

The Cycle of Violence: Examining Attitudes Toward and Experiences of Corporal Punishment in a Representative German Sample

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Abstract

The use of corporal punishment (CP) is controversial despite the negative consequences of its use that have been documented. Consequences include the use of CP by those who experienced CP themselves, described in the theory of the cycle of violence. There are little data on the cycle of violence, especially on those who break it and in representative samples. This study examines the cycle of violence in a representative sample by analyzing experiences of and attitudes toward CP. Attitudes toward, and own experiences of, CP by their parents were assessed in a sample of 2,519 individuals (female 54.6%, age range = 14–99 years, $M = 48.9$ years). Latent class analysis (LCA) was used to identify subgroups of participants who support and oppose CP. Breaking the cycle, defined as having experienced CP and opposing CP, was examined. Factors associated with positive and

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negative attitudes toward CP were identified using group comparisons and binary logistic regression. The majority of the sample opposed CP (56%), whereas one third supported less severe forms of CP and 8.2% also supported severe CP. Those supporting CP reported having experienced CP by their parents more often. Of those who had experienced CP, 47% were identified as breaking the cycle. Female gender, younger age, not being divorced, and being married and living together, as well as a higher level of education were associated with breaking the cycle. Even though CP was legally banned in Germany, a relatively high proportion still reports positive attitudes toward and experiences of CP. The ban of CP by the federal government seems to be an effective measure to change attitudes on a societal level as rates were lower in comparison with earlier studies. Future studies should examine interactions between different types of CP, attitudes toward its use, and additional mediating factors.

Keywords

domestic violence, cultural contexts, intergenerational transmission of trauma, violence exposure

Background

The use of corporal punishment (CP), including any physical punishment against a child in response to perceived misbehavior (Zolotor, 2014), as an educational method by parents has been controversially discussed (Gagne, Tourigny, Joly, & Pouliot-Lapointe, 2007). Although CP was legally banned in Germany in 2000 and before that, in most Scandinavian countries (Larzelere & Johnson, 1999), it is still legal in Northern America and the United Kingdom. In some cultures, it is considered the norm (Smith & Mosby, 2003), even though research suggests that CP is associated with negative outcomes in children (Ateah, Secco, & Woodgate, 2003; Gagne et al., 2007; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Zolotor, 2014). The line between CP and physical abuse is thin and often associated (Zolotor, 2014), and a significant number of people in the general population is affected. Sethi and colleagues (2013) reported a prevalence of 22.9% for physical abuse based on analyses from community surveys from all over the world. Those numbers cause a high economic burden for societies each year (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012; Habetha, Bleich, Weidenhammer, & Fegert, 2012). In regard to the use of CP in the general population, studies indicate that CP remains common worldwide (Runyan et al., 2010). In a survey including six countries, 55% of the families used physical punishment, more than 20% of the parents even admitted to

have been shaking babies younger than 2 years (Runyan et al., 2010). This is similar to findings of Lansford and colleagues (2010), stating that 54% of girls and 58% of boys from nine different countries had experienced mild CP, and 13% of girls and 14% of boys had experienced severe CP by their parents or someone in their household in the last month. Studies from the United States report 64% to 95% of parents using spanking for children between the ages of 2 and 3 years (Straus, 2010). A study on the prevalence of CP in six European countries found that 91.9% of parents reported infrequent CP and 8.9% frequent use of CP (duRivage et al., 2015).

The consequences for those affected are similar to those observed for child maltreatment. Research indicates that the consequences may persist into adulthood (Afifi, Mota, Dasiewicz, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2012; Afifi, Mota, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2013; duRivage et al., 2015; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gilbert et al., 2009; Straus, 2010; Zolotor, 2014). A wide range of studies have demonstrated an association between CP and a variety of mental health and behavioral problems (Afifi et al., 2012; Afifi et al., 2013; duRivage et al., 2015; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Zolotor, 2014). For example, some of the victims become offenders later on and continue to use CP on their own children as well (DuMont, Widom, & Czaja, 2007). This transmission of violence has been described in the theory of the “cycle of violence” (Widom, 1989a, 1989b).

Over the last decades, this theory has been one of the key theories in the intergenerational transmission of violence. The theory comprises two major components. First, children with a history of violence are at greater risk of becoming a violent perpetrator in adolescence and young adulthood. Second, not all children with a history of experiences of violence become perpetrators later on (DuMont et al., 2007; McGloin & Widom, 2001). The theory was initially based on the research finding that physical abuse and or CP is an important predictor for violence in adulthood (Widom, 1989a). The existing work on the cycle of violence is heavily built on agency data of children with maltreatment background that is usually not representative (Wright, Turanovic, O’Neal, Morse, & Booth, 2016). Agency data usually underestimate actual childhood victimization and, therefore, underestimate the relation between history of maltreatment, future violence, or resilience (Topitzes, Mersky, & Reynolds, 2012). Therefore, it has been recommended to study the cycle of violence in representative samples of the general population (Topitzes et al., 2012; Wright et al., 2016).

With regard to passing on of violence to the next generation, attitudes about the use of CP play an important role. Cultural norms shape parental opinions on the use of CP (Bornstein, 2013). Favorable attitudes have been linked with the use of CP (Clement & Chamberland, 2014; Gagne et al., 2007). Eriksson

and Mazerolle (2015) showed that positive attitudes toward CP were predictive of the use of CP. In a large survey from Canada, the majority of participants showed favorable attitudes toward spanking, even though the potential harm associated with CP was recognized (Gagne et al., 2007). The authors reported that older age, in combination with a history of own experiences of CP in childhood, was associated with favorable attitudes toward CP. Therefore, the investigation of attitudes are key in understanding the cycle of violence and in helping to break the cycle, as attitudes may be changed.

