

RACE AND GENDER BIAS IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

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ABSTRACT

The disciplinary actions taken by school building administrators after receiving a discipline referral were examined to identify evidence of race and gender bias in administration of corporal punishment (CP). The relationships between race and CP, and gender and CP, were examined after controlling for the severity and frequency of punishable behaviors by students in each group. Analyses of discipline files ($N = 6,244$) demonstrated a small, yet statistically significant relationship between race and CP, and a larger, statistically significant relationship between gender and CP. The results indicated evidence of race and gender bias in the administration of CP. Results were discussed with reference to educational and legal issues.

The professional literature on school discipline policies is replete with emotional pleas to ban corporal punishment (CP). The popular press and professional journals frequently publish lurid anecdotal accounts of the abuse of corporal punishment by overzealous educators (e.g., Bard, 1973; Dubanowski, Inaba, & Gerkewicz, 1983; Hart, 1987; Holcomb, 1988). Many professional organizations, ranging from the American Bar Association to the American Medical Association, have official policies denouncing CP (Maurer, 1981).

Perhaps the most telling challenges to CP are the accusations that CP is administered in a manner biased against males and minority groups (Glackman, McDowell, Martin, Berv, Hyman, & Spino, 1978; Lively, 1987). Nationwide, 24.5% of students are black, yet 37.3% of CP cases involve black children (Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 1984). Males comprise 51.3% of the nation's school children, yet 80.1% of the cases of CP involve males (OCR, 1984). Such large discrepancies between groups add fuel to the smoldering fire surrounding corporal punishment in the schools by suggesting race and gender bias. However, the cause of these discrepancies is unknown.

Despite harsh criticism, CP is used in 31 states. CP is the second most-frequently used form of school discipline in the states of Oklahoma, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida (Maurer, 1981), where CP in schools is supported by the majority of the citizens (Simpson, 1988). However, according to a 1989 Harris poll, a slight majority of the citizens, nationwide, are opposed to CP. The U.S. Supreme Court has twice upheld the school's right to use CP despite parent objections (*Baker v. Owen*, 1975), and despite potential mental and physical harm (*Ingraham v. Wright*, 1977). The majority of school board members, building administrators, and teachers support CP as a "last resort" critical for maintaining discipline in the schools (Hyman, 1979; Hyman & D'Alessandro, 1984). Clearly, CP has support from many segments of society.

The issues of racism and sexism in the administration of CP are emotionally charged, much like the issues of gender and race bias in mental testing. Bias can be defined the same way for CP as for mental testing: *viz.*, systematic error under- or over-predicting of the behavior of a group (e.g., Jensen, 1980; Reynolds, 1984). In the mental testing model, it is possible for two groups to have different

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distributions on a predictor variable, yet when the predictor is used to estimate a criterion, there may be no evidence of bias (i.e., no systematic under- or over-prediction for the groups in question). In terms of CP, it is possible that some groups (e.g., males) could have a different distribution on a predictor of CP (e.g., severity and frequency of rule violations), yet there may be no bias in CP administration. In the "no bias" situation, the higher rates of CP administration for males and for blacks would be due to their behavior (i.e., the fact that they violate rules more often or commit more severe rule violations), and not their gender or race.

In the present study, the issue of race and gender bias in CP administration were examined using a test bias model. Specifically, the effects of race and gender on administration of CP were tested, after removing the effects of rule violation frequency and severity of rule violation.

METHODS

Subjects

The sample consisted of 6,244 discipline files representing records from 16 schools (K-12) in a central Florida school district. The sample included all children receiving disciplinary action reported to the county school board by building administrators from August, 1987 through April, 1988. Exhaustive reporting of all disciplinary actions taken by school personnel is mandated by the state. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of students receiving disciplinary action and it can be noted how those students differed from the general school population in race and gender (see Table 1). Blacks and male students are referred proportionately more than would be expected from the demographic make-up of the school population.

