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Examining Sources of Social Norms Supporting Child Corporal Punishment Among Low-Income Black, Latino, and White Parents

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Abstract

Child corporal punishment is a prevalent public health problem in the US. Although corporal punishment is sustained through parents' perceptions of social norms supporting this discipline behavior, little research has investigated where these normative perceptions come from. To fill this gap, we conducted 13 focus groups including 75 low-income Black, Latino, and White parents across five states in the US. Results revealed that one influential source of Black and White parents' perceived norms was their positive framing of corporal punishment experiences during childhood. Furthermore, Black parents formed normative perceptions based on identification with parents in their racial/ethnic group, while White parents did so with parents sharing the same generation. Results are interpreted in light of the false consensus effect and self-categorization theory. In contrast, Latino parents viewed their childhood experience of corporal punishment as negative and distanced their parenting practices from those practiced in their countries of origin, suggesting an influence of acculturation. Their perceived norms were likely transmitted through interpersonal communication within their social networks. These findings shed light on how social norms are formed and in turn guide parents' use of corporal punishment as a tool to discipline children.

In the United States (US), at least 1 in 7 children have experienced child abuse and/or neglect in the past year (Finkelhor et al., 2015). In 2018, nearly 1,770 children died of abuse and neglect in the US (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a). In 2017, child protection services carried out investigation responses involving over 3.5 million children with approximately 18% relating to physical abuse, second only to child neglect (US Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families,

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Children's Bureau, 2019). Corporal punishment (CP) is defined as "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior" (Straus, 2001, p. 4). The CDC (2020a) considers CP a form of child physical abuse. The most common forms of CP behavior are spanking, grabbing a child roughly, and hitting a child with an object (Straus, 2001). A rigorous meta-analysis of 75 studies including almost 161,000 children found a consistent association between CP and increased risk of antisocial behavior, aggression, mental health problems, and negative relationships with parents (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

Strategies targeting CP behavior are necessary to prevent child physical abuse (Fortson et al., 2016). Preventing CP is particularly challenging due to the persistence of social norms that support CP (Vaughan-Eden et al., 2019). Parents believe that CP is widely implemented and approved by other parents (Klevens et al., 2019). Such normative beliefs exist at the individual and psychological level because parents likely do not have access to actual norms of the behavior (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). To date, there has been little research investigating why and how parents from different racial/ethnic groups perceive that CP is prevalent and socially approved. Our main goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of what drives parents' perceptions that CP behavior is prevalent and highly approved in their communities. Research shows that low-income parents reported a high risk of hitting children due to socio-economic stress and beliefs in the effectiveness of CP (Black et al., 2001; Mitchell, 2008). Thus, we conducted an analysis of 13 focus groups with low-income Black, Latino, and White parents across five states in the US. Understanding social norms supporting CP behavior can inform campaigns to prevent child physical abuse and promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children.

Corporal punishment as a communicative behavior

While the majority of child physical abuse research conceives that CP constitutes a problematically psychological behavior, communication scholars argue that CP is a communicative behavior (Infante, 2005; Wilson et al., 2010). Specifically, they view CP as a form of non-verbal message that may produce different meanings. CP can also be viewed as a non-verbal communicative strategy for parents to gain compliance when other methods fail, particularly when parents are not able to achieve compliance with verbal persuasion (Roberto et al., 2007). CP is often accompanied by parents' verbal messages to justify the behavior or express verbal aggressiveness (Kassing et al., 1999). Accordingly, CP is a communicative behavior, which is influenced by an array of factors, including cultural norms, religious beliefs, and race/ethnicity. While CP research has gained a foothold in the social work and public health literature, little health communication research has examined this behavioral domain (Straus, 2002). Recently, scholars have suggested that communication interventions should be considered in addition to conventional social work approaches to change perceived norms surrounding CP behavior (Klevens et al., 2019; MacMillan & Mikton, 2017).

Perceived norms of corporal punishment behavior

Social norms are shared patterns of feeling, thought, and behavior in a social group (Hogg & Tindale, 2005), and exist at two levels: collective and perceived norms. Collective norms operate at the social system level and reflect the actual social codes of conduct for a behavior, while perceived norms refer to individuals' interpretations of the collective norms and thus operate at the individual level (Rimal & Lapinski, 2015). Perceived norms are further conceptualized as descriptive norms and injunctive norms (Cialdini et al., 1990). Descriptive norms describe a behavior that is considered as typical in a community. Theorists posit that when people perceive something as typical, they are motivated to think that it must be a sensible thing to follow because it is seen as adaptive and effective (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Injunctive norms specify what ought to be done (Cialdini et al., 1990). People are motivated to conform to injunctive norms because failure to do so likely leads to social sanctions (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Both descriptive and injunctive norms are activated to fit an immediate situation where individuals infer norms from behavior of others in their social groups (Hogg & Reid, 2006).

