FACTORS AFFECTING THE LINK BETWEEN PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE AND CHILD EXTERNALIZING PROBLEMS IN BLACK AND WHITE FAMILIES

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We examined contextual factors that may affect the impact of physical discipline on later child behavior problems among high-risk Black and White families. We examined race, parental warmth, and early child problems as potential moderators of the discipline–behavior problem link. The sample included 442 White and Black children and their caregivers interviewed at ages 4, 6, and 8 years. Results indicated that physical discipline operated similarly across the groups, leading to increased externalizing problems only when children demonstrated behavioral problems early on. However, while
Recent empirical evidence has spurred debate regarding the ubiquity of the link between parental use of physical discipline and the emergence of child disruptive behavior problems. From a social learning perspective it is hypothesized that the use of physical control by parents leads to subsequent child aggression and other antisocial behavior through universal learning mechanisms including modeling (Baumrind, 1993). The use of physical discipline may be associated with child externalizing problems as both an antecedent to, and a product of, escalating coercive parent–child interactions (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Until recently, an extensive empirical base supported this association across studies. A recent meta-analysis revealed that corporal punishment was robustly associated with a variety of undesirable behaviors including increased child aggression, delinquency, and antisocial behavior, with strong consistency in findings corresponding to medium effect sizes (Gershoff, 2002). However, the robustness and generalizability of this relationship has been challenged. In this study we considered three contextual factors that may influence the link between parental use of physical discipline and child behavioral problems: (1) family race or culture, (2) parental warmth, and (3) children’s early behavioral difficulties.

RACE AND PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

Historically, research on physical discipline, parenting, and child misbehavior has largely been conducted with middle-class European American or White families. Deater-Deckard and Dodge (1997) have hypothesized that the link between parent physical discipline and child externalizing behavior varies depending on the context in which it occurs. They argue that the parent behavior–child behavior link varies across cultural groups and according to the context of the broader parent–child relationship. They studied children from a broad range of socioeconomic levels and found that the relationship between physical discipline and externalizing behavior problems held for White families but not for Black families (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). Controlling for the effects of socioeconomic status, single parent family composition, and child gender, early parental physical discipline was related to greater later teacher-reported externalizing problems for White children only. Similar findings of racial moderation have now been reported by other investigators (Gunnoc & Mariner, 1997; McLeod, Kruttschnitt, & Dornfield, 1994; Spieker, Larson, Lewis, Keller, & Gilchrist, 1999).

These studies have cast doubt on the notion that parental physical discipline causes disruptive behavior problems as a developmental outcome in Black families (also see reviews by Gershoff, 2002; Whaley, 2000). In fact, in their most recent analysis, Lansford,

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1. We use the term *physical discipline* to denote a parent’s use of physical tactics in response to perceived problematic situations with a child; this term is broader than corporal punishment, which involves the infliction of pain or harm to the body for a specific child transgression. Physical discipline may include acts that are not intended to cause pain but are used for physical control (e.g., pushing or grabbing). Previous studies have used the more value-laden terms, *harsh discipline* or *harsh parenting*, to refer to the same types of parental behaviors.
Deater-Deckard and colleagues (2004) reported that the racial moderation effect persisted into the adolescent years, with the experience of physical discipline leading to higher levels of externalizing behavior for White adolescents but to lower levels of externalizing behavior among Black adolescents. Moreover, other research suggests that minority parents’ use of contingent physical punishment may actually promote positive child outcomes. Wasserman, Miller, Pinner, & Jaramillo (1996) found that parent-reported physical punishment for child transgressions was negatively related to later externalizing behavior, after controlling for baseline problems, among Hispanics and Blacks. The authors suggest that consequence-based corporal punishment yielded positive outcomes for these minority children.

The research reviewed indicates the importance of contextual factors related to culture, race, and ethnicity in the ontogeny and etiology of child behavior problems. Two major explanations have been advanced to explain this and other examples of racial moderation effects in family processes. First, some scholars have advanced the attenuation hypothesis whereby children of color may be less vulnerable to the adverse effects of family discord than are White children (Amato & Keith, 1991; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). Supporters of this position state that stressful familial processes are often experienced by minority children within a context of an overabundance of distressing life events and chronic conditions. The experience of an overwhelming array of stressors may obfuscate or diminish the specific psychological effects of certain family problems.

