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Spank, Slap, or Hit? How Labels Alter Perceptions of Child Discipline

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Objective: Words shape our perceptions of behavior, and we applied this maxim to evaluating how different verbs can alter the perception of corporal acts used to discipline children. Specifically, we compared spank, swat, slap, hit, and beat. We hypothesized that (a) parents and nonparents would rate these terms differently, (b) corporal terms would be differentiated in a consistent manner across 3 behavior rating scales (common, acceptable, effective), and (c) acceptable and effective ratings would align more closely to each other than either would to common ratings. ***Method:*** In an online survey, participants read 8 vignettes with words used to label parental reactions to child misbehaviors and rated each vignette on how common, acceptable, and effective the response was. ***Results:*** Parents rated corporal actions as more common than did nonparents, but the samples were comparable on acceptable and effective ratings. Rank order of corporal term ratings was consistent across rating scales, with spank rated as the most common, acceptable, and effective response, followed (in order) by swat, hit, slap, and beat. Finally, evaluations of corporal terms on the acceptability and effectiveness of parental responses were more closely aligned with each other than either was to evaluations of how common the responses are. ***Conclusion:*** The specific verbs used to describe acts of physical discipline can alter interpretations of the associated behavior, and potentially serve to normalize, conceal, or justify violent actions.

Keywords: corporal punishment, spanking, parental discipline, connotative meaning, semantics

In the fall of 2014, star professional football player Adrian Peterson was indicted for child abuse. By his own admission, Peterson used a stick to repeatedly "discipline" his 4-year-old son, an action that left marks and drew blood. A wide variety of terms were used in media reports to describe Mr. Peterson's actions, including "spanking," "whooping," "swatting," "smacking," "switching," "hitting," and "beating" (e.g., Krawcynski, 2014). How did these specific words influence how the general public perceived the harm inflicted by Mr. Peterson on his child? Does such an offense appear more routine or justified when it is labeled as a "spanking" compared with a "beating?" Do some terms make the corporal punishment seem ordinary and acceptable, while other labels make the same action appear extraordinary, inappropriate, or unacceptable?

Corporal punishment (CP) is defined as ". . . the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior" (Straus, 1994, p. 4). Whatever term is used for CP, hitting a child in the name of discipline is widespread, both in the United States and around the world (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012). In the United States, parental self-reports suggest that almost 80% of 3- to 5-year-old children experience CP (Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004; Zolotor, Robinson, Runyan, Barr, & Murphy, 2011). Straus and Stewart (1999) found that American parents report using CP an average of 18 times a year, but those rates likely reflect underreporting because audio-recorded home interactions document that CP occurred at a median rate of once every 6.3 hr (Holden, Williamson, & Holland, 2014).

CP is a problematic child-rearing behavior associated with a number of unintended negative outcomes for children, including behavioral problems and mental health issues (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Given the widespread use of CP and its association with child physical abuse (e.g., Fréchette, Zoratti, & Romano, 2015; Zolotor, Theodore, Change, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008), it is essential to better understand how labels applied to acts of punishment can influence the interpretation and cultural acceptance of these actions. The present investigation examined differences among terms commonly used to characterize acts of parental discipline, with respect to how these words influence perceptions of such actions. We also explored how these perceptions vary as a function of the evaluative dimension (i.e., acceptable, effective, and common) and whether or not the respondent was a parent.

How Words Affect Our Perceptions

A large body of cognitive research reveals that terms used to label experiences can influence how these events are perceived and remembered. Initially demonstrated more than 80 years ago, Carmichael, Hogan, and Walter (1932) presented ambiguous line drawings (e.g., two circles joined by a straight line) accompanied by different labels (barbell, pair of binoculars) and found that the subsequent drawings produced by the subjects (from memory) were biased in the direction of the label. Subsequent work revealed that words also influence memory at an implicit level (Ostergaard, Heindel, & Paulsen, 1995), in that such distortions can occur whether or not one remembers previously seeing the label. There is also evidence that labels can influence quantitative judgments.

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When asked to estimate the height of a bridegroom, participants' judgments depended upon whether they were queried "how tall is he?" (72 in.) versus "how short is he?" (67 in.; Loftus, 1975).

