4-1993

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Correlates of Disciplinary Practices in Working- to Middle-Class African-American Mothers

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The disciplinary practices of 52 working- to middle-income African-American mothers were coded to assess the degree to which the mother took a parent-oriented versus a child-oriented approach across various aspects of discipline. Factors associated with physical punishment included maternal education and maternal age. The use of social/material control practices were associated with maternal age, father presence, and concerns about child victimization. Only maternal education was associated with restrictive discipline. Fear of child victimization independently predicted the use of material/social consequences. Findings are discussed in terms of the factors contributing to these individual differences, and the adaptiveness of these practices for the environments in which the parent-child relationship is embedded.

Many researchers have argued for revisions in efforts to understand cultural aspects of childrearing and within-group differences in parenting style and behavior (e.g., Allen, 1978; Allen, Spencer, & Brookins, 1985; Boykin & Toms, 1985; Edelman, 1988; McAdoo, 1978; Myers, 1982; Ogbu, 1981; Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990; Spencer, 1983; Zuckerman, 1990). Developmental scholars are beginning to focus their efforts on race homogeneous studies that elucidate the understanding of the adaptiveness of various childrearing approaches for the neighborhoods and subculture in which the parent-child relationship is embedded.

Disciplinary styles are especially important to address in this way because cross-ethnic comparisons have concluded that African-American

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mothers are parent-oriented. These mothers have been described as expecting unyielding obedience to parental authority with little concern for child input (e.g., Baumrind, 1972; Kamii & Radin, 1967; Radin & Kamii, 1965). This pattern has been contrasted with a more responsive and child-oriented approach usually associated with white middle-class mothers. From the traditional race-comparative perspective, the parent-oriented approach of African-American mothers has been regarded as problematic for child development. In contrast, researchers employing the revisionistic approach stress that these mothers emphasize obedience in a manner that is ecologically valid (e.g., Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; McLoyd, 1990). Studies have shown the value of obedience in teaching respect, child safety, and school achievement (e.g., Bartz & Levine, 1978; Lewis & Looney, 1983; Peters, 1988).

The characterization of African-American mothers as parent-oriented has been based on examinations of lower-income mothers (e.g., Radin & Kamii, 1965). Hess and Shipman (1967) showed that upper middle-class African-American mothers gave more orientation to the task, were more likely to reinforce correct responses, and used more exact language than did lower-income mothers. Another intragroup comparison found that both lower- and middle-class minority mothers emphasized obedience (Kamii & Radin, 1971); however, middle-income mothers were more likely to promote obedience through internal controls, whereas lower-income mothers employed more power assertive techniques. In an application of the Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological theory to the determinants of parenting, Belsky (1984) contends that both maternal characteristics and ecological factors influence parenting. Ecological factors include characteristics of the family, the neighborhood, and cultural influences.

Reviews of the research on urban, African-American family life demonstrate that little empirical research has been conducted on disciplinary practices in working- to middle-income parents (e.g., Allen, 1978; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Hess, 1970; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1982; McLoyd, 1990; Myers, 1982; Ogbu, 1981). This largely theoretical literature has suggested several correlates of disciplinary style. Family factors that may contribute to parent-oriented discipline include younger age at childbearing (Blau, 1981), lower levels of formal education (Hess & Shipman, 1967; Laosa, 1982; Olvera-Ezzell, Power, & Cousins, 1990), and father absence (Slaughter, 1988; Wilson, 1987). Lower levels of maternal education and younger maternal age may result in a greater emphasis on obedience in childrearing, because the occupational opportunities available to such mothers (i.e., semiskilled labor) place an emphasis on obedience as well (e.g., Ogbu, 1981). The stresses caused by father absence (Hetherington,

Cox, & Cox, 1982) may contribute to parent-oriented discipline, given limits on time, patience, and maternal support.

Fears associated with an urban environment (e.g., child involvement in antisocial activity either as victim or perpetrator) may influence parenting. In addition, gender differences in childrearing practices have been reported (Baumrind, 1972; Smith, 1982). Other researchers contend, however, that nurturance and role flexibility are stressed for both minority boys and girls (e.g., Gibbs, 1989; Lewis, 1975; Peters, 1988).

