

Extreme Physical Punishment in the Home and its Associations with Aggression and Victimization at School: A Study among Young Adolescents in Iran

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Abstract

Background: Physical punishment in Iran may partly take other forms than in Western countries. This fact has been studied to a relatively small extent so far.

Methods: Data from 1244 young adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; M age=12.7 yrs, SD=2.1 yrs) was collected in two cities, Mashad and Eylam, in both public and private schools (totaling 24 schools) in Iran. Whether the pupils reported having been exposed to extreme forms of physical punishment (EPP) by parents, such as burning of hands, and breaking of bones, was investigated and served as independent variables in MANOVAs with various types of aggression and victimization in school settings as dependent variables.

Results: Participants who had had their hands burnt (6.5% of respondents), and bones broken (4.9%) as punishment scored significantly higher on both perpetration of and victimization to almost all types of aggressive behavior at school. Notably, EPP had strong associations with the most severe forms of school aggression measured in the study, i.e. threatening (and, respectively, being threatened by) another pupil with a knife or a chain.

Discussion: Results indicate that EPP does indeed occur in Iran, in this sample it had been experienced by about 1/20 of respondents, and it was associated with both perpetration of and victimization to aggressive behaviors. Suggestion for future research: possible intervening variables between EPP and aggression and victimization in school settings need to be investigated further.

Keywords: Physical punishment; Aggression; Victimization; Adolescents; Iran

Introduction

The present study was part of a larger project focusing on relationships between parenting practices and their relationships with antisocial behavior in school settings in Iran. It was conducted in two Iranian cities, Mashad and Eylam. Mashad is a relatively well-to-do city in the Eastern part of the country, untouched by the Iran-Iraq war. Eylam is located in the Western part, and suffered greatly during the war. Pupils from both public and private schools are included in the sample. In that sense, the sample represents a great variety of strata in Iranian society.

This article focuses on one particular part of Iranian upbringing practices, i.e. the prevalence of certain extreme forms of physical punishment (EPP), such as burning of hands, and breaking of bones, among Iranian adolescents. They are not part of everyday life for all pupils, but they do occur, and some children are even exposed to such punishments relatively frequently. It appears likely that such negative experiences at home are likely to affect the children's peer relations and social life at school. Accordingly, a central aim of the study was to investigate the associations between EPP and aggressive behavior in school settings, i.e. both perpetration of aggression towards other pupils, and victimization to the aggression of others.

Physical Punishment (PP) has been associated with a number of negative psychosocial outcomes in adulthood, such as increased aggressiveness [1,2] depression [3], low self-esteem [4], phobias, anxiety, schizotypal personality, and alcohol and drug abuse [5]. Exposure to PP during childhood has also been found to be associated with an increased risk of victimization to school bullying [6]. The last finding suggests that PP may impact aggressive behavior in school settings. Hong and colleagues [7] have suggested a number of possible mediating variables between child maltreatment and school bullying and victimization to

school bullying, including, emotional dysregulation, depression, anger, and social skills deficits.

To date, there is little information about cultural norms about PP and its prevalence of in Iran. As far as attitudes are concerned, Oveisi et al., [8] found that 80% of mothers in Iran were of the opinion that PP is a necessity in child rearing [8]. Twenty per cent of them reported that severe physical PP is required if children do not perform well at school. In the same study, 70% of the participating mothers were not familiar with the concept of child abuse, and 30% stated that child abuse occurs when the punishment causes severe harm and requires hospitalization. In a similar vein, Yekta et al., [9] found that 60% of adult females and 70% of males in their sample believed beating was an acceptable method to discipline children, and mothers were executing the punishment to a higher degree than fathers [9].

In regard to reports of frequencies of PP, especially EPP, Zahrabi Moghadam et al., [10] found that 67.5% of 2-5 years old children in the cities of Ahvaz and Haftgel had experiences of PP. Of these children, 1.3% in Ahvaz and 4.5% in Haftgel had been punished by burning, mainly of their hands, while 1.9% in Ahvaz and 5.5% in Haftgel had been beaten with a stick by their parents. The burning of a child's hand

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was usually done as follows: the parent first heats a metal spoon, and then presses the hot spoon against the hand of the child [10].

Javadi et al., [11] found that 8% of pupils in a guidance school in Gilaneg hard reported having been burnt as a punishment, during the last year [11]. Garrusi et al., [12] reported that the 65% of physicians had observed cases of child abuse in their practice, but that only 4.5% of the cases were reported to authorities [12]. Amirjamshidi et al., [13] reported 6 cases of homicide attempts towards children with sewing needle, two of them concerning children below 10 years of age [13].