Subtle changes in the wording of questions can also alter the recollection of experiences. In an investigation more closely related to the present research, Loftus and Burns (1974) compared synonyms to explore how singular word labels alter memory of the severity of a witnessed experience. After viewing a slide show depicting an automobile accident, participants were given one of five verbs ("collided," "bumped," "hit," "contacted," or "smashed") to describe the accident. Subsequent estimates of vehicle speed prior to the accident were influenced by the verb used (i.e., "hit" = 34 mph, "smashed" = 41 mph). In addition, more severe verbs increased the percentage of participants who later claimed to have seen broken glass on the road ("hit" = 7%; "smashed" = 16%) even though none appeared in the accident scene (Loftus, 2005).

The Present Study

In a similar fashion, the present investigation explored whether the label used to describe a parental disciplinary response to a child's misbehavior can influence how the act is perceived and evaluated. Media coverage of Adrian Peterson's harsh discipline documents the wide variety of terms that can be applied to the same act, but the question remains about whether these terms lead to different interpretations. Relatively little attention has been given to the semantics of discipline (Garbarino, 1996; Straus, 2000) and how word choice can influence perceptions and potentially legitimize violence. The major exception is the pioneering work by Saunders and Goddard (2001, 2010; Saunders, 2013), who have written extensively about the role of language in perpetuating violence. They identified the problem of "textual abuse" of children, where language may exploit, objectify, degrade, reframe or minimize the seriousness of parental behaviors (see Saunders & Goddard, 2001, p. 446). Along those lines, Redman and Taylor (2006) analyzed changes across 20 years in print media accounts of physical punishment of children in the United Kingdom. The earliest news stories framed such behavior as a common practice, then changed to questioning its effectiveness, and most recently address the moral imperative to legislatively ban the behavior.

People naturally use a variety of words to refer to CP. In an observational study of 70 adults with young children in public settings in a large Southeastern city (Davis, 1996), adults were overheard threatening children with such words as "spank," "smack," "get it," "slap," "pop," "beat," "punch," or "hurt." In a small qualitative study of disciplinary terminology, Ispa and Halgunseth (2004) found that "popping" and "tapping" were viewed as interchangeable among African American mothers but regarded as distinctly different from "whupping." Based on their analysis from 10 parents, Gough and Reavey (1997) concluded that there was considerable confusion, semantic variability, and even contradictory statements in discourse about CP.

As suggested in the previously mentioned research, the lexicon of discipline is muddled and ambiguous. To some adults, discipline is synonymous with CP (Mosby, Rawls, Meehan, Mays, & Pettinari, 1999), although the exact meaning of terms like "spank," "hit," and "slap" is vague. This ambiguity has also been recognized with respect to the perceived severity of parental discipline (Taylor, Hamvas, & Paris, 2011). To what extent does this ambiguity affect perceptions? Our goal in the present study is to compare how different verbs, routinely used to describe disciplinary actions, affect judgments of how acceptable, effective, and common the response is.

We selected these rating scales for several reasons. First, all three represent factors that feed into judgments concerning discipline. The acceptability (or approval) of spanking has long been used to measure orientations toward spanking. It has served as an index of changing social attitudes (Straus & Mathur, 1996) and to assess views about whether mothers, baby sitters, and teachers should spank children (e.g., Catron & Masters, 1993). More recently, acceptability of spanking has been evaluated in online comments (Taylor, Al-Hiyari, Lee, Priebe, Guerrero, & Bales, 2016), as well as used to gauge changing attitudes in two Scandanavian countries that have banned CP (Ellonen, Jernbo, Janson, Tindberg, & Lucas, 2015).

Views about the effectiveness of spanking for changing behavior have also frequently been assessed. For example, Graziano and Namaste (1990) found that about two out of three college students thought spanking was an effective form of discipline. Furthermore, mothers who spank their children view the behavior as more effective than mothers who do not (Holden, Miller, & Harris, 1999). A third variable that is increasingly being recognized as an important predictor of spanking, in line with the Theory of Reasoned Actions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011), is how common or normative the behavior is perceived to be. Flynn (1996) recognized that norms about the frequency of CP varied across race, education, religion, and region of the country. Regardless of the specific variable in question, when spanking is viewed as a common form of discipline, parents are more likely to view it positively (Taylor, Hamvas, Rice, Newman, & DeJong, 2011).

