

# Subculture Differences in Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment: College Students Versus Active-duty Military

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**Abstract:** With growing evidence of both short- and long-term detrimental effects of corporal punishment on children, efforts to end corporal punishment are working. However, evidence also suggests that the ongoing incidence of corporal punishment varies across intersectional strata. To more fully understand the variation in attitudes toward corporal punishment across subcultures, a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 factorial vignette design was used to examine (a) whether active duty military personnel, the general population, and college students differ in their attitudes about the acceptability of corporal punishment; (b) variations in attitudes according to ethnic differences after naturally controlling for socioeconomic disparity in the all-volunteer active duty military sample; and (c) whether respondent age, sex, parental status, or education predict varying attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment. Substantially more military respondents (73.6%) than the general population (42.8%) and college student (40.1%) respondents indicated the use of corporal punishment was appropriate in the vignette scenario. Similarly, if faced with the same set of circumstances, 52.4% of military respondents indicated they would spank their own child, compared to 28.7% among the general population, and 34.2% among college students. Respondents' rationales for their responses, implications of these findings, and future directions are discussed.

**Keywords:** Corporal Punishment, Military, Cultural Corporal Punishment, Spanking

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## 1. Introduction

Efforts to end corporal punishment in public schools has gained ground over the past few decades, resulting in laws prohibiting its use in 28 states and the District of Columbia as well as the abandonment of its use by individual school districts in many of the remaining states [1]. Despite this policy shift and a personal petition from the Secretary of Education to state leaders to eliminate the use of corporal punishment in all schools, more than 110,000 students across the country were subjected to corporal punishment during the 2013–2014 school year, according to a letter sent by then Secretary King in November 2016 [1]. Given that efforts to end corporal punishment in the public school system appear to be working, even if at a slower rate than some would like, efforts to end corporal punishment in the home also need to be evaluated. Over the past several decades, research has

identified factors linked to the use of corporal punishment in the home [2–4] and has documented both short- and long-term effects of corporal punishment on children [5–7]. Despite overwhelming evidence that corporal punishment is linked to negative outcomes, national surveys indicate that over 60% of parents in the United States endorse spanking as a regular form of punishment [8, 9].

Slightly higher rates of endorsement have been found among adults who do not have children. For example, a survey conducted in the late 1980s found that roughly 70% of college students believed spanking is an effective form of child discipline, 85% believed that parents have a right to spank, and 83% intended on spanking their own children in the future [10]. Being spanked as a child is associated with the use of corporal punishment as a parent, and over 90% of US college students report being spanked as children [10–12]. Because families are the primary source of childrearing knowledge [13], and normative support for corporal

punishment is typically established prior to one becoming a parent [14], college students can be a good litmus test on the future state of corporal punishment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate whether attitudes toward corporal punishment differ across different subcultures using a sample of active duty military personnel, a sample of college students, and a general population sample. Prior to describing the method and analytic procedures, the relevant literature that informs this study is reviewed.

### **1.1. Sex**

Research findings indicate sex differences exist concerning perceptions and behaviors around the use of corporal punishment. For instance, research examining perceptions of corporal punishment found female observers to be more likely to indicate that corporal punishment was acceptable when administered by a parent of the same sex as the child, whereas male observers indicated that the use of corporal punishment on girls was less appropriate and considered the punishment more severe when administered to a girl by a father [15]. However, college men favored harsher punishment in hypothetical situations than did college women [13]. It remains unclear what may be driving these differences.

Boys are spanked more than girls across all age groups [4, 7, 10, 16, 17], and adult men tend to believe that moderate and severe forms of discipline are more effective than relatively light punishment, regardless of the child's transgression [18, 19]. In an attempt to explain why boys are spanked more than girls, Bryan and Freed [11] proposed that societal acceptance of violence and aggression is greater for males than females, and males' higher capacity for aggressive behavior elicits a higher level of aggression from adults attempting to control them. This rationalization may be especially true among military members, given that those entering the military tend to be more aggressive and hold more traditional beliefs regarding gender roles than do their civilian counterparts [20, 21]. Thus, taken as a whole, it is hypothesized that corporal punishment is viewed more favorably by active-duty military personnel [a predominately male population; 22] when compared to college students and the general population. Specifically, it is expected that military women will support spanking more than college women and women in the general population, and that military men will support spanking more than college men and men in the general population. Furthermore, the use of corporal punishment is expected to be endorsed by a larger proportion of respondents when administered to a boy than to a girl.

### **1.2. Ethnicity/Race**

Ethnicity or race is another variable that often receives well-deserved attention as it relates to the use of and attitudes toward corporal punishment. Compared to European Americans, African Americans tend to be more supportive of spanking [4, 23, 24] and one study found that African Americans are disproportionately spanked in school despite finding no difference in the rate or seriousness of offenses

[25]. Indeed, despite comprising only 22% of the population of students, more than one third of students who received corporal punishment from school administrators during the 2013–2014 academic year were African-Americans [26]. However, some research has failed to find statistical differences in attitudes toward corporal punishment among European Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics [27, 7], casting uncertainty on the extent to which ethnicity or race is associated with attitudes. Due to economic disparities across ethnic groups, it is plausible that social class may be confounded with ethnic differences [28]. In the present study, ethnic and race differences in a military sample are examined, which largely controls for socioeconomic status to determine whether this confound accounts for the ethnic differences that have been found in some previous research on spanking.

### **1.3. Education and Experience**

Correlational evidence has identified education as another factor worthy of consideration when examining attitudes toward corporal punishment, although the findings have been mixed. Some studies have identified negative associations, meaning higher levels of education were associated with less endorsement of corporal punishment [29, 18, 30]. However, others have only found this negative association among those who had obtained graduate degrees [14] or majored in education [8, 13]. In any case, so-called book knowledge may be associated with more idealistic expectations relative to those with hands-on experience. According to Catron and Masters [31], those who lack actual day-to-day child interaction with children and responsibility for managing their behavior over an extended period of time have more idealistic perspectives concerning the use of corporal punishment, which informed my expectation that nonparents are less accepting of corporal punishment than are parents.

