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Child Abuse, Spanking and Adult Dating Violence: A Replication Study of Temple et al., 2018

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Abstract

The issue of whether spanking does or does not contribute to later aggression remains controversial despite public policy statements by the American Academy of Pediatrics and other groups opposing spanking. Studies have remained inconsistent regarding whether spanking does or does not contribute to later aggression. One study, Temple et al., 2018, released results from an adult retrospective study suggesting that spanking and related corporal punishment could predict adult dating violence, but that actual physical child abuse exposure did not. This current study attempted to replicate this unusual finding using similar methodologies. Current results did not replicate the findings of Temple et

al., 2018). Exposure to child physical abuse predicted adult dating violence, but exposure to spanking and related corporal punishment did not. These results suggest it may be premature to link spanking to aggression in adulthood.

Keywords

Spanking

Corporal punishment

Child abuse

Dating violence

Aggression

What's Known: Current data regarding spanking effects on aggression remain controversial despite decades of research. Most prior research has not clearly distinguished child physical abuse from spanking.

AQ1

What's New: This study replicates a prior study (Temple et al., 2018) which found that spanking, but not physical abuse predicted adult dating violence. Replication results suggest the opposite, namely that physical abuse but not spanking predicts adult dating violence.

What's Relevant: Child physical abuse, but not spanking is related to adult dating violence in a replication study of prior research. Future policy on spanking should be cautious to note differences between spanking and more severe corporal punishment.

Whether spanking does or does not lead to later aggression among children exposed to spanking is an issue of significant controversy. Most health organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics [1] and American Psychological Association [2] have policies opposing the use of spanking/corporal punishment (henceforth: spanking) in child discipline. However, data on non-abusive spanking has remained inconsistent. Some large-scale meta-analyses suggest spanking may be related to adverse outcomes [3] whereas others conclude such effects may be minimal [4].

Confusion appears to rest on several issues. One is in relation to effect sizes. Effects for spanking on adverse outcomes tend to be small, with bivariate correlations between $r = .1$ and $.2$. However, effect sizes based on controlled analyses, controlling for preexisting child aggression, for instance, tend to suggest the impact of spanking may be nearer to zero [5]. Some scholars express concern

that meta-analyses reliant on bivariate effect sizes may overestimate the strength of support for a given hypothesis [6]. Other concerns reflect the degree to which studies have effectively separated the effects of spanking from more serious abuse, or to which studies properly control for preexisting behavioral problems in children who are spanked [7]. Thus, rigorous studies which effectively control for these issues would be welcome.

In 2018, one study was published by Temple and colleagues [8] that involved retrospective reports by adults regarding their experiences with spanking, child physical abuse and current self-reported engagement in dating violence. Although retrospective studies have obvious limitations regarding the accuracy of remembered exposure to physical punishment in childhood, this study had potentially important data that would allow for the assessment of spanking, while controlling for actual physical abuse, an important control lacking in many prior studies. In fairness, the measure of spanking/corporal punishment was a fairly sternly worded single item “How often did your parents/guardians discipline you by slapping, spanking, or striking you with an object?” and so could be considered fairly serious corporal punishment, not merely conditional spanking [9]. Nonetheless, the distinction between corporal punishment (even rather severe) and physical abuse has utility. Interesting, results from this study were counterintuitive. Specifically, spanking was found to predict adult dating violence, whereas actual exposure to child physical abuse did not.

This puzzling finding is difficult to fully explain. Why would children be more inclined to learn violence from less serious physical discipline than more serious, abusive physical discipline? There may be several explanations. It’s possible that spanking may be more common than abuse and, as such, become more salient. On the other hand, it is also possible that this outcome might be due to an error in the analysis or that multicollinearity between the spanking and physical abuse variables created unreliable data outcomes. Unfortunately, this dataset has not been made publicly available (including upon request to the authors) and, as such, it is not possible to look at this more closely. As such, a replication of this dataset could be helpful.

