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Harsh Parenting Beliefs as Related to Demographic Factors

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Harsh Parenting Beliefs as Related to Demographic Factors
A Thesis Submitted to the
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By
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Abstract

Parents differ in the extent to which they believe harsh parenting behaviors are beneficial for their children. This study examined whether parents' demographic factors (e.g., ethnicity, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, age, and gender) are related to their beliefs about harsh parenting. Previously-collected survey data from parents ($N = 1,111$) was used for the current study. This data included demographic information as well as a self-report measure entitled "Belief in the Beneficence of Harsh Parenting Scale" (McCarthy, 2014) which was used to measure parents' beliefs about how beneficial harsh parenting is for children. Fathers reported higher beliefs in harsh parenting compared to mothers, employed parents reported higher beliefs in harsh parenting compared to unemployed parents, and younger age predicted higher beliefs in harsh parenting. The relationship between education and harsh parenting beliefs was also found to be moderated by gender with mothers reporting lower harsh parenting beliefs with more education. All other demographic factors were unrelated to parents' beliefs in harsh parenting. Because such harsh parenting beliefs are believed to mediate the relationship between parent demographic factors and harsh parenting behaviors, the goal of such research is to identify factors that could be targeted to improve parent-child relationships.

Harsh Parenting Beliefs as Related to Demographic Factors

Parents sometimes spank, slap, yell at, or otherwise behave harshly toward their child. These behaviors broadly fall into the category of harsh parenting behaviors. Parents also have beliefs about whether or not harsh parenting behaviors have long-term benefits for their children. Harsh parenting behaviors are distinct from harsh parenting beliefs because instead of referring to a specific discipline strategy, harsh parenting beliefs refer to whether harsh parenting behaviors are effective and beneficial to a child (Frías-Armenta & McCloskey, 1998). Parents differ in the extent to which they believe harsh parenting behaviors are beneficial for their children. The use of harsh parenting practices such as spanking is still widely accepted in the United States (Enten, 2014). In fact, according to the General Social Survey, as much as 70% of the United States population still supported spanking in 2012 (Smith, Marsden, & Hout, 2012). Giles-Sims, Straus, and Sugarman (1995) noted that more research needs to be done on the meaning that parents attach to harsh parenting behaviors.

The primary purpose of this study is to assess whether parents' demographic factors are related to their beliefs about harsh parenting. Such demographic factors include parents' ethnicity, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, age, and gender. A secondary purpose of this study is to explore whether parents' gender may moderate the effect of other demographic factors and make harsh parenting beliefs more likely among particular groups of people.

Ethnicity

There are differences between ethnic groups in the way parents discipline their children (Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000). Specifically, African American mothers report greater acceptance and use of physical discipline on their children compared to other

ethnicities (Enten, 2014; Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998). Giles-Sims et al. (1995) examined family characteristics related to spanking rates in preschoolers. They found that African-American mothers spank their children significantly more than mothers from other ethnic groups. Day et al. (1998) also found no difference in spanking rates between European-American mothers and Hispanic mothers. Frías-Armenta and McCloskey (1998) suggested that socialization goals, as well as values of discipline and respect among particular ethnic groups, may explain this relationship. Additionally, Pinderhughes et al. (2000) examined the relationship between ethnicity, parenting beliefs, and discipline responses. They found that African-Americans endorsed more severe punishment of children compared to European-Americans, and proposed that parenting beliefs may mediate the relationship between ethnicity and discipline. Despite this finding, Pinderhughes et al. (2000) did not find a significant correlation between beliefs in the benefits of spanking and ethnicity.

Marital Status

Single motherhood has been found to be associated with higher rates of spanking (Day et al., 1998). Day and colleagues found that unmarried African-American mothers were most likely to spank compared to European-American mothers, married and unmarried, as well as married African-American mothers. Giles-Sims et al. (1995) found that there was no difference between married and single mothers in rates of spanking after controlling for socioeconomic status (SES). Frequencies related to spanking only differed when SES was not statistically controlled, with unmarried mothers spanking more than married mothers (Giles-Sims et al., 1995). Despite these findings, Pinderhughes et al. (2000) found no relationship between marital status and belief in the benefits of spanking.

