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CHILDHOOD PUNISHMENT EXPERIENCES AND ADULT VIOLENCE

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## ABSTRACT

Using secondary analysis of data from a national survey, this note examines the relationship between childhood punishment experiences and adult interpersonal violence. The data indicate that the correlation is rather low, a finding that is consistent with previous research on samples of children. It is suggested that in spite of this finding, rather extreme childhood experiences may be fairly strongly related to adult physical aggression, and suggestions for further research are offered.

## Childhood Punishment Experiences and Adult Violence

In social psychological studies of violence, a frequently noted hypothesis is that the form of punishment experienced by the child will influence the form of aggression "preferred" in his childhood and later as an adult.<sup>1</sup> The child who is predominantly punished by corporal means is said to be more likely to be physically aggressive; the child who is punished through psychological methods, such as withdrawal of love, is said to be more likely to turn aggression inward. The reasoning is discussed extensively elsewhere (e.g., Feshbach, 1970; Miller and Swanson, 1960; Yarrow, et al., 1968) and will not be presented in detail here. Gold summarizes it as follows:

First, physical punishment clearly identifies the punisher. A son can see plainly who controls the flailing arm. The relationship between parent and child is, for the moment, that of attacker and attacked. Psychological punishment creates a more subtle relationship. It is often difficult for the son to tell where his hurt feelings are coming from. Their source is more likely to seem inside him than outside. If there is to be a target for aggression, then, the physically punished child. . . has an external target readily available; the psychologically punished child does not have such a ready target. If he selects one, it is likely to be himself.

Second, the type of punishment. . . identifies for the child the approved behavior when one is hurt or angry. The punishing parent serves as a model whom the child imitates and whose behavior instructs the moral conscience--the superego [Gold, 1958:654].

Various writers, including Coser (1963), Gold (1958), and Miller and Swanson (1960), have linked this hypothesized difference in socialization technique and outcome to position in the stratification order. Coser, for example, argues that a key point about variations in super-ego formation is that they are structured by social class. He concludes that "the bulk of the evidence seems to indicate that working-class and lower-class childrearing practices are more punitive [i.e., corporal] than middle class patterns" (1963:77).

#### 1. DATA FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY

New analysis of data from a 1968 national survey taken for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence<sup>2</sup> provides suggestive evidence on both the link between childhood punishment experience and subsequent aggression as an adult and the pattern of this relationship by social class. Punishment experience is indicated by a single item, "As a child, were you spanked frequently, sometimes, or never?" Analysis shows both the distribution of responses over the categories of this item and the pattern by parents' social class to be highly consistent with previous research (Erlanger, 1974). Physical aggression is indicated by responses to items concerning commission of aggression by slapping/kicking, or punching/beating over the respondent's adult lifetime. As an aid in presentation of the findings, responses for these items have been combined into an "index of slapping or punching, as an adult, in conflict situations."<sup>3</sup> Analysis of the separate items indicates that this combination does not affect the findings reported here for the index. Although the index is less precise than desirable, the amount of violence reported is consistent with that

found in another national survey, taken in 1966.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of better data, these are preferable to the ecological data previously relied on in the study of adult violence.

Table 1 shows the relationship between childhood punishment experience and adult physical aggression for men aged 18-60.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 21% of those who were spanked frequently as a child have been aggressive four or more times, as compared to about 12% of those who were not spanked frequently. This relationship is statistically significant, but the zero order correlation is only about .11, and the distribution of childhood punishment experience is such that aggressors cannot be stereotyped as having been spanked. The relationship is largely independent of education<sup>6</sup> or race, but since there is a tendency for lower status men (as indicated by education or race) to be more likely to have been spanked,<sup>7</sup> the stratification argument receives some support. Aggressors cannot, however, be stereotyped as being of low status.

Table 1

Percentage Who Have Slapped or Punched Four or More Times as an Adult

(by race, education, and childhood spanking experience;  
for male respondents aged 18-60 only)

	WHITE					BLACK
	<u>Grade School</u>	<u>Some High School</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Some College +</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Total</u>
Spanked frequently as a child (N)	39 (18) <sup>a</sup>	23 (26)	12 (33)	20 (30)	22 (107)	19 (36)
Not Spanked frequently as a child (N)	14 (21)	10 (31)	9 (76)	14 (114)	12 (242)	13 (46)

<sup>a</sup> Percentages based on such a small number of cases are unreliable.

