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## Perceived Instrumentality and Normativeness of Corporal Punishment Use among Black Mothers

**Catherine A. Taylor, PhD, MSW, MPH [assistant professor]**

Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, New Orleans, LA, USA

**Lauren Hamvas, MPH [research associate]**

Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, New Orleans, LA, USA

**Ruth Paris, PhD, MSW [assistant professor]**

Boston University School of Social Work, Boston, MA, USA

### Abstract

Corporal punishment (CP) remains highly prevalent in the U.S. despite its association with increased risk for child aggression and physical abuse. Five focus groups were conducted with parents (n=18) from a community at particularly high risk for using CP (Black, low socioeconomic status, Southern) in order to investigate their perceptions about why CP use is so common. A systematic qualitative analysis was conducted using grounded theory techniques within an overall thematic analysis. Codes were collapsed and two broad themes emerged. CP was perceived to be: 1) instrumental in achieving parenting goals and 2) normative within participants' key social identity groups, including race/ethnicity, religion, and family of origin. Implications for the reduction of CP are discussed using a social ecological framework.

### Keywords

African Americans; children, abuse of; corporal punishment; focus groups; parenting; religion

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Corporal punishment (CP), defined as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correcting or controlling the child's behavior” (Donnelly & Straus, 2005, p.3), is a commonly used form of child discipline by U.S. parents (Straus & Stewart, 1999). A recent population-based study found that more than half of parents of 3 year old children have used CP (C. Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010). However, despite its high prevalence, its use is controversial (Durrant, 2008).

In light of a growing body of evidence, CP has emerged as a strong *risk* factor associated with many poor outcomes for children (e.g., Gershoff, 2002; C. Taylor, et al., 2010). For example, although most CP does not necessarily result in direct physical injury of a child, the use of CP has been strongly associated with *risk* for child physical abuse victimization (Whipple & Richly, 1997). Gershoff (2002) found CP to have a medium to large effect size ( $d=0.69$ ) associated with child physical abuse. Trocm' and colleagues (2003) reported that a

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Dr. Catherine A. Taylor, PhD, MSW, MPH Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine (Dept. of Community Health Sciences) 1440 Canal Street, Suite 2301 New Orleans, LA 70112 OFFICE: (504) 988-0292 FAX: (504) 988-3540 ctaylor5@tulane.edu Ms. Lauren Hamvas, MPH Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine (Dept. of Community Health Sciences) 1440 Canal Street, Suite 2301 New Orleans, LA 70112 PH: (504) 988-8633 FAX: (504) 988-3540 lhamvas@tulane.edu Dr. Ruth Paris, PhD, MSW Assistant Professor Boston University School of Social Work 264 Bay State Road Boston, MA 02215 PH: (617) 353-3752 FAX: (617) 353-5612 rparis@bu.edu.

majority of substantiated cases of child physical abuse arose from the inappropriate use of CP. Importantly, population-based studies also have found similar links. Zolotor and colleagues (2008) found that mothers from an anonymous telephone survey who reported spanking (versus those who did not) had nearly 3 times the odds of reporting abusive behavior and nearly 9 times the odds when the CP involved use of an object. Taylor and colleagues (2010) found a dose response association between maternal use of spanking and other incidents of maternal physical aggression, psychological aggression, and neglect. In addition, CP has been associated with increased *risk* for other poor child outcomes as well (Gershoff, 2002) such as weakened parent-child relationships (Durrant, Rose-Krasnor, & Broberg, 2003), depression (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan, 2002), and aggression (Berlin LJ, et al., 2009; C. Taylor, et al., 2010).

It is possible that the link between CP and risk for poor child outcomes might be moderated by factors such as race/ethnicity and situational or normative context. Some longitudinal studies have found CP to be associated with subsequent increased aggression in European Americans but not in African Americans (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Lansford, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2004; Slade & Wissow, 2004). Grusec and Goodnow (1994) theorized that the effectiveness and moral internalization of discipline is linked with the child's perception that the parent's action is appropriate. McLoyd and Smith (2002) found that the association between CP and later behavior problems were eliminated in the context of high levels of maternal emotional support, but still present when such support was low. Considering broader community contexts, some have hypothesized (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997) and found support for the link between CP and aggression being moderated, or eliminated, by perceived cultural normativeness of CP (Simons et al., 2002). However, others have found this link to be dampened but not eliminated in this context (Gershoff et al., 2010).