Moreover, education is a key indicator of social status, with higher levels of education corresponding with higher social status. The military is a prime example due to the class and education differences between enlisted personnel and officers; enlisted military personnel are only required to have a high school degree or equivalent, and military officers are required to have a college degree [20]. Interestingly, one of the strongest predictors of military enlistment is parental education (children of college educated parents are less likely to enlist), high school grades (those with high grades are less likely to enlist), and college plans [those considering college are less likely to enlist; 22]. Therefore, it is expected education will be negatively associated with negative attitudes toward corporal punishment, implying that officers and college students hold less favorable attitudes toward spanking than enlisted military personnel. Additionally, using intergroup contact theory, which posits that prejudice and judgements are reduced through interpersonal contact and interaction [32], it is expected that respondents are more likely to endorse spanking when their sex, ethnicity or race, or culture matches that of the parent in the vignette.

### 1.4. The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine (a) whether active duty military personnel, the general population, and college students differ in their attitudes about the acceptability of corporal punishment; (b) variations in attitudes according to ethnic differences after naturally controlling for socioeconomic disparity in the all-volunteer active duty military sample; and (c) whether respondent age, sex, parental status, or education predict varying attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment. The following hypotheses will be tested:

H1) Corporal punishment is endorsed by a larger proportion of military respondents than other respondents even when accounting for education;

H2) Education is negatively associated with attitudes toward corporal punishment;

H3) Nonparents endorse spanking at a higher rate than parents;

H4) Corporal punishment is endorsed at a higher rate when administered to a boy than to a girl, and;

H5) Spanking is endorsed by a larger proportion of respondents when the sex, ethnicity or race, or culture of the

parent matches their own than when different from their own.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sampling Procedures and Characteristics

Three distinct samples were utilized for the present study: general population, college students, and active duty military. A power analysis calculation using G\*Power [33], based on a two-tailed alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value of .05, a beta ( $\beta$ ) value of .20, and an outcome probability of .70 [based recent national data; 9], and a small effect size (odds ratio) of 1.30 [34], yielded a recommended a total sample size of 557. Two of the three samples far exceeded this sample size while the military sample had only 420 respondents, which was sufficient power to detect odds ratios of 1.35 and larger with a two-tailed alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value of .05, a beta ( $\beta$ ) value of .20. The sampling procedures for and characteristics of the three distinct samples are briefly described below (see Table 1 for complete descriptive statistics). These data were collected as part of a larger data collection effort. Participants were invited to answer questions pertaining to research on family issues concerning parenting and sexual matters.

Table 1. Sample Demographics.

Characteristic	General Population (n = 732)		College Students (n = 1,357)		Active Duty Military (n = 420)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender						
Female	422	57.7	968	60.4	172	40.7
Male	303	41.4	366	22.8	245	58.3
Other	7	1.0	23	1.7	4	1.0
Race/ethnicity						
White/Non-Hispanic	545	74.5	1095	80.7	279	66.3
Black/ Non-Hispanic	56	7.7	78	5.7	54	12.8
Hispanic	42	5.7	58	4.3	43	10.2
Asian	43	5.9	56	4.1	14	3.3
Pacific Islander	30	4.1	36	2.7	15	3.6
Mixed	16	2.2	32	2.4	16	3.8
Relationship Status						
Married	405	55.3	65	4.9	229	54.5
Single	121	16.5	668	50.2	97	23.1
In relationship but not married	111	15.2	584	43.9	62	14.8
Separated	11	1.5	3	0.2	5	1.2
Divorced	69	9.4	9	0.7	25	6.0
Widowed	15	2.0	2	0.2	2	0.5
Children status						
No children	174	23.8	1270	93.6	205	48.7
One child	153	20.9	38	2.8	63	15.0
Two or more children	405	55.3	49	3.6	153	36.3
Highest level of completed education						
Doctorate or professional degree	22	3.0	4	0.3	5	1.2
Master's degree	96	13.1	4	0.3	44	10.5
Bachelor's degree	210	28.7	89	6.6	86	20.5
Associate's degree	96	13.1	44	3.2	59	14.0
Attended college, no degree	226	30.9	939	69.2	133	31.6
High school graduate	79	10.8	275	20.3	91	21.7
Less than a high school education	3	0.4	1	0.1	2	0.5

#### 2.1.1. General Population

Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk)—which is a reliable, cost effective, and superior online recruitment strategy when compared to the use of Listservs and Facebook [35, 36]—

was used to obtain data from 732 respondents between 18 and 87 ( $M = 43.2$ ,  $SD = 13.3$ ) years of age. The majority were female (57.7%) and Caucasian (74.5%); other ethnic groups represented in the sample included non-Hispanic

Black (7.7%), Asian (5.9%), Hispanic (5.7%), Pacific Islander (4.1%), and mixed ethnicity (2.2%). Three-quarters of the sample were parents, including 55.3% with two or more children, 20.9% with one child; 23.8% had no children. More than half (55.3%) were married, 16.5% were single, 15.2% were in a relationship but not married, 9.4% were divorced, 2.0% were widowed, and 1.5% were separated.