Educational Attainment

Education level has a fairly established relationship with harsh parenting practices. The prevalence of harsh discipline has been found to be higher in lower educated parents (Jansen et al., 2012; Day et al., 1998) as well as lower SES parents (Giles-Sims et al., 1995; Pinderhughes et al., 2000). Education level is one aspect that is commonly used in figuring SES. Giles-Sims et al. (1995) found no relationship between education and actual spanking rates in parents, but this may be due to rather crude categories of education in the analyses. Contrastingly, Jansen et al. (2012) found a significant negative relationship between education and harsh parenting in mothers, but this same relationship was not found with fathers.

Frías-Armenta and McCloskey (1998) examined how demographic factors may affect the adoption of an authoritarian parenting style. In this study, the concept of authoritarian parenting style was highly correlated with beliefs about the benefit and appropriateness of harsh parenting. The authors found that authoritarian parenting style predicted harsh parenting. They also found that the mother's education level influenced whether she adopted an authoritarian parenting style with lower maternal education level moderately correlated with authoritarian parenting style (Frías-Armenta & McCloskey, 1998). Correlations between father education and authoritarian parenting were not examined. Furthermore, Frías-Armenta, Sotomayor-Petterson, Verdugo, and Ruiz (2004) found that disciplinary beliefs were indirectly related to harsh parenting through authoritarian parenting style. This gives strong evidence that the connection between educational attainment and harsh parenting is mediated by harsh parental beliefs and parenting style.

Pinderhughes et al. (2000) also examined how educational attainment is related to harsh parenting beliefs and did find a significant negative relationship between educational attainment and beliefs in the benefits of spanking for both mothers and fathers. This may be because parents

with low educational attainment do not know of alternative strategies to discipline their children (Day et al., 1998).

Age

Younger mothers have consistently been found to be more likely to spank their children compared to older mothers (Day et al., 1998; Giles-Sims et al., 1995; Jansen et al., 2012). Jansen et al. (2012) found harsh discipline to be more likely in younger fathers as well. Additionally, Strauss (1994), as cited in Giles-Sims et al. (1995) found that this was true even when controlling for the age of the child. Day et al. (1998) suggest this may be due to older parents having more experience raising children as well as more maturity and self-control compared to younger parents.

Gender

Day et al. (1998) and Jansen et al. (2012) compared mothers and fathers on their frequency of spanking, and both found that mothers spanked more than fathers. Interestingly, the effect of many other variables such as low education, younger age, and low family income were shown to predict the likelihood of maternal harsh discipline much more than paternal harsh discipline (Jansen et al., 2012). Pinderhughes et al. (2000) compared mothers' and fathers' belief in spanking as beneficial to children, but found that they did not significantly differ on their belief in spanking, although fathers did score significantly higher in their endorsement of the child's aggression compared to mothers.

Implications

This study intends to expand the literature by examining harsh parenting and harsh parenting beliefs as related to yelling, expressing anger, and spanking instead of solely spanking. Although African-American parents are known to have the highest spanking rates compared to

all other ethnicities, relatively little research has been done on the meaning that parents attach to spanking, and the research that has examined this has found no significant difference in harsh parenting beliefs between ethnic groups. Furthermore, although several studies have examined the relationship between parenting practices and ethnicity, few expand the range of ethnic groups to include more than African-Americans and European-Americans, or when other ethnicities are included, they are combined into an “other” group. This study intends to expand the scope to include more than just these two ethnicities.

No difference has been found in harsh parenting beliefs between single and married mothers. According to previous research by Giles-Sims et al. (1995), the relationship between marital status and harsh parenting practices may be explained better by the stress associated with being a single parent rather than harsh parenting beliefs. Additionally, research on the relationship between marital status and harsh parenting or parenting beliefs has focused on mothers. This study will explore whether similar results will be found with a larger sample that includes fathers.

The research on the relationship between educational attainment and harsh parenting beliefs has had widely mixed results. This may be due to poor or differing methodology. For example, Giles-Sims et al. (1995) separated education into 3 groups: 11 years of education or less, 12 years of education, or 13 years of education or more. Thirteen years is not enough to obtain a college degree, and it can be argued that those who complete college may be different than those who do not. Therefore, this study intends to group parents who have had some college separately from parents with college degrees to see if differences can be found. Further, much of the relevant research in this area has become outdated. This study intends to examine whether significant results can be replicated with a larger sample size. Moreover, employment status has

rarely been studied outside of the larger construct of SES. This study intends to explore whether employment status alone, rather than a composite SES measure, may affect harsh parenting beliefs.

