THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF PARENTAL PUNITIVENESS TOWARD AGGRESSION AND THEIR CHURCH ATTENDANCE

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By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION AND RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. METHOD</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table | Page
-----|------
I. Summary of Analysis of Variance of Children's Perception of Punitiveness Toward the Father | 12
II. Summary of Analysis of Variance of Children's Perception of Punitiveness Toward the Mother | 13
III. Percentage of Responses Given by Children to Varying Types of Punishment from Father and Mother | 17
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND RELATED LITERATURE

A major goal in developmental psychology is to understand the effects of parental discipline upon children's behavior. However, as Yarrow has indicated, research regarding the effects of parental discipline frequently produces inconsistent or uninterpretable findings. Such results may be attributed to the use of measuring instruments which have questionable validity and reliability. A major methodological weakness in current research on the socialization of aggressive impulses is an excessive reliance on parental reports as primary sources of data. Virtually all major studies (Allinsmith; Sewell, Mussen, and Harris; Sears, Maccoby, and Levin) regarding the antecedent and consequent conditions of parental punitiveness toward aggression have employed parental reports. Furthermore, these reports have emphasized maternal discipline, while the father's role has been neglected.


In reviewing the literature having to do with behavior of children as it is related to behavior and attitudes of parents, one is struck with the idea that a predominant methodological bias does not permit a clear-cut evaluation of the substantive findings of a majority of these studies. This main bias has to do with the disregard of the father both as an important socializing influence and as an informant.\(^3\) A search of the literature between 1929 and 1956 revealed 160 publications dealing with mother-child relationships but only eleven with father-child relationships (Peterson, Becker, Helmer, Shoemaker, and Quay).\(^4\) Since that time there have been a few more studies which have considered the importance of father-centered variables, e.g., Bronfenbrenner;\(^5\) Miller and Swanson;\(^6\) Sears, Pintler and Sears;\(^7\) but information about fathers in these studies usually has been

\(^3\) L. D. Eron and others, "Comparison of Data Obtained From Mothers and Fathers on Childrearing Practices and Their Relation to Child Aggression," Child Development, XXXII (September, 1961), 457.


obtained second-hand, either from the mother or from some other sources.

However, the desirability of developing sources of data other than parental reports is suggested by an evaluation of the limitations of the parent interview. As ego involved, rather than objective observers of their own role, parents are likely to recall their own behavior in a distorted and defensive manner. Typically, a parent may be asked to judge his role without an adequate frame of reference. The hazards of relying exclusively on parental interviews as sources of data have been suggested by a converging body of research. Goodenough demonstrated a significant discrepancy between parental recollections of their responses to aggression and their day-to-day accounts of these techniques as recorded in diaries.® Robbins has indicated that conditions which ought to facilitate accurate parental recall, such as middle-class status, participation in a longitudinal study, and focus on specific behavioral events rather than attitudes, did not preclude inaccurate retrospective reporting.® Furthermore, research done by Eron, Banta, Waler, and Laulicht compares data obtained from both parents and indicates that


parents observe, evaluate, and report their behavior from different frames of reference.\textsuperscript{10}

The practices favored by American parents to influence the actions and character of their offspring have varied from time to time, with the predominant view of the child as a refractory savage, a small adult, or an angelic bundle from heaven. These convictions have, for the most part, been based on humanistic or religious values rather than upon scientific findings.

An authoritarian parent attempts to shape, control, and evaluate the behavior and attitudes of the child in accordance with a set standard of conduct, usually an absolute standard, and formulated by a higher authority. The parent values obedience as a virtue and favors punitive, forceful measures to curb self-will at points where the child's actions or beliefs conflict with what the parent thinks is right conduct. The parent believes in keeping the child in his place, in restricting his autonomy, and in assigning household responsibilities in order to inculcate respect for work. The parent regards the preservation of order and traditional structure as a highly valued end in itself. The parent does not encourage verbal give and take, believing that the child should accept the parent's word for what is right.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10}Eron, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 458.

Authoritarian control is less consistent with the American ethos than it was in past centuries when parental discipline was directed at teaching the child to do the will of God. The authoritarian parent in many cases still feels that his purpose in training his child is not so much for his desire but for fulfilling Divine will.12

Accordingly, one of the main purposes of the present study was to use a parental punitiveness scale, that was developed on the assumption that parental punitiveness is a function of the situation in which aggression takes place. This in turn was used to determine what relationship a child’s perception of parental discipline toward aggression has to varying degrees of church attendance of the child.

It was assumed that because of the background of most church going families, that the authoritarian values that they are taught, would be reflected by them in punishment of their own children. This in turn would be perceived by the child. Therefore, the present study was designed to show that the more church going a child is, the more he will perceive his punishment as being severe.