### 2.1.2. College Students

A simple random sampling technique was employed at a Southern land-grant university using e-mail addresses of all undergraduate students enrolled during the Fall 2016 semester, which was obtained via an open-records request. The only exclusion criterion for the college sample was any history of military training (e.g., ROTC, active duty military service, reserve military service, or National Guard military service). Three large email campaigns of 2,000 email addresses each were disseminated with a \$5 Starbucks gift card incentive offered to the first 50 respondents of each campaign. These sampling procedures yielded a 22.6% response rate resulting in 1,357 college student participants between 17 and 73 ( $M = 20.9$ ,  $SD = 4.8$ ) years of age. The majority were female (60.4%) and Caucasian (80.7%); no other ethnicities exceeded 5.7% of the sample. About half of respondents were single (50.2%); other relationship statuses represented in the sample included being in a committed relationship but not married (43.9%), married (4.9%), and less than 2% of participants identified as divorced (0.7%), separated (0.2%), or widowed (0.2%). The overwhelming majority did not have a child (93.6%), 2.8% had one child, and 3.6% had two or more children.

### 2.1.3. Military Personnel

Active duty military personnel ( $n = 420$ ) were collected through Qualtrics, a survey technology solution which uses online marketing research panels and social media to gain data from targeted research samples. Active duty status in the U.S. military was the only inclusion criterion. Participants ranged from 18 to 61 ( $M = 29.4$ ,  $SD = 9.3$ ) years of age. The majority were male (58.2%) and Caucasian (66.3%); other ethnic groups represented in the sample included non-Hispanic Black (12.8%), Hispanic (10.2%), mixed ethnicity (3.8%), Pacific Islander (3.6%), and Asian (3.3%). Close to half (41.8%) of respondents were in the Army, 23.5% were in the Navy, 22.8% were in the Air Force, 8.1% were in the Marines, and 3.8% were in the Coast Guard. Just over half of respondents in this sample were parents; 36.3% had two or more children, 15.0% had one child, and 47.8% had no children. More than half (54.4%) were married, 23.3% were single, 14.7% were in a relationship but not married, 5.9% were divorced, 1.2% were separated, and 0.5% were widowed.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Factorial Vignette

A  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial vignette was used to examine whether parent sex, child sex, race, and culture affect attitudes toward corporal punishment. A factorial vignette

is a hypothetical situation that depicts a possible real-life scenario that has independent variables randomly manipulated within the vignette across respondents [37]. For example, to examine the effects of sex, race, and culture on attitudes toward corporal punishment, sex was manipulated by randomly assigning one of four possible pictures depicting a father or mother in the act of spanking a boy or girl on the buttock, then asking respondents what they think about the scenario depicted. In addition to manipulating sex, culture and race were also manipulated by randomly depicting a Black or White parent wearing civilian clothing or a military uniform, thereby creating a  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial design that has four factors and two levels of each factor, or sixteen total possible combinations (experimental groups). Each study participant was randomly assigned to one of the sixteen scenarios, and with successful and sufficient random assignment any differences in the aggregated group attitudes can be attributed to the factorial vignette conditions.

### 2.2.2. Open-ended Responses

Inductive content analysis procedures were used to code participants' responses to the open-ended questions [see 38]. Responses were not forced into preexisting categories but rather emerged organically. The first author of this work served as the primary coder, and initially coded approximately one-third of the open-ended data. Then a secondary coder used my set of inductively derived codes to independently code the same responses to test for inter-rater reliability. Patterns of coding disagreements were identified and discussed until consensus was reached, then each coder independently recoded the data. This process resulted in a reliability kappa of .81, which has been characterized as *excellent* [39] and *substantial* [40].

## 2.3. Analytic Procedure

Binary logistic regression models were created for each dependent variable (e.g., whether respondents indicated that corporal punishment was or was not appropriate in the given vignette context and whether respondents indicated that they would use corporal punishment on their own child in the same scenario). The independent variables (vignette parent sex, child sex, race, and culture [military vs. civilian clothing]) were forced into the models. Then the interaction between vignette character and respondent sex, as well as between vignette character race and respondent race, were entered into the models using a forward stepwise procedure to evaluate whether responses varied by racial or sex likeness; that is, to test for attribution bias, which in this study would be the tendency for people to view corporal punishment more (or less) favorably when administered by someone of their own race or sex than by someone of another race or sex. Finally, respondent characteristics (age, sex, parental status, and education) were forced into the models, although education was excluded from the college sample due to lack of variation among the sample.



**Figure 1.** Visual cues for race and culture presented with the corresponding vignette scenario.

**Table 2.** Percentage of Responses to “Is Corporal Punishment Appropriate or Not Appropriate?” Within Each Level of the Independent Variables.

Independent variable	General Population (n = 732)			College Students (n = 1,357)			Military (n = 420)		
	n	Not appropriate	Appropriate	n	Not appropriate	Appropriate	n	Not appropriate	Appropriate
Parent sex									
Male	356	57.6	42.4	690	41.0	59.0	222	31.1	68.9
Female	376	56.9	43.1	643	40.6	59.4	198	21.2	78.8
Child sex									
Male	340	54.1	45.9	655	38.5	61.5	208	26.4	73.6
Female	392	59.9	40.1	678	43.1	56.9	212	26.4	73.6
Culture									
Military	352	58.2	41.8	662	40.5	59.5	212	23.1	76.9
Non military	380	56.3	43.7	671	41.1	58.9	208	29.8	70.2
Race									
Black	373	57.6	42.4	664	40.7	59.3	217	25.3	74.7
White	359	56.8	43.2	669	41.0	59.0	203	27.6	72.4

**Table 3.** Percentage of Responses to “Would you spank your child?” Within Each Level of the Independent Variables.

Independent variable	General population (n = 732)			College students (n = 1,357)			Military (n = 420)		
	n	No	Yes	n	No	Yes	n	No	Yes
Parent sex									
Male	340	68.5	31.5	690	66.5	33.5	222	51.8	48.2
Female	376	73.9	26.1	643	67.7	32.3	198	42.9	57.1
Child sex									
Male	340	68.5	31.5	655	38.5	61.5	208	47.1	52.9
Female	392	73.7	26.3	678	43.1	56.9	212	48.1	51.9
Culture									
Military	352	70.7	29.3	662	68.6	31.4	212	47.6	52.4
Non military	380	71.8	28.2	671	65.6	34.4	208	47.6	52.4
Race									
Black	373	73.2	26.8	664	67.9	32.1	217	47.0	53.0
White	359	69.4	30.6	669	66.2	33.8	203	48.3	51.7

### 3. Results

Overall, 73.6% of military respondents indicated that the use corporal punishment in the vignette was appropriate, which was a substantially higher rate than the general population (42.8%), and college students (40.1%),  $\chi^2(2, N = 2,485) = 110.05, p < .001, \phi = .21$ . Similarly, 52.4% of military respondents indicated they would spank their own child given the same scenario, which again was a substantially higher rate than general population (28.7%) and college students (32.4%),  $\chi^2(2, N = 2,485) = 71.12, p < .001, \phi = .17$ . Complete descriptive results are presented in Tables 2 & 3.