In addition, the existing research especially focuses on childhood and adolescence (McGloin & Widom, 2001; Topitzes et al., 2012), whereas little is known about the consequences of the cycle of violence in adulthood (Wright et al., 2016). Furthermore, research has especially focused on children and adolescents that become offenders. Yet, those who break the cycle of violence, as they do not become perpetrators themselves, are of great interest as relevant information on how to exit the cycle of violence can be gained by studying those individuals. So far, little information is available on underlying mechanisms and factors that contribute to breaking the cycle of violence, that is, staying resilient (Widom, 1989a; Wright et al., 2016).

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to describe the cycle of violence in a representative adult German sample, by examining the association between childhood experiences of, and current attitudes toward, CP. We hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: The experience of CP in childhood is associated with more favorable attitudes toward the use of CP.

In addition, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 2: At least two groups are identifiable: one rather endorsing the use of CP and one rather opposing the use of CP.

Furthermore, we investigated factors that are associated with positive or negative attitudes toward CP, the latter especially with regard to those with own experiences of CP and resilience.

Method

Procedure

The study is based on a representative sample of the general population of Germany. Data were collected using a random route approach between January 20, 2016, and March 16, 2016, in Germany. Households were

randomly selected and approached by research staff. Individuals aged 14 years and older were eligible to participate in the study. Participants were informed about the study by research assistants and informed consent was obtained. In addition, the voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, and participants were informed about their right for a later withdrawal from the study. Minors were included from the age of 14. Informed caregiver consent and assent of the participating minor was obtained before inclusion in those below the age of 18. After informed consent was obtained, research staff conducted an initial interview on sociodemographic data and handed out a questionnaire. The research staff remained in the house in case participants had questions or clarification was needed. If requested, research staff left the room. Participants completed the main part of the study by answering the questionnaire without research staff interfering in answering the questions. In the context of the study, 4,830 households were approached and 2,523 complete data sets were collected. The information about attitudes toward CP was missing for five participants; therefore, these participants were excluded from the analyses. In total, 2,519 data sets were included in the analyses. The survey was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and fulfilled the ethical guidelines of the International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice of the International Chamber of Commerce and the European Society of Opinion and Marketing Research, and received an approval of the institutional review board of the University of Leipzig.

Participants

Measures. In addition to sociodemographic variables that were assessed via a structured interview (see Table 1), participants completed a questionnaire to measure, among others, (a) the attitudes toward CP, (b) their own experiences of CP, and (c) potential risk factors and factors contributing to exiting the cycle of violence. Items for this assessment were partially based on prior surveys by Bussmann (2003) on attitudes toward CP.

Sociodemographic characteristics. The interview assessed age, gender, family status, number of children, occupational status, and educational status. For analysis, educational status was dichotomized in having a high school degree versus not having a high school degree.

Attitudes toward CP. Attitudes toward CP were measured using three items. Participants indicated their agreement with each statement on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *fully agree* to 4 = *fully disagree*. Based on these three items, an LCA was calculated to determine classes including participants endorsing or opposing CP. The items and their endorsement are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Total Sample and by Class Membership, $N = 2,519$.

Characteristic	Total ($N = 2,484-2,519$)		Support CP ($n = 198-204$)		Support Light CP I ($n = 497-499$)		Support Light CP2 ($n = 382-388$)		Oppose CP ($n = 1,409-1,428$)		Test χ^2 (p)
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)		
Gender											24.79 ($p \leq .001$)
Male	45.4 (1,143)	58.8 (120)	47.7 (238)	48.5 (188)	41.8 (597)						
Female	54.6 (1,376)	41.2 (84)	52.3 (261)	51.5 (200)	58.2 (831)						
Family status											97.46 ($p \leq .001$)
Married and living the partner	41.2 (1,038)	37.3 (76)	40.1 (200)	42.5 (165)	41.9 (597)						
Married and being separated	2.1 (54)		1.8 (9)	2.1 (8)	2.6 (37)						
Single	30.7 (774)	21.6 (44)	30.7 (153)	23.5 (91)	34.1 (486)						
Divorced	15.5 (390)	14.7 (30)	17.6 (88)	18.8 (73)	14 (199)						
Widowed	10.1 (256)	26.5 (54)	9.4 (47)	12.6 (49)	7.4 (106)						
Overall living with a partner											
Yes	52.9 (1,314)	46.4 (91)	51.7 (257)	52.6 (201)	54.3 (765)						4.7 ($p = .196$)
No	47.1 (1,170)	53.6 (105)	48.3 (240)	47.4 (818)	45.7 (644)						34.8 ($p < .001$)
Geographical region											
Eastern Germany	20 (504)	31.4 (64)	23.2 (116)	23.5 (91)	16.3 (233)						
Western Germany	80 (2,015)	68.6 (140)	76.8 (383)	76.5 (297)	83.7 (1,195)						
Urban vs. rural area											9.1 ($p = .030$)
Urban	88.2 (2,222)	92.2 (188)	86.2 (430)	91.2 (354)	87.5 (1,250)						
Rural	11.8 (297)	7.8 (16)	13.8 (69)	8.8 (34)	12.5 (178)						
Education											84.52 ($p \leq .001$)
No graduation	2.3 (59)	2 (4)	2.6 (13)	2.1 (8)	2.4 (34)						
Lower secondary education	33.2 (833)	46.6 (95)	33.5 (167)	44.3 (172)	28.2 (402)						
Middle school	39.8 (1,001)	34.3 (70)	41.1 (205)	35.4 (137)	41.2 (589)						
High school	14.6 (368)	10.3 (21)	13 (65)	10.6 (41)	16.8 (241)						
University	10 (253)	6.9 (14)	9.6 (48)	7.7 (30)	11.3 (161)						
Special school	0.1 (2)		0.2 (1)		0.1 (1)						