The potential risks associated with CP, and lack of clear moderating effects, make its high prevalence (C. Taylor, et al., 2010) and high levels of acceptance (Child Trends, 2009) in the United States a broad public health concern. However, concern is greatest in communities deemed at highest risk for CP use. Regionally, rates are highest in the South (Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Black parents tend to spank more frequently than parents of other ethnic groups (Straus & Stewart, 1999; McLoyd & Smith, 2002). Other demographic correlates of CP use include lower socio-economic status (Giles-Sims, et al., 1995; Jackson et al., 1999; Straus & Stewart, 1999), level of education (Ateah & Durrant, 2005), family structure (Kelley & Power, 1992), and religiosity (Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009).

From a public health perspective, it is important to better understand why CP is so common particularly in communities where its associated risks, such as child physical abuse and violence, are also highly prevalent. Further, although prior research has shown that having a positive attitude toward CP is linked with its use (Ateah & Durrant, 2005; Chung et al., 2009; Durrant, et al., 2003; Holden, et al., 1995; Jackson, et al., 1999; Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006), how such attitudes are developed and maintained in communities at risk for frequent CP use is poorly understood. Therefore, in this qualitative study of Black parents living in the South, we sought primarily to gain a deeper understanding of parents' perspectives about CP and what factors they believe explain its common use and acceptance. In particular, we were interested in what its use meant to them, their perceived risks and benefits of using CP, and what sorts of factors contributed to their attitudes toward CP. It is essential for family and community-based practitioners to understand the core values, attitudes, and beliefs of communities they are working with, as well as potential community-level factors of import. Findings are expected to contribute to an improved social ecological

understanding of CP use with the potential to inform family and community-based practice, particularly within high-risk communities such as the one in the current study.

## Methods

### Sampling and Recruitment

A purposive sampling strategy was used to obtain study participants from a population of urban, low-income, Black parents. Participants were recruited in the spring and fall of 2008 through an Early Head Start/Head Start community center that serves low-income families in a southern city; 94% of those served were from female-headed households. Parents who used the Center were approached for recruitment in one of four ways; they either: 1) were asked to sign up after a brief presentation at a monthly parent information session, 2) were approached and told individually about the groups as they entered the Center's lobby, 3) read a recruitment flyer at the Center, or 4) were recruited by word of mouth from other participants. The recruitment presentation and flyer indicated that: 1) we were looking for caregivers of young children, particularly those responsible for disciplining their child; 2) the focus groups were designed for us to learn about how parents manage children's behavior and about their goals for child discipline; 3) the focus groups would provide parents with opportunities to hear other parents' thoughts on these issues, and 4) participants would be paid \$25 for attending a group. Interested parents were called and their eligibility was confirmed via telephone. Eligible participants were primary or familial caregivers for at least one child under the age of 7; they did not have to be the legal guardian. Fathers were not excluded from participation; however, only one father offered his contact information and he was unable to attend any of the groups. A total of 45 parents/caregivers who expressed interest in the focus groups were eligible to participate.

Possible focus group dates and times were discussed with eligible parents to select dates and times that would work best with their schedules. Multiple attendance confirmation and reminder methods were employed. Each parent received a letter and/or e-mail confirming the date and time of the group. Each parent also was called a few days before their assigned group to confirm their intent and ability to attend or to reschedule if necessary. Center staff advised us to expect that only about half of those confirmed would attend the group, as that was typical for most of their programs. Therefore, every effort was made to confirm 10–12 participants for each group to have groups of about 5 persons. Larger groups were not desirable as we wanted all participants to have a chance to speak on all topics. Parents who did not attend their assigned group were called afterwards to reschedule them for a later focus group, if desired.

### Participants

A total of 18 Black women between the ages of 18 and 49 (mean=30) participated in one of five focus groups. Three of the focus groups had a total of three participants, one group had four participants, and one group had five participants. Most of the women were the biological mothers or step-mothers of children; however, there were two grandmothers who cared for their grandchildren, one godmother who cared for her godchild, and one sister who helped her mother care for her younger siblings. Each woman cared for an average of three children, the average age of which was 5.6 years. Of the children within our target age range (less than 7 years old), 53% were female and 47% were male. Most of the parents (13 out of 18) had at least a high school education, with three completing high school, nine having some college and one completing college. The remaining five parents had between a 9th and 11th grade education. As mentioned previously, 94% of those served by this community program were from female headed households. Most participants (n=10) reported being the primary disciplinarian, seven indicated that they shared discipline responsibilities equally

with someone else (five with a male, one with a female, and one with both another male and female), and one indicated that her mother was the primary disciplinarian in the house.