The literature suggests the pervasiveness of social norms supporting CP (Deater-Deckard & Lansford, 2017; Holden, 2020). This literature largely delves into the role of collective norms as guided by the ecological model of child maltreatment (Belsky, 1980). Researchers conceptualize norms as patterns of cognition and behavior that are typical of a social group, which influence attitudes toward child rearing (Deater-Deckard & Lansford, 2017). Scholars recently suggested examining social norms at the individual level (Vaughan-Eden et al., 2019). Recent research found that the majority of parents regardless of their racial/ethnic groups believe that most other parents hit children (Klevens et al., 2019). These parents also agree that people whose opinion they respected support spanking children for disciplinary purposes. However, research examining perceived norms surrounding CP remains scarce.

Sources of perceived norms supporting corporal punishment

The communication literature suggests that perceived norms are not formed within a vacuum (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Although observation of a behavior has been well-documented as a powerful source of normative perception formation (Cialdini et al., 1990), scholars suggest that perceived norms can be formed through interpersonal and mass communication. Interpersonal communication may result in a social conversational mechanism, in which individuals often attend to and mention events that are unusual, vivid, or aberrant, which make people perceive that these events are common (Haines et al., 2005). Likewise, the social exposure concept suggests that people may form perceived norms by interacting with messages deriving from the symbolic environment (Duong & Liu, 2019; Mead et al., 2014). Thus, direct observation, interpersonal communication, and media exposure are common sources of perceived norms for health behaviors.

Unlike many other health behaviors, perceived norms supporting CP behavior might not be formed through these mechanisms for several reasons. First, hitting a child under the observation of others may lead to parents being stigmatized as child abusers. Thus, CP is largely conducted in private settings (Klevens et al., 2019). Second, parents are not willing

to talk with others about hitting their children for fear of being stigmatized and reported to authorities (Fontes, 2005). Third, media reports about child abuse tend to condemn CP behavior, which likely produce non-CP norms rather than pro-CP norms. Paradoxically, perceived norms supporting CP behavior are high. CP behavior, therefore, provides an interesting circumstance to extend our understanding of how social norms are formed and function.

Differences between racial/ethnic groups

CP studies have largely relied on cross-sectional surveys and longitudinal data to explore the associations between variables of interest (Gershoff, 2002). In the process, these studies often combine distinct racial/ethnic minority groups into one single group to compare with the White group (Taussig & Talmi, 2001). Scholars argue that when comparing low-income Black families with middle-class White families, available standards to evaluate child abuse make Black families stand out as dys-functional, which can be seen as a sign of a poor environment for children (Fontes, 2005; Mitchell, 2008). Thus, research that provides findings specific to racial/ethnic groups are needed.

Among studies that attempt to address CP behavior in minority racial/ethnic communities, researchers found that acceptance rate of CP tends to be higher in southern states – home to many low-income Black and Latino families. For example, LeCuyer et al.'s (2011) qualitative study with a sample of southern Black mothers of young children (12–19 months) found that CP was considered normal in this group. Similarly, Taylor et al.'s (2011) qualitative data indicate that Blacks residing in southern states believe that CP is necessary for effective parenting. Regarding Latino parents, research found that 80% of Latinos report that they spank their children, compared to 89% of Blacks and 79% of Whites (Gershoff et al., 2012). Further, research showed that low-income Black, Latino, and White parents believe that CP is approved by parents in their communities and that other parents hit children (Klevens et al., 2019). However, little research has documented how low-income parents from these racial/ethnic groups form their normative beliefs that subsequently influence the use of CP. To fill this gap, we conducted a secondary data analysis using focus group data. Based on the aforementioned literature review, we ask the following research question:

RQ1: What are the sources of low-income Black, Latino, and White parents' perceived norms supporting CP behavior?

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in five different states (see Table 1) through community-based organizations and educational centers (e.g., YMCA, Head Start Center). Flyers described the focus group purpose, time, location, risks and benefits, and 50 USD for participation. Interested parents were screened with questions about parenthood, household income, and education level. Only parents of children of less than 6 years old were invited because research indicated that this was the most vulnerable age group for physical discipline

(Wauchope & Straus, 1992). Other inclusion criteria were a household income of less than 60,000 USD and that the participant did not complete a degree beyond an associate's degree (with two exceptions). Parents provided their answers to these questions via phone, e-mail, or printout copies attached to the flyer.

