by teachers and the infant homicide rate remained significant, but not the overall homicide rate. Although the results are somewhat equivocal, they are consistent with findings from many other cross-cultural studies which have found that all types of violence tend to be related to each other (summarized in Levinson 1989).

**State-to-State Difference in Corporal Punishment in Schools**

There is considerable variation among the states in the extent to which corporal punishment is permitted in schools. At the time the data was reported some states allowed only the principal to hit children, others permitted both the principal and teachers. At the extreme were states that permitted any school employee to hit a child. Florida even prevented school districts from forbidding corporal punishment. This information was used to create a corporal punishment Permission Index score for each state. I found that the more use of corporal punishment is authorized in a state, the higher the rate of violence by students and the higher the homicide rate. Although the murders could have been committed by persons who were physically punished in school a decade or more earlier, it is more likely that the findings reflect the often found tendency for one type of violence to be related to other types of violence. Because this linkage crosses the boundaries between "legitimate violence" (such as corporal punishment) and "criminal violence," it illustrates what I have called the "cultural spillover" principle.

**INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL EVIDENCE**

If corporal punishment is one of the factors that tends to increase the level of violence in a society, that relationship should also be observable in the individual life histories of members of a society. This section summarizes the research my colleagues and I have carried out to investigate the links between corporal punishment and criminal behavior by adolescents and adults. I omitted studies of children, partly because that type of research is well-documented elsewhere, starting with the classic study by Sears, Maccoby, and Levinson, and continuing with a spate of recent studies such as Strasberg, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates, but mainly because the focus of this article is on societal violence. Most people take "societal violence" to mean violence by adolescents and adults. That is unfortunate because the implicit discounting of nonlethal violence by children, and the resulting toleration or discounting of violence by children, including sibling violence, contributes to adult violence. Even the most dismissed type of childhood violence, sibling violence, has serious harmful side effects on child victims.

Direct Linkages. The top three arrows in Fig 1 summarizes findings from studies which show that the more corporal punishment experienced in middle childhood or early adolescence, the greater the probability of crime and violence. The data on delinquency in the top row were obtained by interviewing parents of a nationally representative sample of children. We found that the more corporal punishment these parents used, the greater the probability of the child being delinquent.

The next row of Fig 1 refers to a 33-year longitudinal study of high-risk boys. The crime data is from a search of court records of convictions when the boys in the sample were middle-aged. Figure 2 shows that, even after controlling for the criminal record of the father, corporal punishment is associated with a doubling of the percent sons who were convicted of a serious crime.

The data on non-family assaults in the third row of Fig 1 were obtained by interviewing adults and asking about corporal punishment they experienced at about age 13 and 14. They were also asked whether, during the previous 12 months, they had ever gotten so angry at an adult who was not part of their family that they hit that person.

The studies in the first three rows therefore show that corporal punishment of school-age children and early adolescents is associated with adult violence.
that could bring about the link between corporal punishment and violence as an adult. The remainder of Fig 1 summarizes findings from the studies that my colleagues and I have carried out to test theories about linking processes.

The first of the theories diagrammed in Fig 1 identifies anger as an intervening process. This theory was suggested by a study by Ellen Cohn and I did of 270 college students. We gave these students a list of possible reactions to corporal punishment and asked them to check their reactions to the first time they could remember being hit by their parents and the most recent occasion. For both the first and most recent instances, 42% checked “hated them.” Because their hatred was for something that goes on for an average of about 14 years, it led us to the hypothesis that anger at parents could be generalized to anger at humanity, i.e., that corporal punishment increases the risk of becoming a generally angry person. That hypothesis was tested by Tsang on a sample of 1002 mothers in Minnesota. Tsang found that the more corporal punishment the mothers had experienced, the more likely they were to have high scores on a scale measuring their current level of anger, and that the higher the score on the anger scale, the greater the use of corporal punishment on their own children.

The next intervening process diagrammed in Fig 1 involves elements of social learning theory. Respondents in the 1985 National Family Violence Survey were asked this question: “Are there situations that you can imagine in which you would approve of a wife slapping her husband’s face?” and a parallel question about a husband slapping a wife's face. Twenty-two percent approved of a wife slapping a husband and 14% approved of a husband slapping a wife. Carrie Yodanis and I found that the more corporal punishment a person experienced, the more likely they were to agree when asked these two questions. We also found, not surprisingly, that those who agreed were more likely to have actually hit their partner in the previous 12 months. We interpret this as showing that corporal punishment provides a model for what to do when someone misbehaves and persists in the misbehavior. Unfortunately, sooner or later, almost all spouses misbehave, at least as their partner sees it, and they often persist in the misbehavior. Thus, the “Johnny I’ve told you ten times” principle applied to children can also apply to spouses, and that is what we found. Specifically, the more corporal punishment, the greater the probability of believing that there are occasions when it is okay to slap a partner, and in turn, those who believe that are more likely to actually hit their partner.