Young mothers have been found to spank their children more than older mothers. Little previous research has also investigated whether age affects the parenting strategies and parenting beliefs of fathers. No research seems to have been done on whether young mothers have different beliefs about spanking or whether spanking behavior may be a consequence of stress or not knowing other discipline strategies. This study intends to begin to fill these gaps in the literature.

Many studies that examine parenting practices focus solely on the mother, as mothers have traditionally been the primary caretakers of children. Fathers' involvement in the parenting role have increased in recent years so their parenting practices and beliefs about discipline should also be examined. Furthermore, mothers have been found to spank more, but no difference in parenting beliefs has been found between mothers and fathers according to previous research. More spanking by mothers may merely be a result of mothers spending more time each day with their children compared to fathers rather than a difference in beliefs. This study intends to fill a gap in the literature by examining this disparity. Similar to Jansen et al. (2012), this study also intends to explore whether gender moderates the effect of the other variables being examined including ethnicity, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, and age.

It is important to understand how parents' demographic factors relate to harsh parenting beliefs because harsh parenting beliefs could explain the known relationships between parents' demographic factors and harsh parenting practices. This information can contribute to existing knowledge on variation in parents' use of harsh parenting behaviors. Further, Milner (2003) has established a social information processing model that explains child physical abuse through

perceptions and beliefs about their children and harsh actions. If harsh parenting beliefs are found more often among particular groups of people, this knowledge could be used in preventive efforts to help individuals learn other disciplinary strategies. Alternative discipline strategies are desirable because harsh parenting such as spanking or hitting is known to lead to negative outcomes, especially if the discipline becomes abusive (Widom, White, Czaja, & Marmorstein, 2007; Gilbert, Widom, Browne, Fergusson, Webb, & Janson, 2009; Coley, Kull, & Carrano, 2014). Ultimately, the goal of this project is to identify factors that could improve parent-child relationships.

Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that African-Americans will report a higher belief in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to all other ethnicities. It is also hypothesized that individuals who are single will report a higher belief in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to individuals who are married. It is additionally hypothesized that individuals with a high school degree or less will report a higher belief in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to individuals who have had some college or more. It is hypothesized that age will be negatively related to harsh parenting beliefs. It is hypothesized that fathers will report a higher belief in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to mothers. Finally, as planned-yet-exploratory analyses, parents' employment status will be explored in relation to harsh parenting beliefs, and parents' gender will be explored as a potential moderator of parents' demographic factors on their harsh parenting beliefs.

Method

Participants

Participants were a sample of 1,111 parents recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). At the time of the study, all parents indicated they were (a) older than 18 years old, (b)

the parent of a child who is currently less than 18 years old, and that (c) their child lives with them at least part time. With respect to ethnicity, 75% of the sample self-identified as European-American, 10% as African-American, 7% as Asian-American, 7% as Hispanic, 1% as American-Indian, and <1% as Pacific Islander. The majority of the sample (64%) identified themselves as married while 14% identified as a member of an unmarried couple, 12% as separated or divorced, 10% as never married, and <1% as widowed. With respect to education, 15% of the sample had a high school degree or less, 42% had completed some college, and 43% had a college degree or an advanced degree. With respect to employment, 55% identified as employed, 20% as a homemaker, 14% as self-employed, 5% as a student, 4% as unemployed, 1% as unable to work, and <1% as retired. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 68 years old ($M = 34.51$, $SD = 8.82$). The sample was 67% female and 33% male. See Table 1 for all frequencies of sample demographics.

The Belief in Beneficence of Harsh Parenting Scale

The Belief in Beneficence of Harsh Parenting Scale (McCarthy, 2014) is a 7-item measure that assesses parents' beliefs about the benefit of harsh parenting. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed to statements about the benefit of different harsh parenting behaviors on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example items are “*Yelling at a child when he/she misbehaves will prepare him/her for the real world*” and “*Getting spanked for behaving badly is good for a child in the long run.*” Internal consistency was found to be in an acceptable range ($\alpha = .85$). Belief scores ranged from 1-7 ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.26$).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from Amazon.com's MTurk to complete a survey on parenting beliefs and parenting behaviors. Data collected on MTurk have been found to be reliable (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) and produce similar effects as face-to-face data collection (e.g., Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013). All participants were informed about the nature of the study and consented to taking the survey. To ensure that participants were parents, participants confirmed they were (a) at least 18 years old, (b) the parent of a child who was currently less than 18 years old, and (c) their child lived with them at least part time. If participants failed any of these inclusion criteria they were automatically exited from the survey.