Binary logistic regression models (see Tables 4 & 5) were constructed to assess the effect that the contextual variables had on respondents' support for the use of corporal punishment. Military respondents were the only group that tended to vary within the experimental groups according to which version of the vignette was presented. For example, those who read about a mother were almost twice as likely to say it was appropriate to spank the child than were those who read about a father. Similarly, those who saw the parent in a military uniform were 1.9 times more likely to say it was appropriate to spank the child than were those who saw a parent in civilian clothing.

*Table 4. Binary Logistic Regression Predicting the Perceived Appropriateness of Corporal Punishment.*

Predictor	General Population (n = 732)					College Students (n = 1,357)					Military (n = 420)				
	B	SE	p	OR	95% CI	B	SE	p	OR	95% CI	B	SE	p	OR	95% CI
Race <sup>(Black)</sup>	0.03	0.16	.841	1.03	[0.76, 1.40]	0.01	0.11	.950	1.01	[0.81, 1.26]	-0.12	0.23	.604	0.89	[0.56, 1.40]
Culture <sup>(military)</sup>	0.04	0.15	.798	1.04	[0.77, 1.41]	-0.02	0.11	.870	0.98	[0.79, 1.23]	-0.48	0.24	.046	0.62	[0.39, 0.99]
Parent <sup>(father)</sup>	0.04	0.16	.820	1.04	[0.76, 1.40]	0.04	0.11	.738	1.04	[0.83, 1.30]	0.63	0.24	.008	1.88	[1.18, 3.00]
Child <sup>(son)</sup>	-0.24	0.16	.125	0.79	[0.58, 1.07]	-0.18	0.11	.124	0.84	[0.67, 1.05]	-0.08	0.24	.720	0.92	[0.58, 1.46]
Respondent characteristics															
Age	-0.01	0.01	.361	0.99	[0.98, 1.01]	-0.06	0.02	.001	0.94	[0.91, 0.98]	0.00	0.02	.997	1.00	[0.97, 1.03]
Education	-0.09	0.03	.004	0.91	[0.86, 0.97]	—	—	—	—	—	-0.11	0.05	.037	0.90	[0.81, 0.99]
Female <sup>(male)</sup>	-0.29	0.16	.069	0.75	[0.55, 1.02]	-0.21	0.13	.112	0.81	[0.63, 1.05]	0.00	0.25	.999	1.00	[0.62, 1.68]
Children <sup>(no children)</sup>															
One child	-0.10	0.25	.698	0.91	[0.56, 1.47]	0.19	0.36	.586	1.21	[0.60, 2.43]	-0.73	0.33	.025	0.48	[0.26, 0.91]
Two or more children	0.19	0.22	.382	1.21	[0.79, 1.85]	-0.08	0.36	.821	0.92	[0.46, 1.87]	-0.04	0.29	.886	0.96	[0.54, 1.70]
Race or ethnicity <sup>(White, non-Hispanic)</sup>															
Asian	-0.25	0.35	.473	0.78	[0.39, 1.54]	-0.50	0.28	.076	0.61	[0.35, 1.05]	-0.39	0.62	.531	0.68	[0.20, 2.28]
Black/non-Hispanic	0.92	0.30	.002	2.52	[1.41, 4.50]	0.67	0.27	.011	1.96	[1.16, 3.30]	0.04	0.37	.919	1.04	[0.50, 2.14]
Hispanic	-0.24	0.34	.472	0.78	[0.40, 1.53]	0.10	0.28	.737	1.10	[0.63, 1.92]	-0.46	0.37	.218	0.63	[0.30, 1.31]
Alaskan, Hawaiian	0.98	0.41	.017	2.69	[1.20, 6.02]	0.07	0.37	.839	1.08	[0.53, 2.21]	-0.27	0.63	.664	0.76	[0.22, 2.61]
Mixed	0.36	0.51	.489	1.43	[0.52, 3.91]	0.60	0.40	.137	1.81	[0.83, 3.98]	-1.13	0.57	.047	0.32	[0.11, 0.98]

Note. Reference category in parentheses. CI = confidence interval for odds ratio (OR).

*Table 5. Binary Logistic Regression Predicting the Perceived Appropriateness to Spank Own Child.*