Table 2 shows the results of an attempt to explain two types of adult physical aggression using additive models. The coefficients were calculated using a multiple classification analysis (MCA) program. MCA, like linear regression, is one of the many kinds of analysis deriving from the general linear model (Cohen, 1968). In this method, membership in each category of a nominal variable is treated in the linear equation as a binary ("dummy") variable. Thus, the technique is often referred to as "dummy variable regression." Regression coefficients of the dummy variables are most easily understood when expressed in terms of deviations from the grand mean of the dependent variable (Andrews, et al., 1967; Melichar, 1965). Thus the table shows the deviation from the grand mean for each category of an independent variable, net of the effects of all other independent variables shown. Unfortunately the technique does not yield standardized regression coefficients that are easily interpreted. The advantage of the technique is that it does not assume that independent variables are continuous.

Table 2

Deviations from the Grand Mean, Violence Indices<sup>a</sup>  
by Selected Demographic Variables and  
Childhood Spanking Experience<sup>b</sup>

(Grand mean A = .52, B = .20, N = 1136)

	N	<u>A</u> Slapping or Punching in Conflict Situations as an Adult	<u>B</u> Victim of Serious Aggression as an Adult
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	(578)	.26	.09
Female	(550)	-.27	-.10
<b>Race</b>			
White	(941)	-.00 <sup>b</sup>	-.00 <sup>b</sup>
Black	(195)	.02 <sup>b</sup>	.02 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Childhood Residence</b>			
"Farm"	(351)	-.05	-.04
"Town"	(314)	-.02	-.02
"Small city"	(164)	.05	.07
"Big city"	(291)	.04	.02
<b>Parents' Social Class</b>			
"Middle class"	(315)	-.04 <sup>b</sup>	-.02 <sup>b</sup>
"Working class"	(768)	.00 <sup>b</sup>	-.01 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Education</b>			
Grade school	(243)	.03	.11
Some high school	(233)	.11	-.01
High school	(352)	-.06	-.03
Some college	(182)	.18	.02
College	( 72)	-.35	-.18
Post graduate	( 54)	-.33	-.08
<b>Current Religion</b>			
Baptist	(283)	-.06	-.01
Methodist	(135)	.13	.01
Lutheran	( 69)	-.20	-.09
Episcopalian	( 38)	.21	.30
Other Protestants	(213)	.12	-.04
Catholic	(279)	-.14	-.04
Jew	( 20)	-.26	.09

Table 2--Continued.

	N	<u>A</u> Slapping or Punching in Conflict Situations as an Adult	<u>B</u> Victim of Serious Aggression as an Adult
Current Region of Residence			
Northeast	(312)	.01	-.04
South	(319)	-.15	.05
Midwest	(322)	.08	-.04
West	(183)	.08	.06
City Size			
SMSA	(316)	-.02	.03
Suburb	(291)	.09	-.02
Town: 10-50,000	(128)	-.00	-.04
Town: less than 10,000	(118)	.07	.06
Rural	(283)	-.10	-.02
Age			
18-25	(154)	-.07	.12
26-35	(232)	.19	.10
36-45	(230)	.20	.05
46-60	(282)	-.06	-.05
Over 60	(238)	-.25	-.16
Childhood Spanking Experience			
Never	( 58)	-.26	-.08
Sometimes	(713)	-.08	-.07
Frequently	(365)	.21	.15

<sup>a</sup>Multiple Classification (Dummy Variable Regression) Analysis. Range on index a is 0-6, index b, 0-9. Content of indices is discussed in notes 3 and 9 to text.

<sup>b</sup>Blacks weighted .53, but unweighted N's are shown. Missing data were assigned the modal value when a variable had an obvious mode. Otherwise, missing data were included as a category in the dummy variable regression but not shown in the table. In such cases N's do not add to 1136 and all categories shown may deviate from the mean in the same direction.

Column A of Table 2 analyzes the index of slapping and punching, as an adult, in conflict situations. The independent variables include the categories of the childhood punishment variable and a variety of demographic variables which probably can be assumed to be prior to or contemporary with the aggression.<sup>8</sup> All blacks and whites in the sample are included in this analysis. The entire model has a multiple correlation coefficient of about .33, and, adjusted for degrees of freedom, explains only about 8% of the variance on the dependent variable. The independent contribution of childhood punishment to explained variance is very small; when entered last, childhood punishment experience adds .02 to the multiple correlation coefficient.

The Violence Commission survey also contains some suggestive data on more serious aggression. However, because of the manner in which the questionnaire was designed, for serious aggression we are forced to use an indicator of victimization rather than of aggression. Since victimization and aggression are known to be highly correlated (Wolfgang, 1958), it is probably safe to assume that the sample of victims gives a good indication of the population of aggressors. Existing theory would predict that, if anything, using victims rather than aggressors would underestimate the strength of the socialization-violence relationship. Persons with strong internal control (presumably the product of psychological manipulation during their childhood socialization) may be more likely to "turn the other cheek." The present data should therefore be seen as giving a low estimate of the relationship.