### Focus Group Protocol

A Focus Group Guide was developed and followed to ensure that each group included the same topics and similar questions (Debus, 1988). A series of questions was asked to assess parents' perceptions of CP as a norm as well as parents' motivations for and expectations from using CP. We opened the focus group discussions by asking participants questions regarding their own child discipline repertoire. We then asked parents about their perceptions of the prevalence of CP within their community. Given that parents agreed CP was common in their community, the discussion moved to asking parents why they thought this was the case with questions such as: "Why do you think that physical discipline, such as spanking, is so common?" (given that all groups agreed it was common) and "What are some reasons that parents use physical types of discipline, such as spanking? What kinds of things do you think they hope to accomplish?" Probes were included after each question to elaborate on responses and encourage full participation. Although questions initially were asked regarding perceptions of parents in general to get at perceived reasons for CP being common in their community, many parents naturally moved to sharing their views based on their own personal parenting experience. Following each group, the focus group guide was amended as needed to clarify questions or explore topics in greater depth that arose in previous groups.

Each focus group was held at the Center, which provided a familiar and convenient location for the participants. As an added convenience, the groups were scheduled just prior to the time when parents normally picked up their children at the Center, thus eliminating the need for additional child care. Before each group, parents completed a brief questionnaire about their household composition, education-level, and with whom, if anyone, they shared parenting responsibilities. Informed consent was obtained from every participant. Each participant read and signed the consent form and the facilitator additionally emphasized key points of the consent including the voluntary and confidential nature of the group and the legal requirement to report anything that led the facilitators to believe that the participant or her child was in danger.

The focus groups were conducted by the principal investigator (PI) or by a trained masters-level research associate (RA). Each session was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a graduate-student research assistant and reviewed by the RA for completeness. The transcriber also took notes and recorded observations throughout the group sessions. At the Center's request, one of their social workers attended the first two groups to provide a familiar and friendly face for the participants; Center staff thought that her presence might be important to establish trust and buy-in from the parents given that the research team was white and unknown to them, which had the potential to create apprehension in the participants (Mosby, Rawls, Meehan, Mays, & Pettinari, 1999). However, after two groups, the Center staff and research team agreed that the social worker's presence seemed unnecessary. Indeed, the openness and comfort-level of the participants did not seem to differ in groups where the social worker was not present and findings across groups were similar. At the conclusion of each group session, covered topics were reviewed and summarized, allowing participants to expand on or clarify earlier responses if they desired. Each group lasted for about 90 minutes. Afterwards, parents received \$25 for participating as well as a brochure produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2004) on effective methods of child discipline.

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the PI's home university. Additionally, the focus group guide, informed consent form and procedure, and complete

study protocol were fully reviewed, discussed, and edited by key members of the Center's program staff including the Associate Director of Administration, the Associate Director of Programs, the Early Head Start & Preschool Program Manager, and the Early Head Start Social Worker. Three of these four staff members were Black and provided meaningful insight into concerns and perspectives that had the potential to arise among our participants.

## Analysis

Grounded Theory techniques (Charmaz, 2006) were used to analyze the five focus group transcripts with ATLAS.ti software (Version 5.2). After the groups concluded, the RA, who attended every group, wrote memos regarding initial thoughts and perceptions of group content and process. These memos served as the basis for an initial list of qualitative codes. Focused coding was used to highlight reoccurring statements, themes, or ideas within the groups. Additional items were created throughout the process to highlight pertinent comments. The RA and a graduate student research assistant coded the five transcripts independently but communicated with each other and the PI throughout the process. First, they met weekly with the PI to clarify definitions and propose new codes as needed. The PI also reviewed the progress and provided written feedback. Once a final code list had been developed and clarified, and all the PI's comments had been incorporated into the schema, the two coders completed the coding then met to review the transcripts, discuss discrepancies, and reach consensus. The initial rate of agreement between the coders, before reaching consensus, was approximately 85%; that is, about 15% of the quotes initially were not coded the same. Disagreements from most to least common included discrepancies about: 1) how much of a quote to code in order to represent the context appropriately, 2) what code to assign a particular quote, and 3) whether or not a quote was significant enough to be coded at all. Together the coders reviewed all coding discrepancies and either reached consensus on their own or, in a few cases, met with the PI to resolve discrepancies and reach consensus. Final codes were then reviewed and collapsed into categories representing the most salient themes. Themes that helped to deepen our understanding of our key questions as well as those that were predominant across groups are reported in the findings.

## Results

Most participants in this study believed that using some form of CP with their children was at times necessary and expected as a form of discipline. The analysis revealed two broad themes as explanations for participants' use of CP: 1) the perceived instrumentality and effectiveness of CP and 2) the perceived normativeness of CP as a form of child discipline within participants' key social identity groups. Two other important sub-themes included the perception that certain family contexts might encourage or exacerbate the use of CP and also the potential downsides of using CP. Each of these themes will be described more fully herein.