Predictor	General Population (n = 732)					College Students (n = 1,357)					Military (n = 420)				
	B	SE	p	OR	95% CI	B	SE	p	OR	95% CI	B	SE	p	OR	95% CI
Respondent characteristics															
Age	-0.01	0.01	.430	0.99	[0.98, 1.01]	-0.02	0.02	.194	0.98	[0.94, 1.01]	0.01	0.01	.697	1.01	[0.98, 1.03]
Education	-0.09	0.03	.012	0.92	[0.86, 0.98]	—	—	—	—	—	-0.10	0.04	.026	0.91	[0.83, 0.99]
Female <sup>(male)</sup>	-0.25	0.17	.152	0.78	[0.55, 1.10]	-0.09	0.13	.500	0.91	[0.70, 1.19]	0.26	0.21	.223	1.30	[0.85, 1.97]
Children <sup>(no children)</sup>															
One child	0.10	0.27	.725	1.10	[0.64, 1.88]	-0.22	0.38	.561	0.80	[0.38, 1.70]	-0.23	0.30	.435	0.79	[0.44, 1.42]
Two or more children	0.42	0.24	.079	1.53	[0.95, 2.46]	-0.02	0.38	.951	0.98	[0.47, 2.04]	-0.46	0.25	.059	0.63	[0.39, 1.02]
Race or ethnicity <sup>(White, non-Hispanic)</sup>															
Asian	0.12	0.37	.756	1.12	[0.54, 2.33]	-0.34	0.32	.291	0.72	[0.38, 1.33]	-0.54	0.61	.373	0.58	[0.18, 1.91]
Black/non-Hispanic	0.97	0.29	.001	2.63	[1.50, 4.62]	0.57	0.24	.018	1.77	[1.10, 2.83]	0.34	0.32	.282	1.40	[0.76, 2.61]
Hispanic	-0.74	0.46	.104	0.48	[0.20, 1.16]	0.11	0.29	.710	1.11	[0.63, 1.97]	0.10	0.34	.771	1.10	[0.57, 2.13]
Alaskan, Hawaiian	0.93	0.40	.018	2.54	[1.17, 5.50]	0.48	0.36	.180	1.62	[0.80, 3.27]	0.56	0.57	.331	1.75	[0.57, 5.38]
Mixed	0.55	0.53	.301	1.73	[0.61, 4.91]	0.89	0.36	.014	2.43	[1.20, 4.93]	-0.60	0.54	.271	0.55	[0.19, 1.60]

Note. Reference category in parentheses. CI = confidence interval for odds ratio (OR).

Responses also differed within groups according to respondent characteristics. For example, the general population and military respondents were roughly 10% less likely to indicate spanking was appropriate with each increase in education level. Age was also a statistical predictor among college students, indicating that with each additional year in age they were 6% less likely to report that

spanking was appropriate in the given scenario. Unique to the military sample, respondents with no children were twice as likely to endorse spanking as those who had one child.

Finally, race and ethnicity statistically enhanced the prediction of responses. For instance, non-Hispanic Blacks were roughly twice as likely as non-Hispanic Whites to



indicate spanking was appropriate in the general population and college samples. However, there was not a statistical difference between Blacks and Whites within the military sample. The lack of statistical significance was due to a larger portion of Whites (76.0%) in the military sample who stated spanking was appropriate compared to the White college students (58.3%) and general population Whites (40.4%); whereas the Black respondent percentages remained relatively consistent across the three samples: military (75.5%), student (72.7%) and general population (64.3%). However, taking a broader perspective, Asians and Hispanics

also show a higher rate of endorsement toward spanking in the military sample compared to the other two samples (see Figure 2). It is unclear in this study as to whether the individual is attracted because they are aggressive or if they are socialized to be more aggressive. Moreover, military respondents who identified as ethnically or racially mixed were less than one third as likely as non-Hispanic Whites to endorse spanking. Finally, among the general population, those who identified as Alaskan or Hawaiian were roughly 2.7 times more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to indicate that spanking was appropriate in the vignette.

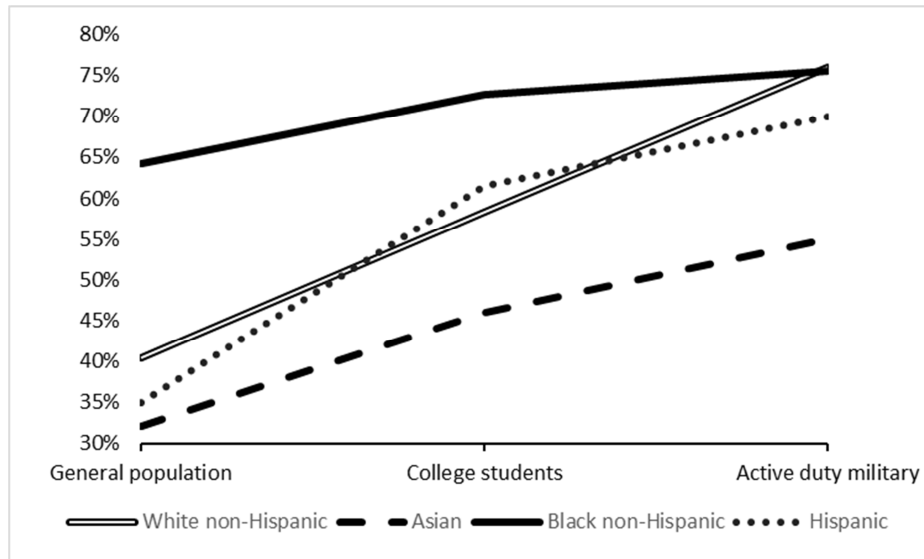


Figure 2. Ethnic differences in favor of corporal punishment across samples.

Respondents were also asked if they would spank their own child given the same scenario as presented in the vignette. Similar to the vignette responses, both general population and military respondents were roughly 10% less likely to endorse spanking their own child with each increase in education level. Moreover, compared to non-Hispanic Whites, non-Hispanic Blacks were 2.6 times more likely and 1.8 times more likely to endorse spanking their own child among the general population and college student sample respectively. Other noteworthy findings concerning ethnicity and race in the data were Alaskan and Hawaiian respondents were 2.5 times more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to indicate they would spank their own child in the general population, and Mixed respondents were 2.4 times more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to endorse spanking their own child among the college student's sample. Again, there was no statistical difference within the military sample according to race or ethnicity.