To our knowledge, judgments about the acceptability, effectiveness, and commonness of spanking have not previously been evaluated in one study. We believe that by parsing judgments into different components, we can discover how evaluations of the acceptability of spanking may be related to the perceived effectiveness of that action and views of its normalness. A second reason to include these three components is that this approach can eventually lead to an identification of which component is potentially the most modifiable (Taylor et al., 2016).

Research Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis concerned parental status. Because parents of young children experience firsthand the challenges of child rearing and have presumably witnessed and/or applied disciplinary actions more often than have nonparents, we predicted that parents would rate all disciplinary responses as more common than would nonparents. Indeed, the parenthood experience significantly impacts various cognitions, both about child rearing practices (Holden, 1988), as well as broader perceptions about work and everyday life (Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004; Görlitz, & Tamm, 2015). We also predicted that parents would judge harsh disciplinary practices as more effective and acceptable, compared with nonparents, because parents are more likely to have witnessed the short-term benefits (i.e., immediate compliance) of such behaviors (Holden et al., 1999).

Our second hypothesis derives from Fishbein and Ajzen's (2011) Theory of Reasoned Action, which states that behavior results from intentions, and intentions derive from subjective views about norms. In line with this theory, we expected that a corporal term seen as describing a more normative (common) disciplinary response would also be perceived as more acceptable and more effective. We suspected that individuals would hold relatively coherent, rather than discrepant, judgments about CP across different evaluative dimensions. Individuals who held positive views would perceive the practice as more common, more acceptable, and more effective than individuals who held negative views. Thus, the mean ratings for CP terms should be similarly ordered *across* the three rating dimensions of common, acceptable, and effective.

The third hypothesis concerned the relationship *among* our three rating dimensions. We expected that acceptable and effective ratings should be more strongly related to each other than either would be to common ratings. Ratings of how common something appears to be is a *descriptive* norm (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990) reflecting individuals' evaluations of how people actually behave. In contrast, both acceptability and effectiveness reflect *injunctive* norms that relate to subjective perceptions about whether a CP behavior is approved (Cialdini et al., 1990). Furthermore, effectiveness and acceptability should have an additional logical connection—a disciplinary act that is viewed as more effective in changing subsequent behavior should also be seen as more acceptable because it can achieve the desired goal of modifying child behavior.

Method

Participants

Two groups of participants were included in this investigation: nonparents and parents. Nonparents consisted of 192 undergraduate students recruited through an online research participation system (Sona) at a medium-sized private university. One student participant was excluded from the analyses because their ratings deviated more than 2.5 *SD*s from the group mean, leaving 191 in the final sample. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 34 years old ($M = 20.4$, $SD = 2.5$). The majority of nonparents (students) were female (87.3%) and Caucasian (66.0%), with the remaining racial/ethnic groups being Hispanic (12.6%), Asian (9.7%), African American (5.8%), and biracial or other (5.8%).

The parent sample was recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online data collection marketplace. MTurk is comprised of a more diverse sample than available in any one site, and data collected is equally reliable to that gathered by traditional methods (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013). Parents were screened to only include adults living in the United States with at least one child between 2 and 6 years old, the peak age range when CP is used (Straus, 1994). A total of 506 parents participated, but 18 subsequently were excluded because of missing or insufficient data, and seven more were dropped because their ratings exceeded the group mean by more than 2.5 *SD*s. Thus, the final parent sample size was 481. Parents ranged in age from 20 to 60 years old ($M = 32.5$, $SD = 6.8$), and a majority were mothers (66.4%). Most parents were Caucasian (74.3%), but the sample included African American (10.9%), Hispanic (7.6%), Asian (4.9%), and biracial or other (2.2%). With respect to parents' education, 42.6% had college degrees, 31.6% had some college or vocational training, 14.3% had completed high school, and 11.5% had a graduate or professional degree.

Materials

A pilot study was used to identify a set of scenarios concerning common child misbehaviors that would be perceived as similarly severe. Ten misbehavior vignettes were presented to 22 undergraduate students, who rated the severity of the child's misbehavior on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *slightly*, 3 = *moderately*, 4 = *considerably*, 5 = *extremely*). Eight of the 10 were included in the main study, and these appear in the Appendix along with mean (and *SD*) severity ratings. The mean scenario ratings for the eight scenarios fell within the "moderately" to "considerably" severe range, indicating the transgressions were serious enough to merit a parental disciplinary response.