The line running from approval of slapping a spouse to physical abuse of child in Fig 1 indicates that the same process that helps explain why corporal punishment is related to assaults on a spouse also helps explain why the amount of corporal punishment a parent experienced is also associated with the probability of severely assaulting a child.

Fig. 2. Links between corporal punishment and adult violence.

and other crime. Obviously, these data cannot tell us about corporal punishment of toddlers. However, the findings apply to the majority of American children because the National Family Violence Surveys and other studies show that over half of children age 13 and 14 are still being hit at that age.

**Linking Processes.** As important as are the relationships between corporal punishment and adult crime summarized by the top three rows of Fig 1, those studies did not provide information on the processes
punishment is associated with a greater probability of being depressed. This is a serious enough problem by itself. In addition, we found that depression is associated with an increased probability of physically assaulting a partner. This is consistent with research showing that depression is not just an attack on the self, but also tends to be externalized in the form of aggression.

Another process that may explain the link between corporal punishment and assaulting a spouse is shown by the entry in Fig 1 for marital conflict. We found that the more corporal punishment, the higher the probability of the marriage being characterized by long-standing and unresolved conflicts. Our guess is that corporal punishment is related to unresolved marital conflicts because the more parents use corporal punishment to deal with a child, the less opportunity the child has to observe and participate in nonviolent modes of conflict resolution. A high level of marital conflict, in turn, is linked to a higher probability of violence against a spouse.

The last row of Fig 1 refers to the possible effects of spanking on the parents themselves. I found that the more parents used corporal punishment on their children, the more likely they were to also hit their spouse. This could indicate a "role practice" effect. That is, each time a father or mother spanks a child for misbehaving, they are practicing the idea that people who misbehave should be hit, and a certain proportion of parents then apply this principle to their partner.

WHY WE DON'T PERCEIVE THE CONNECTION

The evidence summarized above clearly shows that corporal punishment is associated with adult violence and other crime. Some of this evidence has been available for many years. However, it has mostly been ignored. A current example is the violence prevention programs in a large proportion of American schools. I examined four of these programs. All four seemed to be well-designed. None of the four, however, addressed the most frequent type of violence encountered by teenagers—being hit by a parent. Remember that more than half of all 13 and 14 year olds are hit by their parents each year, and that among teens who are hit by parents, it happens an average of about eight times per year. None of the four programs even mention the inconsistency between what they are trying to teach and the example set by most of the parents. It may be beyond the power of a school-based program to get parents to stop hitting their children, but they can at least explain that it is also wrong for parents to correct misbehavior by hitting. Until that is done, it is unrealistic to expect teenagers to accept the idea that hitting is not the way to deal with a friend who insults him/her or makes a pass at his girlfriend or boyfriend.

Another example of the neglect of corporal punishment was revealed by a content analysis of textbooks on child development. These books devote an average of only half a page to corporal punishment, despite the fact that it is a part of the socialization experience of over 90% of American children.

Additional documentation of the extent to which the findings of research on corporal punishment has been ignored may be found in the preface and chapters 1 and 11 of *Beating The Devil Out Of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families.*

The recent pamphlet *Raising Children to Resist Violence: What You Can Do* could be a sign that the head-in-the-sand era of American child psychology is ending. This pamphlet says that "Hitting, slapping, or spanking children as punishment shows them that it's okay to hit others to solve problems and can train them to punish others in the same way they were punished."

However, there are also signs in the opposite direction. Legislation to restore corporal punishment in the schools, for example, was introduced in several state legislatures in 1995. So it is important to understand why the link between corporal punishment and societal violence is so rarely perceived.

Problems With the Evidence

The evidence summarized in this article is dependable in the sense that similar findings occur over and over, and in the sense that most of the statistical analyses controlled for a number of potentially confounding variables, such as the age of the parent and the child, socioeconomic status, whether there was violence between the parents, and ethnic group. Nevertheless, it is a large leap from the correlations described in this article to concluding that corporal punishment causes societal violence.

One of the most important problems is the possibility that the link between corporal punishment and violence as an adult occurs because parents use corporal punishment to respond to aggressive and violent children. To the extent that it is the child's aggression that causes the parents to use corporal punishment, it should not be surprising to find that 20 years later, as adults, the same tendency toward aggression shows up in the form of higher rates of wife-beating and other violence. The most that such research can show is that corporal punishment was not effective in suppressing aggression. To go beyond that requires longitudinal evidence. A longitudinal study could take into account the aggressiveness of the child at the time corporal punishment was used. That would permit finding out if spanking a child who hits another child reduces the chance that, as an adult, this person will hit others, as is widely believed, or as I believe, increases the risk of hitting others when an adult.

