

Parental Styles and Harsh Parenting in a Sample of Mexican Women: A Structural Model

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Abstract

One-hundred and fifty Mexican women were interviewed in regard to their parental beliefs and practices, their level of depression, their degree of autonomy, how much they punished their children, and their perceptions about the effects of child punishment. Factors representing such constructs were specified within a structural equations model, and their relations were calculated. Results revealed that an authoritarian parental style had a significant, positive and direct effect on punishing children, but the authoritative style did not. The level of women's depression, as well as the perception of punishment benefits, positively influenced child punishment, while the perception of punishment costs negatively affected harsh parenting. In turn, disciplinary parental beliefs positively affected authoritarian style and negatively affected women's autonomy in family decisions, while this autonomy inhibited authoritarian parenting.

Keywords: Child punishment; parental styles; depression.

Estilos de Crianza y Paternidad Punitiva en una Muestra de Mujeres Mexicanas: Un Modelo Estructural

Compendio

Entrevistamos 150 madres mexicanas para estudiar sus creencias, sus prácticas de crianza, sus niveles de depresión, su grado de autonomía, el castigo físico que daban a sus hijos y su percepción acerca de la efectividad del mismo. Especificamos factores que representaban dichos constructos y estimamos su relación dentro de un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales. Los resultados del modelo mostraron que un estilo autoritario tiene efecto en la crianza punitiva de los hijos e hijas; efecto que no produjo el estilo de autoridad. El nivel de depresión y las percepciones de los beneficios del castigo propiciaron el castigo de las madres hacia los niños y las niñas. A su vez, las creencias disciplinarias influyeron en el estilo autoritario y en la autonomía y participación de las madres en las decisiones de la casa, en tanto que esta autonomía inhibió los niveles de autoritarismo materno.

Palabras clave: Castigo a los niños y niñas; estilos de crianza; depresión.

According to contemporary research, the use of physical punishment affects children's physical and emotional well-being. Punishment negatively influences children's self-esteem, increases their school failure, and leads them to antisocial and criminal behavior (Simons, Beaman, Conger, & Chao, 1993; Widom, 1989). It also inhibits the development of pro-social competencies, which are frequently replaced by aggressive behaviors (Iverson & Segal, 1992). According to Simons, Whitbeck, Conger and Chin-In (1991) the relentless and sometimes extreme forms of punishment delivered to children can be

considered "harsh parenting", a term proposed by these authors. Harsh parenting therefore includes punitive parenting practices from frequent use of physical punishment to escalated physical abuse.

Significant effort has been invested in studying the determinants of harsh parenting throughout the world. Although our knowledge of these determinants has dramatically increased in the last decades, we are still far from a full understanding of the causes –and remedies– of such a social problem. Models of a salient explanatory power are required in order to produce significant contributions to such understanding. In addition, the problem of child abuse should be studied in all cultures and societies. This paper presents a model in which parental beliefs, parental styles of child rearing, levels of depression and woman's autonomy and participation in family decisions were specified and tested as predictors of harsh parenting in Mexico.

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Harsh Parenting and Parental Disciplinary Beliefs

Physical punishment is strongly embedded in cultures and parental practices throughout the world- including Mexico, our country of interest. According to those cultural contexts and individual practices, slapping, spanking, and other punitive actions are appropriate forms of controlling children's behavior (Díaz-Guerrero, 1975; Straus & Camacho, 1993). Straus (1994) argues that corporal punishment reflects the almost overwhelming approval in almost all Americans, and it is almost extended to most western countries. Swedes still believe that children should be corporally punished (Haeuser, 1990).

Culture permeates the perception of parental abusive behavior. According to Díaz-Guerrero (1975) and Fry (1993), in Mexico, physical punishment is accepted not only as an appropriate disciplinary method, but also as a positive practice which creates good citizens (Frías & Sales, 1997). Although this description could not be generalized to every Mexican community (see Fry, 1993), it is a fact that broad sectors of the Mexican society conceive physical punishment as beneficial for childrearing (Corral, Frías, Romero, & Muñoz, 1995). As a result of the social desirability of disciplinary punishment, some parents believe in the goodness of punitive parental behavior. Frías and McCloskey (1998) reported that disciplinary beliefs were among the most important determinants of child punishment in Mexican families. These effects were also found by Simons et al. (1993), who indicate that parental beliefs were the most significant predictors of harsh parenting.