The second explanation of these racial moderation effects focuses on racial/ethnic differences in the cultural context in which the discipline behaviors occur. Baumrind (1997) states that “two factors affect the meaning to the child of a parent’s use of physical punishment to help explain Black–White differences in associated child outcomes: (a) physical punishment is more normative in Black than White homes, (b) its use is associated with different parental attributes.” Indeed, related to the first factor, Deater-Deckard and colleagues (1996) argue that cultural and historic factors have led Black families to view physical punishment as an acceptable part of a positive parent–child relationship. Mounting evidence suggests that Black parents use physical discipline more often than Whites (e.g., Deater-Deckard et al., 1996; Ferrari, 2002; Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995). The use of restrictive, controlling, and authoritarian parenting has been associated with positive psychological outcomes among Black youth perhaps because this style promotes the toughness and self-sufficiency needed to cope with race-related challenges (Baldwin et al., 1993; Baumrind, 1972), and may function to shield them from danger in their high-risk environments (McLoyd, 1998). Lansford and colleagues (2004) suggest that Black children may regard physical discipline as a legitimate form of parenting done out of concern for the child, whereas White children may regard it as an act of aggression that occurs when parents are angry and out of control.

PARENTAL WARMTH AND PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

With regard to Baumrind’s second point, evidence is accumulating that suggests that physical discipline is related to a different set of parenting characteristics in Black families compared to White families. Among Black mothers, attitudes toward physical discipline appear to have little relation to attitudes toward child-centered responsiveness (Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992) or to maternal warmth (McGroder, 2000). Brody and Flor’s (1998) concept of no nonsense parenting among Black families reflects a combination of high levels of firm control (including physical discipline) that occur along with
displays of warmth and affection. They conclude that firm control coupled with parental warmth may function to protect children from dangerous environments and involvement in antisocial behavior, while promoting self-regulation.

Consistent with these observations, Deater-Deckard and colleagues (1996) contend that the effects of physical discipline will depend on the relationship context in which parenting occurs. They suggest that the relation between physical discipline and child externalizing problems may be buffered by the presence of parental warmth, or magnified in the context of a parent–child relationship with little warmth. They invoke this as a possible explanation for the racial moderation effect observed.

CHILDREN’S EARLY BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS AND PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

Another potentially important contextual factor when considering the effects of physical discipline is the child’s behavioral contribution to early interactions with the parent. Parental coercive behaviors may be elicited by child aversive behaviors and then may exacerbate these child behavioral tendencies (Lytton, 1990). Indeed, parents display more negative behaviors when interacting with conduct disordered (CD) children than with normal children, and parents of CD children are more coercive toward their own children than toward other CD children, suggesting cumulative transactional effects of past interactions (Anderson, Lytton, & Romney, 1986). Longitudinal studies have confirmed bidirectional influences between earlier child behavioral tendencies and parental discipline on later child behavior problems in cross-lagged designs (Lambert, 1988; Moffitt, 1990; Tolan & Lorion, 1988; Vuchinich, Bank, & Patterson, 1992; Sampson & Laub, 1994; Campbell, Pierce, Moore, Marakovitz, & Newby, 1996).

Thus, baseline levels of child behavior problems may indeed be an important moderating factor in the impact of physical discipline on later child behavior problems. Lytton (1997) contends that the problems of children with externalizing behavioral tendencies increase with physical punishment, whereas for most children punishment can serve to decrease the frequency of the punished act. A stronger relationship has been found between physical punishment and child externalizing problems in clinical samples (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986) than among community samples (Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994), suggesting that children with more behavior problems are more adversely impacted by physical discipline than children without significant behavior problems. Investigators have found that early levels of child behavior problems may moderate the relation between later parental practices and subsequent child functioning (Denham et al., 2000; Stoolmiller, 2001). These findings are consistent with a diathesis-stress framework in which physical discipline practices may more strongly potentiate later externalizing problems in children who show externalizing tendencies early on.