After it was verified that participants fit all the inclusion criteria, participants completed a brief self-control scale (e.g., Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). This scale is not pertinent to the hypotheses of the current manuscript and is not included in the analyses. Next, participants completed the Belief in the Beneficence of Harsh Parenting scale (e.g., McCarthy, 2014). Then, participants read a brief vignette about a common parenting scenario and responded to questions about the vignette. As with the responses to the self-control scale, the responses to the vignettes are not pertinent to the current manuscript. Afterward, participants reported their demographic information. Finally, participants were presented with debriefing information, which described the study and contained contact information if they had any questions, and were compensated for their participation.

Results

Parents' average agreement to the 7 items on the Belief in the Beneficence of Harsh Parenting scale was the outcome variable. All hypotheses were tested using a Type 1 error rate of $\alpha = .05$. Refer to Table 2 for means and standard deviations of all variables.

It was hypothesized that African-Americans would report a higher belief in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to all other ethnicities. This hypothesis was tested using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). There was not a significant effect of ethnicity on belief in the benefit of harsh parenting, $F(5, 1070) = 1.04, p = 0.39$. A two-way factorial ANOVA was conducted to test the interaction between gender and ethnicity on harsh parenting beliefs. There was not a statistically significant interaction between the effects of gender and ethnicity on harsh parenting belief, $F(5, 1064) = 0.31, p = .91$.

It was also hypothesized that individuals who are single would report a higher belief in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to individuals who are married. This hypothesis was tested using a one-way ANOVA. There was not a significant effect of marital status on the belief in the benefit of harsh parenting, $F(4, 1072) = 0.45, p = .77$. A two-way factorial ANOVA was conducted to test the interaction between gender and marital status on harsh parenting beliefs. There was not a statistically significant interaction between the effects of gender and marital status on harsh parenting beliefs, $F(4, 1067) = 0.82, p = .51$.

It was additionally hypothesized that individuals with a high school degree or less would report a higher belief in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to individuals who have had some college or more. This hypothesis was tested using a one-way ANOVA. There was not a significant effect of educational attainment on belief in the benefit of harsh parenting, $F(2, 1081) = 0.95, p = .39$. A two-way factorial ANOVA was conducted to test the interaction between gender and education on harsh parenting beliefs. There was a statistically significant interaction between the effects of gender and education level on harsh parenting beliefs, $F(2, 1075) = 3.33, p = .04$. Main effects analyses showed that males reported significantly higher beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting compared to females ($p < .001$). Pairwise comparisons

showed that beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting were not significantly different between males and females when they had a high school degree or less. Males with some college reported significantly higher beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting compared to females with some college ($p = .008$), and males with a college degree or more also reported significantly higher beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting compared to females with a college degree or more ($p < .001$).

It was also explored whether employment status would affect belief in benefits of harsh parenting. This was tested using a one-way ANOVA. There was a significant effect of employment status on the belief in the benefit of harsh parenting, $F(6, 1074) = 2.96, p = .007$. A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that unemployed individuals reported statistically significantly lower beliefs in harsh parenting compared to employed individuals ($p = .04$). None of the other groups differed significantly from each other. A two-way factorial ANOVA was conducted to test the interaction between gender and employment status on harsh parenting beliefs. There was not a statistically significant interaction between the effects of gender and employment status on harsh parenting beliefs, $F(6, 1066) = 1.44, p = .20$.

Furthermore, it was hypothesized that age would be negatively related to harsh parenting beliefs. This hypothesis was tested using a Pearson correlation analysis. There was not a significant negative correlation between age and harsh parenting beliefs ($r = -.04, p = .17$). Multiple regression analysis was used to test if parent age, parent gender, and Age \times Gender interaction significantly predicted harsh parenting beliefs. The results of the regression indicated that higher age predicted lower beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting ($\beta = -.09, t = -2.34, p = .02$). The Age \times Gender interaction did not significantly predict belief in the benefit of harsh parenting ($\beta = .19, t = 1.48, p = .14$).

Finally, it was hypothesized that fathers would report a higher belief in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to mothers. This hypothesis was tested using a 2-tailed independent samples *t*-test. Fathers ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.21$) reported significantly higher beliefs in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to mothers ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.25$; $t(1080) = -6.34$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to assess whether parents' demographic factors are related to their beliefs about harsh parenting. Such demographic factors include parents' ethnicity, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, age, and gender. A secondary purpose of this study was to explore whether parents' gender moderates the effect of other demographic factors and make harsh parenting beliefs more likely among particular groups of parents.