Eight to 10 parents were invited to participate in a focus group. Groups were separated by race/ethnicity and by mothers/fathers, making the groups somewhat homogeneous because we anticipated that diversity in groups may not enhance discussions due to CP being a sensitive topic to discuss with outsiders. The final sample included 75 parents (Black = 30; Latino = 25; White = 20). Each focus group had 2–9 participants. There were more female (52%) than male participants (48%), and more participants living in urban areas (53%) than rural areas (47%). There were 4 Black focus groups (2 with Black mothers and 2 with Black fathers) and 4 White focus groups (2 with White mothers and 2 with White fathers). As for the Latino focus groups, we conducted 5 focus groups (3 with Latino fathers and 2 with Latino mothers). Because we had a small Latino father focus group with 2 participants, we added a third focus group. To help participants feel comfortable with talking about CP, only demographic data related to the screening criteria were collected.

Procedures

The Institutional Review Board of the CDC approved this research protocol. Focus groups were conducted in October and November 2017 by experienced facilitators using the focus group guide.¹ Facilitators were matched with the demographic features of the groups based on gender, language, and race/ethnicity. Another research team member observed and took note of participants' nonverbal cues that was not captured by a recorder. Participants were first asked to read and agree with the informed consent before discussing CP topic for about an hour. Discussion questions aimed at investigating how parents disciplined their children and how common CP was in their communities. Examples of questions were: "How common do you think the use of physical punishment is in your community?" and "What are some common methods that you have used to discipline your child?" Latino parent focus groups were conducted and transcribed in Spanish and then translated into English, producing final English transcripts. Black and White parent focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. Observers' notes were added to the transcripts.

Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the focus group data, which allowed for analyzing experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach involved the researchers immersing in the data, indexing the data, developing the codes, coding data, identifying themes, and reviewing the themes for refinement (Bloor et al., 2001). To do this, the first author read the full transcripts several times and inductively coded the data. The codes were then grouped into categories based on commonalities among the codes. The relationships among categories were examined to identify themes, which were defined as the overarching meanings that corresponded to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used two approaches to create themes. The first was based

¹The guide is available from the corresponding author.

on the commonality of a theme. Commonality was counted as the repeated patterns of meanings for a theme, in terms of both the number of different participants who talked about a theme and the frequency that an individual participant mentioned it throughout the focus group. The second approach captured key and revealing ideas, which provided evidence that illuminated the connection between the literature and the research questions. The research team reviewed the transcripts and discussed the analysis to refine the themes within and across groups.

Findings

Major themes revealed that Black and White parents viewed their childhood experience of CP as positive and commonly shared by other parents. These parents regarded bystander interventions and media representations of parents using CP as intrusive, negative, and lacking understanding of their parenting purposes. Black parents reported a strong identification with their racial/ethnic peers. White parents discussed that parents who were about their age would approve and apply CP. In contrast, Latino parents disassociated their parenting practice from that in their countries of origin. While Black parents across the focus groups were consistent in their perspectives about CP, White and Latino parents showed some variances based on their roles (fathers and mothers) and locations (urban and rural).

Black parents

Perceptions of normative pressure—Black parents discussed that the changing environment no longer supported the use of child physical discipline and discussed how this change was not in their favor. They argued that the public view of their child discipline was judging and interfering. They particularly reacted to others' interference in their child disciplinary work at such public places as big-box and fast-food stores and schools. One Black father commented that, "Everybody is prone to think if you raise your hand to a child, you're automatically wrong."

Black mothers shared that their child disciplinary efforts in public places were often interrupted. One Black mother said, "People always do that. Like you see somebody pops their child because their child did something horrible, somebody will jump in and be like, 'Don't do that! Why would you do that?'" These mothers perceived that such reactions sent them messages of disapproval, which challenged their ability and rights of parenting. Similarly, Black parents discussed how schools interfered with their disciplinary work at home. They indicated their skepticism of the way schools "brainwashed" their children's understanding of CP. Black mothers even suspected that schools tried to get information about family violence through their children. One young Black mother recalled her experience at her own school, where she felt that some staff members tried to search for evidence of physical abuse in her family.

When I was in school, I remember a lady used to take me out of class and set me in a room and tried to get me to tell what was going on in my house. She was trying to ask me question "Are you sure?" They tried to make you feel comfortable enough to say "Yes."

Black parents noted that media stories about their CP behavior did not describe them positively. When one mother mentioned a video clip depicting a Black mother beating her child going viral on Facebook, other participants immediately responded by asking if the mother in the clip had been wrongly put in jail. This discussion suggested that Black parents perceived that the media's portrayal of their use of CP led to legal intervention. Thus, Black parents were aware of non-CP norms conveyed through bystander interventions and through media.

