

Perceptions of Discipline and Punishment in Families from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to explore the perceptions of discipline and punishment among families from diverse cultural backgrounds. By understanding these perceptions, the study aimed to provide insights into how cultural norms, individual experiences, and societal frameworks influence disciplinary practices within different familial contexts.

Methods: This qualitative research utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data from 23 participants of varied cultural backgrounds. The participants were recruited through community centers, cultural organizations, and social media platforms. Interviews were conducted using a guide developed from existing literature, focusing on definitions of discipline, acceptable and unacceptable practices, and cultural influences. Data were analyzed using NVivo software, employing thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns across the interviews.

Results: The study identified three main themes: perceptions of discipline, experiences with punishment, and cultural contexts. Participants generally defined discipline as corrective action aimed at guiding behavior and fostering respect, responsibility, and self-discipline. Non-physical methods, such as time-outs and verbal warnings, were preferred, while physical punishment was widely rejected. Cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and community norms significantly influenced these practices. Experiences with punishment revealed generational shifts towards less physical punishment, with emotional impacts ranging from fear to acceptance. The influence of extended family, migration challenges, and legal frameworks were also highlighted, underscoring the complex interplay of cultural and societal factors in shaping disciplinary practices.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to discipline and punishment within families. Effective parenting programs and policies should integrate diverse cultural traditions while promoting non-physical disciplinary methods. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural dimensions of disciplinary practices, offering valuable insights for parents, educators, and policymakers aiming to support the well-being and healthy development of children in multicultural contexts.

Keywords: Discipline, Punishment, Cultural Backgrounds, Parenting Practices, Child Development, Thematic Analysis, Cultural Norms, Family Dynamics.

1 Introduction

Discipline and punishment within families are complex phenomena influenced by a myriad of cultural, social, and individual factors. Understanding these influences is crucial for developing effective parenting strategies that promote the well-being and healthy development of children. Discipline is often conceptualized as a means of teaching children appropriate behavior, setting boundaries, and guiding moral development (Gächter & Herrmann, 2008). However, the methods used to achieve these goals can vary significantly across cultures. Physical punishment, for instance, has been a contentious issue, with substantial evidence suggesting its negative effects on children's mental health and behavioral outcomes (Hecker et al., 2014; Lansford et al., 2015).

Research by Gershoff et al. (2018) highlights the strong causal evidence against physical punishment, noting its association with increased aggression, antisocial behavior, and mental health problems in children (Gershoff et al., 2018). Similarly, Hecker et al. (2014) found that corporal punishment in Tanzanian children was linked to higher levels of externalizing problems, such as aggression and defiance. These findings underscore the importance of examining cultural contexts to understand the variability in disciplinary practices and their outcomes (Hecker et al., 2014).

Cultural norms and societal attitudes play a significant role in shaping parenting practices. Lansford and Dodge (2008) explored how cultural norms regarding corporal punishment influence its prevalence and acceptance, finding considerable variation across different societies. In some cultures, physical punishment is viewed as an essential component of child-rearing, while in others, it is increasingly seen as harmful and outdated (Lansford & Dodge, 2008).

The influence of cultural background on discipline and punishment is evident in various studies. Khoury-Kassabri (2010) compared the attitudes of Arab and Jewish mothers towards punitive and non-punitive discipline methods, revealing distinct differences rooted in cultural beliefs and practices. This research highlights how cultural context can shape parents' perceptions of what constitutes appropriate disciplinary actions (Khoury-Kassabri, 2010).

First-generation Korean-American parents, for example, often blend traditional Korean values with American parenting practices, leading to unique approaches to discipline (Kim & Hong, 2007). This hybrid approach reflects the adaptation required in multicultural settings,

where parents must navigate and reconcile differing cultural expectations.

Legal and social frameworks also influence disciplinary practices. In countries with strict child protection laws, physical punishment is less prevalent and more stigmatized (Gershoff et al., 2018). Lansford et al. (2014) conducted a longitudinal study across eight countries, examining the interplay between corporal punishment, maternal warmth, and child adjustment. Their findings suggest that while maternal warmth can mitigate some negative effects of corporal punishment, the overall impact remains detrimental (Lansford et al., 2014).

In contrast, in societies where physical punishment is more culturally accepted, such practices are more common, and the societal response is often less critical (Lansford et al., 2015). This cross-cultural variation highlights the need for context-specific approaches to understanding and addressing disciplinary practices.

