



Religious Preference and Spanking Beliefs: Implications for School Corporal Punishment Policies

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Transforming Research

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AMERICAN spanking beliefs were investigated by religious preference. Proportions agreeing with spanking were largest for Protestant (81%), followed by Catholic (69%). The association between Protestant and agreement with spanking ($b=.718$) was surprisingly strong considering associations with Catholic, Jewish, None, and Other were all inverse. The smaller Jewish proportion agreeing with spanking (51%) and the very strong inverse relationship between Jewish and agreement with spanking ($b= -1.072$) were unexpected. A separate analysis found large Christian (81%) and small Moslem (51%) proportions agreeing with spanking. Corporal punishment policies reflect American collective conscience on spanking. Deeper understandings of relationships between religious preference and spanking beliefs help stakeholders become aware of cultural undercurrents affecting school environments.

KEY WORDS: **CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE.**

Introduction

Many generations-old practices and parenting techniques were antiquated by changing times, but physically disciplining children is a withstanding hallmark of old-fashioned American childrearing (Gershoff, 2010). A majority of Americans agrees spanking or paddling children is sometimes a necessity (Lansford, Wager, Bate, Pettit, & Dodge, 2012; Marinescu, 2010; Nolen, 2010; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994). Eighty-five percent of American middle and high school students were physically disciplined by parents (Gershoff, 2010), and most parents reported spanking their children (Gershoff, 2002; Larzelere & Baumrind, 2010; Marinescu, 2010; Straus & Paschall, 2009). Twenty-one states in the United States permit corporal punishment (CP) in schools, and 223,190 American students in 2005-2006 were subjected to CP at least once at school (The Center for Effective Discipline, 2010). An estimated one to two percent of students physically disciplined, approximately 10,000-20,000 students, will sustain injuries requiring medical treatment (Greydanus, et al., 2003; Poole, et al., 1991; Wasserman, 2011). American tolerance of CP in schools is at odds with 106 nations, including 19 European countries, banning CP (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU]/Human Rights Watch, 2008;

Nolen, 2010). The Council of Europe, the European Union, the United Nations, and 45 American organizations—including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Council of Exceptional Children, and the Society for Adolescent Medicine—oppose CP in schools (The Center for Effective Discipline, 2008).

An abundance of literature against CP notwithstanding, physically disciplining children is routine and broadly accepted as a method of maintaining school discipline in some American schools, particularly in the South (Nolen, 2010). Higher incarceration rates, lower ACT composites, and lower graduation rates are associated with states permitting CP (The Center for Effective Discipline, 2008a). According to Nolen (2010), detrimental effects of CP for the individual child include “increased crime, suicidal thoughts, individual fear, racial prejudice, gender bias, and child abuse” (p.526). Straus and Paschall (2009) observed a relationship between the physical discipline of children and lagging cognitive ability. An association between spanking and increased aggression has frequently been reported (Bates, 1994; Greydanus, et al., 2003; Hicks-Pass, 2009; Strassberg, et al., 1994). Religion plays a role in the persistence of CP (Gershoff, 2010).

According to Lansford (2010), religion represents “an important cultural distinction” (p. 94), and may be a stronger predictor of CP than race or ethnicity. Some CP proponents claim parental entitlement; however, religious parents may feel physically disciplining their children is a responsibility or duty (Dwyer, 2010). With religious conviction, “it is typically not that some religion prescribes a different way of life in which hitting has special meaning, but rather that adherents respect the wisdom of religious authority about how best to instill a sense of discipline in children” (Dwyer, 2010, p. 193). The most recognized bible passage supporting the physical discipline of children is, “Spare the rod, spoil the child.”— based on Proverb 13:24 (King James Version), “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes (diligently).” Additionally, the following Old Testament bible passages (King James Version) support physically disciplining children:

- "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him." (Prov 22:15)
- "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die." (Prov 23:13)
- "Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell (Shoel)." (Prov 23:14)
- "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame." (Prov 29:15)