Although cultural attitudes exert a significant influence on parental beliefs regarding child rearing, the personal experience of parenthood could also affect the development of such parental perceptions and beliefs. According to this idea, perceptions regarding the "positive" effects of punishing children not only have a conventional basis (i.e., the social desirability of disciplinary child rearing), but a parent could also believe that hitting or spanking a child is "useful" or results in a "benefit" because he or she has experienced it (i.e., stopping child's misbehavior).

Therefore, in order to investigate the relationship between parental disciplinary beliefs and practices, one should specify two sources of parental beliefs, cultural and individual, which, according to some authors, represent "symbolic" and "instrumental" beliefs (Cary, 1993; Gibson, 1966). Symbolic beliefs are based on social conventions or community norms, rather than on a direct interaction with objects or events (Gibson, 1966). They represent individual identity and values, providing social identification (Abelson & Prentice, 1990). In turn, instrumental beliefs,

which are based on qualitative or physical affinity of individuals with objects or events, are utilitarian attitudes, because they are related to benefits and costs one assigns to personal practices (Gibson, 1966). In summary, a symbolic belief is based on what the social group determines as appropriate, while an instrumental belief emerges from the utility or cost an individual sees from his/her interaction with objects or events. A symbolic disciplinary belief is manifested, as thinking that hitting a child is appropriate because the social group prescribes it. An instrumental belief would result from perceiving that punishing a child has a "positive" effect (i.e., stopping misbehavior).

Parental styles and harsh parenting

In addition to those beliefs, parental styles have been mentioned as significant predictors of harsh parenting. Frías and McCloskey (1998), in a study of determinants of harsh parenting, found that authoritarian styles constituted a unitary construct formed from punitive beliefs and practices. These authors concluded that such authoritarianism is a significant predictor of harsh parenting.

Baumrind (1991) proposed authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive typologies as models of parenting styles. Robinson, Mandlego, Olsen, and Hart (1995) studied the global dimensions of these styles and structured the three factors with specific practices. Authoritative parenting consisted of factors of expression of affection, rational guidance, and encouragement of independence. The authoritarian style is indicated by factors of authoritarian control such as verbal hostility, corporal punishment, and nonreasoning punitive strategies. Permissive parenting confirmed factors such as ignoring misbehavior, and lack of follow through.

It is well documented that the interactions between abusive parents and their children are less positive, responsive and supportive than those of non-abusive parents (Belsky, 1993). In addition, abusive parents rely more in physical punishment and negative acts as disciplinary strategy (Milner & Chilamkurti, 1991), and sustain more rigid expectations regarding their children's behavior (Milner & Robertson, 1990).

Woman's autonomy in family decisions

Parental conflict or cohesion is also related to child abuse. Mollerstrom, Patchner and Milner (1992) investigated the relationship between family social environment and physical child abuse potential. They found a strong relationship between family cohesion, family expressiveness, marital satisfaction and physical abuse;

concluding that the lack of positive interactional patterns is related to abuse potential. Farrell and Barnes (1994), in turn, point out that the more the autonomy of family members (mothers included) the better they function. This autonomy inhibits child abuse. In this sense, allowing children and mothers to develop autonomy (i.e., to make decisions, to express freely) promote a positive family environment decreasing the likelihood of harsh parenting.

Belsky, Youngblade and Pensky (1990) in a study of intergenerational transmission of family violence found that a positive partner relationship ameliorated negative parenting. This mediating effect was also shown in early studies (Crockenberg, 1987; Quinton, Rutter, & Little, 1984); parents with a history of problematic childhood and high supportive partnership decreased their actual harsh or punitive parenting.

Depression and Child Punishment

Harsh parenting has also been linked to depression. Webster-Stratton (1990) refers to depression as one of the factors that increase parent-child aggressive interactions. This author indicates that depressed mothers spank and criticize their children, even if they do not exhibit misbehavior.

Moreover, it has been found that depressed mothers are more disruptive, hostile, and rejecting of their children than non-depressed mothers (Orvaschel, Weissman, & Kidd, 1980). Teti and Gelfand (1992) pointed out that depressed women show low competencies in their maternal role and express less readability in their abilities to respond to their children's demands. Simons et al. (1993) tested a social-ecological model of harsh parenting, and in a path analysis found a direct effect of depression on harsh parenting.

The aforementioned factors should interrelate with each other. Within the complex network of family interactions, culturally and individually-based beliefs regarding physical punishment, woman's autonomy and participation in family decisions, parental styles and levels of parental depression, affect harsh parenting, and influence each other as well. This study presents a model of relationships between those factors and the practice of child punishment in a Mexican community.

