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Attitudes mediate the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment in China

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to examine the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment and the role of parents' attitudes toward corporal punishment in the transmission processes in Chinese societies. Based on social-cognitive theory, it was hypothesized that parents' attitudes toward corporal punishment would mediate the transmission of corporal punishment. Seven hundred and eighty-five fathers and eight hundred and eleven mothers with elementary school-age children (data collected in winter 2009) were recruited through convenience sampling techniques. The Chinese version of Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale (CTSPC) and Attitude toward Physical Punishment Scale (ATPP) were used as the main assessment tools to measure parents' corporal punishment experiences in childhood, current use of corporal punishment and attitudes toward corporal punishment. Findings revealed that the strength of intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment was strong and parents' attitudes toward corporal punishment played a mediating role in the continuity of corporal punishment for both fathers and mothers in China. The findings highlighted the role of attitudes in the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment within the Chinese cultural context and also suggested the need for intervention programs to focus on modification of maladaptive attitudes toward what is appropriate and effective discipline.

1. Introduction

Previous research has indicated that many parents throughout the world endorse harsh discipline, including physical and psychological aggression, as a child disciplinary practice (World Health Organization, 2002). Parental physical aggression is typically considered to include both corporal punishment and physical abuse (Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2007). According to Straus et al. (1998), corporal punishment is defined as the use of physical force to inflict pain but not injury when disciplining children or controlling children's undesirable behaviors, whereas physical abuse refers to parents' use of physical violence to inflict pain and injury on their children. Compared with physical abuse, corporal punishment is a less serious but more commonly used form of physical aggression. To date, numerous studies conducted in both Western and Eastern societies have demonstrated that corporal punishment is related to a range of negative child outcomes, including aggression, delinquency, low self-esteem and antisocial behavior (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003; Chang, Lansford, Schwartz, & Farver, 2004; Gershoff, 2002; Steele, 1987; Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, & Lengua, 2000; Tang, 2006). To reduce the negative effects of corporal punishment, researchers have explored the causes

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of corporal punishment, and several have suggested that the intergenerational transmission of parenting may have an important influence on such parenting practices.

The intergenerational transmission of parenting is defined as the process by which, purposively or unintentionally, an earlier generation psychologically influences the parenting attitudes and behaviors of the next generation (Ijzendoorn, 1992). To date, research conducted in both Western and Eastern societies has observed that parental harsh discipline, such as corporal punishment, is transmitted across generations (Serbin & Karp, 2003; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Wu, 1990; Stattin, Janson, Klackenberg-Larsson, & Magnusson, 1995). For example, Lunkenheimer, Kittler, Olson and Kleinberg (2006) observed that parents who had experienced spanking or physical punishment as children were more likely to use this harsh discipline toward their children. In a prospective longitudinal study, Bailey, Hill, Oesterle and Hawkins (2009) found continuity in harsh parenting, including yelling and spanking, between grandparents and parents. Similarly, in China, Wang and Xing (2014), using a sample of Chinese parents with elementary school-age children, obtained evidence supporting the intergenerational transmission of parental corporal punishment.

To break the cycle of corporal punishment, it is necessary to examine the potential mechanism underlying the perpetration of such a disciplinary practice. Previous studies that have examined the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment were based primarily on the social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), which suggests that corporal punishment is learned through the mechanisms of modeling and imitation. Unwillingly and unknowingly, when parents use harsh discipline to punish their children, they are involved in a complex social learning process with long-term effects on their children. Furthermore, parents communicate to their children that aggression is perfectly acceptable, since it is favored as a method to obtain compliance (Bandura, 1973; Gelles & Straus, 1979; White & Straus, 1981). Thus, individuals who were spanked by their parents were more likely to form approving attitudes toward harsh discipline (Bower-Russa, Knutson, & Winebarger, 2001; Crouch & Behl, 2001; Gagné, Tourigny, Joly, & Pouliotlapointe, 2007). According to the social-cognitive perspective, individuals tend to behave in ways that are consistent with their attitudes about what is and is not appropriate and effective (Deater-Deckard, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2003). Accordingly, individuals who hold favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment are more likely to engage in corporal punishment (Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006). Hence, it is reasonable to predict that attitudes toward corporal punishment play a mediating role in the transmission of corporal punishment.