### Perceived Instrumentality of Corporal Punishment

Parents'<sup>1</sup> motivations for using CP were similar to those for using any type of child discipline. Most broadly, parents hoped to teach their children right from wrong. Some examples mentioned included teaching children to respect and listen to authority figures, respect property, and treat others fairly. However, the choice to use CP specifically often was tinged with a greater sense of urgency in the lesson being taught and/or a greater potential for the child to be harmed, for instance if the child ran into the street or played too close to a hot stove. Four categories encompassed the various ways in which parents viewed

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<sup>1</sup>Participants are referred to as "parents" throughout; however, as noted above in the Methods section, four had other relationships to the children.

the instrumentality of CP; namely, they felt: 1) it was an expression of love not harm, 2) it worked to promote child safety and respect, 3) it worked when nothing else worked, and 4) it was essential for teaching important long-term lessons relevant for being out in the world.

**To express love not harm**—Seven parents mentioned that they never intended to hurt their children when using CP. They repeatedly mentioned that CP was a type of discipline used “out of love” that children can “feel” and that the positive results from using CP far out-weighed any pain it might cause: “We only trying to teach you things so you can learn. Not really trying to hurt you as far as any type of discipline. We just trying to learn y'all or prepare y'all for the outside world.” For the most part, parents did not see CP as painful or detrimental to the child, but instead saw it as a way to show their children that they were looking out for them and cared about them: “Spanking is not gonna hurt. And you lead your child into better thinking, behavior.” One parent also noted her confidence in her husband's CP use for similar reasons: “I know he's not gonna hurt `em. Cause he love `em and I love `em.”

**To promote child safety and respect**—Although parents stated that CP, often referred to as a “spank,” “pop,” or “tap” by parents, was not the only form of discipline that they used, nine parents agreed that particular transgressions warranted the use of CP. For example, when the child's safety was compromised, such as running into the street or playing near cleaning supplies, parents felt that CP often was necessary. Two parents gave examples of when talk alone was not enough: 1) “If my child goes in the chemical cabinet, I can't just say, 'Don't do it;’” And 2) “You have kids running into the street ... and I really think that a parent obviously can't be disciplining them enough, because actually telling them, ‘Don't go,’ which is discussing the issue, ‘into the streets,’ is not working.” One parent described a situation in which “popping” was used to prevent harm to the child that might have brought the attention of public authorities:

We're in the kitchen and he's messing with the pot. I asked you to get out of the kitchen so many times ... now either you get popped by my hands or you get popped ... by that fire, by that grease. Which one you rather have? ... If I pop you, that will go away. If the grease pop you, you gonna get a blister. You gotta go to school. I have to come and explain why he have blisters on his hands (laughs). The child protection people come and I have to explain it to them. So to cut all that I'd rather pop you and that's that.

Other transgressions that warranted CP included signs of disrespect, whether deliberate or not: “Sometimes they don't realize they're being disrespectful, but sometimes ... I use spanking to really let him know that sometimes it is something that is absolutely not acceptable.” This parent mentioned swearing as one such transgression. Several parents noted CP as effective to gain respect from the child and “show him who is the authority and who is the child.”

**When nothing else works**—Four parents expressed using CP as a last resort: “And then you making me keep hollering ... and you get tired of hollering ... and then the spanking coming in.” Parents might have tried other techniques first, such as raising their voice or taking away privileges, to stop misbehavior but if a child refused to listen then many parents felt that CP was necessary:

I make him repeat what I said. Now I know he heard what I said. ... Then if [he] don't listen ... I will pop him on the hand, if the pop on the hand don't stop [him] then [he has] to get a little slap or a little hit.

One parent felt that CP can be more effective than words in getting a child to respond: “If they don’t understand talking for some reason they understand slapping, spanking, a little touch.”

**To promote long-term lessons essential for being out in the world**—Many parents linked use of CP with long term goals for the child to become a responsible adult. Parents implied that without CP, their children would get involved with delinquent activities: “I would rather me discipline them than [the police] discipline them. They gonna kill them without love.” Additionally, parents mentioned a personal responsibility to do whatever necessary to prevent their children from making poor decisions, thus necessitating the use of CP: “If you don’t step up and take your actions, later on in life that’s going to affect them.”

The majority of parents believed that using CP was an important part of teaching their young children how to be responsible adults. As one parent explained, she used CP because she was “just trying to keep them from the negative things, negative influences. `Cause it’s easy for them to get involved into the wrong thing.” Some parents regarded the good behavior of their teenage children as evidence that CP is an effective tool to teach children to avoid negative influences and become responsible young adults:

I thank God they [this mother’s older children] ain’t in trouble ... They in the heart of the `hood where crime and killing and robbery and all that is going on ... if they didn’t have that discipline, and I mean discipline of that firm hand of whipping ... they probably would have gone out here and got into what other children [in their neighborhood] did [criminal activities].