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty mothers living in Hermosillo, a northwestern middle-sized Mexican city, were interviewed.

Half of them were women, who had been referred, as child abusers, to the Sonora State Child Protection Agency (SECPA), during 1997. These women were from poor families, living at Hermosillo's periphery. The other half consisted of non-referred women, forming a control group, matched to the referred women's group in terms of economic income, educational level, number of children, and mothers' and children's age. In both groups, women had at least one child who was younger than eighteen years. Therefore, referred and control mothers were women living in low-class families. Matching both groups had the objective of controlling the effect of these socio-demographic characteristics, which, according to pertinent literature, are significantly related to child abuse (Gelles, 1992; Straus & Smith, 1990). The demographic characteristics of the referred group were analyzed. Subsequently, a neighborhood with the same demographic characteristics of the referred group was chosen, and we interviewed women with children of the same age of the reported. The two groups of women were interviewed in their homes during the months of January through July, 1998. The interview's focus was on women's behavior towards the child who had been the object of abuse. In the case of the control group, a randomly selected child was the point of reference in regard to mothers' behavior in the interview.

The average age of the total sample of women was 32.35 years, with a standard deviation of 7.7. The average number of children per family was 3.5 for the abusive family and 3.1 for the comparison families. Children's mean age was 8.2 for the first group and 7.8 years for the second group. The average monthly family income for the referred families in U. S. dollars was \$201.5 (\$10.00 pesos per dollar) and the SD \$129.5 and the mean for the comparison group was \$190.2 (U.S dollars). Demographic information for both the agency-referred and control samples is shown in Table 1.

Instruments

The *Conflict Tactics Scale* (Straus, 1979), the Hamilton's (1980) *Scale of Depression*, and the *Adolescent and Children Diagnostic Inventory* (Baumrind, 1991) used in this study were originally developed in English and translated to Spanish by professional Spanish translators. Our translated instruments were previously piloted in a Mexican population producing adequate psychometrics properties (i.e., reliability, validity; Frías & McCloskey, 1998; Frías, Corral, Arizmendi, & Yáñez, 1998; Frías, Corral, Moreno, & Rodríguez, 2000). A limited number of items from each scale were selected

Table 1
Comparison of Demographic Variables between Mothers of the Referred Group and Mothers in the Control Group

Variable	Group	M	SD	F	p*
Mother's age	Referred	31.8	(8.0)	.70	NS
	Control	32.9	(8.0)		
Monthly family income	Referred	201.5	(129.5)	.53	NS
	Control	190.2	(115.6)		
Daughters and sons	Referred	3.5	(2.0)	2.0	NS
	Control	3.1	(1.6)		
Persons at home	Referred	5.8	(2.8)	3.6	NS
	Control	5.1	(1.8)		
Daughters/sons living at home	Referred	3.1	(1.6)	2.6	NS
	Control	2.7	(1.2)		
Other children at home	Referred	0.4	(1.2)	1.1	NS
	Control	0.2	(0.9)		
Other adults at home	Referred	0.5	(1.1)	3.6	NS
	Control	0.2	(0.8)		
Age of child	Referred	8.2	(3.6)	.20	NS
	Control	7.8	(3.6)		

*The alpha level was set to .05.

in this study because the sample size did not allow the inclusion of a larger number of variables. In spite of the reduced number of items, the scales resulted to be reliable.

Items from Straus' (1979) *Conflict Tactics Scale* were used in this research. This instrument assesses the frequency (0= never, 6=more than 20 times) of violent episodes in the last six months against children at home. These episodes include actions such as slapping/spanking children, insulting/swearing at them, as kicking or hitting children. Straus (1990) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .72.

Items from Hamilton's (1980) *Scale of Depression* were also used in this study, which investigates the frequency of mothers' depression episodes in the last two weeks. Items measured how many times they felt sadness, guilt for things in the past, difficulties at working, and changes in sexual drive. In another study this scale produced a Cronbach's alpha of .93 (Frías et al., 2000).

In order to assess levels of authoritarianism and woman's autonomy and participation in family decisions, items from the *Adolescent and Children Diagnostic Inventory* (Baumrind, 1991) were administered. This instrument includes items -responded to with a 0 (never) to 4 (always) scale - describing parent-child interactions and woman's participations in the decisions at home. Also used in this research were items intended to measure a parental authoritative style. These items, also responded to with a 0-4 scale, describe parents' expressions of affection, rational guidance and encouragement of

children's abilities. In a study by Frías et al. (1998), items from this scale produced an alpha of .60.