12Ibid., p. 891.
CHAPTER II

METHOD

Subjects

Six classes consisting of 147 third grade children from an independent school district in East Central Texas, participated in the testing situation. The subjects were predominately a white population of a middle socio-economic class. This was judged by the homes ($10,000-$20,000) and cars ($2,500-$3,500 price range). The school records were used to determine the types of jobs held by the parents, which included semi-skilled and skilled workers. This also reflected a middle socio-economic class of families. Since all subjects were representative of the entire school system and also the surrounding community, a cross-section of the population was therefore represented.

Instruments

A parental punitive scale designed through a study done by Ralph Epstein and S. S. Komorita\textsuperscript{13} was used in the present study under consideration. The scale was developed to measure children's perceptions of parental discipline toward

\textsuperscript{13}Epstein, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 129-142.
aggression. The scale consists of forty-five items which measure parental punitiveness toward physical, verbal, and indirect aggression in each of five major situations: aggression toward parents, teachers, siblings, peers, and inanimate objects.

Using the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 as a measure of reliability, the internal consistency coefficient for the father was .93 and for the mother .92. These reliability coefficients indicate that the scale is unidimensional and also supports previous research by Sears, indicating that parental punitiveness toward aggression may be a generalized phenomena across situations.

Also a questionnaire designed to determine frequency of church attendance was used in the present study. The questionnaire which was used contains six choices, one of which was chosen by each student in the third grade according to how frequently he perceived his attendance at church.

The questionnaire is as follows:

A. Very Often - Probably every Sunday unless I'm sick.
B. Often - At least three times a month.
C. Fairly Often - About twice a month.
D. Seldom - Maybe once a month.
E. Very Seldom - Two or three times a year.
F. Never - None at all.

\[14\] Epstein, op. cit., p. 133.

Procedure

An appointment time was set for each of the six third grade classes to be given the church attendance questionnaire. This questionnaire was administered by the respective teacher in each of the six classes at the appointed time. She read the directions to the class and asked that each child make only one response by circling the letter that corresponded to the answer he or she chose to his or her frequency of church attendance. The choice of each child placed him in one of the six reference categories. Approximately one week from the time the church attendance questionnaire was given, an appointment time to each classroom was made in order to administer the parental punitive scale. At this time the experimenter administered the scale rather than the teacher. The delay in time was to reduce the children's anxiety over a new testing situation and at the same time reduce the chances of the children's relating the parental punitive scale to the church attendance questionnaire. In this way, the experimenter would have minimum interaction with the subjects.

In giving the parental punitive scale the experimenter was in fact somewhat cautious because of the size of the classes and because of the age of the subjects. He asked that the class read the directions carefully and then proceed to answer the questions one at a time, so the entire class could stay together. In this way, any questions that
arose on a particular item of the scale could be answered for the whole class together.

The scale consists of four discipline techniques selected to serve as response alternatives for each of the forty-five items on the scale. The following discipline techniques, from least to most punitive, was selected as the response alternative and was given arbitrary integral weights of one, two, three, and four respectively: (1) have a long talk with me; (2) take away my television; (3) send me to bed without supper; (4) whip me. These four alternatives were selected according to the criteria used to establish the scale by Epstein and Komorita.\(^\text{16}\)

Two samples taken from the parental punitiveness scale are as follows: \(^\text{17}\)

If I break a window,

MY
FATHER
WOULD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. have a long talk with me</th>
<th>b. send me to bed without supper</th>
<th>c. whip me</th>
<th>d. take away me television</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MY</td>
<td>a.</td>
<td>b.</td>
<td>c.</td>
<td>d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FATHER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOULD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If I scream at a teacher,

MY
FATHER
WOULD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. take away my television</th>
<th>b. send me to bed without supper</th>
<th>c. whip me</th>
<th>d. have a long talk with me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MY</td>
<td>a.</td>
<td>b.</td>
<td>c.</td>
<td>d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FATHER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOULD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The subject's task was to respond to each of the forty-five

\(^{16}\) Epstein, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 131.

\(^{17}\) Epstein, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 139.
items by choosing one of the four alternatives, first in terms of what he thought his father would do and, second, in terms of what he thought his mother would do. Since children may not grasp that the four punishments are "prototypical," subjects were encouraged to respond to each item by selecting the alternative which most closely corresponds to how their parents would respond to the depicted aggression.\(^1\)

Each individual child has two total scores derived from the parental punitiveness scale, one for father and one for mother. This is accomplished by adding the weighted score \((1, 2, 3, 4)\) of each of the forty-five test items on the scale. These total scores were in turn added for a cumulative total for each of the six reference categories that was determined by frequency of church attendance.

At this point a single classification of analysis of variance was used to determine if there was any significant difference at the appropriate level of confidence. In the present study a .05 level of confidence was to be considered as the appropriate level.