Column B of Table 2 repeats the analysis of Column A, but uses an index of victimization by serious aggression<sup>9</sup> as the dependent variable.

Again, the entire model has a very low multiple correlation coefficient (.29), and, adjusted for degrees of freedom, it explains only about 6% of the variance. The relationship between childhood punishment experience and adult aggression is slightly stronger for serious than for minor aggression, but the effect of punishment is still rather small. The zero order correlation is .15 and when entered last, childhood punishment adds .03 to the multiple correlation coefficient.

## 2. DISCUSSION

Although statements by many commentators (most notably an early statement by Berkowitz, 1962:291) consider the hypothesis that spanking leads to physical aggression to be firmly established, the evidence over the years has been quite mixed. Many studies have found a statistically significant relationship between spanking and physical aggression in children (see e.g., Bandura and Walters, 1959; Eron, 1971; and the citations in Feshbach, 1970). There is, however, a great deal of contradictory evidence. For example, Allinsmith (1954), in a widely cited study, found that in a sample of 115 junior high school boys in Detroit, boys whose parents favored corporal punishment were more likely to write story endings with "direct expression of anger." However, Beardslee (1955), using data collected in the same project (Miller and Swanson, 1960), found that form of punishment had no effect on the use of "self-modifying defenses" in story completion. Yarrow, et al., in an extensive examination of the literature on this question done for NIMH, concluded the following:

The evidence. . .is less than impressive; it can hardly be regarded as greatly convincing for some significant correlations to appear when many have been explored. . .It would seem that theoretical persuasiveness has led to a kind of selectivity of evidence. Many non-conforming findings have been tolerated. . .[Yarrow, et al., 1968:70-71, 81].<sup>10</sup>

In the Violence Commission survey, the correlation between childhood punishment experience and adult aggression is low, but this is mainly a result of the fact that over 60% of respondents report that they were spanked "sometimes," rather than "frequently" or "never." Examination of the unstandardized regression coefficients (presented as deviations from the grand mean on the dependent variables in Table 2) indicates that variation in spanking experience is fairly strongly related to adult aggression. If we calculate the adjusted mean scores for the spanking categories by taking the grand mean on aggression and adding or subtracting the deviations shown in the table, we find that on both indices of aggression, persons who report that they were spanked frequently have a mean score close to three times greater than that of persons who report that they were never spanked. For the index of slapping or punching the adjusted mean score for those who report they were never spanked is .26, while for those who report they were spanked frequently it is .73. For the index of victimization by serious aggression the adjusted mean scores are .12 for "never spanked" and .35 for "frequently spanked." (Persons who report having been spanked sometimes are intermediate in their mean score on relatively minor aggression, but almost identical to those who say they were never spanked in their mean score on the index of serious victimization.) This suggests that although the degree of spanking does not seem important in explain-

ing current levels of aggression in the adult population, this is largely because of the predominance of relatively nonphysical techniques of punishment. A major shift to more frequent use of physical punishment could have a sizeable impact on the amount of aggression.

The data reported here suggest that childhood punishment experience may be quite relevant to adult aggression, and that the area should be pursued in future research. However, given the findings of this and previous research, it seems unlikely that a variable employing a simple distinction between corporal and psychological punishment will prove to be a powerful predictor. Future research should be especially sensitive to differences in combinations of practices and the situations in which they are used. Important steps in this direction have been taken by such investigators as Kohn (1969), McCord, et al. (1961), Miller and Swanson (1960), Solomon (1964), and Sears, et al. (1957), but as the general review by Parke (1970) suggests, much more needs to be done. In addition, special attention should be paid to relatively extreme experiences. It seems plausible, for example, that frequent spanking with a strap or stick may be more highly correlated with physical aggression than frequent spanking with the open hand. More generally, McCord and McCord suggest that "many of those who committed crimes of violence [in the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study] were raised by cruel fathers" (1959:192). But, as in all such work relying on retrospection, attention must also be paid to the possibility that the results may be spurious. For example, in the data reported here, both frequent physical punishment to a child and adult physical aggression could be related to excessive childhood physical aggression. Well designed longitudinal studies will ultimately be required if these difficulties are to be overcome.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Many other aspects of the relationship between socialization and interpersonal aggression are discussed in detail by Becker (1964) and Feshbach (1970).