In summary, we have identified three salient contexts which may result in different outcomes of parental physical control: race, parental warmth, and early child behavior problems. Therefore, the current study will (1) revisit the issue of whether race moderates the longitudinal relationship between physical discipline and child externalizing behaviors, (2) examine whether warm parental attitudes moderate the longitudinal relationship between physical discipline and child externalizing behaviors, and likewise whether this accounts for racial moderation effects, and (3) examine whether early levels of child externalizing problems moderate the relationships between physical discipline and later externalizing problems.
METHOD

Sample

The sample was comprised of 442 White and Black children who were interviewed at ages 4, 6, and 8 years at one of four sites in the consortium of Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN). This coordinated set of four prospective studies uses the same measures, data collection, data entry, and data handling procedures. They differ by sampling children who: 1) are at risk for maltreatment by virtue of early childhood problems or family poverty (Eastern and Southern sites), 2) have had reports alleging maltreatment filed with child protective services (CPS) but may or may not have received interventions (Northwestern), or 3) had reports of alleged maltreatment and received CPS interventions (Southwestern). For further information on subject recruitment at each of the LONGSCAN sites see Runyan et al. (1998). Although the samples were derived in diverse ways, all were thought to share elevated risk for child abuse or neglect. Children who were placed with adoptive or foster parents during the time period of the current study were excluded from the sample.

The subjects for this investigation consisted of all LONGSCAN study children who 1) had completed interviews when they were 4, 6, and 8 years of age, 2) were living with their biological families at the time of each of the interviews, and 3) were Black or White. The inclusion criteria yielded a sample of 299 Black and 143 White youth from the Eastern (n = 166, 3.6% White), Southern (n = 136, 36.8% White), Southwestern (n = 44, 38.6% White), and Northwestern (n = 96, 72.9% White) sites. There were 217 boys and 225 girls in the sample. Adult respondents were primarily biological mothers (n = 416), with some grandmothers (n = 10), other female relatives (n = 6), stepmothers (n = 2), and biological fathers (n = 8).

One major difference between the current study and previous studies investigating the moderation of physical discipline on child externalizing problems is that this study focuses on a sample of children at varying levels of risk and exposure to maltreatment (as defined by state and local CPS). By examining issues of physical discipline in a high-risk sample we can expect a less skewed distribution in parental physical discipline behaviors, compared to community samples. Deater-Deckard and Dodge (1997) suggest that samples that overrepresent the extremes of this distribution are needed to further test their hypotheses.

However, limiting our sample to children at risk for maltreatment necessitates caution in interpretation of the effects of physical discipline versus the effects of maltreatment. Deater-Deckard and Dodge (1997) contend that a major exception to contextual variation in the impact of physical discipline involves instances of physical abuse. When physical discipline is extreme, the effects are presumed to be uniformly deleterious regardless of race/ethnicity, or other contextual variables. Because the current sample includes some children with a history of reports of alleged maltreatment, we used two strategies for controlling for the occurrence of physical abuse on child outcomes. First, we statistically controlled for reports of alleged physical abuse while examining the effects of the other predictors of child problems. Second, we conducted a separate analysis excluding children who had an alleged history of physical abuse during the period of study.

Aggregating Data Across Sites. We conducted analyses to examine the appropriateness of aggregating data from across the four sites to address the research questions in the current study. First, we tested for the main effect of site on the dependent variable of interest. We found no main effect of site on parent-reported externalizing problems at the age 8 inter-
view. Next we examined any potential interaction effects between site and the three main independent variables (physical discipline, warm parental attitudes, and early externalizing problems) on the later externalizing problems and found no significant interaction effects predicting the dependent variable. As such, we proceeded with analyses using data aggregated across the four sites (Richardson, Kolody, Bangdiwala, & Litrownik, in review).