The purpose of the present research was to explore each of these factors as they relate to the disciplinary practices of working- to middle-income African-American mothers. It differs from previous studies because, rather than restrict the focus to a single aspect of discipline, several areas of disciplinary practices were examined. Because demographic variables (e.g., maternal age and education) may moderate the relation between parenting concerns and disciplinary practices, a second purpose was to examine the independent contribution of parenting concerns in the prediction of disciplinary practices.

METHOD

Subjects

Fifty-two African-American mothers or caregivers (2 grandmothers) participated. Mean age of the mothers ($n = 50$) was 32.5 years ($SD = 5.5$ years). Thirty target children were girls and 22 were boys, with a mean age of 4.7 years ($SD = 16.4$ months). Mean income of the families was $35,771 ($SD = $15,063; range: $15,000–$67,000). Mothers with children enrolled in one of several preschool or daycare programs located in middle-class neighborhoods were contacted by letter. Subjects who agreed to participate were interviewed in their homes by one of two African-American female psychology students who were unaware of the hypotheses of the study. All interviews were completed in one session of 1½ hrs. Mothers were paid $10 for their participation.

At the time of the interviews, 40 mothers were married and 12 were unmarried. Ten had completed high school; 16 had completed 1 to 3 years of college; 23 had completed a 4-year university degree, one mother was in graduate school, and two had completed master's degrees. Forty-eight mothers (92%) were employed outside of the home. In the total sample ($n = 52$), 58% were employed in professional positions (e.g., teachers, nurses); 31% in secretarial or technical positions; 4% were unskilled workers; 6%, homemakers; and 2%, college students. Approxi-

mately one half of the fathers who lived with their children ($n = 40$) were employed in professional or sales occupations, and the rest in semiskilled positions. Family size ranged from 1 to 5 children ($M = 2.3$; $SD = 1.0$). Twenty children were first-borns; 15 second-borns; 11 third-borns; and 6 were fourth-borns.

Measures

The degree to which mothers used child-oriented versus parent-oriented disciplinary practices was assessed through a combination of an open-ended interview and a standardized questionnaire. The culturally-sensitive semistructured interview, developed for use in a project on classroom influences on sociomoral development in minority children (DeVries, Lerner, & Morgan, 1991), is an assessment of parenting goals, family rules, and disciplinary techniques. The majority of questions are open-ended to allow mothers to explain in their own words their views on particular issues relevant to parenting. In the section on parenting goals, mothers were questioned about the type of goals they had for their children (e.g., "What goals do you have for [child's name]?" "Why do you believe this goal is important?"). In the section on family rules, mothers were asked about the rules their children had to follow (e.g., "What rules does [child's name] have to follow? Why is this rule important?"). In the section on disciplinary practices, mothers were asked about the various approaches they used to enforce these rules, the importance of obedience, and their rationale for obedience.

Disciplinary practices also were assessed through the Parenting Dimensions Inventory (PDI) (Slater & Power, 1987). The PDI, which allows for the calculation of parent-oriented versus child-oriented disciplinary practices, is a multidimensional, self-report measure. The dimensions of the PDI that were most relevant to disciplinary practices assessed in the present study were: responsiveness to child input (e.g., *I believe that most children change their minds so frequently that it is hard to take their opinions seriously*), restrictive attitude (e.g., *I believe in toilet training a child as soon as possible*), consistency (e.g., *My child can often talk me into letting him [or her] off easier than I had intended*), and type of control. The type of control dimension assesses the reported use of specific disciplinary practices (e.g., material punishment, reasoning, physical punishment, sending a child to his or her room) combined across six childrearing situations.

The PDI was developed using confirmatory factor analytic techniques (Joreskog, 1969) on two predominantly white, middle-class samples (see Power, 1989; Slater & Power, 1987). The PDI has been validated by

examining its correlation with parent and teacher ratings of child behavior (Boggio, 1987; Sharp, 1988; Slater & Power, 1987), observed children's behavior in a stressful medical situation (Cox, 1987), and fathers' and close friends' ratings of the mothers' behavior and attitudes (Boggio, 1987; Sharp, 1988).

