

Age and Gender in Children Identification, Experience and Perception of Physical Punishment

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of age and gender in the identification, perception and experience of physical punishment among primary school pupils. Six hypotheses were postulated and tested. A total number of 150 children ages 7-9 and 10-11 comprising of 81 female and 69 males was used for the study. They were drawn through stratified random sampling from the primary 3 and Primary 5 pupils of NAOWA Primary school, Ikeja, Lagos State. The children were aged between 7-8, 11months and 10-11,11months with a mean age of 108.98 and a standard deviation of 16.25. The data was analyzed using 2x2 independent chi-square statistics. The result of the study showed no gender differences in children's identification of punishment [$\chi^2 (1) = 3.72, p > .05$]. Gender differences were however found in the perception [$\chi^2 (1) = 10.93, p < .005$] and experience [$\chi^2 (1) = 6.13, p < .05$] of punishment. No age differences were found in the identification [$\chi^2 (1) = 1.24, p > .05$] and perception [$\chi^2 (1) = 1.12, p > .05$] of punishment but there was a significant age difference in the experience of punishment. Recommendations and suggestions for further studies were made based on the findings of the study.

Key Words: *Age, Children, Identification, Physical Punishment, Kolberg's Theory of Moral Reasoning*

INTRODUCTION

The process of parenting and bringing up a child is a task that is very important to every nation. Parental use of physical punishment is one of the single most controversial and emotionally charged topics in child-rearing. Any mistake made in the process of child-upbringing has a rippling effect on economy and development of the affected society, this mistake can lead to the issue of street-children, armed robbers, ritual killers, psychological and behavioural problems and many other social menaces.

Punishment is one very important tool that parents and significant others use in the discipline and correction of their wards. Most of the research works done on physical punishment is concerned about its effectiveness and effects on the child both emotionally, socially, psychologically and otherwise.

One very important view that has not been given much attention especially in most developing nation is the way children that receive the punishment interpret and understand the role of punishment and why they think their significant others use it on them. Hence, the purpose of this research work is to evaluate the role of age and gender in children's perception of punishment.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Physical Punishment

In this era of child abuse, molestation, maltreatment and neglect, it has been difficult to separate discipline from abuse in the process of child rearing. Physical punishment has been an integral part of disciplining and correcting children throughout history (Greven, 1991) and has been a focus of psychological research for decades (e.g., Caselles & Milner, 2000; Eron, Walder, Huesmann & Lefkowitz, 1974; McCord, 1988b; Sears, 1961; Straus, 1994a). A growing number of countries (Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Norway, and Sweden) have adopted policies or laws that prohibit parents from using physical punishment as a means of discipline (Bitensky, 1998; EPOCHUSA, 2000).

Physical punishment is an action either at home or in the school to rebuke the child of wrong doing, as a means of molding the child towards better adulthood. According to Preh and Alister (2010), physical punishment is defined as the use of physical force towards a child for the purpose of control and/or corrections and as a disciplinary penalty inflicted on the body with the