Resistance—Black parents resisted social pressures of not using CP because they felt that their parenting practice was misunderstood and unfairly judged. They said that they took caution not to expose their CP behaviors in public places, where others “are watching.” Many parents, however, reported that they were willing to confront such a pressure. They provided three main arguments to justify their confrontation. First, they referred to their experiential knowledge with CP to argue that it was an effective and normal disciplinary method. Second, they argued that nonphysical discipline lead to undesirable consequences. Third, they contrasted their own experience to that of their children to support their position.

In particular, Black parents told stories about how their own parents had used CP as an educational message in the families to help them be better human beings. For example, one Black father described what his mother's use of CP meant to him: “To hit a kid, it is not to hit them. It is to get their attention to stop whatever they are doing and get their focus on you and you have to direct them in whatever direction you want them to go.” Another father added, “We grow up the way we did, books on the head and all of this. We are going to implement that into our teachings with our children.” Black parents' discussions also showed that the frequency of CP applied to them was high. For example, one Black mother recounted that “popping never stopped” when she was young. Despite this, very few Black parents claimed that CP was harmful to them. Instead, several Black parents framed this experience as “it didn't hurt us in any way.” One Black father said:

We, for the most part, were raised up with the switch. Getting physical punishment, that's what we know. And we know it worked for us. Why would we want to change something we know worked for us? We know it will work for our kids, too.

To corroborate this point, several Black parents turned to their own childhood experience of CP to compare and contrast the differences between the effect of CP on themselves and the effect of not using CP with children nowadays. One Black father said:

Honestly, they say that a lot of that stuff traumatizes kids, but in actuality that made me a better person because I'm not in jail right now. I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. You can't say that beatings are always not necessarily the answer. But sometimes, some kids need that. Sometimes, we've got to be a little physical with them.

Additionally, Black parents argued that since the children were theirs, others had no right to tell them what to do. Many Black parents shared this sentiment and said they would be ready to defy authorities to do their parenting job. One Black mother said: “Social Services may have to get me, but I will pop my child at Social Services. They try to call it child abuse, but you've got to teach this child. Talking is not getting anything, these kids come out bad.”

One Black father recounted an incident when his family was at McDonald's and their son was running through the store. The father said that he hit his son and responded to others' intervention that, "I don't give a frig what anybody thinks. That's my child!" Other Black fathers in the focus group supported his view and added that they often encountered similar situations, where they responded in a similar way.

Perceptions of others as outsiders—The resistance of Black parents showed the incompatibility between the non-CP norms in their surrounding environments and their normative perceptions of the behavior. Data revealed the reason why these non-CP norms had little influence on Black parents' perspective: Black parents perceived that others who disapproved of their CP behavior were outsiders. Black mothers reported that they felt like they had to "fight against *the outside* to raise *our* kids." Some also remarked that "every culture is different," and argued that CP was part of their culture and thus outsiders should respect that borderline. Such arguments received support from Black parents in the focus groups.

"*The outside*" was possibly implied by Black parents to mean institutional structures that engineered the changing child-rearing norms. The outside may also include bystanders who intervened in their child discipline efforts. By framing unsupportive others as "*the outside*" and "*they*" while calling themselves and other Black parents as "*we*" and "*us*," Black parents possibly projected two different groups of "others." The first group were outsiders who did not understand how to raise a child in the Black culture, thereby tending to judge, intervene, and mistakenly report Black parents to authorities for child abuse. Black parents contended that the "outsiders" were too accommodating to children. One Black mother commented about her experience with a parent training class: "Not to be racist, but I think they're teaching you the White way how to raise your kids. Because you know how they say White people don't discipline their kids." Several Black parents mentioned incidents where they saw White and Latino children petulantly confronting their own caregivers. Black parents argued that ignoring children in disciplinable situations led to dire consequences for society. For instance, Black fathers discussed "those shooting boys at schools" being the result of lacking discipline at home. Black mothers discussed a video clip of a Latino boy hitting his grandmother at McDonald's and commented that the boy "was throwing up gang signs and everything."

The second group of "others" included those who understood and shared the necessity and value of using CP to discipline children to teach them how to behave, learn to respect parents, and stay away from troubles in the future. Indeed, when Black parents were specifically asked about their perceptions of their fellow Black parents' CP behavior, they assumed that other Black parents would "pinch," "whoop," and "beat" misbehaving children. Awareness of racial/ethnic group identity became even more salient for Black parents when they discussed the linkage between not using CP and the fate of Black people. One Black mother explained why CP was necessary for children, to which all parents in the focus group agreed.

Because a lot of Black people are getting killed by cops and people are saying it is because they have no home training, so they go out in the street and do whatever they want because their parents didn't teach them at home.