Other parents expressed similar sentiments regarding CP as a deterrent for anti-social behaviors later in life: “I would rather sort of spank him now, than for the police, or the lawyer, or the judge to spank him with twenty years.”

### Perceived Normativeness of Corporal Punishment

Parents’ decisions to use CP also were influenced by various socio-cultural contexts. In particular, parents perceived CP to be normative, and therefore expected, within certain social identity groups, including those linked to race/ethnicity, religion or faith, and family of origin.

**Perceived Racial/Ethnic Differences**—Seven parents specifically mentioned CP as a more common discipline technique amongst Black parents as compared to other ethnic groups. One parent felt that she had evidence of this because she saw more White children acting out in public, which she attributed to the fact that White parents use CP less frequently:

I think more ... African Americans whoop their children than Caucasian people. I was in the store one day and I saw one little girl say, “I hate you,” you know I’m like, “what the!” You ain’t gonna hear African American children like that, because a lot of Caucasian people wanna talk to their children, you know.

One parent agreed with this sentiment, further expanding on the differences in discipline techniques between racial/ethnic groups: “[Talking] don’t work for us [Blacks]. It don’t work for them [Whites] either that is why they continue to do it, but they don’t believe in spanking.” Although parents noted the perceived instrumentality of CP amongst Black caregivers, they also recognized that it might not be as effective for all groups. One parent explained her understanding like this: “[CP] has worked for us ... I think that different cultures and different races have different ways of disciplining their kids.”

**Supported by Religion or Faith**—Many parents mentioned that they turned to their faith when they needed parenting advice, with many specifically turning to their pastors, ministers, or God directly (through prayer) for guidance. Six parents felt that the normativeness of CP was linked to its grounding in religious teachings because “it’s in the Bible. Spare the rod, spare the child.” As one parent explained, “[CP] works because the Bible says spare the rod and spoil the child and the rod is when you put something on their butt. That is why I know that works, `cause the word of God tells us that it works.” One mother repeatedly referred to her use of CP as “sparing the rod.” Parents used a similar justification when explaining why they trusted their pastors or other religious leaders for parenting advice: “Because he going ... by the Book, you know, like, spare the rod, you lose the child.”

**Influence of Family of Origin**—Many parents referred to the experience and relevance of CP in their own upbringing as being central in their choice to use CP with their own children: “My momma would whoop me. My momma would hurt me;” “My mom did it to me, so that’s how I’m gonna raise my kids;” “That’s, I mean, that’s all we were brought up [with CP];” “However you were brought up that is the way you are gonna do. Because that is really the only way you know. You don’t know different; you can’t display different.” Another parent pointed out that all parents, to some extent, replicate their own upbringings:

The way you were raised and brought up ... that’s the way you are going to discipline your child; whether it is abusing or the correct way or violent way, I mean, it depends on how you were brought up. You going to think that it was right because that is the way you were taught, you don’t know any different, you don’t know any better, so you can’t do better. I mean, it is up to the parent to like retrace and make their own signature upon how to raise their child.

Many of these parents also turned first to their own mother for advice on how best to parent; so if she believed in using CP, this served as another mechanism for passing on use of CP to the next generation: “when I was born, my mom spanked me, so... [I] think it’s okay.” One parent further noted the success of her own parents’ disciplinary choices as evidence for why she carried on the practice: “I know they say don’t hit your children, all of that, but it worked for nine of us, you know my mom’s kids;” and she believed CP should work for her children, too.

### Linking Family Structure with Use of Corporal Punishment

We noticed that many parents referred to breaks or challenges in family structure as possibly encouraging or adding to the need for use of CP; for instance, families with younger parents, single parents, or those in unconventional parenting situations might be more likely to use CP than families in a more conventional structure. Two parents in different groups brought up the belief that some younger parents do not know how to appropriately discipline their children and land in either of the two extremes—completely ignoring their children’s misbehaviors or disciplining them to the point of abuse:

Some young mothers that I know go to the extent of beating their child ... They don’t even see it as I’m trying to hurt you, but they don’t realize that, you know, that what they did was beyond a spank, beyond a pop. I mean, they really beat their children.

Another parent suggested that some parents might subconsciously over-discipline their children because of particular circumstances, such as a mother no longer being with the child’s father:

A lot of times it’s frustrations, subconscious and even conscious that may not even have to do with that child, but ... some young mothers, they may not be with the



child's father, you know, and especially if the baby looks like that father. Like "oooh come here [makes movement like grabbing a child] 'cause you look just like your daddy."