Findings and Interpretations

This study contributed to the existing literature by examining the meanings that parents of different demographic groups may attach to harsh parenting, which may partially explain the relationship between demographic factors and harsh parenting practices. This study also improved upon the majority of the studies mentioned by examining harsh parenting and harsh parenting beliefs as related to yelling, expressing anger, and spanking instead of solely emphasizing spanking. Finally, parenting research has commonly excluded fathers and only included mothers. This study aimed to begin to remedy this gap by including fathers in this study and examining whether the effect of other demographic factors on harsh parenting beliefs may be moderated by gender.

This study improved upon multiple studies by including many different ethnic groups and not lumping individuals who were not European-American or African-American into an "other"

group. Although other previous research suggests that certain ethnic groups, particularly African-Americans, do engage in harsh parenting more than other ethnicities (e.g. Enten, 2014; Day et al., 1998; Giles-Sims et al., 1995), we found that there was not a significant relationship between harsh parenting beliefs and ethnicity. This lack of a relationship is consistent with previous research by Pinderhughes et al. (2000). Despite previous findings that ethnicity and harsh parenting practices are related, harsh parenting beliefs do not seem to mediate the relationship between parent ethnicity and harsh parenting practices, and no differences by gender were found.

The lack of gender difference in parents' ethnicity may have been nonsignificant because the number of parents in some ethnic groups of the sample were relatively small. Of the 1,111 participants, only 5 identified as Pacific Islander, 13 identified as American-Indian, 71 identified as Hispanic, and 73 identified as Asian-American. These groups were relatively small compared to other ethnic groups in the sample and may not have been large enough to detect differences. Alternatively, this relationship may have been nonsignificant because there really are no differences in the belief of the benefit of harsh parenting among different ethnicities. Other factors such as regional differences or socioeconomic status may better explain the relationship between ethnicity and harsh parenting practices.

This study also expanded on previous research by including fathers when considering single parenthood. Consistent with Pinderhughes et al. (2000), there was no significant relationship between marital status and harsh parenting beliefs, and no differences by gender. Pinderhughes et al. (2000) suggested that single marital status may lead to harsh parenting because of more stress on the single parent rather than differing beliefs. Because single parents, especially those with low SES, are likely to experience high levels of stress in their lives, they may not have patience for other parenting strategies and opt for harsh parenting which often

elicits immediate compliance, but despite their actions, they may not believe that harsh parenting is actually beneficial to their children.

Previous research on the relationship between harsh parenting beliefs and education has found mixed results. This study improved upon the study by Frías-Armenta and McCloskey (1998) by including fathers when examining the effect of education as well as investigating whether the same results as those found by Frías-Armenta and McCloskey (1998) could be found with a much larger sample size. Contrary to previous findings by Frías-Armenta and McCloskey (1998), Frías-Armenta et al. (2004), and Pinderhughes et al. (2000) this study did not find a significant relationship between education level and harsh parenting beliefs, although a nonsignificant negative relationship was observed. Despite this, we did find that education level was significantly moderated by gender. Consistent with findings by Jansen et al. (2012) who found that more education was significantly related to lower levels of harsh discipline in mothers but not fathers, we found that as mothers received more education, their harsh parenting beliefs went down, but the same effect was not seen in fathers. In fact, harsh parenting beliefs were relatively stable in fathers regardless of education. Surprisingly, Jansen et al. (2012) found the largest disparity in harsh discipline between mothers and fathers in the group with the least education while the current study found the largest disparity in harsh parenting beliefs between mothers and fathers in the group with the most education.

Furthermore, no known studies have examined the relationship between employment status and harsh parenting beliefs outside the construct of SES. This study explored whether a relationship did in fact exist, and we found that unemployed individuals reported significantly lower beliefs in the benefit in harsh parenting compared to employed individuals. No differences by gender were found in relation to parents' employment status

Education level may not have had a significant relationship with harsh parenting beliefs because a majority of the sample was well-educated and had received at least some college education. Differences may have been found if there was more variability in education level in the sample. Another potential explanation is that education level was grouped categorically into three groups. Examining education as a continuous variable may have been a better way to discern how differences in educational attainment may relate to harsh parenting beliefs. Regardless of these nonsignificant findings, it is speculated that gender may have significantly moderated the effect of education on harsh parenting beliefs because of different socialization factors for men and women. Future research should aim to investigate why this difference between mothers and fathers is present. The significant difference in harsh parenting beliefs between employed and unemployed parents may actually be a result of a small sample size of unemployed individuals. Only 40 of the parents in the sample (4%) identified as unemployed so relatively few reports of very low harsh parenting beliefs could have more easily skewed the results.