White parents

“I feel like a bad mom”—Several White parents commented that CP was common in their communities, but they did not discuss having seen others using CP. One White mother elaborated why she thought CP was common in her community even though few people talked about it: “I don't think people talk about it, except for saying, ‘I'm going to spank you,’ or something. It's a saying, but no one says to their friend, ‘Oh. I spanked my kid.’ It's very behind closed doors.”

When White fathers were asked about their perceptions of other parents' attitudes and approval of CP, they hesitated and often redirected their responses to their childhood experience of CP, which they perceived as positive and effective. White parents' discussion showed that they viewed their own parents' use of CP as effective messages that reminded them to behave well. One father said, “After one or two whippings, I never gave my father a hard time again.” Another said that he still loved his dad, although his story revealed a harsh experience:

For all the whipping my dad gave me, he never hurt me that bad that I dislike him, or I don't love him. Like I said, I had belts. My dad got mad, and when he usually got mad, it was after a few drinks. So, he didn't know when to stop. Not one schoolteacher could have found it because it was on the places they wouldn't be looking (laugh).

White mothers also perceived that their childhood experience of CP was positive and effective. Thus, they felt confused and lost when spanking was seen as an unforgiving parenting method. One rural White mother felt that social pressure to not spank a child made her uncertain about her parenting ability.

Now you listen good that kind of thing. I wasn't scared of my dad. Like I said earlier, he didn't scare me as a person ... I was just scared to disobey him. I think that's a good thing. But sometimes, not that I feel like a bad mom ... It's just everybody ... You see it online. You see it everywhere, like “spanking's horrible.” “You don't spank your kids.” Like blah, blah, blah. Sometimes it makes me feel like I'm doing my parenting wrong.

A mediatized world and Facebook moms—White parents discussed that people did not support CP as much as in the past and would report CP incidents or make a fuss on social media. They reflected on such incidents being posted on social media, which could “make you scared to want to even punish your kid out in public.” One father commented, “Everything is mediatized, and these things don't help. Everybody takes pictures of everything.” Clearly, there was a sense of discontent as to how CP was viewed and regulated today. To these White parents, this was a negative outcome because it was detrimental to their neighborhood cohesion. One mother commented that the environment around her had become “bad” because people were scared of others calling child protection

services. Another father said, “When I was younger, you could go over and talk to your neighbors and they were best friends. Nowadays, people are looking out of their windows.”

Similar to Black parents, White fathers said that they would resist others’ interference with their use of CP. They felt that others were judgmental and did not know how tough it was to discipline a child. For example, one father showed his understanding of other parents’ child disciplining efforts through his interactions in the shopping mall, “Somebody else’s kid was freaking out and I had people come up to me and go, “Can you believe the way they just did that?’ I’m going, ‘Yes, I can actually.’”

Although urban White fathers initially stated that they did not support CP, their discussion gradually revealed that they agreed that CP should be done in extreme cases, such as “running into the street.” They discussed that parents had to be very careful with applying CP because children had more rights these days and “they can say whatever they want and you’re done.” These parents also discussed that they saw messages on the Internet that told them about “don’t spank your kids.” Furthermore, they said that “everybody gets involved” to stop them from even having “a good hustle type of slap” with their children. Interestingly, urban White fathers separated themselves from those parents who used CP by emphasizing that they themselves only approved CP in extreme cases. They explained that perhaps the difference between those who used more CP and those who use less CP was due to how CP was communicated in families. One father illustrated this by saying, “You know what, I got my butt whooped as a kid, you’re going to get your butt whooped as a kid.”

Meanwhile, White mothers generally argued that spanking was not an abusive form of parenting. They contended that “slapping” and “spanking” were mild forms of physical discipline that served as a nonverbal message to warn children of any wrongdoings. They then discussed that parents who claimed to not beat their children actually did so at home. For example, they stated that those parents who said nice things about not hitting children on social media likely turned out to be hypocrites. When one mother told that those “Facebook moms are really good on social media, but then you go over their house or you go over to see them Facebook moms ... (she shook her head),” other mothers laughed in agreement.

Some urban White mothers also discussed that they were avid consumers of online information about parenting. They said that they “Google” everything, and that the “mom websites are so informative.” They also mentioned talking to their moms and friends for advice related to alternative nonphysical disciplining methods. A few rural White mothers talked about the influence of religious practice. One mother told about her experience with CP and religion in the context of attending a Christian school, “If we didn’t do something right or whatever, they would bring us into the nursery. The pastor would hold our hand up and spank us just like that.” She further said, “It was a Christian thing.” Another mother commented, “A lot of Christian people feel like they have that ability to spank their child because it says so in the Bible.” Thus, for White mothers, the Internet and religion might be sources of social influence for CP.