We reviewed the research literature and discipline measures (e.g., Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998) to select five corporal terms which were broadly representative of the words used to describe CP in American culture: spank, slap, swat, hit, and beat. To encourage a use of the entire range of the rating scale, we also included three terms representing noncorporal parental responses to child misbehaviors: yell, ignore, and reason with. Yell is a harsh but common noncorporal disciplinary behavior (Lansford et al., 2012; Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006). Reasoning is the most commonly used disciplinary behavior (e.g., Lansford et al., 2012), and this nonpunitive parenting technique is regarded as democratic and didactic (Locke & Prinz, 2002; Nelsen, 2006). Finally, ignore was included as a more neutral noncorporal option between the positive "reason with" and the negative "yell."

The vignettes selected from the pilot study described eight different child misbehaviors: aggression, stealing, ignoring requests, deception, teasing, property destruction, animal cruelty, and lying (Appendix). Following each child misbehavior vignette was a sentence describing the parental response. We used a mother's response to her 5-year-old son's action in all scenarios to hold the parent and child gender constant (Appendix). The boy's name differed in each scenario to avoid any carry-over effects from one scenario to another, and we used the active present tense verb form (i.e., "spanks," "reasons with") to make the scenarios more engaging.

Procedure

All participants accessed the survey online using Qualtrics (Provo, UT). Once informed consent was obtained, all participants rated each of the eight vignettes. To ensure that each discipline term appeared equally often with each vignette across participants, eight different item sets were created, and participants were randomly assigned to one set. After reading a vignette, participants made three ratings in succession while the vignette remained on the screen: "How common is the mother's response?"; "How acceptable is the mother's response?"; and "How effective is the mother's response?" Each rating was made on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *slightly*, 3 = *moderately*, 4 = *considerably*, 5 = *extremely*), and participants were allowed as much time as they needed to input their ratings on the computer.

Once all ratings had been made, participants completed several additional questionnaires that are not part of the focus of this study and will not be considered here. Undergraduates' participation lasted approximately 10 min, and they received extra course credit as compensation. Parents completed two more surveys than did nonparents, and their session lasted approximately 20 min. Parents' MTurk accounts were credited $1.00 upon completion.

Results

The rating means (and *SD*s) are presented in Table 1 for each term on each scale, for each sample separately and combined. For clarity of presentation, the discipline terms will appear in bold and rating scales in italics. We present only analyses related to the five corporal terms because these are the focus of this article. We do, however, include summary statistics on the three noncorporal terms in Table 1.

Before considering each separate hypothesis, it is worth noting that each of the five corporal terms were rated as more *common* than either *acceptable* or *effective* (Table 1). Also, although the main purpose of our study was to examine rating differences across samples, scales, and terms, we should point out that most mean ratings for corporal terms fell in the lower end of the scale (midpoint of 3).

Parents Versus Nonparents

Our first hypothesis, that parents would rate disciplinary responses as more *common*, *acceptable*, and *effective* than nonparents, was only partially supported. Although a 2 (Group: parent, nonparent) × 3 (Rating scale: *common*, *appropriate*, *effective*) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant overall difference between groups, $F(1, 653) = 1.07$, $p = .301$, $\eta^2 = .002$, there was a significant interaction of group by rating scale, $F(2, 353) = 6.02$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .009$. Supplementary analyses revealed that the parents' *common* ratings for CP terms was higher ($M = 2.70$) than that of nonparents ($M = 2.54$), $F(1, 665) = 5.63$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2 = .008$, whereas there was no significant mean group difference for either *acceptable* ($M_{\text{parents}} = 1.88$; $M_{\text{nonparents}} = 1.81$) or *effective* ($M_{\text{parents}} = 1.98$; $M_{\text{nonparents}} = 2.03$) ratings, Fs < 1. We did find some (albeit) indirect and modest support for our assumption underlying hypothesis one. Specifically, among our parent sample, those who reported greater use of spanking also reported it as more *common*, $r(486) = .18$, $p < .001$, although there was no relation between spanking frequency and the other two rating dimensions (*acceptable*; *effective*). In summary, parents view acts of physical punishment as more *common* than do nonparents, but there were no group differences in how *acceptable* or *effective* these actions appear to be. It is noteworthy that despite a variety of demographic differences between our samples, they did not differ on ratings of the *acceptability* and *effectiveness* of our five CP terms.