The current study sought to replicate the Temple et al., 2018 study under similar methodological circumstances. Although the sample could not be directly replicated, the methods and data analysis could. This study tests the hypothesis that spanking is correlated with adult dating violence, when exposure to child physical abuse is controlled.

Methods

Participants

Participants in the original Temple et al., 2018 study consisted of young adults who were a subset of a large, on-going longitudinal study. However, the data reported in Temple et al., (2018) were cross-sectional, using retrospective memories of spanking and abuse, not longitudinal. Although the current study did not have the funding to recreate a longitudinal sample, the cross-sectional design of Temple et al., could more easily be replicated.

Participants were thus recruited via snowball sampling through both Amazon's MTurk and through the local university's subject pool of young adults. The current study did employ some additional checks for unreliable responding that will be discussed below under procedures, that were not used in Temple et al. (2018). The final sample consisted of 509 individuals, 170 (33.4%) of whom were male, with 6 individuals (1.2%) reporting non-binary or preferring not to report their gender. Ethnically, whites predominated ($n = 322$, 66.3%) with substantial groups of blacks ($n = 41$, 8.1%) Hispanics ($n = 60$, 11.8%) and Asians ($n = 65$, 12.8%). Mean age was 21.6 with a standard deviation of 3.16. Only individuals who reported being currently in a dating or marital relationship or having been in one over the past year were included.

Materials

Materials used were identical to Temple et al., (2018) with one exception. Two additional scales related to qualities desired in a dating partner and life satisfaction were also included. Neither of these were hypothesis relevant but were included to reduce hypothesis guessing and potential false positive results due to demand characteristics.

As noted, all other materials were taken directly from Temple et al. These included the single item measure of spanking/punishment "How often did your parents/guardians discipline you by slapping, spanking, or striking you with an object?" answered on a four-point Likert scale. There were five items related to exposure to physical abuse taken from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, mainly related to severe physical beatings. Coefficient alpha among these items for the current sample was .865. The dependent variable of dating violence included 4 items from the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory, involving self-reported, hitting, slapping, pushing or throwing objects at dating partners. Coefficient alpha for these items in the current sample was .819. As with Temple et

al., 2018 covariates related to sex, ethnicity (dummy coded variables for white, black and Hispanic, similar to Temple et al), mother's education, age, and alcohol consumption (yes/no previous year), in addition to the physical abuse exposure variable, were considered.

Procedures

As noted above, respondents were recruited through snowball sampling through both MTurk and local university subject pool. As with Temple et al., (2018), adult respondents reported on their current dating violence perpetration as well as on retrospective memories of exposure to spanking and physical abuse.

Participants were eliminated from the sample under two conditions. First, individuals who reported not having been in any dating relationship over the past year were eliminated from the sample. Second, two reliability check items were included among the questions. The first of these checked for attention by asking participants to select a specific answer choice. The second checked for mischievous responding by asking an improbable question ("I have once owned a three-headed dog"). Individuals that failed either reliability check were also eliminated from the sample. These eliminations were made prior to data analysis. No other responses were eliminated from the dataset.

Data analysis was designed to replicate that of Temple et al. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was used with pairwise deletion for missing data. Predictors were included in the same order as Temple et al. Multicollinearity was assessed using Variable Inflation Factor (VIF) analyses. Such analyses did suggest mild collinearity ($VIF = 2.053$) between the spanking and physical abuse variables, but not enough to cause concern.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

AQ2

All procedures described within were designed to meet international standards for ethical research with human participants. All procedures passed local IRB. There are no conflicts of interest to report.

Results

Both physical abuse and spanking were commonly reported in this sample. Only 225 (44.2%) of participants reported experiencing no abuse whatsoever, although the variable was positively skewed, such that reports of heavy abuse were less

common. Reports of spanking were more evenly distributed with only 144 (28.3%) participants reporting experiencing no spanking whatsoever.