Perceptions of generation gap—White parents considered current changes with child-rearing practice as different from the past. Specifically, White fathers stated that those

who supported CP use would be parents like themselves, or “older generation.” One father commented, “The younger parents, I don’t think, use it as much. I think it’s a tool that’s outdated to them. Older parents are more likely to.” So, these fathers used age to differentiate those who approved and used CP from those who disapproved and used less CP. They discussed that younger parents were probably too distant from the conventional way of using CP and could not relate to it. White mothers argued that unsupportive others did not have children to understand parenthood’s challenges. These mothers also felt that spanking was done mostly by parents born in their generation. One mother said, “A lot of moms, at least in our generation, a little bit younger, or a little bit older. They spank their children behind closed doors.”

Latino parents

Negative childhood experience of corporal punishment—The majority of Latino parents talked about the differences between the nonphysical discipline culture in the US and the violent child-rearing practice in their countries of origin. Latino fathers discussed the child abuse law in the US and stated that they agreed with the law. They also felt that public opinion was in line with the law. Their stories revealed some ways in which they came to learn about the non-CP norms in the US. For example, one mother talked about how her family learned this through her son’s interactions with his peers:

Because they weren’t born here, we lived somewhere else. I remember there was a girl who was older than him, about 12 years old, a pretty smart girl, and she used to tell him, “In this country, your parents can’t hit you because you can call the cops.”

In addition, data revealed that Latino parents regarded their childhood experience of CP as negative. They told about their own parents beating them without a clear reason. One father reflected on his childhood experience of CP:

You don’t do that [CP] with your children; you try to be a better parent. I think that all that was previously lived, has been seen, because we come from a country where children are treated like that. I was hit if there was a problem, instead of talking about what was wrong. Our fathers used to give you a slap and said: “What’s wrong with you?”

Latino fathers reported that they wanted to distance their parenting from what they had experienced in their childhood by arguing that their parenting style was different. Specifically, they stated that they wanted to teach their children by “setting good examples,” instead of hitting children like their own parents did. One father stressed how he taught his children:

Sometimes you see all that because our parents were not the kind of people that told us how to behave when, for example, we arrived at a place and if we didn’t say hi. We got hit “you don’t know how to greet me?” We tell our kids to say hi. I think all that was lived by us and it doesn’t apply to us anymore. We try to be good parents and try to understand our children more, because we lived those experiences in a bad way.

At the beginning of the focus group discussion, urban Latino mothers reported that CP use was not acceptable. These mothers perceived using CP could make people “go to jail for doing that.” As the focus group moved on, however, these mothers were divided about whether or not CP was beneficial to children. Some mothers commented that “mild spanking or a soft hit with a belt” is acceptable, but some other disapproved of the use of CP. They argued that CP would make children “remember bad things instead of good ones.” One Latino mother said:

I’ve done that once to my now 19-year-old boy, but I regret having done it and I told him that I was sorry so many times. Sometimes we don’t have to listen to what other people say because they often do it to make you feel bad or see the child suffer.

Interestingly, by mentioning about “what other say”, she suggested social pressure on her to use CP. Although she was not explicit about what made her feel regret, there seemed to be a change in the way she viewed her previous use of CP compared to now. In a way, this mother perceived that there were pro-CP norms surrounding her and wanted to resist this social pressure. Several Latino mothers also mentioned that other parents talked about “smacking kids in the mouth,” “shaking them hard,” and “slapping hard in the hand.”

Most rural Latino mothers acknowledged that they had spanked their children and revealed that they did so only when their children behave disrespectfully. One mother said, “I warn him that if he’s rude to me, I will slap him hard in the mouth.” These rural Latino mothers argued that while their own parents’ beating was harsh, their own CP behavior was not because they had clearly explained why their children needed to be hit. One mother recounted:

Sometimes hitting them harms them more than it fixes them. They grow up with hard feelings towards you. Well, that’s what they used to do with us back in the day. We got hit a lot and we grew up with hard feelings in a way, with a certain anger towards our parents. But sometimes you have to use it when necessary, and you have to make sure your kids know the reason they’re being punished.

Interpersonal communication about disciplining children—Despite their disapproval for applying CP with children, Latino parents still perceived that CP was prevalent in their communities. Rural Latino fathers reported that they thought around 60% to 80% of other parents currently hit children. When queried further, Latino parents believed parents likely engaged in conversations about child rearing within their communities. For example, Latino parents talked about people in their network discussing how to physically punish children. Rural Latino fathers talked about their coworkers, who were also parents, discussing spanking, hitting with a belt and tree sticks, and throwing flip-flops at children when “their kids don’t understand” or “say bad words.” These fathers also named various forms of CP in their native language (i.e., Spanish), which they heard from other parents.