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Characteristic	Total (N = 2,484-2,519)	Support CP (n = 198-204)	Support Light CP1 (n = 497-499)	Support Light CP2 (n = 382-388)	Oppose CP (n = 1,409-1,428)	Test χ^2 (p)
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	
Occupational status						130.74 (p ≤ .001)
Full-time	40.9 (1,032)	38.7 (79)	40.9 (204)	35.8 (139)	42.7 (610)	
Part-time	11.6 (290)	4.4 (9)	10.8 (54)	11.1 (43)	12.9 (184)	
Hourly	2.5 (63)	2 (4)	2 (10)	0.8 (3)	3.2 (46)	
Voluntary service, parental leave	0.8 (19)		0.6 (3)	0.3 (1)	1.1 (15)	
Unemployed	5.7 (144)	2.5 (5)	5.2 (26)	5.7 (22)	6.4 (91)	
Retiree	25.7 (648)	44.1 (90)	30.1 (150)	37.1 (144)	18.5 (264)	
Not working	3.4 (87)	2 (4)	1.8 (9)	2.8 (11)	4.4 (63)	
In training	2.3 (59)	1.5 (3)	2.4 (12)	1.8 (7)	2.6 (37)	
In school	6.1 (154)	4.4 (9)	5.4 (27)	3.9 (15)	7.2 (103)	
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	F (p)
Number of children M (SD)	1.15 (1.17)	1.45 ^{2,4} (1.33)	1.17 ¹ (1.23)	1.25 ⁴ (1.12)	1.08 ^{1,3} (1.14)	7.34 (p ≤ .001)
Age M (SD)	48.85 (18.18)	58.32 ^{2,3,4} (18.64)	49.50 ^{1,3,4} (18.43)	54.01 ^{1,2,4} (17.79)	45.87 ^{1,2,3} (17.33)	44.01 (p ≤ 0.001)

Note. Means with superscripts differ significantly at $p \leq .05$ from the means within rows based on Fisher's least significant difference post hoc paired comparisons.

Table 2. Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment, $N = 2,519$.

Item	% Full Agreement (<i>n</i>)	% Agreement (<i>n</i>)	% Disagreement (<i>n</i>)	% Full Disagreement (<i>n</i>)
1. Spanking never hurt nobody	26.8 (671)	26.8 (672)	14.2 (356)	32.2 (808)
2. A slap in the face never hurt nobody	8.3 (207)	14.9 (373)	19.7 (494)	57.2 (1,434)
3. Beating never hurt nobody	1.8 (46)	4.1 (102)	12.1 (301)	82 (2,043)

Educational methods experienced by parents in childhood. Own experiences of CP were assessed in a broader context of consequences for misbehavior in childhood. All participants were asked which parenting methods they had experienced by their parents. Participants could then indicate whether they experienced a range of CPs and non-CPs. For further analyses, types of CP were categorized into lighter forms of CP and more severe forms of CP. The items are presented in Table 3.

Breaking the cycle. Breaking the cycle of violence was operationalized as having experienced any type of CP in childhood by ones' own parents, but now opposing CP (DuMont et al., 2007; McGloin & Widom, 2001). This operationalization especially focused on the second aspect of the theory of the cycle of violence (Widom, 1989a). Using this definition, a subsample was identified that was able to break the cycle of violence. Those considered to have broken the cycle of violence were compared with those who were not.

Statistical Analysis

In a first step, an LCA based on three items that assessed attitudes toward CP (Table 2) was conducted to identify subgroups with favorable and unfavorable attitudes toward CP. The LCA was performed using MPlus version 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012), and was used to (a) determine the number of latent classes and (b) describe the class with favorable attitudes toward CP in comparisons with the other classes. To identify the number of latent classes, estimates for the number of classes were calculated starting with one class up to five classes until the best fitting model was identified. To determine the number of classes, five fit indicators were used: Akaike information criteria (AIC), Bayesian information criteria (BIC), sample size-adjusted Bayesian information criteria (SSaBIC), and entropy. Additionally, the bootstrap likelihood ratio test (BLRT) and the Lo-Mendell-Rubin Test (LMR; Nylund,

Table 3. Fit Indices for Latent Class Models, $n = 2,519$.

Model	Log Likelihood	AIC ^a	BIC ^a	SSaBIC ^a	Entropy ^b	LMR	BLRT	Classes: n, %
One class	-7,772.875	15,563.749	15,616.248	15,587.653	NA	NA	NA	1: $n = 2,519$ (100)
Two classes	-6,744.868	13,527.737	13,638.568	13,578.200	0.925	-7,772.875 ^{***}	-7,772.875 ^{***}	1: $n = 1,426$ (56.6) 2: $n = 1,093$ (43.4)
Three classes	-6,481.009	13,020.018	13,189.181	13,097.041	0.902	-6,744.868 ^{***}	-6,744.868 ^{***}	1: $n = 866$ (34.4) 2: $n = 1,428$ (56.6) 3: $n = 227$ (8.9)
Four classes	-6,393.006	12,864.013	13,091.508	12,967.595	0.928	-6,481.009 ^{***}	-6,481.009 ^{***}	1: $n = 204$ (8.2) 2: $n = 499$ (19.8) 3: $n = 388$ (15.4) 4: $n = 1,428$ (56.6)
Five classes	-6,377.448	12,852.895	13,138.722	12,983.037	0.925	-6,393.006	-6,393.006 ^{***}	1: $n = 164$ (6.5) 2: $n = 1,427$ (56.6) 3: $n = 535$ (21.2) 4: $n = 191$ (7.6) 5: $n = 202$ (8.1)

Note. AIC = Akaike information criteria; BIC = Bayesian information criteria; SSaBIC = sample size-adjusted Bayesian information criteria; LMR = Lo-Mendell-Rubin; BLRT = bootstrap likelihood ratio test.

