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Research article

Authoritarian parenting attitudes and social origin: The multigenerational relationship of socioeconomic position to childrearing values[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Support for authoritarian approaches to parenting, including corporal punishment, is known to be elevated among individuals with low current levels of socioeconomic attainment. The objectives of this study are: (1) to determine whether authoritarian parenting dispositions are related to disadvantages in one's social background, in addition to one's present socioeconomic standing; and (2) to distinguish, in this regard, between support for spanking and other authoritarian parenting dispositions. Ordered logit models, applied to General Social Survey data concerning a nationally representative sample of US adults, are used to examine relationships of authoritarian parenting dispositions to the socioeconomic positions that respondents currently occupy and in which they were raised. It is found that support for spanking ($N = 10,725$) and valuing of obedience ($N = 10,043$) are inversely related to the socioeconomic status (SES) of one's family of origin, and that these associations are robust to controls for one's current SES. A disadvantaged family background is found to increase support for spanking most among those with high current SES. Strong associations (robust to controls for SES indicators) are additionally found between African-American racial identity and support for authoritarian parenting. Prior research indicates that authoritarian parenting practices such as spanking may be harmful to children. Thus, if the parenting attitudes analyzed here translate into parenting practices, then this study's findings may point to a mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of disadvantages.

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Introduction

Harsh parenting practices may help to transmit socioeconomic disadvantages across generations of a family. Numerous studies have asked how an individual's current socioeconomic status (SES) influences the manner in which she raises her children. A near-consensus exists that lower levels of SES are associated with a greater propensity to support authoritarian methods of parenting including corporal punishment (Flynn, 1996; Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2002; Kohn, 1969; Lareau, 2002, 2011; Luster, Rhoades, & Haas, 1989; Rosier & Corsaro, 1993; Tudge, Hogan, Snezhkova, Kulakova, & Etz, 2000). The present research goes beyond this existing consensus to ask whether influences persist from the SES of one's family of origin to shape her attitudes toward corporal punishment and authoritarian parenting.

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Two factors may work together to give rise to the relationship between an individual's current socioeconomic position and childrearing preferences. First, SES is associated with one's current traits and living conditions, which shape one's needs and worldview, which in turn influence parenting (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Hoff et al., 2002; Lareau, 2011). For example, an individual accustomed to performing low status jobs, which tend to require conformity to established procedures, may find it natural to expect the same from her children (Curtner-Smith, Bennett, & O'Rear, 1995; Erlanger, 1974; Kohn, 1963, 1969; Lareau, 2011). The second factor potentially influencing the relationship between current SES and childrearing preferences has to do with how one was raised rather than one's current living conditions. An individual's SES in adulthood tends to reflect that of the family in which she grew up (Hill & Duncan, 1987; Sharkey, 2013). Low SES adults are likely to have been raised in a low SES household and to have internalized values, expectations, and practices associated with their parents' socioeconomic position.

Studies showing that current SES is related to childrearing preferences, without taking into account the social conditions in which an individual was raised, cannot distinguish the influences of these two factors on childrearing. This distinction is of more than esoteric interest because of its implications for understanding how socioeconomic disadvantages are transmitted through multiple generations of a family (Hill & Duncan, 1987; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Sharkey, 2013). One reason posited for why lower SES parents tend to produce lower SES children is that an authoritarian upbringing, by teaching obedience and conformity, best prepares children for lower SES careers (Lareau, 2002, 2011). Harsh corporal punishment has itself been associated with a litany of negative developmental outcomes that could help to perpetuate socioeconomic disadvantages. While it is beyond this study's scope to summarize the vast literature on these outcomes, it is worth noting that they have been posited to include reduced cognitive and academic performance and increased propensities toward aggressive and antisocial conduct, substance abuse, depression, and other mental illnesses (Bugental, Martorell, & Barraza, 2003; Christie-Mizell, Pryor, & Grossman, 2008; Durant & Ensom, 2012; Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; MacMillan et al., 1999; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994).

It is known that low SES adults tend to prefer authoritarian parenting methods that may disadvantage their children (Flynn, 1996; Kohn, 1969; Lareau, 2011; Tudge et al., 2000). Does this also apply to adults who come from a disadvantaged family background but achieve upward mobility? Does their upward mobility override authoritarian preferences passed down from their families of origin? Or do these preferences persist and potentially allow the disadvantages they experienced while growing up, but have now overcome, to "skip a generation" and affect their children? To answer these questions, this study analyzes how adults' attitudes toward parenting are related to the socioeconomic positions they currently occupy and in which they were raised.

Aims of the Present Study in Light of Past Findings on Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Authoritarian Childrearing

Among scholars who have studied the relationship between SES and childrearing preferences, a consensus exists that, relative to their middle class peers, working class and poor individuals tend to place greater value on obedience (Bluestone & Tamis-LeMonda, 1999; Conger et al., 1994; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Kohn, 1963, 1969; Lareau, 2011; Lipset, 1959; Lipsitz, 1965; Luster et al., 1989; McLloyd, 1990; Rosier & Corsaro, 1993; Tudge et al., 2000). In testing the relationship of current SES to various indices of individuals' orientations toward social institutions, Kohn (1969, p. 86) finds it is most strongly associated, "by a very wide margin," with the valuing of conformity to the dictates of authority. Working class subjects, according to this author, tend to believe that "the most important thing to teach children is absolute obedience to parents" (Kohn, 1969, pp. 78–79). Lareau's recent study (2011) similarly finds that children in working class households are expected to respond to parents' commands with unquestioning obedience. Middle class children, in contrast, are taught to be self-directed and to promote their interests by negotiating with authority figures (Curtner-Smith, Bennett, & O'Rear, 1995; Hoff et al., 2002; Lareau, 2011; Luster et al., 1989; Tudge et al., 2000).

The corporal punishment of children is consistent with an approach to childrearing that values obedience to authorities and conformity to established norms. Past studies have shown that parents harboring authoritarian worldviews, embodied in religious beliefs emphasizing absolute obedience to God, use or support spanking more than others (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal, 1996; Flynn, 1994; Grogan-Kaylor & Oti, 2007). The application of corporal punishment demonstrates to children, in blunt and visceral terms, who has authority and power and who is subordinate in the parent-child relationship. The establishment of such clear and definitive boundaries, as well as the threat of physical sanctions, provide key foundations for the unquestioning obedience found by Lareau (2011, p. 139) to prevail in lower SES households.

On this basis, it is unsurprising that past studies have repeatedly found that working or lower class individuals in the US are more likely to favor or use corporal punishment (Erlanger, 1974, p. 81; Flynn, 1994, p. 318; Flynn, 1996; Fox & Solis-Camara, 1997; Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995, p. 173; Lareau, 2011, p. 211; Smith Blau, 1965). One study has also shown this to apply in Mexico (Fox & Solis-Camara, 1997). Agreement on the link between SES and support for corporal punishment, however, is not universal (Ellison et al., 1996; Horn, Cheng, & Joseph, 2004). One study has purported to show that associations between SES and attitudes toward spanking are specific to particular regions of the US (Flynn, 1994).

While there is widespread agreement that lower SES individuals are more prone to favoring corporal punishment and placing greater value on children's obedience, there is much disagreement over what causes these differences. Some authors credit them to disparities in levels of educational attainment (Hoff et al., 2002; Kohn, 1969, p. 472; Lareau, 2011; Lipset, 1959, p. 489; Lipsitz, 1965, p. 104). Formal education may promote a sense of one's entitlement or ability to reason with

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