**Procedure**

Common measurement protocols and procedures were developed by the LONGSCAN consortium to address multiple questions related to risk and protective factors for child maltreatment and subsequent outcomes. After local Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, a set of common measures was presented to caregivers and children who were 4, 6, and 8 years of age at each site. Primary caregivers were asked to participate in the 2-hour in-home interview. In addition, each child was administered a number of age-appropriate measures. To minimize attrition rates and increase the likelihood of retention, caregivers were reimbursed for their time ($20 to $40/interview), and children in some sites were given small ($10 or less) gifts.

**Measures**

*Demographic Information.* Basic demographic information was collected at the age 4 interview and updated at subsequent interviews. Caregivers reported on the race of child, gender of child, annual family income, and level of parental education.

*Warm Parental Attitudes.* The Adolescent Adult Parenting Inventory (AAPI; Bavolek, 1984) was administered to caregivers at the age 4 interview. Scores on the Empathy Scale were used as an indicator of warm parental attitudes. Caregivers rated their agreement with six attitudinal items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Disagree*). High scores indicated warmer attitudes and rejection of statements consistent with low parental empathy. Examples of these items include, “Children who are given too much love by their parents will grow up to be stubborn and spoiled,” and “Young children who are hugged and kissed often will grow up to be ‘sissies’.” Bavolek (1984) reports established construct validity for the AAPI based on interitem correlations, factor analyses, and item–construct correlations. Data from a subsample of the LONGSCAN study indicate good 2-year stability on the Empathy scale ($r = .76$). Internal consistency of the Empathy scale at the age 4 interview was good for both White respondents ($\alpha = .81$) and Black respondents ($\alpha = .80$).

*Physical Discipline.* Portions of the Parent–Child version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-PC; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998) were administered to caregivers at the age 6 interview to assess levels of physical discipline. The CTS-PC measures the extent to which a parent has carried out specific acts of physical and psychological aggression, regardless of whether the child is injured. The core scales of the CTS-PC include: Nonviolent Discipline, Psychological Aggression, and Physical Assault. The Physical Assault scale is further categorized into Minor Assault, Severe Assault, and Very Severe Assault. The core scales of the CTS-PC have adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .55$ to .70;
Straus et al., 1998). Straus and colleagues (1998) report that the interrelations of the scales and their correlations with selected demographic variables support the construct validity of the scales. In the current study, the six items from the Minor Assault Scale were used as indicators of physical discipline. On this scale, caregivers were asked how often they had engaged in the following actions when they had a problem with their children in the past year: throwing something at, grabbing, shaking, pushing or shoving, spanking, or slapping the child. Internal consistency of the Minor Assault scale is adequate in the LONGSCAN sample with alpha coefficients of .68 at the age 4 interview. Alpha coefficients were in the same range for Black (α = .70) and White (α = .60) respondents.

**Physical Abuse Exposure.** Allegations of physical abuse filed with CPS agencies were used as indicators of physical abuse history. As a part of the LONGSCAN study, CPS record reviews were conducted to determine whether the child participants had any allegations of maltreatment filed with the appropriate local or state CPS agency from birth up until the date of the age 8 interview. Any CPS reports were then coded using the Maltreatment Classification System (MCS; Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993), which provides definitions for six subtypes of maltreatment, including Physical Abuse. Severity ratings are made on a 5-point scale using objective criteria for each of the five levels of severity on each type of maltreatment. Interrater reliability for classifying maltreatment subtype has been found to be adequate with a kappa of .60, with intraclass correlations for severity ratings between .67 and 1.0 (Manly, Cicchetti, & Barnett, 1994). In the current study, a physical abuse history was confirmed when CPS record review yielded an MCS code of physical abuse of severity level 1 or higher.

**Child Externalizing Behavior.** The widely used Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) was administered to caregivers at the age 4 and age 8 interviews. Caregivers reported on child behavior problems over the 6 months prior to the interview on the CBCL, which consists of 118 child problem behaviors rated on a 3-point scale. The CBCL yields broad band factor scores for Internalizing problems and Externalizing problems, as well as a Total problems score. The CBCL is a reliable measure with alphas for the Internalizing, Externalizing, and Total Problems scales reported to be 0.89, 0.93, and 0.96, respectively (Achenbach, 1991). One-week test–retest reliability for the broad band scales are good, ranging from .89 to .93 (Achenbach, 1991). The criterion validity of the CBCL has been demonstrated by its ability to discriminate between clinic-referred and nonreferred children (Achenbach, 1991). The broad band raw score for Externalizing Behavior Problems was used in the current study as the major child outcome variable.