^aLower AIC, BIC, and SSaBIC values indicate better fit.

^bEntropy should be $> .7$; values closer to 1 indicate better fit.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Asparouhov, & Muthen, 2007) were used to decide on the number of classes. As an indicator of reliability of the resulting solution, the class probabilities of the best fitting model are provided in the “Results” section.

In a second step, the association between supportive attitudes toward CP and the experience of CP in childhood, as well as associated factors, was examined using chi-square tests and group comparisons. To identify the most important factors, a binary logistic regression including the group that supports CP and the group that opposes CP was performed.

The third step comprised the identification of a group that was able to break the cycle of violence, consisting of participants that were identified as opposing CP in LCA, but reported a history of CP by their own parents. In addition, associated risk or protective factors were identified using chi-square tests and group comparisons and binary logistic regression including participants who broke the cycle of violence and those who did not.

Results

Participants

In total, the representative sample comprised 2,519 participants. The sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. The participants were between 14 and 99 years of age with a mean age of 48.84 years. The majority of participants were female. Table 1 also presents data on the educational status, the number of children, occupational status, and family status. Regarding the attitudes toward the use of CP, the majority of the participants disagreed with statements such as “a slap in the face would never hurt anyone” and “beating would never hurt anyone.” The patterns of agreement and disagreement with different types of CP are presented in Table 2.

Latent Classes of Attitudes Toward CP

LCA revealed a four-class solution. Fit indicators are presented in Table 3. The four-class solution showed the best fit with the lowest BIC, SSaBIC, the highest entropy, a significant LMR and BLRT. Although AIC decreases as the number of classes increases, this fit indicator is likely to produce lower values when the number of classes increases (Nylund et al., 2007) and, therefore, is considered less reliable than the BIC. Class 1 is characterized by supportive attitudes toward CP and consists of 204 participants. Classes 2 ($n = 499$) and 3 ($n = 388$) are both characterized by supportive attitudes toward lighter forms of CP. The largest class (Class 4) consisted of 1,428 participants and being characterized by opposing CP. The patterns for

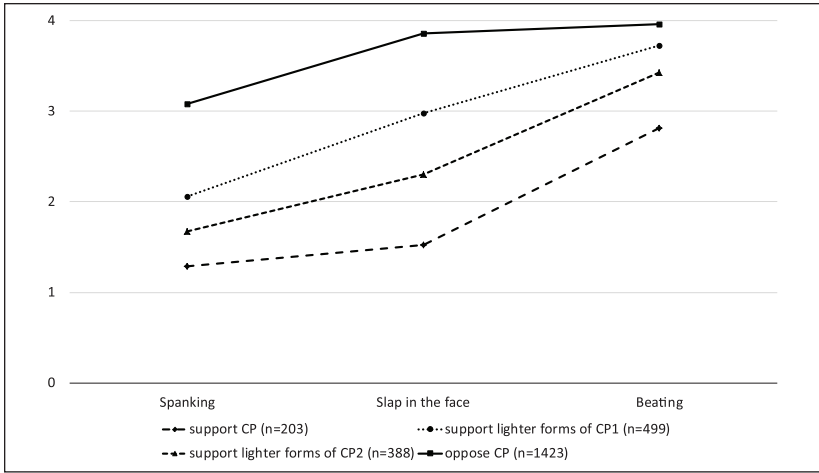


Figure 1. Class patterns of attitudes toward CP.
Note. CP = corporal punishment.

the classes are presented in Figure 1. The class probability for Class 1 is .97, for Class 2 is .99, for Class 3 is .94, and for Class 4 is .98.

Educational Methods

The parenting methods participants experienced by their parents are presented in Table 4. Of the 2,519 participants, 1,766 (69.9%) experienced at least one form of CP. Among them, spanking was reported most often ($n = 1,563, 61.9\%$). Male participants were more likely to report at least one form of CP ($\chi^2 = 5.35, p = .021$). Especially a “slight slap across the face” ($\chi^2 = 11.6, p = .001$) and a “resounding slap across the face” ($\chi^2 = 12.95, p < .001$) were reported more often by male participants. As can be seen in Table 4, participants supporting CP generally experienced more punishment (corporal and noncorporal) by their parents themselves, compared with those opposing CP. Especially with regard to harsh CP methods, those with positive attitudes toward CP had experienced punishment twice as often in comparison with those opposing CP.

Factors Associated With Supportive Attitudes Toward CP

Table 1 shows that the different classes, based on the LCA, differed on all sociodemographic variables, except whether participants lived with a partner or

Table 4. Experienced Educational Methods/Parenting Techniques of the Total Sample and by Class Membership, N = 2,519.