In addition, five items from Corral et al.'s (1995) *Scale of Disciplinary Beliefs* (SDB) were used. The SDB assesses parents' degree of agreement with five general statements. These statements refer to the "positive" effects of using punishment as a corrective strategy. They were used as instances of "symbolic beliefs", according to Gibson's (1966) categorization. Responses range from 0 (no agreement) to 4 (total agreement). In a previous study Corral et al. (1995) analyzed the internal consistency of this scale by using Cronbach's alpha, obtaining an alpha of .83, and a confirmatory factor analysis revealed an indication of construct validity given by high and significant lambda weights between the factor studied and its indicator variables.

Mothers' perceptions regarding the use of punishment against their children were also assessed with a instrument developed for this study. These perceptions represent the "instrumental" beliefs contained in Gibson's (1966) classification. Half of the items measuring perceptions (0-4 scale) established that punishment was useful in stopping improper behaviors (perceptions of punishment benefits), while the other half considered that punitive parental behavior could result in harmful consequences for children (perception of punishment costs). Psychometrics properties of this scale are described in the results section. Finally, questions about socio-demographic

variables: age, number of children, marital status, family income, educational level and occupational status of women, were included.

Procedure

The list of reported cases involving child abuse episodes in 1997 was solicited to SECPA. Only “physical abuse” cases where the reported abuser was the mother, were selected. The demographic characteristics of the referred group were analyzed. Subsequently, a neighborhood of the city with the same characteristics was chosen. The two groups of women were interviewed in their homes during the months of January through July 1998. The objective of the study was explained to them and their voluntary and informed consent was asked and obtained. They were informed that they could stop the interview at any time, and that they could refuse to answer any question. The questionnaire was administered by four (female) clinical psychologists, to every mother in a 60-min. session. They were trained in clinical and research interview.

Data analysis

Means and frequencies of observed variables were obtained and reliability analyses for every scale included in the structural model were conducted. Reliability analysis included Cronbach’s alpha, as indicator of internal consistency for every scale. The univariate statistics were

contrasted between groups. An *F* test, comparing the control versus the referred group was carried out, in terms of continuous socio-economic variables, while discrete variables were compared using *chi-squared* tests. Finally, participants from both samples were collapsed for the structural equations model. Collapsing the samples allowed us to test predictors along a continuum of harsh parenting, a more informative analysis than a between-group analysis of variance. By including responses of the referred mothers together with those of the non-referred sample, the variance of our measured variables should increase, and thus our analysis would enhance the correlations between harsh parenting and its predictors.

By using the measurement component of the structural equations model, indicators of construct (convergent and discriminant) as well as concurrent validity of measures are obtained. Convergent validity is indicated by high and significant factor loadings between each construct and its corresponding observed variables, while lower values of covariances and/or structural paths between factors are taken as an indication of discriminant construct validity. Concurrent validity is established by significant structural coefficients between theoretically related factors.

Description of the structural model

Factors included in the specified model were parental beliefs and practices, woman’s participative role in family,