Several single parents mentioned that they felt CP was necessary for them to remain in control without male figures in the house. One single parent was reminded that when she was growing up, her mother (also a single parent) had her uncles corporally punish her instead of doing it herself, but that she does not relinquish such control when it comes to her children and she uses CP in an effort to maintain that control: "But see, far as me, I don't get no uncles. I don't get no Daddy. I'm here. I'm going to do this [use CP]. I'm going to handle the situation."

### Downsides to using Corporal Punishment

Although participants primarily identified positive outcomes and associations with use of CP, eight parents also spoke of potential downsides to its use, including teaching children that violence in relationships is acceptable: "They grow up thinking a man beating is alright because my mama done beat me." Another way this could play out is through the child retaliating with violence: "The more you beat 'em, the tougher they get, and they'll try to hit you back;" "Some kids will actually get mad and will do something negative, you know, to try to hurt you also." Other suggested consequences included the child calling child protective services on the parents, running away from home, or feeling suicidal. On the latter point, one parent explained that CP might be misinterpreted by the child as a lack of familial support, which could enhance suicidal tendencies: "You discipline your kids 'cause you don't know what peer pressure or what are they going through. ... You just know that they acting out ... when you discipline 'em, you know, you don't know what a child might be going through."

Although parents recognized the societal shifts in opinions away from using CP, they defended their "right" to discipline their children as they deemed appropriate: "I believe in sparing the rod ... Don't knock on my door, because you wanna retain me for something I'm doing that I believe in ... Everybody has their personal beliefs." Parents recognized, however, that social trends shifting away from CP use have implications on their choices of discipline, such as adapting when they will use it: "We don't whoop the child in public now because you would have, 'Oh my goodness, she hit her child. Let's call child protective services on her. Let's call the police, that's abuse.'" Parents were sometimes frustrated by this intrusion on their parenting, with one parent stating that the interference of child protective services "is ridiculous, 'cause it's like, it [CP] made us a better person. You know, like I said we obey the law. We don't do anything to get in trouble with the law. That is because we got beat. [Laughs from others in the group] We got punished."

### Discussion

In this study, we aimed to better understand Black parents' perceptions of why use of CP was so common in their community. The parents we interviewed demonstrated a great deal of care, insight, and reflectiveness with regard to their own parenting and their perceptions of CP. Major themes that emerged highlighted parents' perceptions of the instrumentality of CP and the expectations to use CP within their primary social identity groups. Minor themes focused on family structure stresses linked with CP as well as the potential consequences of its use. Parents believed that CP was both effective and necessary in certain situations, particularly when the child compromised his or her safety, was disrespectful, or would not respond to other types of discipline. Parents also emphasized that they used CP for a child's own good, in both the short and long-term, and that it was not intended to harm the child. Regarding the perceived normativeness of CP use, parents felt that CP was more common

and more accepted among Blacks than among Whites. They also noted the strong influences of both religious beliefs and family practices on their use of CP, given their references to relevant Bible verses, the importance of advice they received from pastors and their own mothers, and their own childhood experience with CP as discipline.

Consistent with other research (e.g., Holden, et al., 1995), our participants mentioned both proximal and distal factors that were linked with using CP. Proximal factors included situational frustrations related to single or young parenthood, the type of transgression committed by the child, and repeated child misbehavior. Distal motivators included the parents' own experiences with CP as a child, perceived normativeness of CP within their identified communities, and their own beliefs in CP as an effective mode of discipline. Similarly, Ispa & Halgunseth (2004), who conducted in-depth qualitative interviews over time with nine low-income Black mothers, found that the mothers all reported using CP, believed CP to be an effective form of discipline, and used CP particularly in response to certain types of child transgressions such as those that endangered the child's safety or showed a lack of respect.

Linking the use and acceptance of CP with biblical roots is not new (Cobb, 1847) and has been undergirded by more contemporary research (e.g., Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009). Six parents referenced religious teachings and biblical verse that they interpreted as supporting the use of CP. It is not uncommon for Black adults in particular to seek counsel and advice through their faith and religious leaders (C. Taylor & Hamvas, 2010; Ward, Clark, & Heidrich, 2009). Therefore, community churches and other religious institutions might be an important entry point for altering favorable attitudes toward CP. Community religious leaders might be engaged in discussions about the risks associated with CP, made aware of the influential role they play with parents, and informed about new ways to address the topic of CP and alternative forms of discipline with parents. Such efforts might face obstacles based in differing professional values of clergy (e.g., R. Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000) and success might be linked to factors such as the clergy's level of education and congregation size (Thomas, Quinn, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994). However, successful efforts could mean that parents that look to clergy for guidance might gradually develop different attitudes toward and beliefs about CP.