To date, while there has been limited research regarding the continuity of harsh discipline, e.g., physical abuse, in the Western culture and the mediating role of attitudes, the results are inconsistent (Bower-Russa, 2005; Chung et al., 2009). For example, by conducting an analogue study using undergraduate student samples, Bower-Russa (2005) found that attitudes partially mediate the association between the experience of physical punishment and the use of physical abuse. However, in a prospective study of pregnant women, Chung et al. (2009) failed to find support for the mediating role of attitudes in the relationship between maternal childhood physical abuse and the use of verbal hostility and infant spanking.

However, there are several limitations to prior studies that have examined the role of attitudes in the continuity of corporal punishment. First, Chung et al. (2009) assessed mothers' attitudes toward corporal punishment when the children were 3 months old and their infant spanking use when the children were 11 months old. The early childhood period is a protected time during which younger mothers may exhibit and engage in gentler treatment of small children and thus seldom engage in harsh discipline with such young children (Lieh-Mak, Chung, & Liu, 1983). Hence, the low degree of the intergenerational transmission of the use of infant spanking found in their study may underestimate the mediating effects of the attitudes toward the discipline method. Thus, findings obtained from this study may not be reflective of the role of attitudes in the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment that may be obtained from mothers with older children. Second, although Bower-Russa (2005) demonstrated the role of attitudes toward corporal punishment, this finding may have limited generalizability in daily life, considering that the disciplinary response was assessed by the analogue for parenting task. In this task, participants were asked to indicate their reaction to the depicted child's behavior. However, this approach may not capture the truly dynamic and interactive nature of disciplinary exchanges in daily life.

Given these limitations, the present study evaluated the occurrence of corporal punishment in daily life and examined the effect of attitudes toward corporal punishment on its intergenerational transmission using a sample of parents with elementary school-age children in China. When elementary school-age children begin their formal schooling, their parents may be more likely to use harsh discipline to motivate the children to achieve social and high academic goals (Tang, 1998; Wang & Liu, 2014). More importantly, elementary school-age children are perceived as being capable of understanding, which is known as *dongshi* (Ho, 1986; Wu, 1996), and the parents' tolerance may decrease once the children reach the age of *dongshi*. Thus, Chinese parents may be more likely to view problem behaviors of elementary school-age children as inappropriate and thus implement harsh discipline when the children display problem behaviors (Ho, 1986; Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006; Wang & Liu, 2014; Wu, 1996). Moreover, Chinese parents are often characterized as physically coercive, restrictive, and controlling (Chao, 1994). Consistent with the adage states, "spare the rod, spoil the child," parental corporal punishment has long been considered normal discipline in Chinese families (Chao, 1994; Simons, Wu, Lin, Gordon, & Conger, 2000; Tang & Davis, 1996). Recent research conducted in China has revealed that 40% to 70% of parents had engaged in corporal punishment toward their elementary school-age child in the past 12 months (Wang & Liu, 2014). Furthermore, quoting a Chinese proverb, "Beating and scolding are the emblem of love" in traditional Chinese culture, corporal punishment is often accepted as an expression of love. Given this cultural background, parents' favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment may facilitate the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment. However, there is a dearth of research on this issue as it pertains to China. Considering the importance of attitudes in determining individual behaviors, the present study, using a sample of parents of elementary school-age children and evaluating the occurrence of corporal punishment in daily life, may convincingly demonstrate the mediating role of attitudes toward corporal punishment in its intergenerational transmission.

It is further noted that because the mother was the primary caregiver for the children, most of the previous studies involving attitudes and the transmission of corporal punishment included primarily mothers, meaning that fathers were not investigated

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