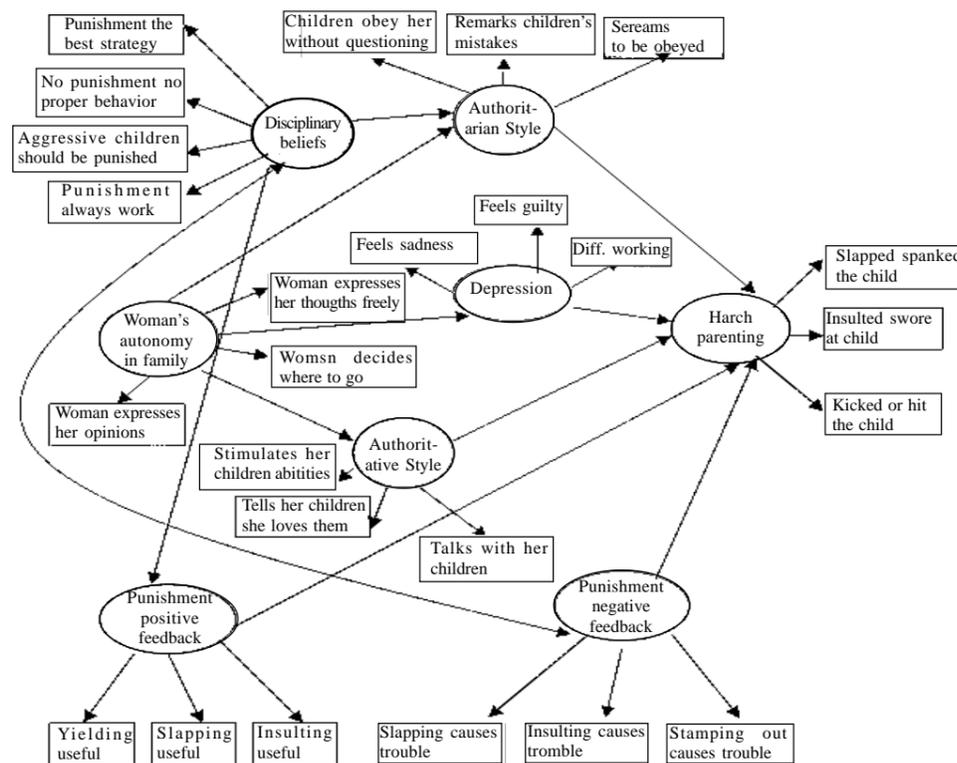


Figure 1. The hypothetical model of predictors of harsh parenting

mothers' level of depression, how much they punish their children (harsh parenting), and the consequences they perceive are associated to the effects of punishing children. Figure 1 shows the specified model of inter-relations.

We hypothesized that, in this model, authoritarian styles, perceptions of punishment benefits, and mother's depression should positively and directly affect harsh parenting. Conversely, authoritative styles as well as perception of punishment costs were modeled as inhibitory and direct influences on harsh parenting. Woman's autonomy at home was modeled as negatively affecting authoritarian styles and depression, and positively influencing authoritative styles, while disciplinary beliefs

were specified as having positive influences on authoritarian styles, and inhibitory effects on woman's autonomy. A negative covariance between disciplinary beliefs and the perception of punishment costs was also specified within this model, as well as a positive covariance between disciplinary beliefs and the perceptions of punishment benefits, and a negative covariance between the two types of perceptions of punishment consequences. A distinction between symbolic (i.e., disciplinary) and instrumental (i.e., perceptions of costs and benefits) beliefs was expected. This should be reflected in the values of the covariances between the symbolic beliefs and the instrumental beliefs. Such values were expected to be lower

Table 2
*Frequency Percentage of Discrete Demographic Variables. Comparison between Control and Referred Mothers**

Variable/Level	Referred (%)	Control (%)	$X^2(df)$	<i>p</i>
1. Marital Status			20.1(4)	0.001
Married	17.0	31.2		
Singled	10.2	2.7		
Concubine	14.9	13.6		
Widowed	3.4	2.0		
Divorced	4.7	0		
2. Women's Occupation			8.7 (5)	NS
Housewives	33.5	41.6		
Auxiliary employees	0	0.6		
Employees	9.4	4.7		
Saleswomen	0.6	0		
Hair stylists	3.3	2.0		
Domestic employees	3.3	0.6		
3. Women's Educations			7.8 (7)	NS
None	1.3	0		
Elementary incomplete	10.7	8.0		
Elementary complete	12.7	18.1		
Junior High incomplete	6.7	2.7		
Junior High complete	13.4	13.4		
High School incomplete	3.3	3.3		
High School complete	1.3	3.3		
College complete	0.6	0.6		
4. Partner's Education			7.8 (8)	NS
None	0.8	2.5		
Elementary incomplete	10.8	10.0		
Elementary complete	5.8	15.8		
Junior High incomplete	2.5	1.6		
Junior High complete	13.3	15.8		
High School incomplete	4.2	5.0		
High School complete	1.7	5.0		
College incomplete	0.8	0		
College complete	2.5	1.7		

*The percentages were computed considering the total interviewed women.

than those of the factor loadings (*lambdas*) of the factor structures for each construct. This indication of divergent construct validity (see Corral & Figueredo, 1999) would support the idea that symbolic and instrumental beliefs are different from each other.

EQS, the structural equations program (Bentler, 1995) was used in the estimation of the hypothesized causal paths. In addition, the models' goodness of fit was obtained from statistical (*chi-squared*) and practical (Bentler-Bonnett NonNormed Fit Index [*BNNFI*], Comparative Fit

Index [*CFI*]). A non-significant *chi-squared* as well as values of *BNNFI* and *CFI* higher than .90 were expected as an indication of the adequacy of the hypothesized model (Bentler, 1993).

