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The Sociological, Religious, Psychological, and Media Influences on Corporal  
Punishment

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Corporal punishment is a method of discipline often described as the use of physical force with the intent of inflicting pain on a child, but not injury, with the purpose of correcting a child's behavior (Fréchette, Zoratti, & Romano, 2015). Today, the most commonly used methods of corporal punishment involve spanking, slapping, shoving a child roughly, and hitting them with certain objects, such as a hair brush or a belt (Fréchette, et al., 2015). About 94% of parents of children from three to four years old in the U.S. have reported spanking their children in the past year (Attitudes toward spanking, 2015), and across all cultures, 74% of societies use physical punishment (Engulu & Harris," 2017). However, the use of corporal punishment is a heavily debated method of discipline (Fréchette, et al., 2015). People who are pro-corporal punishment believe that it teaches children respect for authority and is crucial for preserving control over a child (Fréchette, et al., 2015). However, those who are against corporal punishment maintain the belief that the use of physical force, even if it is minor, is not acceptable under any circumstances, that it violates children's basic rights, and that it leads to a range of both short-term and long-term developmental effects (Fréchette et al., 2015).

Corporal punishment can have multiple sociological factors that play into one's approval and use of this disciplining approach. Religion, specifically Conservative Protestantism and belief in biblical literalism, is one of those factors that plays a significant role in its use. However, it has been discovered that the use of corporal punishment can have many negative psychological effects on a child. Research has also come to find that violence in the form of video games and media can also produce the same negative outcomes. Therefore, many different

forces can affect the approval and use of corporal punishment, and not only does the physical violence in the form of punishment have detrimental effects on a child, but so does violence in media.

### **Sociological Perspective**

Four sociological factors that play into the approval and use of corporal punishment are gender, race and culture, socioeconomic status, and the region in which someone lives. In the case of gender, both the gender of parents and the children effect the approval and use of corporal punishment (Attitudes toward spanking, 2015). In the Child Trends research organization's 2014 analysis of their General Social Survey, men were significantly more likely to agree or strongly agree that it is occasionally necessary to inflict a "good, hard spanking" on a child than women were (Attitudes toward spanking, 2015). Seventy-six percent of men and 65% of women approved of it (Attitudes toward spanking, 2015). Although men have been consistently found to have more favorable attitudes towards the use of corporal punishment than women, most studies have discovered that women use spanking more than men (Engulu & Harris, 2017). In a study of nine countries, in seven of the nine countries, mothers reported spanking, slapping, or hitting their child notably more frequently than the fathers did in the same families (Lansford, 2010). A possible explanation for this is that on average, mothers spend more time with their children than fathers do and have more responsibility in terms of the day to day care of their children (Lansford et al., 2010). Because of this, mothers have more opportunities to witness a child's misbehavior and respond to it (Lansford et al., 2010). When it comes to the gender of the child, Engulu & Harris (2017) found that parents are more apt to use spanking and other practices of corporal punishment with boys than with girls. This even occurs in school settings; boys, especially African American boys, are disproportionately punished corporally in

schools in the U.S (2017). Even in the study between nine countries, parents and children reported that parents in the same family utilized corporal punishment more often with boys than with girls (Lansford, 2010). A possible explanation for this may be that society typically views boys as tougher, while girls are viewed as more fragile. Therefore, people may be reluctant to use corporal punishment on girls.

When it comes to race and culture, Engulu and Harris (2017) found that most studies have discovered that African Americans have more favorable attitudes towards spanking than Caucasians. It was found that 22.2% of Caucasians disagree with spanking, compared with only 8.8% of African Americans. It was also found that black parents had more positive stances on corporal punishment than Latino parents (2017). A possible explanation for the variation in the approval of corporal punishment amongst races and cultures are the differences in cultural values and their views on child-rearing practices (Lansford et al., 2010). Black parents also have fears about the safety of their children, and most believe physical discipline is essential in keeping black children off the streets, out of jail or out of police officers' sight (Patton, 2017).

Gender comes into play again because in 2014, 81% of black women, as opposed to 62% of Hispanic and white women, each, agreed that children sometimes need a “good hard spanking” (Attitudes toward spanking, 2015). Asian women were the least likely to agree with the use of corporal punishment; only 56% of them agreed with the practice (Attitudes toward spanking, 2015). However, there were not any substantial differences in males of different races and ethnicities. (Attitudes toward spanking, 2015).