It was proposed that there would be a significant difference in reference groups and that through evaluation of the mean differences the largest difference would be between reference group A who represented the greatest frequency of church attendance and reference group F who represented no

\(^1\text{Epstein, op. cit., p. 132.}\)
church attendance at all. This would seem to indicate that reference group A would have a higher mean than reference group F. This would also tend to show that the children in group A perceived parental punitiveness as being more severe than did reference group F.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The use of single classification of analysis of variance showed no significant difference at the .05 level of confidence. This held true for both the children's perception of punitiveness for father and mother. The results of the analysis of variance of the children's perception of punitiveness toward the father are summarized in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>Sum Sq.</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1,180.35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>236.07</td>
<td>.673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>49,447.48</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>350.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50,622.83</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>346.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The children's perception of the mother's punitiveness follows close to that of the father's, showing no significant
difference at the .05 level of confidence. Table II summarizes the results of the analysis of variance of the children's perception of punitiveness toward the mother.

**TABLE II**

**SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF PUNITIVENESS TOWARD THE MOTHER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>Sum Sq.</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1,585.96</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>317.18</td>
<td>.554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>80,707.31</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>572.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>82,293.23</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>563.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As already stated statistically, there was found to be no significant difference between a child's perception of parental punitiveness toward aggression and how often he attended church. This was consistent even with the assumption that the more church-going a child the more authoritarian his parental attitudes and behavior would be. This does not show that more church-going families are more authoritarian, but it does show that a child's perception distinguished no difference in relation to his attending church.

Possibly one explanation of the above results might be in the fact that all subjective information was obtained from the same subject. Thus, response set cannot be eliminated from the possible interpretation of the results. In addition
to contributing important information which has usually been lacking in childrearing studies, the use of both mother and father as informants could serve as one check on this source of error. The optimal procedure, of course, is to have completely independent observations of the child and individual measures obtained from both parents.\(^\text{19}\)

Authoritarianism in church-going parents was an underlying assumption. It was also assumed that from this background a child would perceive punishment as being more severe than would a child under any other kind of family setting. The preceding assumptions do not, however, take into consideration that the parents of a stable, predictable, sensible child can afford to be democratic no matter if they attend church or not. This does not depend on authoritarianism, either. On the other hand parents of an erratic, difficult, peculiar child may become apparently inconsistent out of sheer desperation. So, even a non-authoritarian parent could be perceived by the child as administering severe punishment. Of course, this does not in any way depend on church attendance either. Thus it seems from the results of the present study that a child from any extreme of church attendance will, to a great extent, perceive his parents' punitiveness toward aggression not just on the basis of the authoritarianism or non-authoritarianism of the parent, but consistent to a degree on the kind of child he is.

\(^{19}\)Eron, op. cit., p. 457.
The direction of a causal relationship can only be established through determination of temporal priorities, the need to examine children very early in their development, and the need to explore the effects children may have on parents. For the child's effect upon the parent may be directly related to how the parents respond to the child and thus how the child perceives the parents' attitudes and behavior, including punishment.

It seems that attitudes of not or infrequent church-going families may still reflect types of punishment associated with a traditional religious background. On the other hand, frequent church-going families may be becoming more permissive and free in their view of punishment. Therefore, a counterbalancing effect occurs. A factor to consider here might be the different religions and varied denominations that cover the extremes of liberal, moderate, and conservative teachings. The teaching would filter down through to the individual parents and would have some influence on child rearing practices. Of course, it would not necessarily take a religion or a denomination for a non-church attending parent to utilize any of the same child rearing practices. Thus, both high-frequency church attenders and low-frequency attenders may tend to punish in similar manners. This is not so much based on anything they have gotten in or out of church, but perhaps from new disciplines,
such as in the fields of medicine, psychology, marriage and family counseling, etc.

The results of the present study tend to show that a church-going family or a non-church-going family may or may not value punishment any differently. Thus, the child perceives (by responses on questionnaire) punishment as being severe regardless of the wrongdoing and regardless of whether he attends church or not.

It was noted by the present study that both the child attending church frequently and less frequently tend to perceive punishment as usually being severe. This was indicated by the high number of responses of "whip me." This agrees with Radke's observation that "about three-fourths of the cases, the child sees the authority of the parent as a restrictive influence in his life." ²⁰

It was also noted that "although mothers are more often than fathers the agents of punishment, the fathers, according to the children, deal out punishments more severely." ²¹ A great deal of this was expressed by verbal response of the children during the time the punitive scale was being administered.

The children see their parents as "whipping" them more than any of the other means of punishment. It can be seen in


²¹Ibid., p. 55.
Table III no matter what the frequency of church attendance, that this holds true. The percentage of the responses given by the children to varying types of punitiveness from the father and mother is summarized in Table III.

