



Are there population biases against migrant children? An experimental analysis of attitudes towards corporal punishment in Austria, Norway and Spain



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ABSTRACT

This article examines whether migrant children are viewed differently than native children, employing an experiment on a representative sample of the populations of Austria, Norway and Spain. Asked about the acceptability of corporal punishment (CP) and whether it should be reported to child protection authorities by the school, the results show significant cross-country differences in the acceptance of CP but no biases due to migrant background. However, biases were found in some population sub-groups. The results suggest that when it comes to protecting a child from CP, the rising cultural status of children and the spread of a child protective attitude across societies may win out over biases against the child of migrant background.

1. Introduction

Throughout Europe, there is expressed negative sentiment towards migrants as well as a decline of trust in governments' abilities to handle the migration-related challenges facing Europe (Papademetriou & Thielen, 2009). This paper addresses an under-researched area of these challenges, namely whether these trends include population biases towards children due to their migrant background. Specifically, we focus on children who may experience mistreatment by their parents. Prior empirical research has revealed systemic biases against migrant children and families by public child protection systems in the global north: social workers may harbor stereotypes when practicing with migrant families as shown in Austria (Ranftler, 2012). Migrant children are overrepresented in the Norwegian child protection system (Skivenes, 2015), and in the USA, Hispanic and Black children of migrants are overrepresented in the child welfare population (while non-Hispanic Asian and white children are underrepresented) (Dettlaff & Earner, 2012). However, similar research evidence on population views on children of migrant background is to our knowledge non-existent.

To help fill this gap, this article employed an experimental survey vignette study of a representative sample of the populations of Austria, Norway and Spain in 2016 (total $n = 3002$) examining if a child's migrant background matter to how the populations of Austria, Norway and Spain view the acceptability of corporal punishment (CP) towards

children. Furthermore, if a child's migrant background affects the populations' opinion about whether CP should be reported to the public child protection authorities. The three countries were chosen because they have a ban on corporal punishment; they have a similar child protection system, a family-service oriented system in which the aim is to support and provide for families at risk and in which a removal of a child is last resort (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011; Skivenes, Barn, Kriz, & Pösö, 2015); and because the authors have in-depth knowledge of these three societies. For the purposes of this article, the terms 'migrant child' or 'child of migrant background' refer to a child with two parents who were born outside of the country the child currently resides in. Corporal punishment includes all forms of physical violations of children, and although it is not one agreed upon definition of the term we apply a distinction between weak corporal punishment (being pinched, pushed, hit with flat hand, hair being pulled) and strong corporal punishment (being hit with fist or an object, being beaten, other violent action) (Mossige & Stefansen, 2016). This study focus populations view on in the aggregate on weak corporal punishment, examining three hypotheses: First; there will be biases in the acceptance of CP based on the child's migrant background. Second, there will be biases in reporting of CP based on the child's migrant background. Third, there will be differences between Austria, Spain and Norway in the degree of biases, with more bias evident in Spain than in Norway, with Austria situated in the middle.

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In the next section, we will discuss the background information on legislation and population attitudes that serves as the platform for our hypotheses; thereafter the research methods for this study will be outlined, followed by a findings section, a discussion section and concluding remarks.

2. Corporal punishment and the law

Adults' use of CP to discipline children is an indicator for the traditional view about children as being lesser individuals than adults; as such, a ban of CP is a step forward in the modernization process to regard children on an equal footing with other individuals in society. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) has postulated the elimination of all forms of CP; it defines CP as “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light” (CRC Committee, 2006, p. 4). The literature on CP seems to divide CP into a weak and a strong type. The weak type includes a child being pulled by the hair, pinched, pushed and hit with a flat hand; the strong type includes being hit with a fist or an object and being beaten (Mossige & Stefansen, 2016). In this paper we use weak CP as a yardstick of how a population regards a discipline practice towards children. The *Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children* (2016) has shown that Corporal Punishment of children has been banned in 51 countries, including Austria (1989), Norway (1987) and Spain (2007) (Bussmann, Erthal, & Schroth, 2009). 55 more countries have expressed a commitment to fully prohibit it.