Latino mothers also talked about hearing some parents “smacking kids in the mouth,” “shaking them hard,” and “slapping hard in the hand.” Thus, they perceived that CP was

not socially approved but they also perceived that CP was prevalent in their ethnic group because they had heard about these behaviors. One Latino mother remarked:

I can probably say that most of them do. Definitely most. Well, at least the ones I know, I believe most of them has spanked or slapped their kids at least once, I'm not saying they do it every day, but maybe ... it's something like a ritual.

Discussion

This study investigated the sources of perceived norms influencing CP behavior for low-income Black, Latino, and White parents. Data revealed three major points of discussion. First, Black and White parents projected pro-CP norms from their perceptions of shared positive experiences of CP during childhood. Second, these parents categorized parent groups into ingroups and outgroups when discussing social approval of CP. We employed the false consensus effect and self-categorization theory as theoretical lens to discuss these findings. Third, Latino parents' normative perceptions did not appear to be influenced by their experiences of CP, which we discussed through the lens of acculturation framework. Findings also suggested that interpersonal communication among Latino parents might affect their pro-CP norms.

The false consensus effect offers two theoretical perspectives that provide some insights into the relationship between childhood experience and normative perceptions of CP. This effect refers to a process whereby individuals perceive their own judgments and behaviors as relatively common, which results in norm perception formation (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Marks & Miller, 1987). The first perspective is the hypothesis of salience and focus of attention, which posits that as individuals focus their attention on a preferred position rather than considering alternative positions, they may project a consensus of others for their position (Marks & Miller, 1987; Sherman et al., 1983). Positive framing of CP during childhood may make it a preferable behavioral choice for parents, which subsequently becomes salient to guide parents' communication about how other parents would perceive and use CP. This suggests that these parents focused their attention on a pro-CP position and likely registered CP behavior as a dominant position. They then attributed similar perceptions and behavior to other parents.

A second theoretical perspective deriving from the false consensus effect concerns a motivational bias mechanism (Ross et al., 1977). Theorists explain that when experiencing a tension associated with anticipated social interactions, individuals are motivated to seek social support and rationalize the appropriateness and representativeness of their position to maintain cognitive balance (Marks & Miller, 1987). This theoretical perspective seems plausible to explain the role of childhood experience in forming CP norms for two reasons. First, in the salient context of societal pressures to abandon CP, Black and White parents likely felt motivated to justify their CP use as socially appropriate and prevalent rather than atypical and negative. Second, Black and White parents likely felt that their CP behavior was a deviation from prevailing non-CP norms and thus, perceived a threat to their self-esteem for being labeled as child abusers. This perception may trigger an even greater need to normalize their CP behavior through a projection of a considerable target

population approving of and practicing the same behavior. Given the lack of compatible and accurate information related to pro-CP norms and the salience of incompatible information about non-CP norms in contemporary US context, parents' best solution to estimate the prevalence and approval of CP would be to utilize a subsample of cases that are readily and vividly available in memory (Mullen et al., 1985; Ross et al., 1977). Note that although Black and White parents talked about media stories about CP, they disagreed with how the media portrayed parents' use of CP. Only a few White urban mothers discussed that they searched for alternative disciplinary strategies on the Internet. As such, findings pointed to the possibility that the false consensus effect was the mechanism linking childhood experience of CP and pro-CP norms for Black and White parents.

Findings suggested that Black and White parents categorized the others into ingroupers and outgroupers. Ingroupers are those who are perceived by an individual to share similar traits and backgrounds, while outgroupers are those who have dissimilar attributes (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Fear of being labeled as abusers along with potential legal consequences likely motivated Black and White parents to identify with ingroupers to defend their self-concept through a pro-CP position. According to self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987), people belong to multiple social categories and thus have different social identities. These identities often compete and intersect with one another. In contentious situations linked to social identity, people are motivated to engage in categorizing themselves and similar others as belonging to one same group while perceiving dissimilar others as outgroup members. CP is a contentious issue and oftentimes regarded as a cultural behavior to parents of color (Fontes, 2005), which possibly makes social category distinction salient. When social categories are at the fore, shared similarities with ingroup members and differences from outgroup members will be accentuated, resulting in ingroup norm salience (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Ingroup norms become influential when individuals perceive an intergroup conflict for gaining a favorable social status (e.g., good parents) or avoiding a social stigma (e.g., being labeled as child abusers). As such, behaviors that are consistent with perceptions of ingroup norms are activated. Thus, self-categorization and ingroup identification may explain why ingroup pro-CP norms were more influential than non-CP norms deriving from the media, social institutions, and bystander interventions.