Cross-ethnic equivalency of the PDI has been demonstrated in two studies of lower-income African-American mothers (Kelley, 1988; Kelley et al., 1992). In both cases, expected relations among demographic factors and disciplinary practices and attitudes were found. To date, no research has employed the PDI with a working- to middle-income African-American population. Alphas in the present study ranged from .65 for *restrictiveness* to .89 for *material punishment,* with a mean of .79 (Cronbach, 1951). These alphas are similar to those in the earlier research on African-American mothers (Kelley et al., 1992) where the range = .65 to .88, M = .80, are slightly higher than those in a study of white, middle-class parents (Longano, 1990) in which the range = .40–.89, M = .73.

Coding of the Semistructured Interviews

To score the degree to which mothers used parent-oriented versus child-oriented disciplinary practices, three aspects of the interview were coded: rated importance of obedience, obedience orientation, and child-rearing techniques. The two obedience measures were assessed by examining two questions: "On a scale of 1 through 10, with 10 indicating *very important,* how important is child obedience to you?" "Why do you feel that child obedience is important?" Responses to the second question were classified into one of four categories: (a) *child-oriented* (e.g., child obedience is necessary for the child to become a better, self-respecting person); (b) *school success* (e.g., child obedience is necessary for success in school), (c) *authority relations* (e.g., obedience is necessary for later relations with bosses and authority figures); and (d) *parent-oriented* (e.g., children are supposed to obey their parents). The coding categories used in the present study were modified from previous research (e.g., Kelley, 1988). Mothers received an overall score based on the most child-oriented response they gave. If a mother gave a child-oriented reply, she was assigned a score of 1. Mothers who gave only parent-oriented responses were assigned a 4. Those who gave authority relations explanations (and, in a few cases, authority relations and parent-oriented) received scores of 3, whereas mothers who gave school success (and, in some cases, a combination of school success, authority relations, and parent-oriented) received scores of 2.

All childrearing techniques mentioned by the mother during the disciplinary practices section of the interview were coded into one of three cate-

gories (Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957): (a) *direct-external controls* (controlling the child's behavior by direct intervention or force such as physical punishment); (b) *indirect-external controls* (indirectly influencing the chld's behavior through reward and punishment by means of praise, taking away privileges); and (c) *indirect-internal controls* (indirectly controlling the child's behavior by encouraging internal motivation for behavior such as reasoning). Measures employed in the factor analyses that follow were the proportion of the total reported childrearing techniques that fell into the direct-external or indirect-internal control categories. Indirect-external techniques were not entered into the factor analyses because this proportional measure contributed no independent information over the contribution of the direct-external and the indirect-internal technique measures.

Each of these measures was coded by an undergraduate student who was unaware of the purposes of the study. To assess interrater agreement, one quarter of the interviews were coded by the first author. Agreements for the coding categories were 79% for orientation toward obedience, and 91% for childrearing techniques.

To assess fear of victimization, fear of involvement in antisocial behavior, and educational concerns, mothers used a 5-point Likert-type scale to rate seven items. The two items that comprised the victimization scale were: "How much do you worry about your child being kidnapped?" and "How much do you worry about your child being molested?" The two items that comprised the fear of child involvement in antisocial behavior scale were: "How much do you worry about your child getting involved in alcohol and drug use?" and "How much do you worry about your child becoming a teenage parent?" The three items that comprised educational concerns were: "How much do you worry about your child not doing well (making poor grades) in school?" "How much do you worry about your child being held back in school?" and "How much do you worry about your child dropping out of school?" Each mother received three scores. These were the sum of the items comprising each parental concern. These items were chosen based on previous exploratory and empirical research examining the parenting concerns of African-American mothers living in an urban environment (Kelley, 1988; Kelley et al., 1992). Alphas were .73 for the victimization scale, .86 for the antisocial behavior scale, and .76 for the educational concerns scale. Demographic information was taken from a background form.