Although previous research has found a negative relationship between age and harsh parenting (e.g. Day et al., 1998; Giles-Sims et al., 1995; Jansen et al., 2012), no known research has examined whether parents' age is related to beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting. This study aimed to begin to fill this gap in the literature and found that age significantly predicted harsh parenting beliefs. Increases in age predicted a decrease in harsh parenting beliefs. Although the relationship between age and harsh parenting beliefs was not significantly different between mothers and fathers, the negative relationship was stronger for mothers.

This negative relationship between parents' age and harsh parenting beliefs may have been significant because older parents have more experience raising children as well as more

maturity than younger parents. Further, parents who are older may have postponed having children because of academic or career goals and are therefore likely to be more educated and know that parenting strategies other than harsh parenting are more beneficial in the long-term. It also is possible that beliefs and values about parenting can change over time. Unfortunately, because the current study was cross-sectional, it is not possible to tease apart age differences that are due to individuals' changes across time (e.g., maturation) or due to social changes across time (e.g., generational differences).

Finally, many studies that examine parenting have focused solely on mothers. As fathers have begun to share more of the parenting role in recent years, it is important that this gap in the literature be filled, and this study aimed to begin to fill this gap. Contrary to findings by Pinderhughes et al. (2000), fathers were found to have significantly higher beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting compared to mothers. Although mothers have previously been found to spank more than fathers (Jansen et al., 2012), this may be due to the fact that mothers often spend more of their time with children as mothers are still more likely to be the primary caregiver. In other words, the differences between previous studies such as Jansen et al. (2012) and the current study may merely reflect whether a study measured parenting behaviors or parents' beliefs in whether those behaviors are beneficial. The difference between mothers and fathers in the current study may be due to the tendencies for fathers to endorse aggression more often when compared to mothers (Pinderhughes et al., 2000).

It is important to keep in mind that harsh parenting actions and harsh parenting beliefs are not synonymous. Parents may use spanking or yelling because it elicits immediate compliance, but they may not believe these behaviors are beneficial to their children in the long run. Still, other parents may use harsh parenting practices because they do not know other parenting

strategies that may actually be more effective in eliciting compliance from their children. Finally, it is possible for parents to believe that harsh parenting has long-term benefits but nevertheless not use those harsh behaviors (e.g., their spouse does not endorse harsh parenting, parents feel outside pressure to not engage in harsh parenting, etc.).

Implications

It is advantageous to know whether particular groups are more likely to have higher beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting. Harsh parenting beliefs could explain the known relationship between parents' demographic factors and harsh parenting practices, and this information can contribute to existing knowledge as to why some groups may be more likely to use harsh parenting compared to other groups of people. With this knowledge, groups that are more likely to have high harsh parenting beliefs can be specifically targeted by parent support programs so that they can learn other parenting strategies, and parent-child relationships can be improved. Based on the results of this particular study, it seems that fathers should receive more attention because they report significantly higher beliefs in the benefits of harsh parenting compared to mothers, and these beliefs do not seem to decrease with more education like they do for mothers. Along with fathers, young parents should also be targeted by parent support programs so that they may have the opportunity to learn other disciplinary strategies.

Limitations

Although this study contributes to research on harsh parenting and how beliefs about the benefit of harsh parenting may mediate the relationship between several demographic factors and harsh parenting practices, it is limited in some respects. First, we used a self-selected sample of parents from a self-report online survey. Individuals willing to take this online survey are probably different than those unwilling to take the survey. Also, self-reports may not actually

reflect true beliefs, and participants may have wanted to answer in a desirable way, especially when responding to questions of a sensitive nature such as those about harsh parenting beliefs. Second, the sample was mostly white, mostly married, mostly employed, and most had at least some college education. Furthermore, because the study was conducted through an online survey, it is expected that participants were from higher SES backgrounds because they likely took the survey from a home computer. The potentially non-representative nature of the sample may have made it difficult to find differences that may exist in a more diverse sample. Finally, because the study could be completed at home, participants may not have taken it as seriously as they would have if they had taken the survey in a more professional setting such as a research lab.