Method

Sample

Data was collected by use of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire from 1244 young adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; M age=12.7 years, SD=2.1 years) in two cities, Mashad (n=644) and Eylam (n=600) in both public (n=636) and private schools (n=608), totaling 24 schools, in Iran. The sampling of schools was conducted in order to make them as representative as possible of Iranian society, taking into account a large variety of social strata. The questionnaires were filled in during school lessons.

Instrument

Information about exposure to PP was gathered with the Brief Physical Punishment Scale (BPPS) [14]. In the original version, respondents state, on a five-point scale ranging from 0="never" to 4="often", to what extent they have been exposed to four types of PP during their childhood: (1) "pulled by the hair", (2) "pulled by the ear", (3) "hit with the hand", and (4) "hit with an object". In Iran, two extreme forms of PP were added: (5) "had one's hands burnt", (6) "had one's bones broken". In the present article, only data on the last two are presented.

Information about aggressive behavior at school was gathered with the Mini Direct and Indirect Aggression Inventory (Mini-DIA) [15]. The Mini-DIA is an abbreviated version of the Direct-Indirect Aggression Scales [16], developed as a less time-consuming version of the original instrument. It has been shown to yield similar results as the original scales [17]. Instead of consisting of multi-item scales measuring physical, verbal, and indirect aggression, the scales are instead single-item, and the types of aggression are defined to the respondents as follows: (1) physical aggression: "another pupil has for instance hit, kicked, or pushed you"; (2) verbal aggression: "another pupil has for instance screamed at you, or said hurtful things about you or [added in Iran] your family"; (3) indirect aggression: "another pupil has spread malignant gossip about you, spread untrue stories about you, or tried to freeze you out". Respondents then state, on a five-point scale, ranging from 0="never" to 4="often" to what extent they have been exposed to these. There is both a Victim and a Perpetrator Version of the Mini-DIA. The Perpetrator Version is formulated in similar wordings, with the exception that respondents now are stating the extent to which they themselves have behaved aggressively towards their peers at school.

In Iran, a more extreme form of aggressive behavior was added: (4) "threatened by [threatening] another pupil with a knife or a chain".

Strategy of analysis

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance Approach (MANOVA) was adopted for the study, using SPSS-20.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the ethical board of Åbo Akademi

University, and conducted with the consent of school authorities in Mashad and Eylam, and the parents of the children.

Results

EPP had been experienced by a small but substantial minority of the Iranian pupils participating in the study: 6.5% of respondents reported having had their hands burnt as punishment at least once, and 4.9% having had bones broken at least once. One percent of the respondents declared that it had happened "very often", in case of both types of EPP. There was a strong association between having had one's hands burnt, and having had bones broken [$\chi^2_{(1)}=218.08, p<.001, \phi^2=.18$].

Boys had been exposed to both types of EPP more often than girls [hands burnt: $t_{(1222)}=3.022, p<.001, \eta^2=.007$; bones broken: $t_{(1225)}=2.382, p=.003, \eta^2=.005$]. Adolescents in public schools had had their hands burnt significantly more often than respondents from private schools [$t_{(1222)}=2.546, p=.011, \eta^2=.005$].

Tables 1-4 and Figures 1-4, present results of MANOVAs comparing differences between adolescents who had had bones broken as a punishment, with those who had never experienced this type of punishment, and adolescents who had or had not had their hands burnt as a punishment, with various types of aggressive behavior at school, either as victims or perpetrators, as dependent variables. As the tables and figures indicate, these types of EPP were associated with almost all types of aggressive behavior at school, the only exception being

	F	df	p ≤	η_p^2
Effect of Having Had Hands Burnt				
Multivariate Analysis	29.24	41,214	0.001	0.088
Univariate Analyses				
Victim of Indirect Aggression	4.12	11,217	0.043	0.003
Victim of Verbal Aggression	18.26	"	0.001	0.015
Victim of Physical Aggression	20.97	"	0.001	0.017
Threatened with a Knife or Chain	108.4	"	0.001	0.082

Table 1: The results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with having had hands burnt or not by an adult as a punishment as an independent variable, and four types of victimization at school as dependent variables (N = 1,216).

	F	df	p ≤	η_p^2
Effect of Having Had Bones Broken				
Multivariate Analysis	29.24	41,214	0.001	0.088
Univariate Analyses				
Victim of Indirect Aggression	4.12	11,217	0.043	0.003
Victim of Verbal Aggression	18.26	"	0.001	0.015
Victim of Physical Aggression	20.97	"	0.001	0.017
Threatened with a Knife or Chain	108.4	"	0.001	0.082

Table 2: The results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with having had bones broken or not by an adult as a punishment as an independent variable, and four types of victimization at school as dependent variables (N = 1,219).