Latino parents referred to their childhood experience of CP as negative and incompatible with the mainstream US culture. Data revealed that several Latino parents expressed a strong tie with their countries of origin. This background suggested the role of acculturation, which may be a plausible explanation for why Latino parents behaved differently from the Black and White parents. Acculturation refers to a cultural and psychological adaptation process that occurs through sustained contacts between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (Berry, 2005). Research found that less acculturated Latino parents spanked their children significantly less frequently than more acculturated Latino parents (Berlin et al., 2009; Maker et al., 2005). We suspect that this might be because recent Latino immigrants perceive that their welcome in the new country depended on their being invisible and compliant to the law and dominant cultural expectations (Fontes, 2005). Thus, childhood experience of CP did not seem to influence Latino parents' perceived norms. Instead, findings suggested that interpersonal communication among Latino parents likely transmitted pro-CP norms.

Researchers have recently proposed that CP prevention interventions should leverage the influence of perceived norms (Klika et al., 2019). The CDC (2020b) recommended public education campaigns to shift social norms and reframe the way people think and talk about childhood adverse experiences. Our findings revealed that ingroup norms were influential for CP behavior. Thus, normative messages should incorporate influential and salient reference groups. Furthermore, perceived norms could be misperceived due to the false consensus effect. Hence, addressing normative mis-perceptions through norm-based messages might be a way to reduce pro-CP norms (Perkins, 2003). Simultaneously, campaigns should increase parents' efficacy to use alternative discipline strategies to replace CP (Duong et al., 2021).

Findings suggest some avenues for future research. First, few studies have investigated how interpersonal communication might be encouraged to propagate positive parenting norms in different racial/ethnic groups. Such studies likely have much to offer because people form and modify their perceptions of group norms through communicating with ingroup members (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Second, investigating the influence of acculturation on parents' CP behavior according to their racial/ethnic groups might be a promising direction. Third, although parents in this study reported that media messages promoted non-CP norms, recent studies showed that pro-CP norms could also be constructed in the media environment. For example, parents may tweet about child discipline methods (Lee et al., 2020) and posted their comments to online news stories about CP (Taylor et al., 2016). This source of perceived norms might influence behavioral intent and policy support (Duong et al., 2020). This is another gap that communication theories might contribute to understanding social norms related to this behavior.

This study has limitations. Focus group methods limit the generalization of the results to a larger population. Social influence is a potential challenge in focus groups. For example, fear of social disapproval may work against people's desire to self-disclose particularly on such a sensitive and legal topic as CP. Alternatively, social influence within a small group of comparable backgrounds provides an environment for in-depth conversations. Additionally, participants were informed that they would be reported if they disclosed information relevant to child abuse. Because the line between child abuse and CP was delicate, some participants might be influenced by social desirability. Other limitations include self-selection (volunteering) into the study, difficulty with recruiting rural Latino fathers, and limited demographic data (e.g., no age and religion affiliation reported and unknown immigration status) that could further contextualize these findings and provide insight into generalizability.

To our knowledge, this is the first study that attempts to integrate child abuse literature with health communication theories concerning social norms. Our findings can be used as an important groundwork for prospective research using norm-based communication theories to empirically test the associations between normative sources, attitudes, perceived norms, and behavioral intentions among these racial/ethnic groups. The health communication literature is abundant with norm-based frameworks to guide the research and design of social norm intervention messages. This research direction likely offers practical implications to

intervention campaigns to prevent corporal punishment, and ultimately child physical abuse, in the US.

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Table 1.

Distribution of focus group participants based on race/ethnicity, sex, and state.

| Focus group number | Location and Race/ethnicity | Sex of Parent | City, State | Number of participants |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Urban Black | Male | Brooklyn, New York | 8 |
| 2 | Urban Black | Female | Brooklyn, New York | 8 |
| 3 | Urban Latino | Male | Bushwick, New York | 8 |
| 4 | Urban Latino | Female | Bushwick, New York | 7 |
| 5 | Rural Latino | Male | LaBelle, Florida | 2 |
| 6 | Rural Latino | Female | LaBelle, Florida | 5 |
| 7 | Rural Latino | Male | LaBelle, Florida | 3 |
| 8 | Rural White | Male | Oxford County, Maine | 6 |
| 9 | Rural White | Female | Oxford County, Maine | 5 |
| 10 | Rural Black | Male | Windsor, North Carolina | 5 |
| 11 | Rural Black | Female | Windsor, North Carolina | 9 |
| 12 | Urban White | Male | New York City Metro | 4 |
| 13 | Urban White | Female | New York City Metro | 5 |