

Influence of childhood maltreatment and intimate partner violence on parental use of physical punishment in Colombia

Problem

Research in developing countries has documented a high prevalence of intimate partner violence. Studies in Colombia and Peru indicate that approximately 39-42 percent of women have been victims of intimate partner violence and that 41-47 percent of women have used severe physical punishment on their co-resident children (Ojeda, Ordóñez, & Ochoa, 2005; Reyes & Ochoa, 2001). Although intimate partner violence is widely recognized as a public health problem, the association between intimate partner violence and physical violence toward children has not been adequately examined. The majority of studies have been conducted in more developed countries and few of these have focused on whether it is only physical violence in intimate relationships that influences the severity of child physical punishment or whether other forms of intimate partner violence play a role as well. Moreover, little information exists on fathers' use of harsh discipline and on how maltreatment during childhood affects parenting behaviors in developing country settings. These gaps in the literature are due, in part, to the scarcity of data on violence against children, the absence of international consensus on the dividing line between physical discipline and child physical abuse, and the perception of physical punishment as being rooted in cultural norms and values. A methodological shortcoming of many studies is the use of low-income or clinical samples, which limits the generalizability of findings.

Justification

There is substantial evidence that child maltreatment is related to a number of negative outcomes. Some studies have linked child physical punishment and abuse to poorer academic and intellectual outcomes, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, externalizing behavior, substance abuse, personality disorder, suicidal behavior, and aggression (Afifi, Brownridge, Cox, & Sareen, 2006; Frias-Armenta, 2002; Grogan Kaylor, 2005; Rogriguez, 2003; Thompson, Kingree, & Desai, 2004; Turner & Muller, 2004). Other long-term health consequences of physical abuse in childhood include gastrointestinal problems, greater physical functional disability, more physical health symptoms and more hospitalizations, especially among females (Thompson et al., 2004).

Theoretical Perspectives

Most research has drawn from social learning theory to explain the link between exposure to violence in childhood and later perpetration of violence with an intimate partner or child (Bandura, 1977). Pertinent aspects of social learning theory include: (1) identification with parents who use physical punishment, the basic premise being that individuals who were physically punished in childhood would be more likely to use physical punishment on their own children if they identified with the perpetrator in the family of origin. (2) observational learning or vicarious reinforcement, which posits that physical violence between family members provides models for learning violence and conveys that such behaviors are appropriate in the family setting; (3) positive reinforcement, which implies that experience of physical punishment and exposure to marital conflict in childhood teaches approval of the use of physical violence or physical punishment as a necessary strategy for achieving behavioral change in family and intimate relationships. Stress theory and negative affect in intimate relationships have been used to explain the relationship between marital discord and harsh parenting (Tang, 2006).

Objectives

The objective of this study was to examine the influence of childhood physical punishment and intimate partner violence on maternal and paternal use of physical punishment. Three research questions were of interest: How important was intimate partner violence relative to childhood history of physical punishment or maltreatment for understanding violence against children? Did intimate partner violence affect fathers' use of physical punishment to a greater degree than it affected that of mothers? Was it only physical violence in intimate relationships that mattered for understanding child physical punishment or did emotional and sexual violence play roles as well? The current study adds to existing research on intimate partner violence and child maltreatment in developing countries by examining more normative as well as more severe forms of child physical punishment, and by analyzing nationally-representative data. Understanding the cycle of family violence, from childhood to adulthood and from victimization to perpetration is critical for designing effective violence prevention programs.

Data and Methods

Data were obtained from the 2005 Colombia Demographic and Health Survey. Women were asked to report the forms of punishment used with biological and adoptive/step children in the household by each person responsible for disciplining the children, be it the respondent, her partner, or someone else. Women were also asked to describe how they themselves were punished by their parents in childhood and whether their partners had been maltreated by their own parents/step-parents in childhood. We distinguished between minor and severe physical punishment and used ordered logit regression to capture the continuum of physical punishment used by women and their partners: 0 if no-physical punishment was used; 1 if only minor physical punishment was used; and 2 if severe physical punishment was used. Explanatory variables included presence of intimate partner physical, emotional, and sexual violence in the current union (entered as separate variables and based on survey questions from an adaptation of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1990); number of controlling behaviors exhibited by the woman's partner; childhood history of physical punishment/child maltreatment; age; number of completed years of schooling; presence of biological children of the woman in the age groups 0-4, 5-9, 10-14 and 15-17 years (with each age group being entered as a separate variable); presence of step-children in the household; household wealth index; occupation; and region of residence. In addition, the women's regression controlled for witnessing fighting between parents in childhood and experience of physical assault by someone other than the woman's partner since age 15;