The open-ended rationales given by the respondents provided a bit more insight as to why respondents did or did not find spanking appropriate. For instance, across all samples those in favor of corporal punishment both in the vignette and with their own child tended to believe that spanking a child was beneficial to the child's learning process particular to understanding the importance of obedience, consequences for the child's actions, and instilling

discipline and respect for the child's parent: general (38.5%), college (27.9%), military (53.2%). However, the rationales varied a bit among those respondents who did not find spanking appropriate in the vignette or with their own child. For example, college students (30.1%) and the general populations' (39.1%) most common rationale against spanking was that it was unacceptable. Responses often identified this type of punishment was inappropriate, abusive, and/or stated their lack of belief in using it. For the military respondents (34.5%), the most common rationale for finding the use of corporal punishment in the vignette and with their own child was that the punishment was not appropriate according to the child transgression or "did not fit the crime."

Finally, the rationales offered by the conflicted respondents, those who indicated it was appropriate in the vignette but not when it came to their own child, or those who identified it was inappropriate in the vignette but would spank their child, also differed according to the sample. A little more than one-third of the college students (34.7%) and the general population (36.4%) who felt conflicted about spanking agreed that it was okay for someone else to spank, but not okay for them to do it. Interestingly however, the most common rationale for the military respondents (33.0%) who found themselves conflicted tended to believe that spanking was effective even if they themselves choose not to use it (see Table 6).

*Table 6. Most Common Coded Rationales for Attitudes toward Spanking.*

Qualitative Rationale	General population (N=732)		Student (N=1,357)		Military (N=420)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Supportive of spanking						
Okay for them but not for me	1	0.5	1	0.2	0	0.0
Personal experience	26	13.0	68	15.7	20	9.1
Repetition	34	17.0	64	14.7	49	22.3
Effective	47	23.5	114	26.3	38	17.3
Punishment	25	12.5	25	5.8	10	4.5
Parental right	4	2.0	17	3.9	4	1.8
Learning	77	38.5	121	27.9	117	53.2
Normal	56	28.0	76	17.5	34	15.5
Unsupportive of spanking						
Okay for them but not for me	3	0.0	6	1.1	0	0.0
Personal experience	9	0.0	33	6.1	2	1.8
Effective	33	0.1	55	10.2	14	12.7
Harmful	24	5.9	35	6.5	6	5.5
Ineffective	60	14.7	52	9.6	12	10.9
Accident	36	8.8	31	5.8	13	11.8
Other methods are equally effective	134	32.9	157	29.1	31	28.2
Unacceptable	159	39.1	162	30.1	17	15.5
Punishment does not fit the crime	83	20.4	131	24.3	38	34.5
Begets Violence	32	7.9	18	3.3	2	1.8
Conflicted on spanking						
Okay for them but not for me	43	36.4	124	34.7	22	25.0
Personal experience	12	10.2	35	9.8	5	5.7
Repetition	9	7.6	24	6.7	9	10.2
Effective	28	23.7	101	28.3	29	33.0
Punishment	6	5.1	5	1.4	5	5.7
Parental right	29	24.6	89	24.9	22	25.0
Learning	9	7.6	20	5.6	12	13.6
Normal	26	22.0	36	10.1	8	9.1
Harmful	0	0.0	3	0.8	0	0.0
Ineffective	3	2.5	5	1.4	0	0.0
Accident	2	1.7	4	1.1	1	1.1
Other methods are equally effective	16	13.6	59	16.5	17	19.3
Unacceptable	7	5.9	11	3.1	4	4.5
Punishment does not fit the crime	19	16.1	57	16.0	12	13.6

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Hypothesis Testing

Binary logistic regression analyses was conducted to determine the predictive power of sex, ethnicity or race, and culture, as well as other identified correlates including, parental status, and education on attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment. In support of the first hypothesis, results indicated that military respondents (73.6%) endorsed attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment at a statistically significant higher rate than the college student (59.2%) and general population (42.8%) samples. These findings suggest that military personnel have an overall belief in the use of corporal punishment which, as evidenced by the open-ended rationales, is entrenched in the understanding that corporal punishment produces obedience, discipline, and respect for authority. Partial support of my hypothesis was based on literature stating males [who make up 85% of the US military; 20] are more likely to endorse harsh punishment compared to females [18, 19]. However, it is important to note the military sample used in this study had an over-

powered female representation (40.7%) in which both males (74.7%) and females (73.1%) had the relatively same high rates of endorsement suggesting the finding may be more accurately attributed to a cultural component of the military than to sex alone. However, due to an all-volunteer military female that join the military may be more likely to be aggressive as suggested by Clever and Segal [20]. Additional research is needed to corroborate this finding.

In addition to the high rate of military approval, these findings also suggest an overall reduction in positive attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment among the general population and college student population. For instance, among the general population sample males demonstrated a 47.2% approval rate, while only 39.8% of female thought spanking was appropriate. These rates are much lower than the Child Trends [9] data which revealed 65% of females and 76% of males endorsed spanking which may represent a cognitive shift away from spanking.

Furthermore, the rates of approval were lower among college students in this study compared to the findings of Graziano and Namaste [10]. For example, 59.2% of students in this study stated spanking was an effective behavior modification, and only 32.4% indicated they would spank



their own child. Although these study samples differ (this study included college students regardless of year in school), these results indicate a possible reduction in attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment among college student populations. Additional research is needed to confirm the reduction in attitudes toward corporal punishment among the general population and college students.

Additional statistically significant differences between groups were present in the results according to respondent characteristics. For example in support of the second hypothesis, among the general population and military respondents' education was negatively associated with those in favor of spanking in the vignette and when asked if respondents would spank their own child given the same situation. These findings are consistent with prior research [18, 29, 30] illustrating the importance of continued educational efforts to include curriculum highlighting not only the negative outcomes associated with spanking, but also outlining effective behavioral modification strategies for both parents and nonparents alike.