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, we found no significant differences, regarding continuous demographic variables, between the referred group and the control group. Thus,

Table 3
Means and Internal Consistence of Scales Used

Scale/Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Alpha</i> *
Disciplinary beliefs	1.6	1.6	.75
Physical punishment is a good corrective	1.3	1.5	
Without punishment there is no children discipline	1.7	1.6	
Aggressive children should be punished	1.3	1.5	
Punishment has always worked	1.4	1.7	
Strict parents make good children	2.3	1.6	
Depression	2.8	4.0	.71
Has felt sadness	4.0	4.8	
Has felt guilt for things in the past	1.8	3.8	
Has difficulties at working	1.6	3.5	
Changes in sexual drive	2.1	4.2	
Woman's autonomy	2.7	1.4	.71
She can freely express her opinions	2.8	1.4	
She can freely express her thoughts	2.7	1.4	
She decides where to go	2.5	1.4	
Authoritarian parental style	2.7	1.1	.60
Children obey without questioning	2.9	1.3	
She constantly points out to her children mistakes	3.0	1.0	
She screams to be obeyed	2.2	1.2	
Authoritative parental style	3.1	1.2	.50
Stimulates her children's abilities	3.0	1.1	
Tells her children she loves them	3.3	1.0	
Talks with her children about their issues	2.8	1.4	
Punishment positive feedback	0.4	0.6	.63
It's useful to scream at her children	0.7	0.9	
It's useful to slap or to spank them	0.2	0.5	
It's useful to insult or to swore at them	0.2	0.5	
Punishment negative feedback	2.3	1.1	.65
Slapping her children can cause them trouble	1.3	1.1	
Insulting/swore at them can cause trouble	2.6	1.2	
Stamped them out of house can cause them trouble	2.9	1.2	
Children punishment	2.0	1.8	.60
Slapped or spanked him/her	2.5	2.1	
Insulted or swore at him/her	3.2	2.2	
Kicked or hit him/her with a fist or another object	0.4	1.1	

* *Cronbach's alpha* was used as reliability indicator

the matching procedure seemed to be effective in balancing mother's and target child's ages, family income, number of children, and family size, in both groups. The discrete demographic variables are exhibited in Table 2. Most of the measured characteristics (women's occupation, educational level of women and their partner) were not significantly different between groups. The only exception was women's marital status, given that there were more single mothers in the referred group than in the control group.

Table 3 exhibits means and reliabilities of scales used in the structural model. The "disciplinary beliefs" scale (values 1=total disagreement to 5=total agreement) produced a mean of 1.6; while a mean of 2.8 episodes of depression experienced in the last two weeks was found in analyzing the "depression" scale. The scale "woman's autonomy" resulted in a mean of 2.7; the mean of the "authoritarian parental style" scale was also 2.7, and the one for the "authoritative parental style" was 3.1. These three scales describe women's behavior and mother-children interactions at home, and have response values ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always). The mean for the "punishment positive feedback" (.04) was lower than the one resulting from "punishment negative feedback" (2.7). These scales, which describe parental perceptions of consequences of punishing children, also included response values ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always). In

table 3 we also show that Cronbach's alphas resulted in values from .60 to .75 for the used scales, with the exception of the scale "authoritative parental style" which produced an alpha of .50.

Table 4 presents results contrasting the two groups of mothers, in terms of the eight analyzed constructs. These were treated as indexes resulting from averaging responses to each scale. No significant differences were found between referred mothers and the control group, regarding their level of disciplinary beliefs, autonomy, authoritarian and authoritative styles, and the positive and negative punishment feedback. The two significant discriminant variables were the level of depression, and the use of physical punishment, which were higher in the referred group.

Finally, in figure 2 we present the results of the structural equations model. High and significant values of factor loadings between each construct and its corresponding indicators were obtained. This is evidence of convergent construct validity for our measures. Since most values of structural coefficients and covariances among factors were smaller than the values of factor loadings, this can be interpreted as indication of discriminant construct validity. In addition, evidence of concurrent validity is seen in high and significant structural coefficients resulting from constructs and their hypothesized dependent factors.