Future Studies

In future studies, it would be prudent to see if different results than this study can be found with a more diverse sample. Increased sample sizes and complementary recruitment methods for many of the demographic variable subgroups examined in the present study would be the best way to achieve this. Furthermore, future research should examine whether these results would be replicated with in-person research methods such as interviews or in-person surveys. Future studies should also examine parent demographic variables not considered in the present study that may be related to harsh parenting beliefs such as regional differences, age at the time of their first child, intergenerational transmission of harsh parenting, number of children, or gender of children. It could also be explored whether harsh parenting beliefs change over time with maturation or experience raising children, which would require different research designs such as longitudinal studies. Another possibility for future research is to explore whether other factors besides harsh parenting beliefs may mediate the relationship between demographic

factors and harsh parenting practices, especially where considerable previous research has shown a relationship between particular demographic variables and harsh parenting practices. Finally, a potential future next step is to examine why there may be differences in harsh parenting beliefs among different groups. Perhaps different groups are socialized differently or uphold different values that may or may not contribute to harsh parenting beliefs.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to assess whether parents' demographic factors are related to their beliefs about harsh parenting. A secondary purpose of this study was to explore whether parents' gender may moderate the effect of other demographic factors and make harsh parenting beliefs more likely among particular groups of people. Few previous studies have examined parenting beliefs behind disciplinary strategies, and little research has been done in the field of parenting in relation to fathers. This study contributed to filling these gaps in the literature. It was found that fathers reported significantly higher beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting compared to mothers. It was also found that the relationship between education and the belief in the benefit of harsh parenting was moderated by gender with mothers' harsh parenting beliefs going down with more education, but fathers' harsh parenting beliefs staying relatively stable irrespective of education level. It was additionally found that unemployed parents reported significantly lower beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting compared employed parents. Finally, it was found that increases in age significantly predicted decreases in beliefs in the benefit of harsh parenting. Interventions aimed at improving parent-child relationships may be targeted towards young parents and fathers.

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Table 1
Frequency Distribution of Demographic Variables

| Variable | N | % |
|----------------------------|-----|----|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 738 | 67 |
| Male | 367 | 33 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| White | 827 | 75 |
| African American | 110 | 10 |
| Asian American | 73 | 7 |
| Hispanic | 71 | 7 |
| American Indian | 13 | 1 |
| Pacific Islander | 5 | <1 |
| Marital Status | | |
| Married | 706 | 64 |
| Member of Unmarried Couple | 149 | 14 |
| Divorced/Separated | 135 | 12 |
| Never Married | 106 | 10 |
| Widowed | 3 | <1 |
| Employment Status | | |
| Employed | 610 | 55 |
| Homemaker | 221 | 20 |
| Self-employed | 156 | 14 |
| Student | 57 | 5 |
| Unemployed | 40 | 4 |
| Unable to Work | 11 | 1 |
| Retired | 9 | <1 |
| Education Level | | |
| High School Degree or less | 164 | 15 |
| Some College | 467 | 42 |
| College Degree or More | 476 | 43 |

Table 2
Belief Score Means and Standard Deviations

| Variable | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|----------------------------|----------|-----------|
| Gender** | | |
| Female | 3.32** | 1.25 |
| Male | 3.83** | 1.21 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| White | 3.46 | 1.24 |
| African American | 3.70 | 1.25 |
| Asian American | 3.62 | 1.36 |
| Hispanic | 3.38 | 1.38 |
| American Indian | 3.60 | 1.29 |
| Pacific Islander | 3.86 | 0.27 |
| Marital Status | | |
| Married | 3.51 | 1.25 |
| Member of Unmarried Couple | 3.43 | 1.22 |
| Divorced/Separated | 3.38 | 1.23 |
| Never Married | 3.55 | 1.40 |
| Widowed | 3.19 | 0.87 |
| Employment Status** | | |
| Employed | 3.60** | 1.24 |
| Homemaker | 3.35 | 1.25 |
| Self-employed | 3.34 | 1.23 |
| Student | 3.70 | 1.35 |
| Unemployed | 2.99** | 1.16 |
| Unable to Work | 3.33 | 1.47 |
| Retired | 3.71 | 1.38 |
| Education Level | | |
| High School Degree or less | 3.61 | 1.28 |
| Some College | 3.49 | 1.25 |
| College Degree or More | 3.45 | 1.25 |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$