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THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT: A COMPARISON OF SOCIAL LEARNING AND TEMPERAMENT MODELS

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Abstract—This family study examined two models regarding the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment. The model based on social learning assumptions asserted that corporal punishment influences aggressive child behavior. The model based on temperament theory suggested that aggressive child behavior impacts upon parental use of corporal punishment. Participants were 1,536 parents of 983 college students. Corporal punishment was assessed from father, mother, and child perspectives. Path analyses revealed that the social learning model was most consistent with the data.

Key Words—Child abuse, Child maltreatment, Corporal punishment, Temperament, Social learning.

INTRODUCTION

ONE OF THE most commonly reported characteristics of physically punitive parents is that of history of maltreatment. It is often asserted that there is a high concordance between being a recipient of severe corporal punishment and carrying out similar behavior on one's own children (e.g., Carroll, 1977; Gillespie, Seaberg, & Berlin, 1977; Isaacs, 1981; Lieh-Mak, Chung, & Liu, 1983; Webster-Stratton, 1985), the so-called "cycle of abuse" (Kempe & Kempe, 1978). It is important to note that the "cycle of abuse" may be somewhat overstated. Quinton and Rutter (1984a, 1984b) studied parents with serious and persistent parenting difficulties. Of these parents, 61% had experienced four or more childhood adversities such as frequent beatings, while 16% of controls suffered such adversities. Kaufman and Zigler (1987) noted that only one third of adults who had received rigorous corporal punishment went on to do so with their own children. Furthermore, Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, and Chyi-In (1991) found correlations below .31 between grandparent harsh discipline and parent harsh discipline.

Coming out of the research tradition that emphasized the intergenerational transmission of physically punitive parenting were several studies demonstrating the relationship between experiencing corporal punishment in one's childhood and manifesting subsequent aggressive

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behaviors. These investigations typically have assumed the operation of social learning principles. In that view, aggressive actions and use of corporal punishment are behaviors learned from one's parents. Several studies indicated that children who receive severe corporal punishment are more likely to demonstrate aggressive responses toward others (e.g., McCord, 1988; Trickett & Kuczynski, 1986). Kratcoski and Kratcoski (1982) found formerly maltreated adolescents were more likely to direct violence toward significant others. Muller, Fitzgerald, Sullivan, and Zucker (1994) found that severe physical punishment of children predicted those children's aggressiveness among alcoholic families. Simons and colleagues (1991) found evidence for a path model suggesting that harsh parental discipline would lead to a hostile personality in the survivor, predicting survivor's use of harsh discipline.

All of the studies on aggressive behavior cited above make certain implicit assumptions. They are based on an environmental model of behavior. Specifically, it is assumed that if physically punitive parents end up with aggressive children, it is because the child has learned some pattern of response. It may be suggested, alternatively, that the child had a predisposition toward aggressive behavior, and that the punitive parental behavior is a response to the child.

Several investigations suggested that children that are more difficult to manage end up receiving greater levels of severe corporal punishment. Smith (1984) proposed that verbally aggressive children may be at high risk for physical punishment. Investigating 570 German families, Engfer and Schneewind (1982) found that having a child that is rated by the parent as difficult to handle, and who manifests conduct disorder problems in school (problem child) is the best predictor of mothers' use of corporal punishment. Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, and Egolf (1983) studied case records of 825 physical maltreatment incidents, occurring in 328 families. Parents were asked for the reason the incident took place. Parents cited child misbehaviors such as refusals, fighting, "immoral" behaviors, and aggressiveness as leading to greater use of severe corporal punishment.

The studies cited above assume that corporal punishment can be a response to aggressive child behavior, rather than its cause. The two sets of studies described here use very different assumptions to explain the same associations. However, these prior studies have failed to test the causal pathway of the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment and aggressive behavior.

In Figure 1, two models with very different assumptions are presented as explanations of the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment. Model A assumes that aggressive behavior is an individual difference characteristic that is based in temperament. As such, "parent's lifetime aggressive behavior" is the initial variable in the causal chain. Further, the model posits that aggressive behavior is a factor that leads to the response of corporal punishment on the part of one's parents. Thus, for people who are currently parents, their former aggressive behaviors influenced the likelihood of their receiving corporal punishment from their own parents. Children's aggressive behaviors influenced the likelihood of their receiving corporal punishment from their own parents.

Model B proposes directly the opposite, and it assumes the operation of social learning principles. The model asserts that an individual's tendency to manifest aggressive behavior across the lifespan is a consequence of the observational learning that takes place when receiving corporal punishment from the parents. Thus, for people who are currently parents, greater levels of corporal punishment given by their own parents influenced greater manifestation of their own aggressive behaviors. Similarly, children who received corporal punishment from their parents are more likely to manifest subsequent aggressive behaviors.

It is important to note that these two models are based on assumptions that are diametrically opposed. They represent philosophical positions (temperament and social learning theory) that are on two ends of a spectrum. The purpose of this research was to assess the legitimacy of these two contrasting models, and to assess the extent to which each of these two positions contributes in greater measure to the child maltreatment process.

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