**Data Analyses**

An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed to identify predictors of child externalizing behaviors at age 8. Control variables entered in the model included: child gender, family income, and single parenthood. These controls were used in Deater-Deckard and colleagues (1996, 1997) analyses. In the current study, we also entered a variable accounting for a history of physical abuse allegations between birth and age 8. The focal independent variables of interest included race, early child externalizing problems at age 4, physical discipline at age 6, and warm parental attitudes reported at age 4. In this model we included the set of all six possible 2-way interactions between the main independent variables, and the
three possible 3-way interaction terms between ethnicity and the other main independent variables. We chose to examine these 3-way interactions involving race in order to address the hypotheses regarding the moderating role of race in the association between these other constructs. More specifically, we were interested in testing the 3-way interaction effects of Race × Parental warmth × Physical discipline on later externalizing outcomes, and Race × Early externalizing problems × Physical discipline on later externalizing problems. The reasoning of Deater-Deckard and colleagues would be supported if our data show that (1) There is a positive association between physical discipline and child externalizing problems for Whites but not for Blacks, and (2) Among Black families, there is a positive association between physical discipline and child externalizing problems only when the parenting context lacks warmth. This would be demonstrated by a significant 3-way interaction: Race × Physical discipline × Parental warmth on child externalizing behaviors. Furthermore, we examined the interaction between early behavior problems and physical discipline on later problems to determine whether the effects of physical discipline would be more deleterious when it is used on children who display high early levels of disruptive behavior.

We ran a second ANCOVA model in which we excluded children from the sample if they had a history of physical abuse during the period of study, that is, between the age 4 and age 8 interviews. This was done to try to further disentangle findings regarding physical discipline from the effects of contemporaneous abusive parenting. In this model we included a control variable for the occurrence of physical abuse events prior to age 4.

### RESULTS

Preliminary bivariate analyses were conducted to characterize basic racial differences on the independent variables of interest. The results of independent sample t-tests indicated that there were no group differences in levels of caregiver-reported externalizing problems at age 4; however, at the age 8 interview White caregivers reported more problems than did Black caregivers. Black caregivers reported lower warm parental attitudes and endorsed greater use of physical discipline than did White caregivers.
The results of the first ANCOVA model are displayed in Table 1. The results revealed that there were no significant effects of family income and single-parent family status on child externalizing behavior problems at age 8. There was, however, a main effect of gender ($F = 4.00, p < .05$) whereby boys (estimated marginal mean = 14.02, standard error = .65) had higher externalizing scores than girls (estimated marginal mean = 12.57, standard error = .62). Furthermore, children with a history of alleged physical abuse (estimated marginal mean = 14.20, standard error = .82) had significantly more problems than did children without such a history (estimated marginal mean = 12.39, standard error = .51) ($F = 4.10, p < .05$). The significant main effect of race on externalizing problems at age 8 found in the bivariate analysis was no longer significant in this multivariate analysis. In terms of the variables of interest, after controlling for all covariates, there were no main effects of early externalizing problems, physical discipline, or warm parental attitudes on the expression of later externalizing problems. Indeed, the effects of these variables were moderated by other variables.

The two-way interaction that emerged as significant indicated that the effect of physical discipline on later externalizing problems was moderated by early levels of child externalizing problems ($F = 8.56, p < .01$). Post hoc regression analyses were conducted to determine the nature of this interaction. The sample was bisected into high and low early externalizing groups based on the median externalizing score at age 4. Regression equation parameters (intercepts and unstandardized B coefficients) were used to graph functions for each group. As displayed in Figure 1, caregivers’ endorsement of physical discipline was significantly positively associated with later externalizing problems when children initially displayed high levels of externalizing problems ($B = 5.11, p < .001$), but this association was not significant when children had low levels of problems initially.