Researchers have theorized that parents who use CP are not aware of its potential negative effects (Holden, Miller, & Harris, 1999). Although this might be true in some cases, many of the parents in our study, as well as those in Ispa & Halgunseth (2004), understood that CP had potential for negative consequences, such as teaching children that violence is acceptable or making children more aggressive, while at the same time embracing many of its perceived benefits. Therefore, they might believe simply that the benefits of CP outweigh the negative consequences or they might not be convinced that sub-abusive CP might carry risk of negative consequences for children. Future intervention strategies might focus on teaching parents that the risks of using even sub-abusive CP might outweigh the potential benefits. Concurrently, it will be important to propose and teach alternative, non-physical forms of discipline, such as the correct use of time out, which have been linked with improved parenting and reduced child aggression (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008).

We also discovered that breaks or stresses in traditional family structure were perceived as exacerbating risk for using CP. Some participants felt that younger parents, single parents, and grandparents who served as primary guardians used CP more often than parents in traditional family structures, which is consistent with previous research (Ateah & Durrant, 2005; Kelley & Power, 1992; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Greater use of CP among grandparents might be expected given that CP was more common and acceptable a generation ago than it is now. Young and single parents might be more prone to increased

parenting stress, which can increase risk of using CP (Combs-Orme & Cain, 2008; C. Taylor, et al., 2010). Younger parents, especially teenage parents, might be more likely to use CP because of lower levels of education (Ateah & Durrant, 2005; Kelley & Power, 1992; Straus & Stewart, 1999); also, they are likely to have less knowledge about alternative forms of child discipline than older, more experienced parents. One unique comment came from a mother who felt that single mothers might be more inclined to use CP on a child that resembles the child's father, especially when the mother no longer has a positive relationship with the father. In such a case, the mother's anger and disciplinary response might be disproportionate to the child's transgression. We are not sure how common this is but it might be worth exploring to determine if children in this situation are at increased risk for CP or abuse.

What seemed most consistent across all of our focus groups was parents' use of CP in hopes of keeping their children on a path toward responsible citizenship and behavior. The parents we spoke with lived in communities that were typically high in crime. Parents living in such communities might believe they need to do everything in their power to reverse the trends of drugs, violence, and crime in their neighborhoods. Most parents we spoke with believed that using CP could prevent their children from entering such a lifestyle and, perhaps most importantly, that CP was more effective than any other type of discipline at preventing anti-social behavior. This noble desire unfortunately stands in contrast to the growing evidence suggesting that CP instead is associated with risk for increased aggressive and anti-social behavior (e.g., Gershoff, 2002; C. Taylor, et al., 2010) and that alternative discipline strategies can be more effective in helping them to reach their parenting goals (Kaminski, et al., 2008).

### Limitations and Strengths

Our study had a number of potential limitations. First, our sample size was small. We made strong efforts to encourage parents to attend; however, only 40% of those who originally signed up attended our groups. Had resources permitted, we would have held another group or two to increase our sample size. Second, we intentionally conducted focus groups that were fairly homogenous. We would expect findings to differ substantially if the study were conducted within different socio-cultural groups. Again, had funding allowed, we would have preferred to also conduct another set of groups to assess these same questions within groups of other ethnic and economic backgrounds to compare and contrast findings across groups. Finally, each of our group facilitators was White and unknown to the participants before the focus groups. It is possible that the participants might have responded differently if the facilitators also were Black or persons with whom the parents were more familiar.

Our study also had a number of important strengths. First, the research is novel; we only were able to identify one other qualitative study that addressed the issue of CP with Black parents, and that study involved in-depth, individual interviews over time with nine parents (Ispa & Halgunseth, 2004). Also, the focus group process seemed to go quite well. The parents we interviewed were very responsive and answered all of the questions in detail. Although many of the questions asked the participants to consider their communities as a whole, parents often answered based on their own personal parenting experiences, emanating a sense of pride in their parenting techniques and a perceived lack of judgment from others in attendance, including the facilitators. Parents interacted with each other and with us in a friendly and easy manner, allowing each group to take on a relaxed, conversational tone. Additionally, parents often replied to others' comments with anecdotes of their own, which helped to build rapport as well as support for common themes. Finally, our thematic analysis was both verifiable and reliable with our coders achieving an initial high rate of agreement and eventual full consensus.