intension of causing some degree of pains or discomfort, however mild. United Nations Committee on the rights of child (2006) stated that although most forms of corporal punishment involve hitting children with the hand or implement (such as a belt or wooden spoon), other forms of corporal punishment include: Kicking, shaking, biting and forcing a child to stay in uncomfortable positions. The desired outcome of physical punishment is child compliance with adult directives (Gawlik, Henning & Warner 2002; Smith, Gollop, Taylor & Marshall 2004). Psychologists and other professionals are divided on the question of whether the benefits of physical punishment might outweigh any potential hazards; some have concluded that physical punishment is both effective and desirable (Baumrind, 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Larzelere, 2000), whereas others have concluded that is ineffective at best and harmful at worst (American Academy of Paediatrics, 1998; Lytton, 1997; McCord, 1997). This controversy over physical punishment has inspired series of recent debates among psychological, sociological, and legal scholars about what physical punishment does and does not do for children (Donaldson, 1997; Mason & Gambrill, 1994). Contrary to the more vertical and unidirectional view that only emphasizes the perception of parents concerning their children, few researchers have highlighted the importance of considering the perceptions of children concerning their parents and evaluating how such perceptions explain certain constructs. Instruments available to evaluate the perception of children concerning their parents, with some exceptions, are even more scarce (Costa et al., 2000; Teixeira, Oliveira & Wottrich, 2006). Despite this controversy and the hundreds of scientific studies invoked on either side of the debate, most of this studies does not recognize the child's perceptive and how they evaluate its justification in a given circumstance or situation. It becomes imperative to do a proper evaluation of how our children perceive and interpret physical punishment as this will shed more light on the controversy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The pre-conventional morality, the first stage of Kolberg's (1958) theory of moral reasoning constitutes the main theoretical framework used here, which covers children from nine years and below. Kolberg posited that they do not have a personal code of morality. Instead, their moral code is shaped by the standards of adults and the consequences of following or breaking their rules. Authority is outside the individual and reasoning is based on the physical consequences of actions. Children at this level judge the morality of an action by its direct consequences. The pre-conventional level consists of the first and second stages of moral development and is solely concerned with the self in an egocentric manner. A child with pre-conventional morality has not yet adopted or internalized society's conventions regarding what is right or wrong but instead focuses largely on external consequences that certain actions may bring. In this stage, (obedience and punishment driven), individuals focus on the direct consequences of their actions on themselves. For example, an action is perceived as morally wrong because the perpetrator is punished. "The last time I did that I got spanked, so I will not do it again." The worse the punishment for the act is, the more "bad" the act is perceived to be. This can give rise to an inference that even innocent victims are guilty in proportion to their suffering. It is "egocentric," lacking recognition that others' points of view are different from one's own. There is "deference to superior power or prestige."

The increasing rate of maladaptive behaviours manifested by children in this century has made it imperative to identify the reasons for this increase and also to check the effectiveness of the various correctional measures used to control these behaviours. Has punishment lost its relevance or is it that children's perception of punishment has made it an ineffective tool for correction and discipline? Smith (2004) discovered that children who understand and accept their parents' disciplinary requests are more likely to

comply with them and, as a result, to behave in socially appropriate ways while Sigvaldason (2006) discovered that children found physical punishment relatively ineffective. Investigating physical punishment through the eyes of children rather than the adult should therefore be the single most pressing research need.

This study is aimed at evaluating the way children view the use of physical punishment by their significant others as a form of discipline and correctional tool. The result of the study will be relevant for homes, educational institutions, correctional homes and all the agencies that work with children. This study will be carried out using children from NAOWA Nursery and Primary school, Ikeja Military Cantonment in Lagos state.

METHOD

Participants

The researcher used NAOWA primary school which is located inside the Ikeja Military cantonment Maryland Lagos for the study. The school has a student population of 514 pupils. The pupils in basic 3 to 5 were used to carry out the study because the age group under study are in those classes.

Population sample/ sampling procedure

A total of 150 participants were used for this study. They were selected through stratified random sampling from primary 3 and primary 5 classes. They were stratified by class and age. They comprised of 69 males and 81 females, with an age range of 7 years, 0 months to 11years, 2 months, a mean age of 9 years, 1 month and a standard deviation of 16.25 months. The children were subdivided into two groups using age as a criteria; 7-8 years and 10-11 years.

Instruments

A questionnaire containing 18 questions and two pictures depicting images of physical punishment was developed by the researcher and validated by use of SPSS. The questionnaire was structured around 3 sections: (1) Socio-demographic characteristics such as; gender (female and male) and age which were divided into groups; ages 7-8 and 10-11. (2) Picture showing the act of punishment. (3) This section contains questions that will elicit children's perception of punishment. Section (3) of the questionnaire contains questions measuring the children's ability to identify physical punishment as shown in the picture, their perception towards physical punishment and their personal experiences. These questions were open ended, requiring participants to write down their feelings and perception.

Item analysis was conducted to determine the reliability and validity of the items. The items were divided into subscales; perception, identification and experience. 8 items measured perception, 4 items measured identification while 6 items measured experience of punishment. After the analysis, it was discovered that two items measuring identification of punishment had low inter item correlation matrix and they were eliminated. The Cronbach alpha reliability for the perception subscale is .91, while that of identification and experience are .75 and .85 respectively. The Cronbach alpha reliability for the whole scale is .79.