Disciplinary Practices Summary Scores Derivation

Intercorrelations were examined from the PDI scale scores (i.e., using material punishment, taking away privileges, sending a child to his or

Table 1. Principal Components Analysis of Disciplinary Scales

	Factor		
	I	*II*	*III*
Material punishment	.78	.25	.15
Privileges	.80	.08	−.19
Send to room	.83	.12	.10
Restrict to house	.87	−.04	−.05
Direct-external control	.31	.70	−.01
Importance of obedience	−.04	.30	.18
Physical punishment	.07	.67	−.04
Reasoning (reversed)	.09	.74	.17
Restrictive attitude	.19	.37	.73
Responsiveness to child input (reversed)	.04	−.18	.85
Consistency (reversed)	−.25	.06	.76
Obedience orientation[a]	−.04	.14	−.06
Indirect-internal[a] control (reversed)	.26	.23	.16

[a]Due to low factor loadings, these items were not included in the disciplinary practices composite scores.

her room, restricting a child to the house, physically punishing, reasoning, nurturing, having a restrictive attitude, responding to child input, and having consistency) and the disciplinary items from the interview (i.e., direct-external controls, indirect-internal controls, rated importance of obedience, and obedience orientation).

Principal components factor analyses using a varimax rotation revealed the presence of three dimensions of disciplinary practices. (See Table 1.) These were: (a) material/social *consequences,* comprised of using material punishment, taking away privileges, sending a child to his or her room, and restricting a child to the house, all from the PDI; (b) *physical punishment,* comprised of use of direct-external control (from the interview), the importance of obedience (from the interview), using physical punishment (PDI), and reasoning (PDI-reversed scoring); and (c) *restrictiveness,* comprised of restrictive attitude, responsiveness to child input (reversed scoring), and consistency (reversed scoring, all from the PDI). This factor appeared to reflect the degree of authoritarian parental behavior: insensitivity/lack of child input, restrictiveness/inflexibility, coupled with inconsistent parental behavior, and lead to the identification of this factor as *restrictiveness.*

The cut-off used to determine factor inclusion was .30. Direct-external control loaded .31 on Factor I (material/social consequences) and .70 on Factor II (physical punishment). Restrictive attitude loaded on both Factor II (physical punishment, .37) and Factor III (restrictiveness,

.73). The factor loadings for direct-external control and restrictive attitude were higher, however, on one of the two factors. Furthermore, it made greater conceptual sense to include these two scales on the physical punishment and restrictiveness factors, respectively. Thus, a decision was made to include only these scales on the factor in which they had the highest loadings. Two questionnaire items (i.e., obedience orientation and use of indirect-internal techniques) had low factor loadings and were not included in the disciplinary practices composite scores. Eigenvalues were 3.7, 2.4, and 1.5, respectively. The amount of variance accounted for was 25%, 15%, and 13%, respectively.

Each mother received three composite scores: material/social consequences, physical punishment, and restrictiveness. These scores were the sum of the standard scores obtained on each of the measures described earlier. Alphas were .86 for maternal/social consequences, .62 for physical punishment, and .72 for restrictiveness.

RESULTS

Considerable variability was found in the disciplinary practices measures. Z score totals ranged from -6.4 to 7.1 ($SD = 2.8$) for physical punishment, from -8.1 to 5.4 ($SD = 3.4$) for material/social consequences, and from -3.0 to 7.1 ($SD = 2.4$) for restrictiveness. The correlation between physical punishment and material/social consequences was positive, $r(52) = .26, p = .07$, but nonsignificant. Correlations among the other disciplinary practices measures were not significant ($ps > .17$). T tests were used to compare the disciplinary practices of mothers of boys with those of the mothers of girls. No significant differences were found (all $ps > .31$).

Correlates of Disciplinary Practices

Table 2 presents the major correlations between the disciplinary practices scores and the predictor variables. Maternal education was negatively correlated with restrictiveness. Maternal age and education were negatively correlated with physical punishment. Material/social consequences was negatively correlated with maternal age, but positively related to father absence and concerns about child victimization.