Analyses were run separately for women and their partners using STATA version 10.0. The complex study design was accounted for by using sampling weights to adjust for variations in sample selection probabilities and response rates. The estimation method was weighted maximum likelihood with variances obtained by using Taylor linearization. The coefficients of the ordered logit model were then used to predict the probability of using no, minor or severe physical punishment. Analyses of maternal use of physical punishment were restricted to 14,342 women aged 15-49 who were currently married or living together, had biological or adoptive/step-children in residence, were responsible for disciplining the children, and had no missing data on any of the variables included in the regression. Data on partners' parenting practices were based on women's reports and corresponding analyses were restricted to 10,171 women who had biological or step-adoptive children in the household, reported that their partner was responsible for disciplining the children, and had no missing data on any of the variables included in the regressions of partners' parenting practices.

Findings

Table 1 presents the findings of the ordered logit models. The top panel presents the results for women's use of physical punishment and the bottom panel, the results for male partners' use of physical punishment. Intimate partner physical violence victimization (women) and perpetration (male partners) increased the odds of parental use of physical punishment with children. The probability of using severe physical punishment was 0.547 among women who were victims of intimate partner physical violence compared to 0.439 among those who were not. Similarly, men who had perpetrated physical violence against their current partners had a probability of using physical punishment of 0.515 compared to 0.345 among those who had not physically abused their partners (predicted probabilities not shown). Intimate partner emotional and sexual violence had significant positive effects on male partners' but not on women's likelihood of using physical punishment.

Findings also showed that childhood history of physical discipline and maltreatment predicted use of physical punishment among women and their partners, respectively. Women who were physically punished in childhood were 2.485 times more likely than those who were not to physically punish their own children. Similarly, male partners who were reported by women to have been maltreated by parents/step-parents in childhood were 1.269 times more likely than those who were not to use physical punishment. These effects were significant at the one percent level. The next step of the analysis will examine whether the severity of physical punishment experienced in childhood by the woman was related to the severity of physical punishment that she meted out to her biological or adoptive/step-children.

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Table 1 Odds ratios and standard errors from multivariate ordered logit models assessing associations between selected characteristics and parental use of physical punishment, Colombia 2005

	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.
WOMEN (N=14,342) ^{a, b}		
Intimate partner physical violence in current union		
No (R)		
Yes	1.305***	0.075
Intimate partner emotional violence in current union		
No (R)		
Yes	1.120	0.066
Intimate partner sexual violence in current union		
No (R)		
Yes	1.176	0.106
History of childhood physical punishment by parents		
Not punished by parents	1.175	0.128
Non-physical punishment only (R)		
Physical punishment	2.485***	0.158
MALE PARTNERS (N=10,171) ^a		
Husband/partner perpetrated intimate partner physical violence in current union		
No (R)		
Yes	1.500***	0.101
Husband/partner perpetrated intimate partner emotional violence in current union		
No (R)		
Yes	1.227**	0.089
Husband/partner perpetrated intimate partner sexual violence in current union		
No (R)		
Yes	1.427**	0.151
Husband/partner mistreated in childhood by parents		
No (R)		
Yes	1.269***	0.081
Don't know	1.067	0.096

*** p < .001 ** p < .01

a After controlling for number of controlling behaviors exhibited by the woman's partner; age; number of completed years of schooling; presence of biological children of the woman in the age groups 0-4, 5-9, 10-14 and 15-17 (with each age group being entered as a separate variable); presence of step-children in the household; household wealth; occupation; and region of residence

b Includes controls for witnessing fighting between parents in childhood and experience of physical assault by someone other than the intimate partner since age 15