Table 4
Comparison of Variables between Referred and Control Mothers

Variable	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> *
Disciplinary beliefs	Referred	1.9	1.2	2.9	N.S.
	Control	1.4	1.1		
Depression	Referred	2.6	3.1	6.0	0.01
	Control	1.4	2.1		
Positive family environment	Referred	2.1	0.8	2.0	N.S.
	Control	2.3	1.0		
Authoritative style	Referred	3.1	0.8	0.4	N.S.
	Control	3.1	0.8		
Authoritarian Style	Referred	2.8	0.8	1.9	N.S.
	Control	2.6	0.8		
Positive Feedback	Referred	0.3	0.4	0.07	N.S.
	Control	0.3	0.5		
Negative Feedback	Referred	2.8	0.9	0.01	N.S.
	Control	2.3	1.0		
Children Punishment	Referred	1.8	1.9	5.6	.01
	Control	1.1	1.0		

*Note: The alpha level was set to .05.

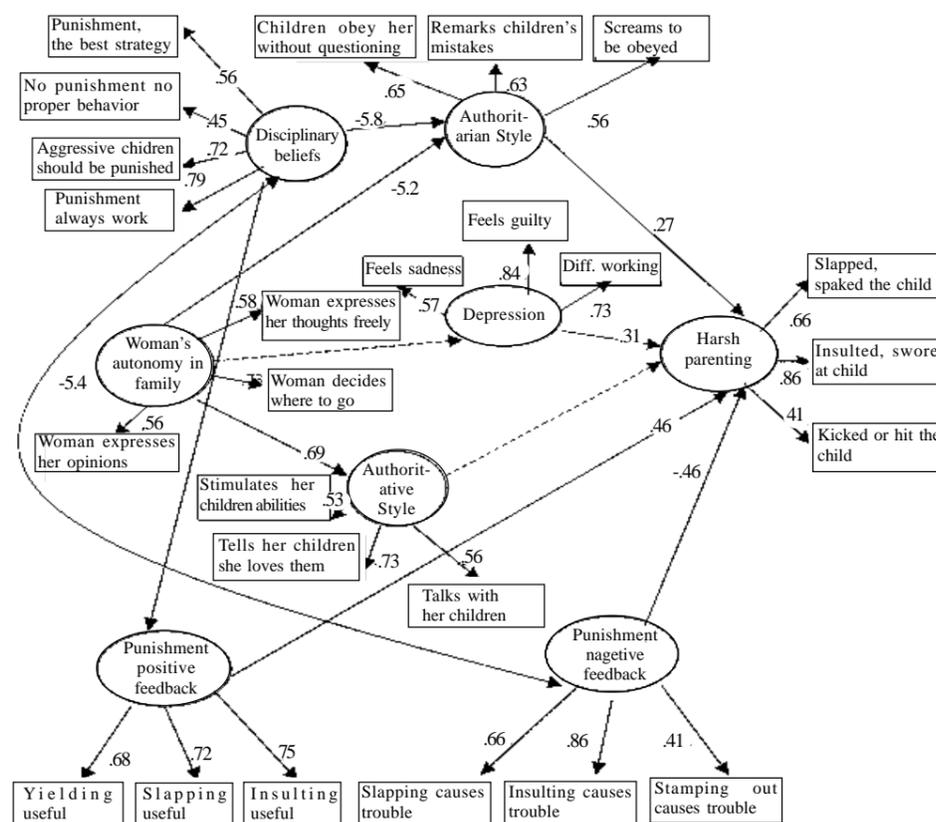


Figure 2. Results of the structural model of predictors of harsh parenting. Dotted-line arrows represent non-significant ($p > .05$) causal effects.

Regarding the specified model of between-construct relations, the authoritarian parental style was significantly and positively affected by disciplinary beliefs, and negatively influenced by woman's autonomy. This autonomy did not affect the levels of women's depression but positively influenced the authoritative parental style. The effects of the two parental styles and the two types of perceptions regarding punishment consequences on child punishment were not uniform; the authoritarian style positively affected child punishment but the authoritative style did not, while in both, benefits and costs perceived consequences of punishment positively influenced child punishment. The specified covariances between disciplinary beliefs and perceptions of punishment cost, and the one between the two types of perceptions of punishment consequences were significant and negative. Finally, the covariance between disciplinary beliefs and perceptions of punishment benefits was significant and positive. The value of the disturbance term (d or factor residual) associated to the dependent variable "harsh parenting"

was .71. Since $R^2 = 1 - d^2$, the R^2 for this model is .50, meaning that our model explained 50% of the variance of harsh parenting.

Goodness of fit indicators for this model provides evidence of its adequacy. The value of the *chi-square* (327.7; $df=312$) was significant ($p=.25$), while values of the practical indices *BBNNFI* (.91) and *CFI* (.92) exceeded the established cut-off of .90 (Bentler, 1993), which indicates that this model is supported by the data.