Literature connects religious preference with beliefs regarding the physical discipline of children. Conservative Protestants are strongly supportive of spanking (Gershoff, 2010; Lansford, 2010). Jewish Law endorses the physical discipline of children— based on commands to educate and reprove children (Shmueli, 2010). Schools with Catholic affiliation, on the other hand, ban CP (The Center for Effective Discipline, 2011). A research hypothesis was spanking beliefs would vary by religious preference. Methodology and national, social survey data furthered a unique comparison of American spanking beliefs by religious preference.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to investigate American spanking beliefs by religious preference. The following two-pronged research question guided the investigation: How do proportions of Americans agreeing with spanking vary as a function of religious preference (i.e., Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, None, and Other), and what associations are evident between religious preference and spanking?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Corporal punishment policies and practices reflect the broader structure of American collective conscience on spanking . Literature associates spanking beliefs with religious preference (Dwyer, 2010, Gershoff, 2010; Lansford, 2010; Shmueli, 2010; The Center for Effective Discipline, 2011). According to Lansford (2010), “conservative Protestant church leaders and popular media figures, such as James Dobson” (p. 94) are CP advocates. Conversely, pulpit sermons may disavow CP because it contradicts the 2006 commitment against child violence that was signed by over 800 religious leaders at the World Assembly of Religions for Peace (Olivier, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Analyses included frequency cross-tabulations and logistic regressions. Descriptive statistics are shown on Table 1. Percentages, frequencies, Pearson Chi-Squares (Chisq-P), probability levels (p), and sample sizes (n) were reported in cross-tabulation tables. A stratified cluster sample design was employed with a Taylor series approximation method. Samples were complex and a Rao-Scott adjustment was applied, with F statistics factored. Specifically, significance levels were from F statistics. Statistics exclude missing-data and out-of-range values. A collapsed category of Groups Excluded was created from categories of Religion. Groups Excluded was explored with a separate

cross-tabulation, as noted in the Results Section. Logistic regressions offered alternative statistics for comparing relationships. Spanking was dichotomized with a variable control for Category One (agreement with spanking). Independent logistic regressions were repeated with variable controls for each of the five categories of Religion studied (i.e., Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, None, and Other). Regression coefficients (B), standard errors (SE [B]), exponentials of coefficients (Exp [B]), t-tests (T-statistic), p, and population (N) were reported in the regression table. T-tests represented the ratio of B from independent predictors divided by corresponding SE. Regression coefficients measured one unit change effect in the independent variable on the dependent variable logistic. The exponential of logistic regression coefficients estimated odds ratios for observing outcomes.

Analyses spanned survey years 1986-2010. Sample sizes varied by Religion categories and weighting. A survey weight (COMPWT) was applied to address number of adults in a household and black oversampling. A 95% confidence level was applied throughout. The threshold of .05 determined statistical significance.

Spanking belief was the dependent measure. The survey prompt for spanking asked: "Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard, spanking?" (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 1972-2010). Strongly Agree and Agree were collapsed for Category One, and Disagree and Strongly Disagree were collapsed for Category Two. The spanking prompt was included in surveys 1986 and after.

The prompt for Religion asked respondents' religious preference and was included in the survey replicating core since 1972 (years of the current study only spanned 1986-2010, however). Categories were controlled for religious groups with samples larger than 500. The five categories studied were Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, None, and Other.

Research questions were examined with the 1972-2010 General Social Survey (GSS) Datafile from the National Opinion Research Center (Smith, et al., 1972-2010). The survey was accessed through the Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program at the University of California, Berkley. The GSS tracks attitudinal and other measures on non-institutionalized, English speaking Americans over the age of 18 (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [ICPSR], 2007). Spanish speaking Americans were included in the GSS target population since 2006 (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 2011). Thousands of variables are included in the GSS replicating core and special interest topic modules. Full probability sampling was utilized (ICPSR, 2007).

Non-respondents were sub-sampled in surveys 2004 and after, and surveys 2006-2010 utilized sampling based on the United States Census (ICPSR, 2007). Response rates varied slightly by survey year with a total response rate of 71% approximately (ICPSR, 2007).

RESULTS

Whether or not respondents agreed with spanking varied significantly by their religious preference. Protestant (81%) had the largest proportion of those agreeing with spanking than any other religious groups (Table 2). The association between Protestant and agreement with spanking was moderately strong ($b = .718$) (Table 3). Protestant odds for agreement with spanking were over twice as likely ($\text{Exp [B]} = 2.050$) (Table 3). Catholic (69%) had the second to largest proportion of those agreeing with spanking. The proportion of Catholic agreeing with spanking was one percent point higher than that of Other (68%) and four percentage points higher than the group with a preference of no religion (None) (65%). The association between Catholic and agreement with spanking ($b = -.409$), however, was inverse. Catholic odds for agreeing with spanking were 33% less ($\text{Exp [B]} = .665$). The lowest proportion of those agreeing with spanking was found for Jewish (51%) — nearly half. The inverse relationship between Jewish and agreement with spanking was very strong ($b = -1.072$). Jewish odds for agreeing with spanking were 66% less ($\text{Exp [B]} = .342$).