Poverty and socioeconomic status tend to play a significant role with corporal punishment. As cited in Foster, Brooks-Gunn, and Martin (2007), two studies from 1979 and 1985 used national survey data and found that families with poverty-level income or below

reported greater percentages of severe and very severe physical violence against children than families with higher incomes did. These higher levels of direct physical victimization included assault with a weapon and multiple perpetrator assault. Therefore, family poverty is linked to harsher parenting (2007). The use of violence on a child in poverty was also higher among younger children, children living with younger parents, and in single-parent families (Foster et al., 2007). It can be said that these three family situations are significantly stressful circumstances. As cited in Niu, Lui, & Wang (2018), Anthony et al. (2005) found that parents who had high parenting stress tended to use more severe discipline, such as corporal punishment. Therefore, stress levels of parents of lower socioeconomic statuses can be a potential explanation for their higher rates of use of corporal punishment. Going back to gender, male children in households of lower socioeconomic statuses were more probable than those in wealthier families to be at a higher risk for maternal hitting and use of more than one physical punishment per week (Foster et al., 2007). However, female children in all households of all income levels were not at an elevated risk of this punitive maternal punishment (Foster et al., 2007).

Foster et al. (2007) also found that children and youth residing in households with lower incomes also had higher rates of witnessing and indirect exposure to community violence. Disadvantaged community contexts also increase the risk of corporal punishment used on intimate partners, or intimate partner violence (IPV). Children in underprivileged settings are therefore at a greater risk for witnessing IPV than children that live in more affluent communities. Lower socioeconomic status is therefore a risk factor for parent-child maltreatment, witnessing IPV in adults, and witnessing and experiencing direct victimization by community violence. As we will discover later, this exposure to violence will have detrimental effects on children's emotional and behavioral wellbeing (2007).

Finally, the region in which individuals live tends to shape their approval and use of corporal punishment (Engulu & Harris, 2017). It has been found that parents living in Southern states have more positive attitudes towards spanking as opposed to parents from the Northeastern states, who have the most disapproving attitudes towards spanking (Engulu & Harris, 2017). In Flynn's (1994) study, 86.1% of Southerners supported the use of corporal punishment. Just over 36% of the Southerners strongly agreed with the use of spanking, and only 1.5% of them disagreed with the practice (1994). The 23 states that still allow corporal punishment in schools are mainly found in the south; the states with the highest rates of corporal punishment in their schools are Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, and Georgia (Engulu & Harris," 2017). Flynn (1994) also found that overall, Southern school employees engage in physical punishment more frequently than school workers in other regions of the country. The East South Central states (Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee) had the highest support of them all with 92.8% of them agreeing that the use of spanking was sometimes necessary. On the other hand, The Northeast was the region that had the least favorable positions towards spanking. One of every eight respondents from this region strongly disagreed with the use of corporal punishment (Flynn, 1994). An explanation for this lies in the research of Baron and Straus (1988) in which they found that the Northeast had the least amount of culturally sanctioned violence (Flynn, 1994). This culture may stem from the Yankee culture from the Civil War, which was very anti-southern (Flynn, 1994).

### **Religious Influence on Corporal Punishment**

Southerners' strong belief in the use of corporal punishment may have its origins in the Bible (Flynn, 1994). Southerners tend to have more traditional and conservative opinions on moral and religious issues (Flynn, 1994). Because of their conservative religious views, many of

them have a more literal interpretation of the bible (Flynn, 1994). Other studies found that biblical literalism, which is a strategy that is dedicated to sustaining the unity and inerrancy of the text of the Bible (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993), was positively linked to favorable attitudes toward spanking (Flynn, 1994). Therefore, religious conservatives use spanking more frequently and have more positive attitudes towards corporal punishment (Flynn, 1994). More specifically, due to their literal interpretation of the Bible, Conservative Protestants use corporal punishment more frequently and have more supportive attitudes towards corporal punishment than those from other religions (Engulu & Harris,” 2017). Flynn’s (1994) research found that Conservative Protestants were far more apt to agree with spanking than those who were not affiliated with this denomination. Overall, 89% of Conservative Protestants agreed with the use of corporal punishment (1994). Only 11.0% of Conservative Protestants disagree with corporal punishment, as opposed to 23.2% of members of other religions (Engulu & Harris,” 2017).

It has been established that Conservative Protestants’ support for the use of corporal punishment on their children is influenced by their belief in the principle that the Bible should be interpreted as the literal Word of God (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal, 1996). Ellison et al. (1996) state that Conservative Protestants believe, per the Bible, that physical “chastisement” with the “rod” is the chief biblical ordained response to the blatant challenges of authority. Some of the passages in the Bible that state this idea are 2 Samuel 7:14, which states, “I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands,” Proverbs 13:24, which says, “Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them,” Proverbs 22:15, which states, “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far away,” and Proverbs 23:13, which reads, “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish

them with the rod, they will not die.” Most Conservative Protestants believe that the use of corporal punishment conveys an important religious lesson to their children about the nature of God. They claim that parents symbolize God's authority to children, and that many children come to envision God and comprehend their relationship to Him through their parental imagery. While parents need to teach their children by example that God is caring and loving, it is equivalently important to show by example God's uncompromising nature of divine punishment (1996).