Procedures

Data from each discipline file were collected describing each child's grade, race, gender, severity of rule violation, number of discipline referrals per child,

and disciplinary action taken by school administrators for each referral. Race was recorded as black or white; Hispanic, Asian, and other groups were excluded because these groups made up only 5.8% of the school population and 3.4% of discipline referrals. Severity of rule violations was determined by judges from the school district (school psychologist, guidance counselor, special education teacher, 5th grade teacher, and a building administrator), who rank-ordered the severity of 35 categories of rule violations. The mean rank of each violation from the five judges was used to determine the severity of the violation. Thus, a continuum of severity was created for rule violations, ranging from the most severe violation, "physical assault" (assigned a score of 35) to the least severe violation, "inappropriate grooming" (assigned a score of 1). Inter-judge agreement on severity of rule violations was strong ($r = .81, p < .01$). Although a wide variety of disciplinary actions taken by school administrators were reported ($N = 71$), actions were dichotomized as corporal punishment or not corporal punishment. Corporal punishment was defined in this school district as "a swat or lick to the buttocks of the student with hand or paddle." Not corporal punishment was defined as all other disciplinary actions, including: suspension, expulsion, calling the parents, staying after school, etc. It is interesting to note that expulsion was only used 4 times in 6,244 disciplinary cases. Suspension was used on only 18 occasions.

RESULTS

Simple Correlation Analyses

Corporal punishment was used in 24.7% of all discipline referrals. Race had a weak relationship with CP ($r = .10, p < .005$). However, gender had a stronger relationship with CP ($r = .19, p < .002$). To illustrate the meaning of these correlations, of all white females referred for disciplinary actions ($N = 1,248$), only 11% ($N = 137$) received CP; of all black males referred for disciplinary actions ($N =$

TABLE 1
Referral and School Population Demographics

| Population | Variable | | | |
|------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Males % | Females % | Blacks % | Whites % |
| School | 52.4 (<i>N</i> = 5176) | 47.6 (<i>N</i> = 4702) | 19.1 (<i>N</i> = 1886) | 75.1 (<i>N</i> = 7418) |
| Referral | 68.7 (<i>N</i> = 4289) | 29.6 (<i>N</i> = 1848) | 27.8 (<i>N</i> = 1736) | 67.9 (<i>N</i> = 4239) |

Note: Percentages do not add to 100% because of the exclusion of Asian and Hispanic students from the sample. Total population of the 16 schools = 9,878.

1,191), 41% (*N* = 488) received CP. White children tended to be referred for disciplinary action for more severe rule violations than black children ($r = .17$, $p < .002$), yet no relationship between gender and severity of rule violation was present ($r = .08$, NS).

Severity of rule violation was not related to CP ($r = .01$, NS). Frequency of rule violation was not related to CP ($r = .00$, NS) or any variable of interest. Grade and CP were related ($r = -.57$, $p < .0001$), meaning that children in the lower grades were more likely to receive CP than children in the later grades (see Table 2 for the correlations among variables in the study).

Multiple Correlation Analyses

A multiple regression of CP on race, severity, and frequency was performed. Frequency and severity were entered into the equation first; these two variables did not predict CP. The addition of race created significantly better prediction of CP than frequency and severity alone ($R^2_{12.3} = .131$, $p < .003$) (see Table 3). This result lends some support to the hypothesis of race bias in CP.

A second same multiple regression procedure was performed. This time gender was added after entering frequency and severity into the equation. The addition of gender created significantly better prediction of CP than frequency and severity alone ($R^2_{12.3} = .192$, $p < .002$) (see Table 4). This result lends some

support to the hypothesis of gender bias in CP.

A multiple regression analysis was also performed to investigate the overall strength of the relationship of CP and the variables of interest using a stepwise procedure, in which predictors were entered in descending predictive order (i.e., best predictor first). These four variables yielded an R^2 of .217. Most of the variance in CP administration is left unaccounted for by these variables. Again, the frequency of referral and severity of violation were nonsignificant predictors of CP, whereas gender and race were significant predictors (see Table 5).

DISCUSSION

There was evidence of race and gender bias in the administration of CP. But that evidence was not as strong as many educators would hypothesize. The magnitude of the partial correlations was modest, with bias accounting for less than 22% of the variance between groups receiving CP, suggesting the practical significance of the bias is small. In other words, bias in whether CP was administered after receiving a discipline referral was not the major contributor to the discrepancies in CP administration to blacks versus whites, or males versus females.