Austria, Norway and Spain have ratified the CRC; in Norway, the CRC was turned into national legislation in 2003. In Austria, the CRC was ratified in 1989, and in Spain in 1990 (Article 154 of the Civil Code). The CRC Committee has, however, to a varying extent and at different times, expressed concern regarding the protection of children from corporal punishment in all three countries. In 1994, the CRC Committee expressed concern about Art. 154 in Spain, because the article stated that parents “may administer punishment to their children reasonably and in moderation”, which may be interpreted to allow for actions in contradiction with article 19 of the Convention” (UN Committee, 1994, p. 2). In 2002 and 2010, the CRC Committee then reiterated its recommendation to Spain to change the wording of article 154 and recommended that Spain conduct awareness campaigns to encourage non-violent forms of discipline of children (UN Committee, 2002; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2010). For Norway the CRC Committee in 2005 expressed concern that children who are exposed to violence within the family do not always receive sufficient care and assistance, and recommended that the State party continued to strengthen its efforts to provide adequate assistance to, among others, children who are exposed to violence within the family through measures as public education campaigns about the negative consequences of ill-treatment and preventive programs, including family development programs promoting positive, non-violent forms of discipline (UN Committee, 2005). In *Austria*, the CRC Committee notes that the State party has taken measures to raise awareness, but remains concerned by the continued use of corporal punishment by many parents and by the fact that parts of the population are still unaware of the prohibition of all forms of corporal punishment in the State party. The CRC Committee recommends programs and education campaigns in order to promote positive and alternative forms of discipline and respect for children's rights, with the involvement of children, in line with general comment No. 8 (CRC Committee, 2006). Furthermore, it recommends educating teachers and parents on the immediate and long-term negative impact of corporal punishment on children (UN Committee, 2012).

There are additional legal supports of the ban of CP, as in Spain with changes to the adoption law regarding the exercise of parental authority “... with respect for their physical and psychological integrity” (Spain, 2009, p. 76). Furthermore, in Austria, the Supreme Court underscored in 1992 that children can be removed from parents who do

not abide by the law, and in a 1992 directive, the court specifically referred to a weak form of CP—a slap in the face—similarly to the one used in the vignette for this study, by stating that “every unreasonable treatment of a child that is detrimental to the child's welfare is prohibited. This does not only preclude personal injury and the infliction of physical pain (“the healthy slap in the face”) but also any treatment that is hurtful to the child's human dignity, even if the child themselves does not perceive that behavior as suffering in the concrete case” (Bundesministerium, 2009, p. 5; translation ours). The strong rights spelled out in the CRC, national legislation in the three countries and the expressed political will to ban all forms of CP, lead us to expect that if populations are law abiding there will be low tolerance for CP and few cross-country differences.

3. Differences due to migrant status and between countries

Individuals in society are imbedded in a value system that influences how they think and proceed on a range of issues (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), but there is a scarcity of knowledge about population attitudes towards children, their interests and the role the state should play when interacting with children who have been maltreated by their parents. Public child protection agencies are particularly dependent on the confidence and support of the population in their work as they make significant interventions into family life and provide support services to protect the interest of the child (Juhász & Skivenes, 2016). At the same time, it is the citizens, through their elected representatives, who constitute the political basis of a child protection system—thus this study of population attitudes towards CP is crucial. It is the citizens who, ultimately, provide frontline staff in public child protection authorities with the powers and legitimacy to make decisions about intervening in situations that may pose a risk to a child. This relationship has often been neglected in political science but is immensely important because it represents the “side of the state with which citizens came into direct contact, and on which they were dependent” (Rothstein, 1998, p. 165).

Research on welfare state and child protection has not paid much attention to population attitudes about children's rights, although the value base in populations constitutes a platform for the cultural and political preferences and norms about children in a society. It is childhood sociology that has pulled children into the social science research agenda (cf. James & Prout, 1997). This body of scholarship has shown that the traditional view of children—that they are the property of the father (pater) or the parents—has come under pressure in modernity (Zelizer, 1994). With modernization processes, such as the development of human rights and the formal recognition of marginalized groups in society, children have increasingly become a direct concern of the state (Shapiro, 1999). Shapiro asserts that “in virtually every aspect of their [children's] lives, [...] as a consequence of different and sometimes conflicting forces, children found themselves subjected not only to the authority of their parents but also to that of teachers, judges, bureaucrats, social workers and other public officials. Much of the expansion of public authority over children was motivated by a concern for their welfare, but perhaps predictably, its effects were mixed. In some areas, at least, it produced new forms of subjugation” (Shapiro, 1999, p. 66). States provide for children differently. The latest UNICEF well-being index of 29 high-income countries, measuring children's living conditions on essential variables, ranks Norway as number two, and Austria and Spain as number 18 and 19 respectively (UNICEF, 2013, p. 3). The ranking shows that the general welfare conditions for children vary considerably for Norway versus the two other countries, which may indicate a stronger child-focus in Norway compared to Austria and Spain.

Europe hosted the largest number of migrants and refugees in 2015—a total of 76 out of 244 million overall (United Nations, 2015). By September 2016, approximately 300,000 migrants had arrived in Europe from the global south in that year alone, especially from

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