After this analysis, the items used for the computation of results for the study were now reduced to 16 items.

Research Design

Cross sectional survey design was adopted for this study because the researcher was examining differences in a particular and similar group of

children with varying ages at a single point in time. The variables of interest were also not manipulated by the researcher and this research was aimed at providing information but not explaining why.

Procedure

After obtaining permission from the headmistress and class teachers and assuring them of confidentiality, the researcher with the help of 5 teachers distributed the questionnaires to the pupils in primary 3, 4 and primary 5. The researcher assured the pupils of confidentiality and encouraged them to be very honest and candid.

The questions were explained to participants who had difficulty in understanding them and the researcher also helped them to calculate their ages in months. The researcher then waited for them to complete the questionnaires and it took 3 hours and 30 minutes for all the children to submit. The researcher then collected the completed questionnaires and thanked them. A total of 186 questionnaires were distributed but only 150 fell within the age group under study and were properly completed hence used for the study.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analysed using chi-square statistics because the scale used for measurement was an ordinal scale.

RESULT

Table 1: Descriptive statistics showing the gender of the participants

	Frequency	Percentage
Female	81	54.0
Male	69	46.0

Table 2. Descriptive statistics showing the age level of the participants (in months)

	Frequency	Percentage
Older children	70	46.7
Younger children	80	53.3

Table 3. Descriptive statistics showing the mean and SD of the variables

	Mean	Standard deviation
Age (Months)	108.98	16.25
Identification	2.77	.88
Perception	13.00	2.96
Experience	11.71	1.01

Table 4. Summary Table of 2X 2 Chi-Square Tests for Gender by Identification, Perception and Experience of Punishment

		Identification of Punishment					
		Poor Identification	Adequate Identification	Total	χ^2	<i>P</i>	
Gender	Female	48 (42.1)	33(38.9)	81 (81.0)	3.72	.054 ^{NS}	
	Male	30 (35.9)	39 (33.1)	69 (69.0)			
		Perception of Punishment					
		Positive Perception	Negative Perception	Total	χ^2	<i>P</i>	
Gender	Female	40 (30.2)	41(50.8)	81 (81.0)	10.9 3	.001 ^{**}	
	Male	16 (25.8)	53 (43.2)	69 (69.0)			
		Experience of Punishment					
		No Experience	Experienced	Total	χ^2	<i>P</i>	
Gender	Female	2 (5.9)	79(75.1)	81 (81.0)	6.13	.013 [*]	
	Male	9 (5.1)	60(63.9)	69 (69.0)			

Note: ** = $P < .005$, * = $P < .05$, NS = $P > .05$.

Independent chi-square tests were performed to determine whether gender differences were significantly associated with the three sub-scales of punishment (identification, perception and experience) among children. The results in Table 1 above show no statistically significant gender differences in the identification of punishment among children [$\chi^2 (1) = 3.72, p > .05$]. However significant gender differences were found in the perception of punishment [$\chi^2 (1) = 10.93, p < .005$], and in the experience of punishment [$\chi^2 (1) = 6.13, p <$

.05]. A further look into the results show that females (N = 40) perceived punishment more positively than males (N = 16). Also, females (N =70) had more experience of punishment than males (N = 60).Therefore, we reject the first hypothesis and accept the second and third hypotheses and conclude that females tend to be more associated with a positive perception of punishment and showed more experience of punishment than their male counterparts.

Table 5. Summary Table of 2X 2 Chi-Square Tests for Age by Identification, Perception and Experience of Punishment

Identification of Punishment						
		Poor Identification	Adequate Identification	Total	χ^2	P
Age	Younger	45 (41.6)	35(38.4)	80 (80.0)	1.24	.265 ^{NS}
	Older	33 (36.4)	37 (33.6)	70 (70.0)		
Perception of Punishment						
		Positive Perception	Negative Perception	Total	χ^2	P
Age	Younger	33 (29.9)	47(50.1)	80 (80.0)	1.12	.289 ^{NS}
	Older	23 (26.1)	47 (43.9)	70 (70.0)		
Experience of Punishment						
		No Experience	Experienced	Total	χ^2	P
Age	Younger	9(5.9)	71(74.1)	80 (80.0)	3.87	.049*
	Older	2 (5.1)	68(64.9)	70 (70.0)		

Note: ** = $P < .005$, * = $P < .05$, NS = $P > .05$.