A separate cross tabulation was performed to investigate spanking beliefs in the collapsed category labeled as ‘Groups Excluded’. Valid results (Pearson Chi-Squares and significance levels) were obtained for five of the seven religious groups in the Groups Excluded category despite small samples. Sample sizes for Groups Excluded categories where percentages are following ranged from nine to 196 (1986-2010). Proportions of those agreeing with spanking in selected Groups Excluded categories were as follows: Buddhism (62%), Hinduism (75%), Moslem (51%), Orthodox Christian (71%), Christian (81%), and Inter-Nondenominational (72%). The Christian proportion of those agreeing with spanking was as large as that of Protestant (81%). The Moslem proportion agreeing was as small as Jewish (51%).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The relatively large Protestant proportion of those agreeing with spanking supported previous observations noted in literature. The association between Protestant and agreement with spanking, however, was unexpectedly strong considering associations

with other religious groups were inverse (Table 3). An expectation was Catholic would have a smaller proportion of those agreeing with spanking because CP was banned in Catholic schools. A consideration was proportions agreeing might be smaller for all groups because the prompt was strongly worded (i.e., good hard spanking). Thus, the large Catholic proportion agreeing with spanking was unexpected. The small proportion of those agreeing with spanking for Jewish and the strong association between Jewish and disagreement with spanking (regression was logistic) was not noted in literature reviewed and was unexpected. The relatively smaller proportions agreeing with spanking for Buddhism and Moslem were also unexpected.

Lansford (2010) characterized religion as a cultural distinction, and better understandings of relationships between spanking and religion has practical implications for school culture. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from *A Violent Education*: “A principal turned on the loud speaker while paddling a student: ‘It was on the intercom in every class in the school.... He was trying to send a message ... [I]ike, ‘you could be next.’ (ACLU/Human Rights Watch 2008, p. 3). A majority of schools in voucher programs of some states are private schools with religious affiliations (Barrow, 2012). Understanding effects of religion on spanking beliefs gains educational relevance as students enter schools in state voucher programs and exit failing schools. Corporal punishment policies substantially affect students and staff, and develop within the broader context of American beliefs.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The study informs scholarship on the unique topic of relationships between spanking and religion with results from multiple analyses using current, national social survey data. Findings hold indirect practical implications for all students and staff affected by CP policies. Understanding effects of religion on American spanking beliefs helps stakeholders become aware of cultural undercurrents affecting school environments.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Measure	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Spanking	20,456	1	4	2.05	0.85	0.56	-0.24
Strongly agree	27(5,600)						
Agree	47(9,663)						
Disagree	19(3,809)						
Strongly disagree	7(1,384)						
Religion	36,336						
Protestant	57(20,671)						
Catholic	24(8,812)						
Jewish	2(701)						
None	12(4,437)						
Other	2(718)						
Groups excluded	3 (997)						

Note: Percentages (frequencies) shown under n for variable categories. Frequencies are not weighted.

Source: General Social Survey (National Opinion Research Center) accessed through Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program, University of California, Berkeley.

Table 2: Spanking Belief by Religious Affiliation: It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a Good, Hard, Spanking

Column percent Weighted n	Religious Preference					
	Groups Excluded	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	None	Other
Strongly agree/Agree	71 376	81 9,147	69 3,617	51 203	65 1,589	68 280
Disagree/Strongly Disagree	29 152	19 2,199	31 1,657	49 197	35 853	32 130
Total	100 528	100 11,346	100 5,275	100 399	100 2,442	100 410
Means	1.29	1.19	1.31	1.49	1.35	1.32
Std Devs	0.45	0.40	0.46	0.50	0.48	0.47
Unweighted n	504	11,559	5,002	409	2,480	418
Rao-Scott-P: F(5,1300) =114.88 (p ≤ 0.001) Chisq-P(5) = 565.26						

Note: Strongly Agree-Strongly Disagree (1-4)

Source: General Social Survey (National Opinion Research Center) accessed through Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program, University of California, Berkeley.

Table 3: Logistic Regressions: Religious Preference on Agreement with Spanking

	B	SE(B)	Exp(B)	T-statistic	p
Protestant	0.718	0.033	2.050	21.992	≤0.001
Catholic	-0.409	0.035	0.665	-11.555	≤0.001
Jewish	-1.072	0.102	0.342	-10.558	≤0.001
None	-0.522	0.046	0.593	-11.371	≤0.001
Other	-0.320	0.107	0.726	-2.985	=0.003
Groups Excluded	-0.171	0.098	0.843	-1.753	=0.080

Note: N=20,372. Prompt: It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard, spanking.

Source: General Social Survey (National Opinion Research Center) accessed through Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program, University of California, Berkeley.

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