## Conclusions and Implications for Theory and Practice

The social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which accounts for multiple spheres of influence on individual behavior, provides a useful framework for considering these findings. At the macrosystem-level, broad societal values and conditions that foster racism, lack of economic opportunity, and violence in poor communities might contribute to some of the particular challenges and stressors that these families consider to play a role in CP use. Perceived normative values of the “Black community” and “the church” to promote and expect the use of CP might directly (as microsystems) and indirectly (as exosystems) influence parents' disciplinary choices. Similarly, at the interpersonal micro-level, values and norms that support use of CP are perceived from the family of origin, and interpersonal connections within family and community seem to help maintain positive attitudes toward CP. It is likely that each of these social spheres has an influence on the formation parents' own beliefs about the effectiveness (e.g., will promote love, respect, safety, long-term civility and good behavior) and possible dangers (e.g., might encourage violent behavior) of CP use, as well as their own felt stress as parents that often need to make challenging decisions about how best to discipline their children.

This social ecology of CP is in alignment with Garbarino's (1977) human ecology of child maltreatment and adds some specificity of relevance to family and community-based practitioners. (Again, although CP is not considered child physical abuse, it is a strong *risk* factor for such behavior; therefore, we consider Garbarino's discussion useful.) Garbarino (1977) argued that two conditions are *necessary*, although not sufficient, for child maltreatment to occur. First, he argued that the use of physical aggression against children must be socially approved. Indeed, the parents in our study felt that CP was approved of in their familial, racial/ethnic, and religious social spheres. Second, he argued that social support systems must be adequate to provide good parenting, and are especially important in buffering parental stress. This ties in with parents in our study perceiving that those families with structural family stressors were particularly vulnerable to increased used of CP. Further, perceptions of CP being necessary to achieve instrumental parenting goals (i.e., to communicate love and the importance of safety and respect, etc.) might be lessened with more supportive parenting education designed to teach alternative forms of discipline.

Taken together with our findings, this framework suggests that family and community practitioners that are aiming to reduce the use of CP might need a multi-level intervention approach. At the micro-level, it is crucial to have an understanding of the target population's belief systems and motivations surrounding CP use when crafting intervention strategies and messages. Parenting education and support programs that teach parents how to use non-physical forms of discipline correctly and consistently should be sure to link these methods with parenting goals identified by parents. Interventionists can utilize the fact that many parents already recognized the potential for negative effects with use of CP and emphasize that, in order to meet parenting goals, positive disciplinary techniques should replace CP use rather than simply be used in addition to CP; Ispa and Halgunseth (2004) found that many parents were doing the latter. In his qualitative study of mostly Black but higher SES parents, Davis (1999) found that parents who stopped using CP often had experienced an ideological shift in their beliefs about parenting through reading materials or parent training.

However, similar to the conclusions of Davis (1999), our findings suggest that CP use will not likely be curbed simply by introducing alternative discipline techniques to parents. It will be important to engage extended family members along with trusted leaders in the Black community, such as ministers, to address the perceived familial, biblical, and broader community support for CP. Familial engagement is likely to be most challenging with older extended family members, such as grandparents, given that they might have more favorable attitudes toward CP than younger relatives (Gagné, Tourigny, Joly, & Pouliot-Lapointe,

2007). Again, Davis (1999) found that parents who stopped using CP often were influenced by external sanctioning that suggested use of CP was wrong.

It's important to note that our findings and this theoretical framework may not be relevant in communities with different cultural norms, values, and beliefs. There is a need for researchers to investigate similar questions with other cultural communities. A qualitative study of cultural norms relevant to parenting suggests that there is very little variation in parenting goals across ethnic groups in the U.S.; however, there were some differences with regard to when and how CP ought to be used (Lubell, Lofton, & Singer, 2008). For example, Black parents thought that using CP immediately after a transgression was very important (as opposed to waiting to get home) and some thought that use of an object was acceptable.

Family and community practitioners know that it is essential to begin where the family or community is at; in other words, know the values, hopes, and challenges of the families and communities in question. With regard to CP, it is essential that practitioners realize that many parents value the use of CP for all of the right reasons (i.e., to show their children love, teach them respect, promote safety and civility, etc.) and find it supported by those whom they most trust. Whatever a practitioner's goal with regard to CP, he or she is likely to meet with greater success when they are first aware and respectful of the clients' values and attitudes on this issue.

In sum, from a public health perspective, multi-level intervention efforts that are respectful of and aligned with community values and parenting goals might be useful in reducing use of CP. Parent educational efforts could help parents to learn non-physical forms of punishment that are aligned with their noble parenting goals, while simultaneously raising their awareness that even legal, sub-abusive CP carries a *risk* of harm to their child's well-being. Broader community-level efforts to reduce CP use could target extended family, clergy, and other community leaders to help shift the normative influence of these groups towards reducing parents' use of CP, and replacing it with less risky, non-physical forms of discipline. Such efforts might help to reduce the prevalence and frequency of CP use in communities and, therefore, have the potential to reduce risk for child physical abuse and later aggression as well.

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