Frequency and severity of rule violations do not predict the administration of CP. This is surprising, in that CP is usually defended as a "last resort," or as

TABLE 2
Simple Correlations between Variables

| | Race | Gender | CP | Severity | Frequency | Grade |
|-----------|------|--------|------|----------|-----------|-------|
| Race | — | .12* | .10* | -.17* | .01 | .01 |
| Gender | | — | .19* | .03 | .01 | .01 |
| CP | | | — | .01 | .00 | -.57* |
| Severity | | | | — | .04 | .00 |
| Frequency | | | | | — | -.02 |
| Grade | | | | | | — |

* $p < .005$ $N = 6,244$

Note. Males were coded as "1" and females as "0."
Blacks were coded as "1" and whites as "0."

TABLE 3
Summary of Regression of CP on Race, Severity, and Frequency

| Variable | Model R^2 | Partial R^2 | F |
|-----------|-------------|---------------|-------|
| Frequency | .001 | .001 | 0.004 |
| Severity | .004 | .003 | 0.011 |
| Race | .131* | .128* | 3.761 |

* $p < .003$

Note. Variables are listed in their order of entry into the equation.

a strong measure to a serious rule violation. The findings of this study suggested CP was administered without regard to the child's current or previous rule breaking behavior. In other words, CP did not appear to be reserved for incorrigible children nor for serious rule violations.

There were some potentially significant limitations to this study. First, bias was determined only for the decision-making process (i.e., what happens after a teacher refers a child to an administrator for disciplinary action). It was not possible to determine whether there was bias in the referral process (the decision of the teacher to refer the child to the administrator). The fact that whites were referred for more severe rule violations

than blacks raises the question of referral bias. In other words, teachers may have been more tolerant of minor rule violations for whites than for blacks. It is also possible that whites simply do not break minor rules as often as blacks. The present results are limited in that they do not reflect on possible bias in the referring agent (i.e., teacher).

A second limitation of this study was the limited scope of predictor variables for CP administration. Although one might argue the decision to administer CP ought to rest solely on the severity and frequency of the child's rule breaking behavior, other factors have a significant effect on CP administration. For example, some schools never used CP, and other schools reported CP for a majority of referrals.

TABLE 4
Summary of Regression of CP on Gender, Frequency, and Severity

| Variable | Model R^2 | Partial R^2 | F |
|-----------|-------------|---------------|-------|
| Frequency | .001 | .001 | 0.005 |
| Severity | .005 | .004 | 0.013 |
| Gender | .192* | .186* | 4.332 |

* $p < .002$

Note. Variables are listed in their order of entry into the regression equation.

TABLE 5
Summary of Regression of CP on Variables of Interest

| Variable | Model R^2 | Partial R^2 | F |
|-----------|-------------|---------------|-------|
| Gender | .194** | .194** | 4.258 |
| Race | .214* | .020* | 1.742 |
| Severity | .216 | .002 | 0.011 |
| Frequency | .217 | .001 | 0.005 |

** $p < .002$

* $p < .004$

Note. Variables are listed in order of the amount of variance accounted for, as determined by a stepwise regression procedure.

Therefore, the building-level administrator's philosophy may significantly affect the decision to administer or withhold CP.

Finally, a third limitation was the geographic sampling of the study. On one hand, selecting 16 schools from the State of Florida, in a school district known for its support and use of CP, raises the possibility that results may not generalize to other areas. On the other hand, the similarity of these results to other studies, such as higher rates of CP for males and blacks (Glackman et al., 1978; Lively, 1987; OCR, 1984), and the lack of relationships between CP and the severity and frequency of rule violations (Glackman et al., 1987; Hyman, 1979) suggest the sample was typical. Replication of the study in other settings would shed light on the possibility of sampling limits in this study.

This study is unique in that it borrows

methods from the mental test bias literature and applies them to the study of bias in CP. Bias technology provides a powerful model for investigating race and gender bias in CP. Evidence of bias in the administration of CP was statistically significant, yet practically modest, and was limited to the study of administrator behavior. Evidence of bias in CP administration, however small, suggests schools must be more sensitive to potential violations of students' rights in the practice of CP administration.

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