In the remaining analyses, data from parents and nonparents are combined, given that there were no other significant main effects or interactions of group with scales and terminology, Fs < 1.

Terminology Differences Across Scales

Our second hypothesis was that the pattern of differences (or lack thereof) among the five corporal terms would be consistent across each of the three rating scales. Separate repeated measures ANOVAs were computed for each scale and followed up with statistical comparisons between each pair of terms. The one-way ANOVAs for each scale were all statistically significant: *common*, $F(4, 2696) = 321.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .323$; *acceptable*, $F(4, 2704) = 341.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .335$; *effective*, $F(4, 2680) = 281.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .246$. The results from supplementary comparisons are presented in Table 2. To keep the overall error rate at .05 across tests, a Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons required the use of a .005 significance level on each individual test. The second hypothesis was clearly supported, in that the pattern of differences was identical within each rating scale. **Spank** was rated highest and **beat** was rated the lowest, with **swat** significantly higher than both **hit** and **slap** which did not differ from each other. Thus, most CP terms were clearly differentiated from each other. The only exceptions were **hit** and **slap**, which were seen as comparable on each rating dimension. In short, **spank** was viewed as the most *common*, *acceptable* and *effective* form of CP and **beat** was the least *common*, *acceptable* and *effective* approach to corporal discipline.

Acceptable Versus Effective Ratings

The third hypothesis was that *acceptable* and *effective* ratings (injunctive norms) would be more closely aligned with each other

Table 1
Mean Ratings (SDs) for Discipline Terms on Three Scales, for Nonparent and Parent Samples

	Nonparents			Parents			Combined		
Variable	Common	Acceptable	Effective	Common	Acceptable	Effective	Common	Acceptable	Effective
Corporal terms									
Spank	3.24 (.94)	2.66 (1.16)	2.62 (1.15)	3.28 (.99)	2.54 (1.29)	2.51 (1.23)	3.26 (.97)	2.58 (1.24)	2.53 (1.21)
Swat	2.88 (.95)	2.14 (1.14)	2.23 (1.08)	3.15 (1.04)	2.32 (1.22)	2.28 (1.18)	3.06 (1.02)	2.27 (1.19)	2.27 (1.15)
Hit	2.32 (.98)	1.59 (.93)	1.84 (.89)	2.49 (1.05)	1.58 (.93)	1.70 (.99)	2.44 (1.03)	1.57 (.92)	1.75 (.96)
Slap	2.28 (.92)	1.39 (.75)	1.70 (.86)	2.40 (1.01)	1.52 (.88)	1.69 (.95)	2.36 (.98)	1.48 (.85)	1.69 (.93)
Beat	1.92 (.87)	1.18 (.52)	1.66 (.95)	2.12 (1.03)	1.35 (.85)	1.56 (.94)	2.06 (.99)	1.31 (.77)	1.59 (.94)
M	2.54 (.68)	1.81 (.68)	2.03 (.81)	2.70 (.80)	1.88 (.79)	1.98 (.88)	2.64 (.76)	1.84 (.74)	1.97 (.82)
Noncorporal terms									
Yell	4.04 (.94)	3.10 (1.14)	2.53 (.99)	4.06 (.86)	2.85 (1.13)	2.32 (1.00)	4.05 (.88)	2.91 (1.14)	2.37 (1.00)
Reason	3.42 (1.01)	3.62 (1.29)	3.13 (1.32)	3.19 (1.01)	3.29 (1.32)	2.90 (1.28)	3.26 (1.01)	3.38 (1.31)	2.97 (1.29)
Ignore	2.55 (1.10)	1.70 (.91)	1.32 (.74)	2.79 (1.11)	1.67 (.98)	1.44 (.87)	2.72 (1.11)	1.69 (.96)	1.41 (.84)
M	3.35 (.66)	2.80 (.72)	2.32 (.61)	3.35 (.66)	2.61 (.71)	2.22 (.67)	3.35 (.66)	2.66 (.66)	2.25 (.66)

Table 2
T-Tests on the Difference Between Mean Ratings for Each Pair of Terms, Within Each Scale