Regarding the regression model, the full model was statistically significant [$R = .448$, $_{adj}R^2 = .186$, $F(9, 493) = 13.73$, $p < .001$]. All standardized regression coefficients are presented in Table 1. Of interest to the main hypotheses, while child physical abuse was correlated with current dating violence ($\beta = .276$, $p < .001$), spanking exposure was not ($\beta = .060$, $p = .297$). Thus, the reanalysis does not replicate Temple et al., 2018, although these results fall in the intuitive direction of child physical abuse having greater impact on current violence than does spanking.

Table 1

Standardized regression coefficients predicting adult dating violence

Predictor	Standardized Coefficient	<i>P</i> value
Female sex	−.111	.008
Hispanic	.162	.002
White	.251	.000
Black	.103	.032
Mother's Education	−.039	.342
Age	−.110	.010
Alcohol	.025	.544
Child Physical Abuse	.276	.000
Spanking	.060	.297

Exploratory Analyses

The regression equation was then rerun, removing the covariate for child physical abuse. In this equation, the spanking variable now became significant ($\beta = .247$, $p < .001$). This result suggests that, while spanking and adult violence may correlate, this correlation may be best explained by a third variable, namely child physical abuse. Controlling for physical abuse in childhood removes the predictive value of spanking alone.

Rerunning the regression only with participants who reported experiencing no physical abuse whatsoever ($n = 225$) resulted in a non-significant regression model

$[R = .251, \text{adj}R^2 = .028, F(8, 214) = 1.79, p = .080]$. This further suggests that most correlation between exposure to physical discipline and dating violence occurs among those exposed to physical child abuse.

Discussion

The issue of whether spanking does or does not contribute to later aggression remains contentious [10]. Despite condemnations by several professional advocacy organizations, it remains unclear whether spanking uniquely contributes to adult physical violence above and beyond exposure to child abuse. One study by Temple and colleagues suggested that spanking but *not* physical child abuse was predictive of adult dating violence in a retrospective study. The current reanalysis sought to confirm this curious finding. Contrary to Temple et al., the reanalysis found that child physical abuse but *not* spanking was associated with adult dating violence. This calls into question whether non-abusive spanking is a predictor of adult dating aggression.

Arguably, the results from the current reanalysis are more plausible. Even were spanking to be associated with adult violent behaviors, it certainly would be expected that child abuse would also be associated with such outcomes, arguably more strongly. With this in mind, the results of Temple and colleagues are somewhat perplexing and difficult to explain. Ultimately, the current reanalysis, using identical measures, was unable to replicate this finding. Without access to the original raw data, it is difficult to conceptualize the nature of this result. It's possible that the inclusion of reliability checks in the reanalysis removed unreliable responses that might have caused spurious findings in the original Temple et al. study. Ultimately, it does not seem inherently credible that actual child physical abuse would have little impact on adult aggression.

The current results also highlight the importance in distinguishing and controlling physical abuse from spanking. In the exploratory analyses, once the physical abuse control variable was removed, spanking did correlate with adult dating violence. This suggests that childhood physical abuse is a critical control variable. Undoubtedly, parents who physically abuse their child also often spank them. Thus, failing to control for physical abuse may create spurious correlations between spanking and adult aggression that are actually due to child physical abuse exposure. This is also a serious issue for meta-analyses, to the degree that some over rely on uncontrolled bivariate correlations.

Like all studies, this one has limitations. As a replication study, some of these limitations are carried over from the original Temple et al. study. For example, the spanking outcome conflates spanking with, arguably, more serious forms of corporal punishment. Second, as a retrospective study, it is possible that adults' memories of their exposure to spanking of physical abuse may be distorted. In fairness, it is also arguable that memories of abuse may be more salient to current emotional states. Related to the current replication, although the materials and analyses were replicated, the sample does differ from the original sample. It is possible that differences in results may reflect differences in the underlying sample.

Conclusions

The current study did not find evidence to link spanking to adult dating violence. Further, this study was unable to replicate previous findings by Temple and colleagues. It is recommended that conclusions drawn between non-abusive spanking and adult aggression may not be reliable based on current data. As such, policy statements by some groups such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and American Psychological Association may need to be reconsidered.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

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