Also, independent chi-square tests were performed to determine whether age level is significantly associated with the three sub-scales of punishment (identification, perception and experience) among children. The results in Table 2 above show no statistically significant age differences in the identification [$\chi^2 (1) = 1.24, p > .05$] and perception [$\chi^2 (1) = 1.12, p > .05$] of punishment among children. However a significant age difference was found in the experience of punishment [$\chi^2 (1) = 3.87, p < .05$]. A further look at the results show that younger children (N = 9) tend to be associated more with having no experience of punishment than older (N = 2) children. Therefore, we reject the fourth and fifth hypotheses and accept the second and sixth hypotheses.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the influence of gender and age in children's perception, experience and identification of punishment. Six hypotheses were postulated and tested. The first hypothesis which stated that there will be a significant gender difference in children's identification of punishment was rejected. The result showed that there were no gender difference in children's identification of punishment. This implies that male and female children interpreted the content of the pictures depicting a child being punished in the same manner. Closer examination of the results revealed that male children were better at identifying punishment than the female children though the difference was not significant.

The second hypothesis which stated that there will be a significant gender difference in children's perception of punishment, the result showed a significant difference between male and female children in perception of physical punishment. A further look into the results show that females (N = 40) perceived punishment more positively than males (N = 16). The implication of this finding is that female children will more likely approve punitive measures more than their male counterparts. The result is in line with the findings of

(Hough and Roberts 1998, and contradicts the findings of Gault and Sabini (2000), Dobbs (2007) and Deater-Dearard, Lansford, Dodge, Petit and Bates (2009) which found out that female are less punitive because of their difference in empathy. The females in this study saw punishment as a way of disciplining them and not just an act of wickedness. Majority of them stated that they were punished because of their wrongdoings and misbehaviour and that the purpose of punishment was to correct them and prevent the reoccurrence of the particular behaviour. This could mean that punishment as a correctional tool may be more effective on the female children than the male children.

The third hypothesis, which stated that there will be a significant gender difference in experience of physical punishment, the result showed a significant difference. It revealed that females (N =70) had more experience of punishment than males (N = 60). This contradicts the finding of Sanapo and Nakamura (2010) which revealed that more boys than girls were physically punished. In Nigeria, parents place more emphasis in bringing up their female children uprightly because it is believed that they give birth to the nation. They are more lenient with the male but are very strict in disciplining their female children. There is a belief that female children are potential homemakers and as such, they should be more responsible. This difference in finding can therefore be attributed to cultural differences.

The fourth hypothesis stated that there will be a significant age difference in children identification of physical punishment. The result showed no statistical significance in age in children's identification of physical punishment. This implies that both younger and older children were able to identify what was happening in the picture in the questionnaire. Therefore the hypothesis was rejected.

The fifth hypothesis that there will be a significant age difference in children's

perception of physical punishment was rejected. The result revealed no statistical significant difference between the younger and older children in perception of punishment. This contradicts many research works that have found age as one of the socio-demographic attributes that affect perception of physical punishment. Such research works include Dobbs (2007), Cullen, Clark, Cullen and Mathers (1985) and Sigvaldason (2006). A closer look at the results showed that younger children had more positive perception of punishment than the older ones but this difference was not significant. Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning explains this. In the pre-conventional morality stage of his theory, he stated that younger children's moral codes are shaped by that of adults and the consequences of following or breaking their rules. This implies that when a younger child is punished, he/she automatically believes that it is a consequence of a wrongdoing or misbehaviour. Older children on the other hand, tend to rationalize and decide if the action or behaviour deserves punishment. Denham *et al* (2002) stated that as child grows older, they become increasingly competent in not only understanding and expressing their own emotional responses but also in understanding the emotion of others. So it can be said that compared to older children, younger children are more likely to view punishment as fair because their ability to articulate their emotional responses to it is more limited.