<sup>2</sup>The survey instrument was designed under the direction of Sandra Ball-Rokeach. The sample included 1,176 adults (941 whites, 195 blacks, 40 other nonwhites) over age 18, in 100 clusters in all parts of the United States. The individual to be interviewed was specified in advance, but no call-backs were made. The questionnaire may be found in David L. Lange, et al. (1969). Preliminary findings are reported in Lange, et al. (1969) and in Rodney Stark and James McEvoy, III (1970). Some of the tables in the latter paper exaggerate class difference because the analysis does not control for age. The findings presented here are based on a secondary analysis of the data.

<sup>3</sup>Because of several ambiguities in the questionnaire, the "index of slapping and punching in conflict situations" is only a rough indicator of the use of violence. The core items used for the index were "Have you ever slapped or kicked anyone?" and "Have you ever punched or beaten anyone?" The ambiguities are these:

1. The respondent was asked whether the aggression occurred when he was a "child," or "adult," or both, but this was according to his own definition. There is reason to suspect that older persons may be defining events which occurred in their early twenties (or so) as having been in their "youth."

2. Although frequency of occurrence is recorded, it was asked independently of time. Thus, unless a person reported that the event(s) occurred only during childhood or adulthood, we cannot determine the

frequency as an adult. In addition, frequency was recorded in only four categories: 0 score 0; 1 = 1; 2 or 3 = 2; 4 or more = 3.

3. Type of incident, e.g., conflict, military, sports, play, is recorded only for the most recent incident.

For each of the two core items, an adjusted index was constructed by reducing the frequency to zero if the aggression occurred only during childhood or if the last instance was not in a situation of "anger or conflict." The latter adjustment is quite stringent and assumes that the most recent incident is representative of the previous ones. Experimentation with less stringent adjustments had no important effect on the findings reported here. As an aid in presentation of the findings, the scores on the slap/kick and punch/beat indices were combined. The major detriment of combining the items is the increase in the ambiguity of the frequency scores. A score of three on the combined index is taken as the best estimate of four or more incidents.

<sup>4</sup>NORC interviewed 1,651 blacks and 1,326 whites in two national surveys, asking "Have you ever been in a fight (not an argument, but a real fight) since you were an adult?" Twenty-eight percent of black respondents, and 19% of white respondents answered yes (Crain and Weisman, 1972:35). Comparable figures for the index of slapping and punching used here are 23% for blacks and 17% for whites.

<sup>5</sup>Men over 60 and women are omitted from this table because the rate of reported physical aggression for these groups is much lower than for men aged 18-60. See Table 2.

<sup>6</sup>Because the items indicating aggression are retrospective (see note 3), current income could not be used as an indicator of status at

the time of aggression. At any rate, the relationship between minor aggression and income is even weaker than that for education. Information on occupation was not included in the data set.

<sup>7</sup>Controlling for race, sex, and age, the partial correlations between "being spanked as a child" (high score = frequently) and current level of education is  $-.15$ ; for being spanked and current income of head of household it is  $-.11$ . Note that these correlations are smaller than some statements have implied, and even these may be larger than the correlation usually relied on, i.e., that between class or origin and being spanked as a child. Although the relationship between social class and the use of corporal punishment has been generally accepted since Bronfenbrenner's (1958) seminal review of the literature, reconsideration of the data available to him suggests that there is at best a weak relationship, and that over time there has been more similarity than difference by social class in the use of corporal punishment (Erlanger, 1974).

<sup>8</sup>Current age is also included because of the reporting problem mentioned in note 3. Black responses are weighted  $.53$ , but unweighted N's are shown. Because of weighting problems, respondents of other nonwhite races (N=40) are excluded.

<sup>9</sup>The serious victim index was constructed in a manner analogous to the index of slapping and punching in conflict situation (see note 3). It is based on the following core items: "Have you ever been choked by another person?"; "Have you ever been threatened or actually cut with a knife?"; "Have you ever been threatened with a gun or shot at?" The resulting range is 0-9, although the actual high score was 7. Besides the ambiguities listed in note 3, this index is based on reports of victimization rather than aggression and includes threats.

<sup>10</sup>Arguments about the relationship between form of punishment for misbehavior and subsequent forms of aggression may be confused with the more specific case of the consequence of punishment for aggression. Sears, et al. (1957), are often cited as showing that punishment for aggression only serves to breed more aggression; Eron, et al., conclude that their similar findings serve only to "corroborate the monotonous findings of survey studies of child rearing practices" (1971:72). However, in reviewing this facet of the literature, Yarrow, et al., again conclude that the evidence is ambiguous (1968:78-80). Note, too, that the Sears data show that it is a combination of permissiveness and punishment that is more important than punishment for aggression per se. The rate of aggression was twice as high for children of inconsistent parents than for children of consistent parents who punished. McCord, et al. (1961), also find consistency of parental discipline to be an important factor in boys' aggression. See also the references and discussion in Parke (1970).

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