	F	df	p ≤	η_p^2
Effect of Having Had Hands Burnt				
Multivariate Analysis	35.19	41,217	0.001	0.104
Univariate Analyses				
Perpetrator of Indirect Aggression	71.48	11,220	0.001	0.055
Perpetrator of Verbal Aggression	53.18	"	0.001	0.042
Perpetrator of Physical Aggression	29.69	"	0.001	0.024
Has Threatened Others with a Knife or Chain	100.49	"	0.001	0.076

Table 3: The results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with having had hands burnt or not by an adult as a punishment as an independent variable, and four types of perpetration of aggression at school as dependent variables (N = 1,222).

	F	df	p ≤	η_p^2
Effect of Having Had Bones Broken				
Multivariate Analysis	32.51	41,219	0.001	0.096
Univariate Analyses				
Perpetrator of Indirect Aggression	66.81	1, 1222	0.001	0.052
Perpetrator of Verbal Aggression	36.04	"	0.001	0.029
Perpetrator of Physical Aggression	12.48	"	0.001	0.01
Has Threatened Others with a Knife or Chain	95.66	"	0.001	0.073

Table 4: The results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with having had bones broken or not by an adult as a punishment as an independent variable, and four types of perpetration of aggression at school as dependent variables (N = 1,224).

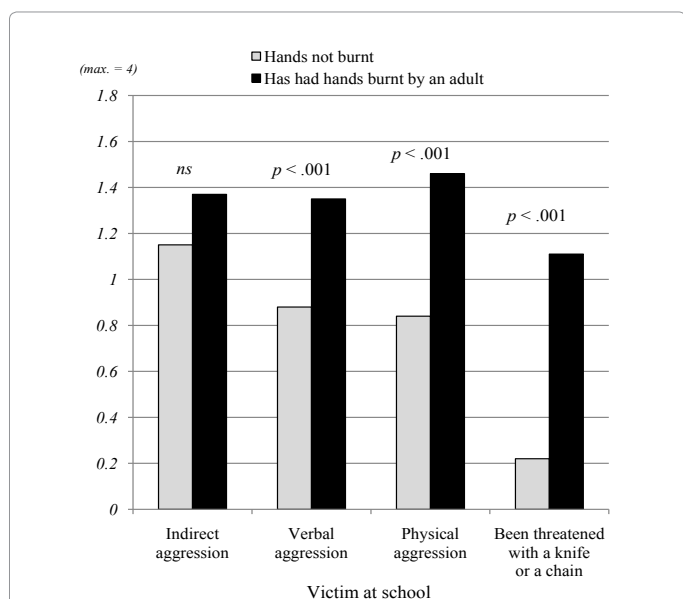


Figure 1: Victimization to four types of aggression in schools in Iran (N=1,216). Adolescents who had, respectively had not, had their hands burnt by an adult, as a punishment at home.

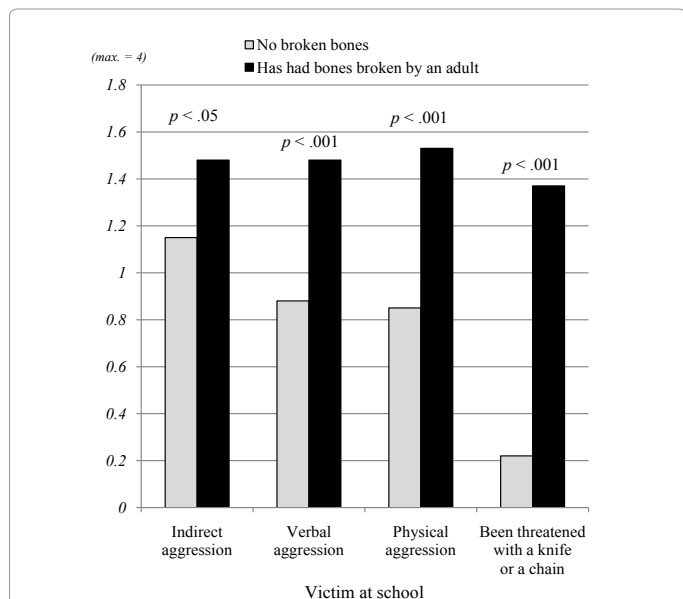


Figure 2: Victimization to four types of aggression in schools in Iran (N=1,219). Adolescents who had, respectively had not, had bones broken by an adult, as a punishment at home.