Discussion

The proposed model of harsh parenting predicted by parental beliefs, parental styles and depression explained a fifty percent of the target-variable variance. Our results indicate that, at least in the context of the studied community, beliefs and perceptions conferring a positive value upon disciplinary punishment, higher levels of family authoritarianism and parental depression are significant predictors of punitive parenting.

In this study, two parental styles—namely authoritarian versus authoritative styles—and symbolic and instrumental parental beliefs regarding child punishment were studied as determinants of physical punishment. Our results showed that a distinction between these two kinds of beliefs exist, since the values of the covariances between the symbolic beliefs and the instrumental beliefs were—in general—lower than the *lambdas* of their corresponding factor structures. This indication of divergent construct validity evidences that symbolic and instrumental beliefs are different, as expected.

In addition, the effects of woman's autonomy and level of depression were estimated. Results showed that the authoritarian style positively and directly affected harsh parenting, which implies that the higher the authoritarian style, the higher the likelihood of punishing children. Since there was no significant association between the authoritative style and such harsh parenting, it seems that, in our sample, punishing children occurs regardless how authoritative a parent might be.

The effect of disciplinary beliefs on perceptions of punishment benefits and costs was, as anticipated, differential. Believing that punishment is an appropriate disciplinary method increases the perception of punishment benefits, and having disciplinary beliefs decreases the perception that punishing is harmful for children. These results are also consistent with Gibson's (1966) classification of beliefs as instrumental and symbolic: Disciplinary beliefs are instances of symbolic beliefs, supported by cultural perceptions regarding childrearing, while parental perceptions of punishment costs and benefits are instrumental beliefs generated from parental practices and their consequences. It is also possible that "symbolic" disciplinary beliefs could be reinforced and maintained by the perceived positive effects of punishment, regardless of their ultimate cultural origin. Culture and experience support beliefs about the positive effects of corporal punishment on children. The perception of abusive behavior as an appropriate and positive disciplinary method increases the chance of using corporal punishment. Straus (1994) argues that corporal punishment is approved in many cultures and it originates its generalized use.

In our model, perceptions of punishment benefits had a significant and positive effect on harsh parenting. Parents who perceived that punishment produced "useful" consequences on childrearing were more prone

to exhibit punitive behavior against children. Therefore, the utilitarian and immediate "value" of being punitive increased the likelihood of using punishment against children.

A negative effect on harsh parenting was found from perceptions of punishment costs, which means that the more harmful consequences of punishment are perceived, the less this punishment is practiced. The effect was anticipated because one would expect that a perception of negative consequences should be associated with a decrease in the levels of punitive parenting behavior (i.e., parents should not wish to injure their children), but also because this perceptual factor is negatively related to the perception of punishment benefits. In addition, the perception of negative punishment consequences also covariates negatively with disciplinary beliefs, as was also anticipated.

Disciplinary Parental Beliefs had a positive effect on authoritarian style and a negative effect on woman's autonomy at home. These results confirm the supposition that parental styles (i.e., sets of parental practices), and woman's autonomy correlate with beliefs on the effect of childrearing practices. Believing in the "positive" effects of punishing children occurs more frequently in mothers who do not express freely their feelings and ideas and who do not make family decisions. The disciplinary beliefs also promote a punitive childrearing style, while (indirectly) decrease the generation of authoritative styles (Frías & McCloskey, 1998; Robinson et al., 1995).

We expected a negative relationship between woman's autonomy and depression. However, that relationship was not significant, meaning that depression occurs independently of the participation of women in making their own decisions and opinions within the family system. Nevertheless, regardless of the origin of depression, this psychopathology is an important factor in the etiology of child punishment. Since depression had a significant effect on harsh parenting, this result would indicate that detecting and treating such parental psychological disorder would be an effective strategy for preventing child abuse.

Our systemic model showed the combined effect of factors, which had previously been studied as separate predictors of harsh parenting. Disciplinary beliefs, parenting styles and depression seem to be salient contributors to the development of parental punitive

practices, at least in the Mexican context. A limitation of our study is that we used a small number of items from the original scales, which could potentially decrease the content validity of our measures. The relatively small sample size was another limitation. These should be considered in future studies regarding the relationship between parental styles and harsh parenting. Meanwhile, our results could be taken into account when planning and implementing preventive and remedial strategies for child abuse and family dysfunction cases.

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