Although the practice may seem punitive, Ellison and Sherkat (1993) state that Conservative Protestants do have guidelines they need to follow when engaging in this physical punishment. Corporal punishment is thought to be appropriate under two conditions. The first is that physical punishment can only be used after the child is made to understand the reasoning behind the punishment. The second is that it can be used only if the punishment ritual is followed by a period of loving intimacy with the parent. When it comes to what they can use to punish their child with, only certain instruments are deemed as appropriate "rods." Examples of appropriate items are hickory sticks or other light objects. The parents are never allowed to use their hand or heavy objects. Also, only certain parts of the child's body are considered appropriate areas for striking. They can strike the buttocks, but are never allowed the head or face (1993).

### **Psychological Effects**

Some parents may see corporal punishment as an effective means of disciplining their child and getting them to cooperate. However, research has found the use of corporal punishment to have many detrimental psychological effects on children that can also affect them later in life. Grogan-Kaylor's (2004) research found that escalations in the use of corporal



punishment were evidently associated with increases in the level of antisocial behavior in children. Antisocial behaviors are disruptive actions characterized by covert and overt hostility and deliberate aggression toward others (“Antisocial behavior”). As cited by Wallace (2017), researcher Elizabeth Gershoff found that spanking does not improve behavior. She also found that it leads to heightened aggression and other behavioral issues such as stealing and lying, and makes it more probable that children will have mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. It could also lead to learning problems in school (2017). Adolescents who are more likely to participate in fighting, bullying, and victimization of others report that their parents used corporal punishment as a disciplining technique (Parents’ Use). Harsh physical punishment can lead to an increased probability of childhood emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, and exposure to intimate partner violence (Afifi et al., 2017). There are no studies that show that spanking improves a child’s development or their physical or mental health (Afifi et al., 2017).

Not only does spanking negatively affect an individual in childhood, but the negative effects can carry over into adulthood, as well. Afifi et al. (2017) carried out a study to compare the extent to which a history of being spanked in childhood is linked with mental health impairments in adulthood. They found that a history of childhood spanking was associated with an amplified likelihood of suicide attempts, moderate to heavy drinking, and the use of street drugs in adulthood. It was also associated with depression. They found that harsh physical punishment was correlated with heightened odds of intimate partner violence perpetration, victimization, and reciprocal violence in adulthood, as well (2017).

As previously stated, parents believe that using corporal punishment will help their child by reducing their improper behaviors. However, it is parental disapproval of the use of corporal

punishment that is linked with more prosocial attitudes and less use of physical violence among youths (“Parents’ use). Research has shown that parental use of corporal punishment might pose a risk for violent behaviors among youth (“Parents’ use). Experiencing physical punishment in childhood can make physical violence seem acceptable and can therefore increase the chance of violence carrying over to intimate partner relationships in adulthood (Afifi et al., 2017). A study by researcher Straus and his colleagues (1997) found that instead of decreasing inappropriate behaviors among children, the use of corporal punishment teaches children that using physical aggression is the norm and is a proper method for solving conflicts, as cited in Grogan-Kaylor, 2004. A study showed that parents who were victims of recurrent physical punishment during their childhood were more apt to believe that it was acceptable to be disciplined that way, therefore, they frequently spanked their children. Their children, in turn, frequently believed that spanking was an appropriate method of discipline (Smith, 2012).

It is evident that the use of corporal punishment can be passed down from parent to child, and it has been found that the rate of transmission of physical abuse from one generation to the next is nearly 30% (Bower & Knutson, 1996). This can be seen in the notorious case of National Football League (NFL) player Adrian Peterson, the star running back for the Minnesota Vikings. Peterson admitted to disciplining his 4-year-old son with a tree branch (Wallace, 2017). O’Connor’s (2014) article says that Roger Goodell, the Commissioner of the NFL, wrote in a letter that there was "visible swelling, marks and cuts" on the child's ankles, limbs, back, buttocks and genitals after Peterson hit his child with the tree branch, or "switch." Peterson's son said that his father put leaves in his mouth during the beating and was afraid that his father would punch him in the face if he voiced to the police what his father had done to him. Goodell said that Peterson showed "no meaningful remorse" for his conduct (2014). Peterson was using a

method of discipline that was similar to the way his parents disciplined him growing up in East Texas. He stated, "Deep in my heart I have always believed I could have been one of those kids that was lost in the streets without the discipline instilled in me by my parents and other relatives... I have always believed that the way my parents disciplined me has a great deal to do with the success I have enjoyed as a man" (Wallace, 2017). Therefore, it is evident that his parent's use of corporal punishment was transmitted to the next generation through him.