What kind of educational methods were used by your parents to educate you?	Total (N = 2,519)		Support CP (n = 204)		Support Light CPI (n = 499)		Support Light CP2 (n = 388)		Oppose CP (n = 1,428)		Test χ^2 (p)
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)		
CP											
At least one method of CP	69.95 (1,762)	90.2 (184)	80.76 (403)	88.4 (343)	58.26 (832)						
Slaps across the backside (spanking)	61.9 (1,563)	80.9 (165)	70.7 (353)	80.4 (312)	51.1 (729)						175.35 (p ≤ .001)
Slight slap in the face	43.6 (1,100)	74.5 (152)	50.9 (254)	71.9 (279)	28.9 (412)						342.92 (p ≤ .001)
Resounding slap in the face	19.3 (486)	48 (98)	16.6 (83)	30.9 (120)	13 (185)						181.1 (p ≤ .001)
Beating with bleedings	3.6 (90)	8.3 (17)	2.8 (14)	4.6 (18)	2.9 (41)						17.59 (p ≤ .001)
Spanking with a stick	8 (203)	18.1 (37)	7 (35)	9.8 (38)	6.5 (93)						34.89 (p ≤ .001)
Kicking	1.4 (36)	3.9 (8)	1.4 (7)	0.8 (3)	1.3 (18)						10.47 (p = .015)
Choking	0.2 (5)		0.8 (4)		0.1 (1)						11.53 (p = .009)
Beatings with objects (e.g. belt, bamboo cane)	6.5 (163)	14.7 (30)	6 (30)	7.5 (29)	5.2 (74)						27.6 (p ≤ .001)
Other CP	3.1 (77)	7.8 (16)	3.8 (19)	3.9 (15)	1.9 (27)						24.13 (p ≤ .001)
Experiences of lighter forms of CP	66.8 (1,682)	85.3 (174)	78.2 (390)	85.8 (333)	55 (785)						213.8 (p < .001)
Experiences of more severe forms of CP	24.4 (615)	52.9 (108)	22.6 (113)	36.9 (143)	17.6 (251)						159.5 (p < .001)
Non-CP											
Ban on watching TV	39.3 (993)	34.8 (71)	43.5 (217)	42 (163)	37.9 (541)						7.78 (p = .051)
Curfew	45.6 (1,152)	50.5 (103)	48.7 (243)	52.8 (205)	41.9 (599)						19.76 (p ≤ .001)
Reduction of pocket money	26.5 (668)	28.4 (58)	27.9 (139)	34.3 (133)	23.7 (338)						18.78 (p ≤ .001)
Stop talking to him or her	16.6 (420)	20.6 (42)	19.2 (96)	20.4 (79)	14.1 (201)						15.39 (p = .002)
Shouting him or her down	12.9 (325)	20.6 (42)	11.6 (58)	14.9 (58)	11.7 (167)						14.75 (p = .002)
None of those methods	19.1 (482)	6.4 (13)	11.8 (59)	8.2 (32)	26.5 (378)						118.1 (p ≤ .001)

Note. CP = corporal punishment.

Table 5. Model Parameters of the Binary Logistic Regression of Supportive Versus Negative Attitudes Toward the Use of CP, $n = 1,632$.

Included	B (SE)	95% CI for Odds Ratio		
		Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Sex (male)	-0.56 (0.17)	0.41	0.57	0.81
Age	-0.03 (0.005)	0.96	0.97	0.98
Experiences of CP				
Slap in the face	1.35 (0.19)	2.6	3.7	5.4
Resounding slap in the face	1.25 (0.19)	2.4	3.4	4.9
Education (having a general qualification for university entrance)	0.08 (0.04)	1	1.1	1.2
Region (Eastern and Western Germany)	0.83 (0.2)	1.6	2.3	3.5

Note. CP = corporal punishment; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

not. Beyond sociodemographic variables, different subgroups also differed according to the experiences of parenting methods by their parents (see Table 3). The binary logistic regression indicates that supportive attitudes toward CP were associated with male gender, higher age, having experienced “a slap across the face,” a lower level of education, and having grown up in the Eastern part of Germany (former German Democratic Republic; see Table 5).

Breaking the Cycle of Violence

Within the sample, 1,766 (70.1%) participants reported experiences of CP. Of those, 832 (47.1%) were opposing CP and are, therefore, considered as “cycle breakers.” The sociodemographic characteristics of those who continue in the cycle of violence versus those exiting it are presented in Table 6, the experiences of CP in Table 7. Results of a binary logistic regression indicate that female gender, younger age, having fewer experiences of being slapped in the face, and having a high school degree were associated with breaking the cycle, that is, having experiences of CP in childhood and now opposing CP (see Table 8).

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to describe the cycle of violence in a representative sample of the German population. In addition, factors contributing to

Table 6. Sociodemographic Characteristics of All Participants Who Experienced CP by Their Parents and by “Cycle Breaker” Versus “Non–Cycle Breaker,” $n = 1,762$.