**TABLE III**

PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES GIVEN BY CHILDREN TO VARYING TYPES OF PUNISHMENT FROM FATHER AND MOTHER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Punishment for FATHER</th>
<th>Frequency of Church Attendance (Reference Groups)</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Have long talk</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Take away T.V.</td>
<td></td>
<td>02</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Send me to bed</td>
<td></td>
<td>01</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Whip me</td>
<td></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Punishment for MOTHER</th>
<th>Frequency of Church Attendance (Reference Groups)</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Have long talk</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Take away T.V.</td>
<td></td>
<td>01</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Send me to bed</td>
<td></td>
<td>02</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Whip me</td>
<td></td>
<td>72</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This picture of disciplinary methods as seen by the child shows little variation or ingenuity on the part of the parents. However it is entirely possible that subtler
methods of coercion or guidance are not recognized by the child as disciplinary in character. It is also entirely possible that the child perceives punishment as being severe not because it is severe, but that he wants and needs more controls and limits. It may be that the child wants more firm discipline to be administered by his parents—he is perhaps projecting that which he desires but does not have.

Often times, however, parents fail to respect the child's personality and to treat him tactfully; and of course a child will perceive this. This calls for further investigation, in the child's first patterns for handling social situations are his parents' actions. If the parents show little tact or respect in dealing with the child, it can hardly be hoped that the child will do otherwise in social relations.\textsuperscript{22}

Hart states that "the results of authoritarian personality depend rather critically on the status of one assumption: that the authoritarian parent's relative preference for non-love-oriented punishment is a cause as well as an effect of authoritarianism."\textsuperscript{23} This is not to equate the above discussion of punishment with non-love orientation. Hart continues by assuming that the children of authoritarians themselves tend to be authoritarian. One can speculate about

\textsuperscript{22}Radke, op. cit., 56.

the role of avoidance tendencies in the etiology of authoritarianism. It may be that the child of authoritarian parents is highly ambivalent toward them (and other authorities) because of a heightened avoidance gradient, resulting in a more closely balanced approach and avoidance tendencies.

His later behavior toward superordinates typically reflects 'coping techniques'—such as emphasis on the maintenance of social distance, interaction between formal roles rather than persons as individuals, etc.—designed to manage this ambivalence. But, as many writers on authoritarian personality have contended, there remains an underlying resentment and hostility toward authority that is revealed in such displaced forms as scapegoating and prejudice.\textsuperscript{24}

The speculative tenor of the above remarks could be avoided if the child's actual behavior toward and perception of his parents, and reaction to different forms of socialization pressure, were determined by direct and indirect means in subsequent research. Even if all social influences could be encompassed and absolutely perfect measurement of them attained, a sizeable share of the variance in child behavior would still be unexplained.

The need for direct, independent, objective measurement of both parental attitudes and behavior and of a child's attitudes and behavior is obvious. Much of this current

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 236.
effort is addressed to the development of such measures in the conviction that their proper application can determine some of the facts so urgently needed for adequate explanation, accurate prediction, and successful modification of developing personality trends in children.

In considering the importance of the relationship presented in this study no matter how small it may seem, there is justification in agreeing with Sears, who regards the location of any real (i.e., replicable) influence, however low its magnitude, as a contribution to knowledge.\(^2\)\(^5\) If the general assumption is correct—i.e., that any given behavior is the product of many influences—it would be quite possible to obtain high correlations between single child rearing dimensions and the measures of child behavior and adult behavior for that matter.\(^2\)\(^6\) Thus the results of the present study seem to indicate the operation of many factors other than those to be examined.

\(^2\)\(^5\)Sears, op. cit., 243.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to furnish information about the relationship of children's perception of parental punitiveness toward aggression and frequency of church attendance. The present study had one basic purpose, which was to show that a high frequency church attending child would perceive parental punishment as being more severe than a non- or low-frequency church-attending child. This purpose had a general underlying assumption that because of the background of most church-going parents, the authoritarian values that they are taught, would be reflected by them in the punishment of their children. And this in turn would be perceived by the child.

On the basis of the recent development of a scale that measured the parental punitiveness toward aggression, its use was to measure the severity of punishment as a child perceives it. This was in turn compared to the frequency of the child's church attendance on a six-degree interval ranging from frequently or almost every Sunday to infrequently, meaning little or none at all.
The following results emerged: (1) There was no significant difference in the way a frequent church attending child perceived parental punishment as related to an infrequent or not church attending child perceived parental punishment. This was contrary to the stated assumption and original expectation. (2) Both the children attending church frequently and those attending less frequently tend to perceive punishment as being severe. This held true within both of these extremes.

Most research has been done on mother-child relationships, most of which has been done from the standpoint of the mother's perception of that relationship. There is an urgent need to examine other social factors, as well as constitutional predispositions, in personality development through the direct application of objective measures. The need to study fathers, as crucial components of the social environment along with other studies from the standpoint of the child's perception, is especially vital in better understanding the complex phenomena of family dynamics.
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