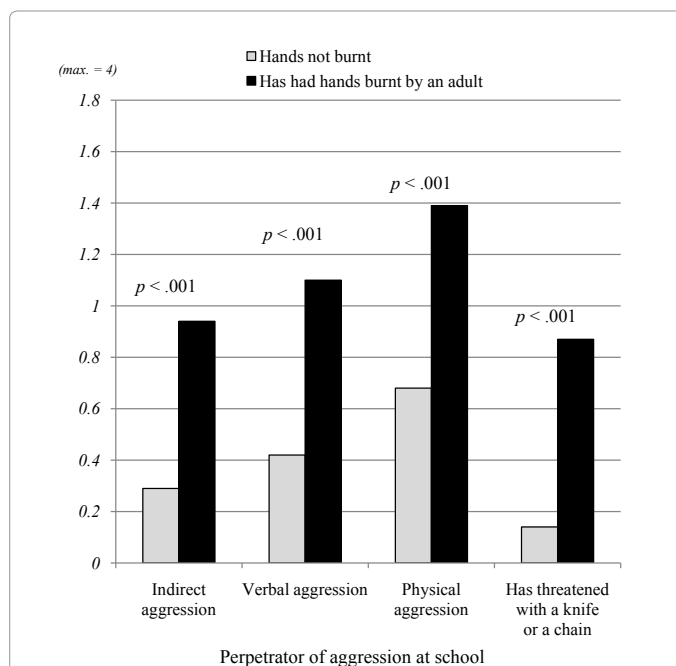


Figure 3: Perpetration of four types of aggression in schools in Iran (N=1,222). Adolescents who had, respectively had not, had their hands burnt by an adult, as a punishment at home.

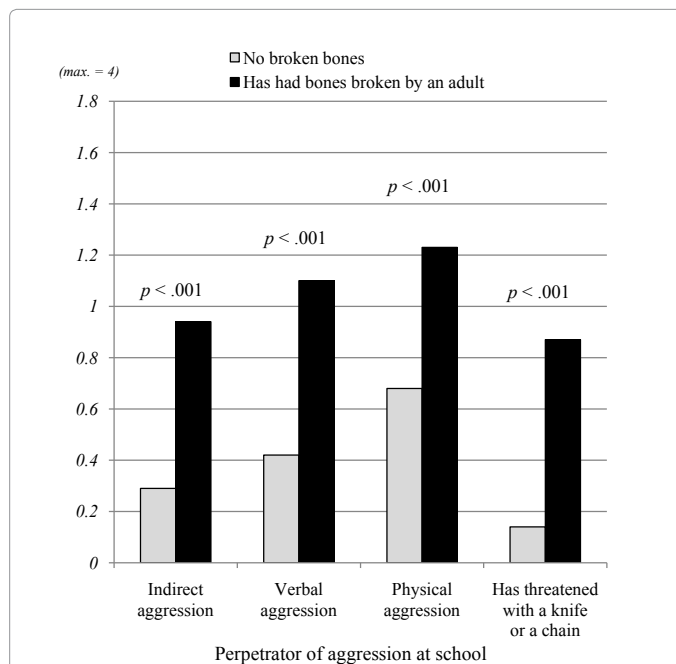


Figure 4: Perpetration of four types of aggression in schools in Iran (N=1,224). Adolescents who had, respectively had not, had bones broken by an adult, as a punishment at home.

victimization to indirect aggression. The clearly strongest associations (effect sizes varying between $\eta_p^2=.048$ and $\eta_p^2=.058$) were with the most severe type of aggression at school, “threatening another pupil with a knife or a chain”, both as a perpetrator and as a victim.

Discussion

Experiences of extremely harsh forms of physical punishment, of

types virtually nonexistent in Western society, were reported by about 1/20 of the respondents. In this respect, the present study is in agreement with previous ones [8,9]. One per cent of respondents had experienced EPP “very often”. The reasons for these disciplinary methods’ existence in Iranian society may be several. Cultural tradition is certainly an important contributing explanation. It would, however, be too simplistic to blame it on religion, as this type of PP is not accepted by the Koran. Iranian culture is considered to be of a collective nature [18], meaning that individuals have closer psychological and physical contact with others in daily life than the case is in non-collective cultures. This may facilitate the acceptance of extreme types of physical punishment as justified and tolerable without even reflecting upon whether it is a question of improper violation of the children’s integrity.

The study found clear associations between EPP at home and aggression at school, both perpetration of aggression towards others, and victimization to the aggressive behavior of others. Since the present study is not longitudinal, it is not possible to draw conclusions about cause and effect. It is worth noting that the strongest associations were with the most extreme form of school aggression measured.

An implication of the present study is the need to investigate possible intervening variables between EPP and school aggression and victimization. In what cases do victimization to EPP predict aggression, and in what circumstances victimization? In some cases it appears to be the same individuals who are both perpetrators and victims, but not always. One could speculate that EPP may lead to depression [3] and poor self-esteem [4], thereby increasing the possibility of predisposing to a “victim personality”, as suggested by some [6]. On the other hand, EPP may lead to anger, hate towards life in general, and wish to take revenge, and thus predispose to aggressive behavior. A suggestion for future research is to focus on possible mediating and moderating variables.

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