Characteristic	Total ($n = 1,738-1,762$)	Cycle Breaker ($n = 822-832$)	Non–Cycle Breaker ($n = 916-930$)	Test
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	χ^2 (p)
Gender				11.22 ($p \leq .001$)
Male	46.9 (826)	42.7 (355)	50.6 (471)	
Female	53.1 (936)	57.3 (477)	49.4 (459)	
Family status				18.49 ($p \leq .001$)
Married and living together	42.2 (741)	43.6 (362)	40.9 (379)	
Married and not living together	2 (35)	2.5 (21)	1.5 (14)	
Single	27.1 (476)	29.3 (243)	25.1 (233)	
Divorced	16.8 (295)	15.5 (129)	17.9 (166)	
Widowed	12 (210)	9 (75)	14.6 (135)	
Overall living with a partner				4.1 ($p = .04$)
Yes	54.1 (941)	56.7 (466)	51.9 (475)	
No	45.9 (797)	43.3 (356)	58.1 (441)	
Geographical region				3.3 ($p = .07$)
Eastern Germany	20.5 (361)	18.6 (155)	22.2 (206)	
Western Germany	79.5 (1,401)	81.4 (677)	77.8 (724)	
Urban vs. rural area				1.33 ($p = .25$)
Urban	88.2 (1,554)	87.3 (726)	89 (828)	
Rural	11.8 (208)	12.7 (106)	11 (102)	
Education				48.76 ($p \leq .001$)
No graduation	2.4 (43)	2.5 (21)	2.4 (22)	
Lower secondary education	36.6 (644)	29.3 (244)	43.1 (400)	
Middle school	38.8 (683)	41.3 (343)	36.6 (340)	
High school	13.3 (235)	11.2 (141)	10.1 (94)	
University	8.9 (156)	10 (83)	7.8 (73)	
Special school	0.1 (1)		0.1 (1)	
Having a general qualification for university entrance				21.05 ($p \leq .001$)
Yes	19.35 (341)	23.92 (199)	15.27 (142)	
No	80.65 (1,421)	76.08 (633)	84.73 (788)	
Occupational status				51.11 ($p \leq .001$)
Full-time	39 (682)	41 (339)	37.1 (343)	
Part-time	11.1 (195)	12.7 (105)	9.7 (90)	
Hourly	2.3 (41)	2.9 (24)	1.8 (17)	
Voluntary service, parental leave	0.6 (10)	0.8 (7)	0.3 (3)	
Unemployed	6.3 (110)	7.5 (62)	5.2 (48)	
Retiree	30.5 (534)	22.8 (188)	37.4 (346)	
Not working	3.1 (54)	4 (33)	2.3 (21)	
In training	2.2 (38)	2.4 (20)	1.9 (18)	
In school	4.9 (86)	5.8 (48)	4.1 (38)	
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	F (p)
Number of children M (SD)	1.26 (1.20)	1.21 (1.17)	1.30 (1.23)	2.09 ($p = .149$)
Age M (SD)	51.12 (18.10)	48.31 (17.37)	53.63 (18.38)	38.76 ($p \leq .001$)

Note. CP = corporal punishment.

Table 7. Experienced Educational Methods of All Participants Who Experienced at Least One Method of CP and by “Cycle Breaker” Versus “Non-Cycle Breaker,” $n = 1,762$.

	Total ($n = 1,762$)	Cycle Breaker ($n = 832$)	Non-Cycle Breaker ($n = 930$)	Test
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	χ^2 (p)
What kind of educational methods were used by your parents to educate you?				
CP				
Slaps across the backside (spanking) ^a	88.5 (1,559)	87.6 (729)	89.2 (830)	1.14 ($p = .286$)
Slight slap in the face ^a	62.3 (1,097)	49.5 (412)	73.7 (685)	108.88 ($p \leq .001$)
Resounding slap in the face ^b	27.6 (486)	22.2 (185)	32.4 (301)	22.56 ($p \leq .001$)
Beating with bleedings ^b	5.1 (90)	4.9 (41)	5.3 (49)	0.11 ($p = .746$)
Spanking with a stick ^b	11.5 (203)	11.2 (93)	11.8 (110)	0.18 ($p = .670$)
Kicking ^b	2 (36)	2.2 (18)	1.9 (18)	0.11 ($p = .736$)
Choking ^b	0.3 (5)	0.1 (1)	0.4 (4)	1.49 ($p = .222$)
Beatings with objects (e.g., belt, bamboo cane) ^b	9.3 (163)	8.9 (74)	9.6 (89)	0.24 ($p = .63$)
Other CP	4.4 (77)	3.2 (27)	5.4 (50)	4.77 ($p = .029$)
Experiences of lighter forms of CP	95.5 (1,682)	94.4 (785)	96.5 (897)	4.5 ($p = .034$)
Experiences of more severe forms of CP	34.9 (615)	30.2 (251)	39.1 (364)	15.6 ($p < .001$)
Non-CP				
Ban on watching TV	46.1 (812)	47.2 (393)	45.1 (419)	0.84 ($p = .359$)
Curfew	55.3 (974)	54.3 (425)	56.1 (522)	0.58 ($p = .448$)
Reduction of pocket money	31.6 (556)	29.9 (249)	33 (307)	1.93 ($p = .164$)
Stop talking to him or her	20.1 (354)	18.1 (151)	21.8 (203)	3.70 ($p = .054$)
Shouting him or her down	17.1 (301)	17.7 (147)	16.6 (154)	0.381 ($p = .537$)
None of those methods	0.6 (10)	0.8 (7)	0.3 (3)	2.09 ($p = .148$)

Note. CP = corporal punishment.

^aLighter forms of CP.

^bMore severe forms of CP.

positive and negative attitudes toward CP were identified that are relevant to potentially break the cycle of violence. Results revealed that the majority of the participants opposed CP (56.5%). Yet, a substantial part of the population endorsed less severe forms of CP (35.5%) and about 8% endorsed also more severe forms of CP. Those reporting positive attitudes toward CP were more likely to report own experiences of CP by their parents compared with the other groups. Generally, parents seem to inflict less violence on their children as they have experienced themselves (Bussmann, Erthak, & Schroth, 2011). When categorizing the different types of CP into lighter forms of CP and more severe forms of CP, results indicate that experiences of more severe forms of CP were associated with a higher endorsement of CP. These results provide

Table 8. Model Parameters of the Binary Logistic Regression of “Cycle Breaker” Versus “Non–Cycle Breaker,” $n = 1,757$.