The three-way interaction between race, early externalizing problems, and warm parental attitudes was also significant ($F = 3.85, p < .05$). Figure 2 shows the results of post hoc analyses used to clarify this higher-order interaction effect. Four separate regression equations were computed and plotted for Black and White children with low and high lev-
els of early problems. Among Black children who initially displayed higher externalizing problems, greater caregiver endorsement of warm parental attitudes was related to greater levels of subsequent externalizing problems ($B = .37, p < .05$). However, for White children who initially displayed higher externalizing problems, there was a trend for warm parental attitudes to be associated with fewer externalizing problems later ($B = -.31, p < .10$). Warm parental attitudes were unrelated to later externalizing problems for both Black and White children with low initial levels of externalizing problems.

A second ANCOVA model was run on the sample excluding children exposed to physical abuse during the period of study from the age 4 interview to the age 8 interview. Eighteen (13.0%) White children and 29 (10.7%) Black children were excluded from this analysis. The predictors included in this model were identical to those in the previous model with one exception: the physical abuse variable now indicated the presence or absence of physical abuse allegations between birth and the age 4 interview. Few differences emerged in this model compared to the previous model. The effect of child gender was only marginally significant ($F = 3.59, p = .059$). There was no effect of a history of alleged physical abuse on externalizing problems at the age 8 interview. However, the same two interaction effects emerged as significant in this follow-up model.

**DISCUSSION**

In the current study, we did not replicate the findings of previous studies demonstrating that the effects of physical discipline depend on race (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; McLeod et al., 1994; Spieker et al., 1999). In the current sample, physical discipline operated similarly for both racial groups, affected by a third variable not accounted for in the previous studies. For both Blacks and Whites, physical discipline was related to subsequent child externalizing problems when children demonstrated behavioral problems at an early age. This *punishment exacerbation effect* suggests that physical discipline may be particularly ill-advised when used with children with a predisposition to impulsive, aggressive, or noncompliant behaviors. This pattern appears to generalize across the two racial groups under study. Moreover, these observations suggest
that the causality of the relation between physical discipline and child behavior problems may easily be reversed, such that the child’s own earlier disobedient and aggressive tendencies demonstrate continuity with later behavioral problems, and evoke physical discipline along the way (Belsky, 1997; Lytton, 1997). This dynamic transaction may be culturally generalizable, at least across the two racial groups under study.

Therefore, one possible explanation for our failure to replicate the results of previous studies could be that previous studies did not account for the potential moderating effect of early child behavior problems. Deater-Deckard and colleagues (1996) did not formally control for the main effect of earlier externalizing behaviors on subsequent child outcomes. On the other hand, Spieker and colleagues (1999) appropriately controlled for the effects of earlier problems on later problems using longitudinal analyses. However, they did not test for the possibility that baseline levels of externalizing problems might influence the trajectory of problems over time. Furthermore, Deater-Deckard et al. (1996) reported that there were racial differences in baseline problems, such that Black mothers reported fewer child externalizing problems controlling for socioeconomic status, marital status, and gender. As such, it is possible that the finding of racial moderation may have been attributable in part to differences in baseline child externalizing problems.

While we did not find evidence of racial differences in the effects of physical discipline on child adjustment, there was some evidence of racial variability in the effects of other family processes. The significant interaction effect of race by parental warmth by early problems was not predicted a priori but may be consistent with the crosscultural literature. High levels of parental warmth are valued in modern European American culture and in the current study high parental warmth appears to be protective in White families when children show behavioral problems early on. In the current study, warm parenting attitudes reflected values regarding the importance of being sensitively responsive and empathic to children. Our findings indicated that high levels of parental warmth on this measure may not be adaptive for Black children when they display acting-out behaviors at a young age. The unconditional display of empathic warmth directed toward a child with persistent disruptive behaviors may not be consistent with the cultural notion of no-nonsense parenting in Black families (Brody & Flor, 1998). It is possible that the warmth associated with no-nonsense parenting must be delivered on a contingent schedule to achieve positive outcomes within Black families.