The sixth hypothesis that there will be a significant age difference in children's experience of physical punishment was significant. The result showed that older children have experienced physical punishment than their young counterparts. This finding contradicts the finding of Sigvaldason (2006) who found out that younger children experience more physical punishment but supports the finding of Poluha (2004) who discovered that age played a significant role in children's experience of punishment. He stated that caregivers seem to believe that younger children should not be punished and this is not farfetched from what we experience in Nigeria. Most parents do not use physical punishment on their younger children because it is believed that

they do not know what they are doing and they may not be strong enough to withstand to punishment and may not even understand the reason behind the punishment.

CONCLUSION

Punishments have been considered as one of the method of disciplining children and it is necessary to make a child form a well-behaved and disciplined adult. The findings of this study indicated that most children have experienced physical punishment from their significant others.

Also, the children used in this study had a positive perception of physical punishment as majority of them defined punishment as “what is done to you when you do something wrong.”

The above definition might have been influenced by the cultural orientation of the children. Similar findings emerged in a study carried out in Ghana by Twum-DansoImoh (2013), which reported that the majority of the Ghanaian children in the study believed in the use of physical punishment as a key method of child-rearing and Lansford *et al* (2005) which argued that in a culture where people believe that parents have the right to use physical punishment and consider this method as normal disciplinary practices, children appear to be more likely to accept this method as a form of disciplining.

Also, the study revealed that gender and age are important socio- demographic attributes that should be considered in the use of physical punishment. Majority of them reported been punished mainly by their parents and teachers and they did not like the way they felt at the moment but acknowledge that it was for their own good.

Some researchers suggested that corporal punishment may be harmless to children in specific parenting contexts and this determined by the intensity of the punishment, given that there is a thin line between punishment and child abuse.

Many studies have also criticized punishment as disciplinary tool. Jester *et al* (1999) found out that children whose mothers used reasoning to solve conflicts were more confident with words at age 7 and the more the children are flogged, the more difficulties with attention and hyper activities they had at age seven and they also found out that it affected their cognitive abilities.

Gershoff (2002) found an association between physical punishment and decrease in the quality of parent-child relationship. The study suggested that the damage to the relationship is due to the association of the feelings of fear, anxiety and anger created by physical punishment with the parent, leading to fear and avoidance of parent. This may in turn lead to more negative consequences and can be detrimental to the mental, social and emotional wellbeing of the child.

In this study's opinion, having compared the findings of other studies, the study believes that to a large extent physical punishment is important in child rearing but will be more effective if combined with other softer methods of discipline and conflict resolution. These methods may include negative reinforcement, discussion and dialoguing with the children as this will make them understand the consequences of their actions and also be a part in the decisions made towards correcting and disciplining them. It will also create a stronger bond and positive attachment between the caregiver and the child.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most empirical research works reviewed in the process of carrying out this study were carried out by non-psychologists. More psychologists especially those specializing in developmental, child and educational psychology should venture into understanding the role of punishment in child rearing as many research has shown its importance in the formation of the child's personality.

A positive parenting programme should be initiated in the country. The aim of this programme among other things should be to spread the idea that parents and teachers can promote confidence and competence in their children by choosing alternatives to physical punishment.

This study discovered that younger children had more positive perception than the older ones. This means that the use of physical punishment is more effective when the children are younger and more subtle forms or methods of punishment should be adopted as they get older.

When the significant others carryout discipline, punishment and redirecting of the child, they must include an explanation of why the particular behaviour they are punished for is acceptable or unacceptable.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Specifically, this research is based principally on children's self-reports. It is possible that the research might have reached somewhat different conclusions if other sources of data had been used. The sample size used for this study is somewhat small. Future researchers should adopt a larger sample size.

Children from a military primary school were used for this study and the nature of their school may have affected their responses. This study did not control for social desirable responses.

SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Future researchers should adopt a larger sample size. More quantitative measures of children's perception of punishment should be developed. The influence of other socio-cultural variables such as; birth order, parenting style, socioeconomic status and locality on children's perception of punishment should be examined.

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