Included	B (SE)	95% CI for Odds Ratio		
		Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Sex (male)	-0.32 (0.1)	0.6	0.73	0.9
Age	-0.02 (0.004)	0.98	0.99	0.99
Experiences of CP				
Slap in the face	0.94 (0.11)	2.1	2.6	3.2
Resounding slap in the face	0.24 (0.12)	1	1.3	1.6
Education (having a general qualification for university entrance)	-0.45 (0.13)	0.49	0.64	0.82

Note. CI = confidence interval; CP = corporal punishment.

evidence for the cycle of violence theory (Widom, 1989a) in a representative sample of adolescents and adults. Focusing on those with own experiences of CP, almost 50% can be considered as “cycle breakers,” meaning that despite having personally experienced CP during their childhood, they opposed CP. As research has shown, attitudes toward the use of CP are highly linked with actual use of CP (Clement & Chamberland, 2014; Gagne et al., 2007), even though recognizing potential negative outcomes for the child.

However, the overall number of those opposing CP is relatively low, considering the ban of CP in 2000 in Germany. International studies have concluded that the ban of CP has helped to shift parental attitudes and to reduce violent child rearing in Sweden (Durrant, 1999; Janson, 2005). A comparison between six European countries concluded that banning CP leads to a decline in CP (Bussmann et al., 2011). One result was that the percentage of those who are familiar with the ban in Germany is much lower in comparison with Sweden. In 2009, only 31% were aware of the legal situation in Germany, whereas 90% of the Swedish respondents were. These results concerning the knowledge about the ban of CP might at least in parts explain the relatively high number of those who endorse CP in the present study. Whereas there was a massive ongoing information campaign in Sweden, Germany only saw two campaigns in 2001 and 2003. Therefore, an intensive information campaign might be useful to reduce the rate of people endorsing CP, which is in line with recommendations of Bussmann and colleagues (2011). On the contrary, some studies report a decline in violent child rearing, even though CP has not been banned, leading to a discussion about the effectiveness of a legal ban (Beckett, 2005; Larzelere & Johnson, 1999; Roberts, 2000). However,

results of comparative studies indicate that legislation may affect the use of CP as approval of CP and knowledge about the legal status were the strongest predictors for the use of CP (Bussmann et al., 2011).

In addition, some parents may attitudinally oppose CP, but may still engage in CP. Studies show that many parents believe that violence happens as a result of momentary helplessness (Bussmann et al., 2011). Therefore, results of the present study might overestimate the actual rate of those who are not engaging in CP. This might be further reinforced by answers of social desirability. However, the wording of the items that assess attitudes resemble sayings in Germany and might in some parts of the population not be seen as negative. This might in turn explain the relatively high number of approval despite the ban in Germany.

In general, evidence for both aspects of the cycle of violence theory was provided. The percentage of breaking the cycle of violence is lower compared with results of other studies that followed up children with a history of maltreatment into adulthood (McGloin & Widom, 2001). In a study by McGloin and Widom (2001), 68% of those with a history of maltreatment did not report violence in a self-report measure. The difference might be due to the fact that, in this study, self-reported violence was assessed in contrast to attitudes toward the use of CP, including the use of less severe types of CP. One explanation for exiting the cycle of violence might be resilience. Even though, no uniform definition of resilience exists (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014) and the operationalization of resilience may vary considerably between studies (Klika & Herrenkohl, 2013), resilience has often been referred to as adaptive functioning in the face of adversity (Rutter, 2012). Those existing in the cycle of violence might also show adaptive functioning in other relevant indicators of resilience, such as absence of psychopathology, or emotional or academical functioning (Klika & Herrenkohl, 2013). However, we primarily focused on attitudes toward CP and resilience has not been assessed. Therefore, future studies should examine the role of resilience in breaking the cycle of violence.

Generally, a range of factors seem to be associated with the endorsement of, respectively, opposing the use of CP. Although the geographical region (East Germany) and family status were associated with the overall endorsement of CP, these factors do not seem to play a role in breaking the cycle of violence. The comparison of “cycle breakers” versus “non-cycle breakers” revealed that female gender, younger age and a higher educational status, and not having experienced certain forms of CP were associated with opposing CP, despite own experiences with CP.

Yet, the role of gender in adaptive functioning after adversity is unclear and findings are contradictory. For example, DuMont and colleagues (2007)

found that females were more likely to be resilient in adolescence and young adulthood, and McGloin and Widom (2001) reported that female gender was associated with resilience in adulthood; whereas, other studies (Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2007) showed that female gender reduced the likelihood for resilience in adulthood. It has to be considered though that two different operationalizations of resilience were applied, which might lead to contradictory findings. Whereas Bonanno and colleagues (2007) operationalized resilience as the absence of posttraumatic stress symptoms in the face of trauma, McGloin and Widom (2001) used different indicators of functioning, including absence of violent behaviors, to determine resilience in the face of maltreatment. In general, female gender is a risk factor for posttraumatic stress symptoms (Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000), which may explain the findings of Bonanno and colleagues (2007). The results of the current study and other studies (Sethi et al., 2013) indicate that gender probably is linked to different types of maltreatment. It has been argued that gender might play a complex role in the relationship between risk and adaptive behavior and might be dependent on the target symptoms (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003). The results of the present study indicate that men are more likely to report own experiences of CP, which can be interpreted in a sense that it has been less socially sanctioned to punish boys corporally. This might reflect a risk factor for males, as having experienced a higher dosage of adversity leads to a reduced probability to oppose CP. As gender plays a complex role in the relationship between adversity and adjustment, more research, especially longitudinal studies, is needed for better understanding these interactions.