Variable	Swat	Hit	Slap	Beat
Common ratings				
Spank	$t(677) = 27.80^*$	$t(678) = 19.26^*$	$t(677) = 21.91^*$	$t(677) = 27.80^*$
Swat		$t(678) = 15.03^*$	$t(677) = 16.58^*$	$t(677) = 23.45^*$
Hit			$t(679) = 2.19$	$t(679) = 10.54^*$
Slap				$t(678) = 8.45^*$
Acceptable ratings				
Spank	$t(680) = 7.93^*$	$t(680) = 21.25^*$	$t(678) = 23.44^*$	$t(678) = 26.20^*$
Swat		$t(680) = 15.77^*$	$t(678) = 17.73^*$	$t(678) = 21.19^*$
Hit			$t(678) = 2.57$	$t(678) = 8.07^*$
Slap				$t(676) = 5.55^*$
Effective ratings				
Spank	$t(678) = 7.57^*$	$t(676) = 17.99^*$	$t(678) = 19.06^*$	$t(678) = 20.65^*$
Swat		$t(674) = 12.64^*$	$t(676) = 14.13^*$	$t(676) = 16.00^*$
Hit			$t(674) = 1.81$	$t(674) = 4.96^*$
Slap				$t(676) = 3.48^*$

$^* p < .005$.

than either would be to *common* ratings (descriptive norm). The hypothesis was tested using three different correlations within each term, comparing pairs of rating scales. To illustrate, the top line of Table 3 displays correlations between the *common* and *acceptable* ratings of **spank** (.42), the *common* and *effective* ratings of **spank** (.36), and the *acceptable* and *effective* ratings of **spank** (.80). The pattern of the 15 correlations presented in Table 3 supported the third hypothesis: associations between *acceptable* and *effective* ratings are much stronger (*r*s from .55 to .80; median $r = .70$) than between either *common* and *acceptable* (*r*s from .42 to .56; median $r = .48$) or between *common* and *effective* (*r*s from .31 to .43; median $r = .38$). Furthermore, this pattern was consistent for each of the five CP terms.

Discussion

The words used to describe harsh discipline certainly color perceptions of that behavior, but the impact of the discipline terms on our evaluations has not previously been empirically documented. This present study verified such speculation. Our fundamental finding was that different verbs used to label a disciplinary action do indeed evoke divergent evaluations of the associated behavior. With respect to our specific predictions, we found only partial support for our first hypothesis, that there would be significant differences between parents' and nonparents' interpretations of disciplinary terminology. Apparently, the experience of having a child increases one's perception of how *common* the response is, but does not alter views of how *acceptable* or *effective* such practices are. Although the experience of parenthood does influence child-rearing problem solving abilities (Holden, 1988), judgments about the acceptability and effectiveness of disciplinary practices appear to already be established at a younger age. Prior evidence indicates that emerging adults have already developed attitudes about spanking, including its effectiveness (Graziano & Namaste, 1990) and appropriateness (Simons & Wurtele, 2010).

Table 3
Pearson r Correlations (df) Comparing Rating Scale Responses, Separately for Each Term

Variable	Common and acceptable	Common and effective	Acceptable and effective
Spank	.42 (679)	.36 (679)	.80 (681)
Swat	.48 (679)	.38 (677)	.80 (679)
Hit	.56 (681)	.43 (677)	.70 (677)
Slap	.50 (679)	.41 (678)	.70 (677)
Beat	.44 (678)	.31 (678)	.55 (677)

Note. All correlations significant at $p < .001$.

Our second hypothesis received strong support. The five words representing CP behaviors showed a consistent ordering of mean ratings across all three scales. **Spank** was rated highest on *commonness*, *acceptability*, and *effectiveness* and **beat** lowest, while **swat** ranked second and higher than both **hit** and **slap** (which did not differ from each other on any rating dimension). This pattern of rating differences suggests that the terms used to describe CP are clearly and consistently differentiated in our sample of participants. In short, **spanking** a child is the most *common, acceptable, and effective* form of corporal discipline. At the other end, **beating** a child is the least *common, acceptable*, and *effective* approach. This finding builds on previous work revealing that language contributes to the mistreatment, abuse, and denial of a child's rights (Saunders, 2013), and has important implications for understanding and changing child discipline practices.