Unique to the military sample, respondents with no children were twice as likely to endorse spanking as those who had one child. This finding provides partial support for the third hypothesis that nonparent respondents would endorse spanking at a higher rate than parents, as it was expected to be evident in all samples. In accordance to Catron and Masters [31], nonparents may have more idealistic attitudes concerning corporal punishment due to their limited day-to-day child interactions with and responsibility for managing a child's behavior over an extended period of time. Another explanation of this finding is plausible using the intergroup contact theory [32], by which the respondents who are parents were more likely to identify the child in the vignette as their child and consequently decided not to spank. Conversely, those respondents who do not have children do not identify with the child and are therefore more likely to find spanking the child appropriate. It was expected that the college students would not represent this finding as only 6% of the sample were parents, however uncertainty remains as to why this finding was not evident in the general population sample.

The fourth hypothesis that respondents would report higher levels of endorsement when corporal punishment was delivered to a boy than when delivered to a girl was not supported by the data. However, partial support of the fifth hypothesis that respondents would endorse spanking when the sex, race, or culture of the parent in the vignette matched their own was evident. Interestingly however, it was only supported among the military sample. The data revealed military respondents were 1.6 times more likely to endorse spanking when a parent wearing military fatigues was pictured in the vignette provided. Through the use of intergroup contact theory [32], it is plausible that as active-duty military personnel are accustomed to working alongside other military personnel on a daily basis that prejudice, stigma, or bias, associated with military persons (i.e. forceful, aggressive, mean) may not exist among others in the group,

therefore making military respondents more likely to agree with persons from their own group.

Another possible explanation may be due to the comradery of military units and their desire to strengthen cohesion or harmony within the group. This is a prime example of what Irving Janis [41] called groupthink. Janis explains the dangers inherent with this type of thinking can often lead to the oversight of irrational or dysfunctional decision-making. For example, spilling milk on the carpet may very well be an accident, and may even be attributed to the developmental process of a child. Although nearly 74% of the military sample indicated it was appropriate to spank the child, when the question was asked if the respondent would spank their own child given the same situation only 52% indicated *yes*. This reduction in attitudes may be an indication that military members are willing to overlook the irrational decision of another military member in order to create cohesion among the unit or branch, but not be willing to make the same decision when it comes to their own child. Additional research is needed to confirm these explanations.

#### **4.2. Other Significant Findings**

Other significant findings were discovered in the research. For instance, military respondents were the only group that tended to vary within the experimental groups according to which version of the vignette was presented. For example, those who read about a mother were almost twice as likely to say it was appropriate to spank the child than those who read about fathers. This finding may be due to military personnel's adherence to more traditional gender roles compared to non-military personnel [20] resulting in beliefs that all domestic responsibilities, including the raising and disciplining of children, falls to the mother. It could also be due to an inflated machismo among the military which assumes women do not spank as hard as men, rendering a mother's spank more acceptable.

Age was also a statistical predictor among college students and was negatively correlated with spanking indicating that with every additional year in age respondents were 6% less likely to find spanking appropriate. This finding, as it was only found in the college student sample, maybe attributed to the rapid maturity that occurs during the late adolescent to early adult development combined with general college curriculum focusing on individual and child development.

Race and ethnicity was the final demographic variable that produced statistically significant differences among the groups. For instance, Black, non-Hispanic respondents were 2.5 times more likely to indicate spanking was appropriate compared to White, non-Hispanics in the general population, and roughly 2 times more likely than college students. Similarly, Black respondents were 2.6 times and 1.8 times more likely than White respondents to endorse spanking their own child in the general population and college student samples, respectively. Interestingly, there was not a statistical difference among military respondents. Examining the findings within each sample separately, they support prior research findings [4, 23, 24]. However, these results as a whole present a surprising

finding. Due to the inherent control for socioeconomic status in the military sample, it was initially believed that the results signified what was commonly reported as racial differences in attitudes toward corporal punishment may have been more accurately the result of social class or socioeconomic status. However, at closer look, the percentage of Black respondents that endorse spanking remain relatively high in all three samples, while in the military sample White, Asian, and Hispanic respondents all indicate statistically higher rates of endorse toward the use of corporal punishment than in the other samples. This finding presents a need for additional research to explain why an increase in attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment appears among certain ethnicities, but not others in the military. Replication is needed using similar controls for socioeconomic disparities before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

Other interesting findings were also discovered in the data concerning ethnicity and race. For instance, in the military sample White, non-Hispanic respondents more than 3 times as likely to endorse spanking than respondents who identified as ethnically or racially mixed, while in the college sample ethnically mixed respondents were 2.4 times more likely than Whites to endorse spanking. In the general population, respondents who identified as Alaskan or Hawaiian were roughly 2.7 times more likely to indicate spanking was appropriate in the vignette, and 2.5 times more likely to spank their own child than White, non-Hispanics. These results present new findings as no known studies have reported findings concerning attitudes toward spanking among Alaskan or Hawaiian or ethnically and racially mixed respondents, and therefore require additional research to further evaluate and help explain their significance.

#### 4.3. Open-ended Rationales

The open-ended rationales provided a much-appreciated context to the respondents' choices. The most common rationale in favor of corporal punishment was the same across all samples; however, it was provided by a significantly larger portion of the military sample  $\chi^2 (2, N = 854) = 40.44, p = <.001$ . This rationale in particular clearly illustrated the belief that spanking a child is beneficial to the child's learning process particular to understanding the importance of obedience, instilling discipline, and respecting authority. It is not surprising that over half of the military sample that agreed with the use of corporal punishment desires to teach their child(ren) the importance of obedience, discipline, and respect. Military culture is built on the foundational principles of discipline and respect for authority, and active-duty military are held to high standards according to such principles, outlined in their leadership manuals (see FM 22-100, AU-24, RP 0103, CG-28, Navpers 13954). Given that the rationale was provided by the slight majority of respondents in the military may also be indicative of a cultural value that is collectively understood, expressed, and upheld by those within the group further pointing to a cultural norm.