Besides female gender, younger age was identified as a factor associated with breaking the cycle of violence. This finding is in line with research from other European countries, showing that time is needed to change traditional beliefs about child rearing (Bussmann et al., 2011). One potential explanation for this finding might be current legislation and associated cultural norms. The results on attitudes toward CP in general differing between Eastern and Western Germany underlines this notion, as the Eastern part of Germany represents the former German Democratic Republic with different cultural norms. Since the end of 2000, there is a legal ban on CP in Germany. Therefore, older people have been living longer in a society in which CP was accepted as an appropriate measure in raising children, whereas younger individuals have lived within a different climate and cultural norms for a greater part of their lives. Legislation might, therefore, be an effective measure to change attitudes toward CP on a societal level and help to break the cycle of violence. It can be argued that legislation as a manifestation of a societal norm leads to peer pressure that results in an actual change of

attitudes toward the use of CP. In Germany, studies have shown that the knowledge about the ban of CP has increased in the society after the act was initiated in 2000 (Bussmann, 2003, 2005). Also on an European level, evidence has been provided that the ban on CP may change parental attitudes toward the use of these measures and reduce the use of violent measures during child rearing (Bussmann et al., 2011). Studies conducted in Sweden and Finland that were among the first countries to ban CP indicate a significant decrease in support for CP as well as a decline in prevalence of CP (Osterman, Bjorkqvist, & Wahlbeck, 2014; Zolotor & Puzia, 2010). This is in line with research that shows that odds of having parents who reported using occasional to frequent CP were 1.7 times higher in countries where its use is legal (duRivage et al., 2015). This in turn explains why cultural norms may be either risk factors or protective factors in the context of child maltreatment (Witt, Rassenhofer, Pillhofer, Plener, & Fegert, 2013). Therefore, legislation might be an effective measure to diminish the exposure toward adversity and promote resilience on a societal level, reaching a wide range of people.

Participants with positive or negative attitudes toward CP did not differ in regard to their own experiences of CP, except for being slapped in the face. When the different forms of CP were categorized into lighter and more severe forms of CP, it becomes clear that the endorsement of CP was especially associated with the experience of more severe forms of CP. These results, therefore, suggest that this form of CP seems to be especially detrimental. Other studies also provided evidence that having experienced certain forms of CP is associated with supporting CP. Ateah and Parkin (2002) reported that those being spanked were more likely to agree with the idea that CP is a necessary measure in disciplining children in contrast to individuals who reported other forms of CP. Bell and Romano (2012) showed in their sample of Canadian nonparents, that having experienced violence in one's childhood was associated with less favorable attitudes toward spanking in general. Yet, those who experienced CP in childhood and more parental warmth reported more favorable attitudes toward spanking (Bell & Romano, 2012). The link between experiences of different types of CP and attitudes toward the use of CP in interaction with a range of factors, such as parental warmth, should be examined in future studies.

Limitations

Some limitations have to be considered. It has to be stated that in this study only attitudes in the second generation of the cycle of violence were examined and no actual behavior was assessed. Therefore, some of the participants may have stated favorable attitudes toward CP, but never engaged in

CP. Yet, studies show that attitudes are highly linked with actual behavior (Bussmann et al., 2011; Clement & Chamberland, 2014; Gagne et al., 2007), therefore making actual engagement in CP in participants with positive attitudes very likely. However, attitudes were assessed using only three items. The wording of items was also somewhat negative. Therefore, results may be biased because of answers of social desirability, especially considering the ban of CP in Germany in 2000. In addition, some people might oppose attitudinally but still may engage in CP, for example, as a reaction in the heat of the moment. Furthermore, only attitudes toward CP were assessed. Assessment of whether participants rather preferred non-violent techniques might have put results into perspective, as studies suggest that, regardless of whether CP is legal, parents rather prefer to talk to their children (Bussmann et al., 2011). As own experiences of CP have been assessed retrospectively, recall biases cannot be ruled out completely. In regard to causality, it has to be stated that the study is cross sectional and, therefore, no causal interpretations can be drawn, even though the timely sequel of childhood experiences of CP may suggest causality. In addition, it has to be considered that the present study only assessed experiences of CP and no other types of child maltreatment that usually co-occur (Herrenkohl & Herrenkohl, 2009) and may also account for future use of CP. Furthermore, our study did not include a measure to assess resilience that might be one potential explanation for exiting the cycle of violence.

Conclusion

These results provide useful information on where specific prevention strategies should be applied to further decrease the use of CP. The majority of the population opposes the use of CP. Those who do support CP, more often report own experiences of CP in their childhood. Of those who have experienced CP in their childhood, almost 50% are able to break the cycle of violence and now oppose the use of CP. Factors that are associated with exiting the cycle of violence are female gender and younger age. The fact that younger age was associated with resilience might be linked to cultural norms in the form of the legal ban of CP. Generally, legal measures in combination with information about the legal status might be an effective measure to tackle the cycle of violence on a societal level by changing a society's climate toward opposing violent child rearing. In addition, different forms of CP in combination with other factors, such as experienced parental warmth seem to produce differential outcomes with regard to attitudes toward the use of CP and should, therefore, be examined in future studies.

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