The notion that supportive and warm parenting can buffer the impact of family adversity on later child adjustment is both intuitively appealing and has empirical support in studies conducted with predominantly White samples (Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 1997). However, the cultural-ecological context surrounding families is what defines optimal parenting competencies (Ogbu, 1981). In this respect, parental behaviors are thought to be supportive when they optimize children’s adaptation to the requirements of the immediate cultural-ecological context. The most adaptive parenting styles and behaviors may, in part, be determined culturally.

Research suggests that Black families expect their children to become independent earlier than White families (Garcia-Coll, 1990; Zeskind, 1993). For example, Reis (1993) reported that Black mothers more often endorsed the view that praise and attention can spoil infants, and infants who cry or demand attention should be left alone. In the current study, children with early behavioral problems in Black families had poorer outcomes when their parents endorsed warm, empathic attitudes consistent with these modern European-American parenting values. Conversely, agreement with statements valuing early autonomy in young children (e.g., “Children whose needs are left unattended will often grow up to be more independent”) was related to better

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outcomes when Black children had problems initially. This pattern parallels ethnographic descriptions of Black child socialization as placing a premium on facilitating self-reliance (Young, 1970, 1974). Within Black families, culturally unique concepts of parental support and discipline are bound together with the joint purpose of promoting child autonomy. Parenting values that are indicative of this type of empathic warmth among Whites may actually be contraindicated in some Black families. Our findings do not suggest that parental warmth is unimportant in Black families; rather, we argue that there is a need for culturally sensitive and appropriate measures of parental warmth that would reflect adaptive parenting in families of diverse backgrounds. For example, by coding open-ended questions tapping parental attitudes, Magnus, Cowen, Wyman, Fagen, & Work (1999) found that overall warmth and closeness in the parent–child relationship was the strongest predictor of positive child outcomes among both Black and White families.

One implication of these findings is that Black children who display early externalizing behavior problems appear to be at heightened risk for later problems across different types of parenting contexts. Under conditions of physical discipline, they are placed at risk of increased later problems. Similarly, under conditions of empathic warmth or indulgence, these early problems may be exacerbated. It appears that parents may have less latitude in effectively parenting Black children with early disruptive behaviors. Communities must recognize that parenting may need to take different forms in different racial and cultural groups in order to best support children’s development of emotional and behavioral self-regulation.

In summary, the current study extended the previous research on the question of racial moderation of parental attitudes and practices. Using a longitudinal design with a high-risk sample of White and Black families, we found evidence for both racial variability and generalizability in the effects of parenting processes on child adjustment over time. We examined the main and interactive effects of race, warm parental attitudes, physical discipline, and early child behaviors on later child adjustment problems. As such, we extended literature by accounting for multiple contextual factors influencing the link between parenting and child outcomes. However, we have not yet tested a comprehensive model of the array of possible contextual factors that can affect the impact of parenting processes.

In this study, we focused only on familial characteristics as potential contextual factors influencing the impact of physical discipline. It would be equally important to investigate neighborhood contexts as moderators of the effects of parenting. The use of physical discipline may be invoked to ensure children’s survival in dangerous environments where neighborhood violence and racially motivated victimization and oppression are immediate threats. Under these broader ecological conditions, restrictive parenting with physical control may be optimal for adaptation and survival. Future studies should examine these macro-level factors as potential moderators of the link between physical discipline and child outcomes.

Finally, these results should be interpreted with caution given the limitations of the study. One major limitation of this study is the reliance on parent reports of parenting attitudes, practices, and child behaviors. We did not test our model with independent assessments of child externalizing problems, parental warmth, or discipline. As such, shared method variance in the study may have inflated the relationships observed. In addition, it is possible that our measures of physical discipline and child externalizing behaviors may lack cultural sensitivity. We discussed this concern regarding our measure of parental warmth, and it is worth noting again that future studies may benefit from the
use of more family-centered, open-ended interviews to assess the constructs of interest. Finally, replication is needed to support our conclusions about purported relationships between parenting, racial context, and child outcomes. Further study is especially warranted because our sample is not representative of the general community and the findings may be generalizable only to high-risk families.

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