Perhaps even more interesting and revealing was the most common rationale provided by those respondents who

indicated spanking was inappropriate. While college students and the general population respondents both most commonly expressed that spanking was *unacceptable*, military respondents stated the reason they did not agree with the vignette was because the *punishment did not fit the crime*. It seems telling that while two samples denounced the use of spanking the military sample did not state that spanking was wrong, but just not warranted given the simple transgression. Moreover, when examining the conflicted respondents (those who respondent *yes* to one question and *no* to the other) additional highlights were discovered. As college students and the general population samples once again similarly indicated that it was okay for another person to spank their child but not for them personally, military respondents conflict lie in the belief and rationale that spanking is effective.

#### 4.4. Future Directions

This study is unique in its contributions to the examination of attitudes about corporal punishment, but it is also limited in some ways. For example, although the general population and military samples were large and represented the ethnic and racial composition of the respective populations from which they were drawn, the samples were collected using online survey panels, and the study topic which may have attracted persons from those populations who tended to have relatively strong feelings in one way or the other concerning corporal punishment. This form of self-selection may result in a sample not fully representative of the overall general military population or the overall general population, creating the need for careful interpretation.

In addition, the college student sample was recruited from the student population at a southern state university that was not representative of the entire population of college students in the United States on some demographic measures, such as ethnic and racial composition. Given these sample limitations, the findings particular to this sample may not generalize to the broader college student population.

Finally, although there was good variation in the responses provided by study participants, only one relatively mild child transgression (i.e., spilt milk) was presented in the vignette. Responses might have been different if more serious child transgression would have been presented such as stealing, hitting, or even life threatening situations involving running into the street. Thus, additional studies are needed to assess how attitudes vary according to the variety of child transgression parent's face.

Notably, the lack of support for three and a half of the tested hypotheses in this study was not due to a lack of sufficient statistical power. Rather, the lack of statistical support for those hypotheses was most likely due to the nature of examining a unique or divergent sample indicating a cultural component may be responsible, requiring further examination of the military population and or other subcultures.

Limitations aside, our findings suggest that educational needs concerning parenting and behavior modification strategies may be best targeted to active-duty military

members. Continued efforts to educate and share the negative effects of spanking with college students should also be made.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of college student, military personnel, and the general population on attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment extends the existing literature by exploring and understanding unique populations. More specifically, the present study uncovered

a possible cultural component that exists within the active-duty military, and may exist among other subpopulations as well. This investigation suggests a possible reduction in attitudes toward spanking among the general and college student populations and illustrates a target population where parenting and child adolescent education concerning healthy behavior modification strategies are needed. The continued educational efforts to support parents and nonparents with resources about appropriate discipline for children is needed.

## Appendix

### *Demographics*

1. Are you male or female?
    - a. Male
    - b. Female
  2. In what month and year were you born?
  3. With which of the following racial and ethnic classifications do you identify? (select all that apply)
    - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
    - b. Asian
    - c. Black or African American
    - d. Hispanic or Latino
    - e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    - f. White or Caucasian
    - g. Another racial or ethnic identification (please identify)
  4. Select the highest level of education you have completed
    - a. Did not complete High School
    - b. High School diploma (or GED)
    - c. 1 year of college (but no degree)
    - d. 2 years of college (but no degree)
    - e. 3 years of college (but no degree)
    - f. 4 years of college (but no degree)
    - g. Associates degree
    - h. Bachelor's degree
    - i. Master's degree
    - j. Doctorate
  5. Which of the following best describes your religious preference?
    - a. Catholic
    - b. Muslim
    - c. Protestant
    - d. Islamic
    - e. Jewish
    - f. Other
    - g. No preference
- [If A, B, D, E, or G Skip to #6] [If C or F Skip to # 5]
6. Which denomination
    - a. Baptist – Unspecified
    - b. Baptist – Northern
    - c. Baptist – Southern
    - d. Congregational
    - e. Episcopalian-Anglican
    - f. Fundamentalist
    - g. Jehovah's Witness
    - h. Lutheran
    - i. Methodist
    - j. Mormon/LDS

- k. Non-Denominational
  - l. Pentecostal
  - m. Presbyterian
  - n. Quaker
  - o. RLDS
  - p. Seventh Day Adventist
  - q. Unitarian
7. Would you say that you are
- a. Very religious
  - b. Moderately religious
  - c. Somewhat religious
  - d. Slightly religious
  - e. Not at all religious
8. To what degree do your religious beliefs inform your day to day decisions?
- a. A great deal
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Slightly
  - d. Not at all
9. What is your current relationship status?
- a. Single
  - b. In a relationship but not married
  - c. Married
  - d. Divorced
  - e. Separated
  - f. Widowed
10. How many biological, adopted, and/or step children have you parented while they were minors (i.e., 0 to 18 years of age)?
- a. Boys
  - b. Girls
11. With which of the following races and ethnicities do you most closely identify?
- a. African American
  - b. Asian American
  - c. Caucasian, Non-Hispanic
  - d. Native American
  - e. Pacific Islander
  - f. Hispanic
  - g. Mixed
  - h. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
12. Are you currently an active duty serve member in the US military?
- a. No
  - b. Yes
13. What is your current rank?
- |       |       |        |
|-------|-------|--------|
| a. E1 | j. W1 |        |
| b. E2 | k. W2 | s. O5  |
| c. E3 | l. W3 | t. O6  |
| d. E4 | m. W4 | u. O7  |
| e. E5 | n. W5 | v. O8  |
| f. E6 | o. O1 | w. O9  |
| g. E7 | p. O2 | x. O10 |
| h. E8 | q. O3 | y. O11 |
| i. E9 | r. O4 |        |
14. In which military branch do you serve? (allow for more than one to be selected)
- a. Army
  - b. Navy
  - c. Air Force
  - d. Marines
  - e. Coast Guard
15. What year and month did you begin active duty service for the first time?

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