The third hypothesis that we tested concerned the relations among the three rating dimensions. *Common* ratings reflect a participant's views on descriptive norms, or how often this behavior appears to occur in a society (Cialdini et al., 1990). In contrast, *acceptable* and *effective* both tap into injunctive (subjective) norms about how parents should behave. As such, it follows that *effective* and *acceptable* ratings should relate more closely to each other than either should to *common,* which is what we found. Extrapolating from this, the extent to which a disciplinary response is evaluated as *effective* is closely related to how *acceptable* it seems to be. Across the five terms, the median correlation between *acceptability* and *effectiveness* was .70, with two correlations at .80 (Table 3). Whereas *acceptability* is fundamentally a moral judgment (right or wrong), *effectiveness* ratings reflect pragmatic views. The fact that the two ratings did not show more divergence,

is noteworthy, and may reflect ambivalence about, or disregard of, children's rights in the United States (e.g., Melton, 2008). If this study were conducted in a European country where CP has been banned, a very different result might be expected.

We acknowledge several limitations to this investigation. With respect to our samples, nonparents were mostly women from one university, and parents were more highly educated than the general public. Even though most U.S. households (73%) now have computer and Internet access (Pew Research Center, 2014), the parent sample consisted of self-selected MTurk workers. Research suggests no differences between MTurk workers and the more general public (e.g., Buhrmester et al., 2011), but a replication with more diverse samples would be useful.

A second limitation is that we did not supply definitions of the discipline terms for participants. This was intentional, because we were primarily interested in intuitive word connotations and did not want to bias participants' interpretations. However, there may be substantial individual differences in how the behaviors associated with each term are imagined. For example, a **slap** may be applied on the hand *or* on the face (Mahoney, Donnelly, Lewis, & Maynard, 2000), and these two actions would likely elicit substantially different interpretations (ratings). Similarly, views of the appropriateness of disciplinary responses are, in part, a function of the context in which the misbehavior occurs and the nature of the transgression (Catron & Masters, 1993; Grusec & Kuczynski, 1980; Kelder, McNamara, Carlson, & Lynn, 1991). Our vignettes were, by design, lacking such contextual details. An additional limitation is that the set of verbs tested here does not encompass all the terms used to refer to acts of CP. We selected what we believed to be the most commonly used terms in North America, but others are regularly used in regional, ethnic or racial subgroups (i.e., "whup," "tap," "pop," "paddle"; Ispa & Halgunseth, 2004; Mosby et al., 1999). Similarly, other countries may have a different hierarchy of disciplinary terms and connotations (e.g., "smack" in many Commonwealth nations), limiting the geographical generality of our findings.

With respect to our misbehavior vignettes, we controlled for possible biases of specific combinations of scenarios and terms by counterbalancing these two variables. However, we only included a small subset of possible child misbehaviors. Also, because we used brief hypothetical scenarios rather than real events or more richly detailed vignettes, contextual details were left up to the respondents' imaginations (e.g., seriousness of the transgression; intention of the misbehaving child; immediately preceding events). Finally, our vignettes used only male children of a specific age (5 years old) and female parents, for consistency across scenarios. There may be differences in the way that our verbs would be evaluated when used to describe parental discipline that is applied to girls, to younger or older children and by fathers (Ispa & Halgunseth, 2004).

Research Implications

Our research provides an important empirical step in documenting how our perceptions of a parent's disciplinary response are influenced by the terms used to describe the act, a problem recognized by Saunders (2013). In most realms, having a broad range of synonyms available to convey experiences enriches our communication. However, as Loftus and Burns (1974) demonstrated, selecting the term "smashed" versus "hit" to describe the same car accident can bias recollection of the event's intensity (speed) and consequences (broken glass). In the same way, our study suggests that the descriptors used for acts of child discipline may likely alter the implied intensity (e.g., physical harm) and consequences (e.g., emotional upset) of the action. When assessing the personal or cultural estimates of CP, some responses (**swat**) may imply higher prevalence, justifiability and validity than others (**slap**), even if the actual act of punishment is the same. Evidently, researchers should take great care in selecting the terms used in their studies.