Unfortunately, there is as yet no published research linking corporal punishment to adult violence that can answer the question of whether corporal punishment makes things better or worse by taking into account the fact that parents hit children because they are aggressive. However, a forthcoming study does. This is a study of three large cohorts of children. As shown in Fig 3, we found that, after holding constant the level of antisocial behavior at the start of the study (and also other variables such as emotional support and cognitive stimulation), the more corporal punishment parents used to correct that misbe-
behavior, the worse the child’s behavior was 2 years later.

Although there have been legitimate scientific bases for skepticism regarding the evidence on the links between corporal punishment and violence, I think the fundamental reasons lie elsewhere. The following sections identify some of these extra-scientific reasons.

corporal punishment and Personal Experience

A major obstacle to accepting the evidence that corporal punishment is linked to violence occurs because that evidence seems to contradict personal experience. The seeming contradiction occurs because, as was pointed out earlier, most people who were spanked, like most heavy smokers, will not suffer a harmful side effect. They can say, and almost everyone does say, “I was spanked and I’m okay.”

Another reason findings from research on the harmful effects of corporal punishment are likely to be ignored is that it requires admitting that one’s parents did something seriously wrong, and the even greater difficulty in acknowledging having brought up one’s own children in a way that unnecessarily exposed them to risk of serious harm.

Perhaps the most important reason the evidence linking corporal punishment to violence has been ignored is the lack of direct, observable evidence. The harmful side effects do not occur right away, often not for years. When they do occur, for example in the form of depression, almost no one even considers the possibility that this depression might be the result of the disciplinary efforts of loving parents.

The delayed effects and the small proportion seriously hurt are the same reasons the harmful effects of smoking were not perceived for centuries. As noted previously, epidemiologic research shows that one third of very heavy smokers die of lung cancer or some other smoking-induced disease. That, of course, means that two thirds of heavy smokers do not die of these diseases. So most heavy smokers can say “I’ve smoked more than a pack-a-day for 30 years and I’m okay.” Similarly, most people who were spanked can say “My parents spanked me, and I’m not a child abuser.”

Other Obstacles to Perceiving the Effects of corporal punishment

Much of the opposition to steps to end corporal punishment is based on one or the other of the ten cultural myths about corporal punishment described in chapter 10 of Beating The Devil Out Of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families. There are also other and even more deeply embedded obstacles described in the concluding chapter of that book. Space limitations prevent more than mentioning these problems, but they reflect deep-seated aspects of American culture and the American psyche. Among these are the cultural norms supporting use of violence for socially desirable ends, extreme individualism, fear of government intervention in the family, and the opposition of Protestant fundamentalists.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There are a number of other methodological problems and limitations in addition to those just discussed. Consequently, none of the studies reviewed can show that spanking causes violence. Neither, however, can this evidence be dismissed. One reason is that although the limitations of the studies prevent concluding unequivocally that corporal punishment causes violence, each of the studies could have falsified the hypothesized link between corporal punishment and violence, whereas all but a few have shown that corporal punishment is associated with violence or other crime.

Another reason the evidence summarized in this article is important, despite the limitations of each of the studies, is that the weak point of one study may be dealt with in another study. Of course, that other study, in turn, will have its own limitations. But when so many different studies, using such a variety of methods, almost always show that corporal punishment is related to violence and other antisocial behavior, it is truly remarkable. That remarkable situation is similar to the relationship between smoking and lung cancer at the time of the first surgeon general’s report. The report concluded that, while a definitive study did not exist, the cumulative weight of the evidence led to the conclusion that smoking does cause lung cancer. That conclusion is still denied by the tobacco industry, but is otherwise almost universally accepted.

It may not be many years before we also conclude that, despite the limitations of individual studies, corporal punishment is dangerous to the health of children and to society and all birth certificates will
have a warning notice to that effect. Of course, corporal punishment is only one of many causes of violence. Consequently, even if all parents stopped hitting their children, it would not mean the end of violence. But, it is not unreasonable to think that it might result in at least a 10% reduction in violence and other crime. That would be a profound change for the 10% who are spared these problems. However, there are also indirect victims. A much larger percentage will be spared the pain of being victimized by crime. An even larger number will be spared the trauma of having a family member victimized. A still greater number will be spared some of the economic costs of crime and prisons and mental health treatment. Although it is currently impossible to know the percentages, and to be sure that some new evil will not replace hitting children, the research reviewed suggests that, in addition to many other benefits, a society in which parents never spank will be a society with less violence and other crime.

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