As previously mentioned, harsh physical punishment can lead to an increased probability of different types of childhood abuse (Afifi et al., 2017). One of these types of abuse that corporal punishment can increase the risk of is child physical abuse (Fréchette et al., 2015), which is also evident in Peterson's case. Child physical abuse includes the deliberate use of force against a child, so that it produces injury or puts the child at risk for injury (Fréchette et al., 2015). This force might include methods such as beating, hitting, shaking, pushing, choking, biting, burning, kicking, or assaulting a child with a weapon (Fréchette et al., 2015). Child physical abuse differs from corporal punishment because corporal punishment does not intend to produce injury (Fréchette et al., 2015). Peterson did not consider his or his parents' abusive actions to be wrong, and there is research that explains why this is.

Bower and Knutson (1996) examined the relationship between childhood experience with punitive discipline, perceptions of a punitive childhood history, and adult attitudes concerning appropriate discipline. Participants who had experienced a particular form of physical discipline as a child were less likely to label that form of discipline as abusive. Childhood victimization was also associated with an over-all decrease in sensitivity to the use of severe corporal punishment and discipline as an adult. Among persons with severely punitive histories and childhoods, those who did not label themselves as abused were less likely to label

events as physically abusive than those who classified themselves abused (Bower & Knutson, 1996).

### **Effects of Violent Media**

As it has been proven, physical violence such as corporal punishment, can lead to heightened violence and aggression in children and adults, and research shows that exposure to violence in media and video games can have the same detrimental effects. Violent media is media that depicts any intentional attempts by individuals to impose harm on others (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). The reenactment of aggression is mainly based on the learning and application of aggressive knowledge structures stored in our memories (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Violent media increases aggression by teaching its observers how to be aggressive by readying aggressive thoughts, heightening arousal, or by creating an aggressive affective state (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). It is even possible for nonviolent games to increase aggressive affect by producing elevated levels of frustration (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Many of today's most popular video games, such as "Grand Theft Auto," "Mortal Kombat," and "Call of Duty" are violent games. In their meta-analytic review on the research on the effects of violent video games on the behavior of children and young adults, Anderson and Bushman (2001) found that high video-game violence was definitely associated with heightened aggression and increased physiological arousal. Short-term exposure to violent video games was found to cause at least a temporary increase in aggression, and exposure to violent video games is correlated with aggression in the real world. Violent video games also cause at least a temporary decrease in prosocial behavior, demonstrating that exposure, once again, would not help in the real world (Anderson and Bushman, 2001). In terms of more long-term consequences, the main mechanism behind the development of aggressive personality is aggressive cognition (Anderson and

Bushman, 2001), which are hostile attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, or wishes (Allen and Anderson, 2017). Exposure to violent video game is positively related to aggressive cognition, meaning it can lead to an aggressive personality (Anderson and Bushman, 2001).

Anderson and Bushman (2001) explain that not only do violent video games have the same effects on people as corporal punishment does, but so does violent television and movies. It is now recognized that even short exposure to violent TV or movies results in the significant heightening of aggression. It is also known that recurrent exposure of children to media violence escalates their aggressiveness as young adults and is a significant risk factor for youth violence (2001). A report by the National Institute of Mental Health identified three major effects of witnessing violence on TV. The first was that children can become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others. The second was that children might be more fearful and afraid of the world around them. And finally, it may be more probable for children to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others (“Violence in the Media”). As cited in “Violence in the Media,” research by psychologists Huesmann, Leonard Eron and others found that children who watched several hours of violent TV when they were in elementary school showed heightened levels of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers. They also came to find that in adulthood, these same participants were more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts. Interestingly, being aggressive as a child did not predict watching more violent TV as a teenager, suggesting that TV watching could be a cause rather than a consequence of aggressive behavior (“Violence in the Media”).

## **Conclusion**

In summary, it can be said that many different sociological factors influence attitudes towards and the use of corporal punishment. These factors include the gender of both parents

and children, one's race and culture, a family's socioeconomic status, and the region in which they live. Religiosity, specifically Conservative Protestantism and their belief in biblical literalism, also increases the approval and use of corporal punishment on their children. However, it is evident that the use of corporal punishment can have many detrimental effects on the psychological well-being of children that can last into adulthood, such as mental illnesses, and more approval of corporal punishment by the child, themselves. It also increases the rates of antisocial behavior and aggressiveness, which are also outcomes that can result from seeing various forms of violent media. Since there are decades' worth of research proving that violence in the forms of corporal punishment and violent media have such detrimental effects, it is about time that we find and publicize the use of alternatives to both these causes of harm on children, such as giving them time outs, logical consequences for their actions, and setting limits.

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