Predictors of Disciplinary Practices

Nine separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed to examine the extent to which fears of child victimization, fears of child involvement in antisocial behavior, or educational concerns predicted

Table 2. Correlates of Disciplinary Practices Summary Scores

	Restrictiveness	Physical Punishment	Material/Social Consequences
Maternal education	−.36***	−.29**	−.17
Maternal age	.07	−.27**	−.36***
Father absence	.14	.13	.26*
Concerns about victimization	.03	−.02	.36***
Concerns about antisocial behavior	.10	.09	.19
Concerns about education	.17	.07	.21

*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

disciplinary practices beyond the contribution of maternal age, education, and father absence. In each regression, maternal age, education, and father absence were entered in the first step, followed by the fear of child victimization, fear of child involvement in antisocial behavior, and educational concerns, respectively. By controlling for various demographic variables in this way, the independence of the parenting concerns in the prediction of disciplinary practices could be tested. Fear of child victimization significantly predicted the use of material/social consequence, $F(1, 47) = 5.5$, $p < .01$, accounting for 9% of the variance. There was a tendency for fear of child involvement in antisocial behavior to predict the use of material/social consequences, $F(1, 47) = 3.5$, $p = .07$, accounting for 6% of the variance. There was also a tendency for educational concerns to predict restrictiveness, $F(1, 47) = 3.60$, $p = .06$, accounting for 6% of the variance; the Fs reported are those associated with the change in R^2 for the second step.

DISCUSSION

These results indicate that considerable diversity exists within the disciplinary practices of working- to middle-income African-American mothers. Furthermore, family composition, maternal characteristics, and environmental concerns are associated with parenting orientation.

As has been found previously (Hess & Shipman, 1967; Kelley et al., 1992; Laosa, 1982; Scanzoni, 1971), higher levels of maternal education were associated with a more responsive, interactive disciplinary style. Furthermore, these results support those of Zegiob and Forehand (1975) who found that mothers with higher educational levels were more likely to embrace a more child-oriented style of parenting.

Younger mothers reported more use of physical punishment than did older mothers; this may be due to greater exposure to a wider variety of disciplinary practices, as well as maturity, experience, and less isolation in the parenting role. Previous research has shown that younger mothers have higher levels of maternal stress (e.g., Reis, Barbera-Stein, & Bennett, 1986). Higher stress, in turn, appears associated with more power assertive parenting techniques (e.g., Hetherington et al., 1982).

Single mothers reported more physical disciplinary practices than did married mothers. It is likely that a mother raising a child alone may experience at times additional stress as a result of task overload, financial concerns, and have less time and energy to employ strategies that involve child-oriented practices such as reasoning, persuasion, and modeling. Under these circumstances, it may be adaptive for the mother to employ control practices that quickly and decisively reinforce obedience to established rules.

These results also demonstrate that parental concerns such as child victimization are associated with parenting orientation. Families in the present study resided in urban neighborhoods in which child victimization may be especially prevalent. Mothers that were concerned about these dangers, and perhaps believed they had little control, reported more use of material or social consequence techniques (e.g., sending a child to his or her room), perhaps to protect or insulate the child from environmental dangers.

Only maternal education was associated with restrictive disciplinary practices. Mothers with higher levels of education appeared less receptive to this disciplinary orientation. African-American mothers with higher levels of education have been exposed to a greater variety of philosophies of childrearing than mothers with less formal education. The latter mother may be more comfortable with a parenting philosophy that stresses strict parental control.

It is important to note that African-American mothers had shared concerns about their children's well-being that related to their disciplinary practices. When maternal age, education, and father presence were controlled, patterns were still found among fears of child victimization and fears of child involvement in antisocial behavior and the use of material/ social consequences. Furthermore, results indicate some degree of relation between educational concerns and the use of restrictive disciplinary practices that is not accounted for by the individual differences examined in the present study. Findings suggest that, for African-American mothers, disciplinary practices are not simply explained by demographic variables as implied by previous research (e.g., Blau, 1981; Hess & Shipman, 1967; Wilson, 1987). Instead, it appears that a constellation of concerns may

be related to disciplinary practices. Furthermore, these concerns may be central to mothers despite individual differences.

The results of the present study show several significant relations between environment and parenting that can be followed in future research. The use of a wider ranger of predictors, and a combination of self-report and observational methodologies, may contribute even more to understanding. Examining the association between economic mobility and parenting practices is another possible direction for future research. Given the lack of research on these issues to date, the present study provides a method for examining the relation between the environment and behavior in this population.

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