In future research into the impact of language, parental responses could be presented in greater detail. We used a minimal description of the parental reaction (i.e., "Jacob's mother hit him"), but future studies could expand the complexity and detail of parental responses to avoid ambiguity. Another approach to evaluating the impact of verb selection would be to assess how participants later recall the event: "how angry was the parent?"; "how distressed was the child?"; "how hard was the child struck?" Indeed, cognitive research indicates that how an event is labeled during or immediately after the experience may alter memory for details (Carmichael et al., 1932) and severity (Loftus & Burns, 1974; Loftus, Miller, & Burns, 1978) of the event, and such biases increase over time (Daniel, 1972).

In addition to the more detailed scenarios and delayed memory evaluation, future research should compare a wider range of corporal terms, including ones commonly used in various subcultures. Gathering data from a more diverse sample of respondents from a variety of different ethnic, racial and regional backgrounds would also be informative. Finally, a broader array of scenarios could be used, including a greater age range of children of both genders, as well as both fathers and mothers as disciplinarians.

Clinical and Policy Implications

Whereas **spank, swat, hit, slap,** and **beat** may be functionally indistinguishable in the media's descriptions of the Adrian Peterson case, we found that each term evokes different interpretations of the associated parental behavior. Because **spank** is seen as a more *common*, *acceptable*, and *effective* response, its use may sanitize or normalize harsh punishment (Saunders, 2013). In a more general sense, all terms describing physical punishment (**spank, slap, swat, hit, beat**) were seen as more *common* than either *acceptable* or *effective*, suggesting that such disciplinary responses may be employed more often than respondents consider appropriate.

A larger issue related to our findings is the recognition that intergenerational transmission of family violence and CP of children is propagated through culturally sanctioned violent behaviors, and maintained as normative practices (Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011; Berzenski, Yates, & Egeland, 2014; Lansford & Dodge, 2008). With harsh child discipline, the most common mechanism of intergenerational transmission is when children grow up and adopt their parents' attitudes and behavior (Lunkenheimer, Kittler, Olson, & Kleinberg, 2006; Markowitz, 2001; Simons & Wurtele, 2010). Given that preadolescents have developed attitudes about CP (Deater-Deckard, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2003), interventions that address the terminology used to refer to physical punishment should begin in childhood.

Our study highlights the role of language in legitimizing violent parental behavior. Altering the verb used to describe the same act of CP can have a substantial impact on how that parental response

is evaluated, with some terms having a relative tempering effect (e.g., **spank**, **swat**) compared with others (**hit**, **slap**, **beat**). The clear implication is that public health interventions could focus on changing the semantics of discipline to reduce or prevent violence. There is a need to eliminate words which maintain "social norms that hide violence in plain sight" (UNICEF, 2014, p. 12). That effort should include public education about research indicating the negative consequences associated with CP (Holden, Brown, Baldwin, & Croft Caderao, 2014). Legal reform is also needed that recognizes children's right not to be hit by anyone (Durrant & Smith, 2011), and our study suggests that some simple linguistic modifications might help. Excising the term **spank** from our lexicon and replacing it with the word **assault**, as suggested by Garbarino (1996) several decades ago, is likely to change perceptions and in turn, modify attitudes about and use of physical punishment.

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(*Appendix follows*)

Appendix

Eight Behavioral Scenarios, with Mean (and *SD*) Severity Rating from the Pilot Study

Behavioral scenario	*M* (*SD*)
John continues to hit his sibling after his mother has asked him to stop. John's mother ___ him.	3.95 (.59)
On a playdate, Jacob grabs a toy from Mason's hand and pushes him down. Jacob's mother ___ him.	3.57 (.81)
Ethan's mother asks him to put away his toys. After refusing to do so a few times, Ethan begins to ignore his mother. Ethan's mother ___ him.	3.05 (.67)
After being told it is wrong, Noah sneakily takes candy from his mother's purse without asking. Noah's mother ___ him.	3.05 (.92)
Charlie is in tears because his brother, William, is teasing him. After repeatedly being told to stop, William continues to tease Charlie. William's mother ___ him.	3.62 (.67)
After being repeatedly told to turn off the laptop, Liam becomes angry and throws the laptop onto the floor. Liam's mother ___ him.	4.29 (.58)
Michael's mother catches him being mean to the neighbor's dog again. This time, Michael is throwing rocks at the dog. Michael's mother ___ him.	4.29 (.72)
Alexander's mother has taught him that lying is wrong. Nevertheless, Alexander lies to his mother about having scratched the car with his bike. Alexander's mother ___ him.	3.14 (.84)

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