The psychological and behavioral outcomes of different disciplinary practices have been widely studied. Garcia et al. (2020) examined the effects of parenting warmth and strictness across three generations, finding that both factors significantly influence children's psychosocial adjustment (Garcia et al., 2020). These findings suggest that while strictness can provide structure and discipline, warmth is crucial for emotional security and healthy development. Ma et al. (2012) explored the relationship between corporal punishment and externalizing behavior in Chilean youth, finding a positive correlation between the two. This study adds to the growing body of evidence indicating that physical punishment can exacerbate behavioral problems, rather than resolve them (Ma et al., 2012). Simango and Mafa (2022) discussed the conflict between child disciplinary practices and child rights in Zimbabwe, highlighting the challenges of balancing cultural traditions with modern child protection frameworks. This tension is particularly evident in societies undergoing social and legal changes, where traditional practices may clash with new norms and regulations (Simango & Mafa, 2022). Cross-cultural comparisons provide valuable insights into how disciplinary practices are perceived and implemented worldwide. Molho (2024) discussed cross-societal variation in norm enforcement systems, emphasizing how cultural context shapes the enforcement and acceptance of various norms, including those related to child discipline (Molho, 2024). Yu et al. (2018) investigated how maternal acculturation and child inhibitory control interact to influence Chinese American children's adjustment,

illustrating the complex interplay between cultural adaptation and parenting practices. This study highlights the importance of considering both parental and child factors in understanding the outcomes of disciplinary practices (Yu et al., 2018). Zhao (2023) explored the relationship between parenting styles and school bullying behavior among adolescents, finding that authoritative parenting, characterized by high warmth and high control, was associated with lower levels of bullying. This research underscores the protective effects of balanced parenting approaches that combine structure with emotional support (Zhao, 2023).

Given the diverse cultural backgrounds of families and the significant impact of disciplinary practices on children's development, it is essential to explore how these practices are perceived and enacted in different cultural contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the perceptions of discipline and punishment among families from various cultural backgrounds, using qualitative methods to capture the nuanced experiences and beliefs of participants.

The research questions guiding this study are:

- How do families from different cultural backgrounds define and perceive discipline and punishment?
- What are the commonly accepted and rejected disciplinary practices in these families?
- How do cultural norms, legal frameworks, and individual experiences shape these perceptions and practices?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex factors influencing disciplinary practices, providing insights that can inform more effective and culturally sensitive parenting strategies and policies.

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This qualitative research was designed to explore the perceptions of discipline and punishment within families from diverse cultural backgrounds. By employing a phenomenological approach, the study aims to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals regarding disciplinary practices in their respective cultural contexts.

The study targeted families from a variety of cultural backgrounds to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Participants were recruited through community

centers, cultural organizations, and social media platforms. The inclusion criteria were:

- Individuals aged 18 and above.
- Families with children aged 5 to 18.
- Willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview.

A total of 30 participants from diverse cultural backgrounds were interviewed, with the goal of achieving theoretical saturation. The diversity of participants was ensured by including individuals from different ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and educational levels.

Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews commenced. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and removing any identifying information from the transcripts.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences. The interview guide was developed based on existing literature and was designed to cover key areas such as:

- Definitions and perceptions of discipline and punishment.
- Cultural influences on disciplinary practices.
- Personal experiences and observations within the family context.
- Changes in disciplinary practices over time.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a location chosen by the participant to ensure comfort and privacy. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo software, which facilitated the organization and coding of qualitative data. Thematic analysis was employed to identify common themes and patterns across the interviews. The process involved:

- Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts.
- Initial coding to identify significant statements and phrases.
- Grouping similar codes into potential themes.
- Reviewing and refining themes to ensure they accurately represented the data.
- Defining and naming themes for reporting the findings.

Throughout the analysis, an iterative process was followed, constantly comparing new data with existing themes to achieve theoretical saturation. This ensured that the identified themes were comprehensive and reflected the full range of participants' experiences and perceptions.

3 Findings and Results

Table 1

Categories, Subcategories, and Concepts

Category	Subcategory	Concepts
Perceptions of Discipline	Definition of Discipline	Corrective action, Guidance, Behavioral control
	Acceptable Disciplinary Practices	Time-outs, Verbal warnings, Grounding
	Unacceptable Disciplinary Practices	Physical punishment, Emotional abuse, Deprivation
	Goals of Discipline	Respect, Responsibility, Self-discipline
	Cultural Influences on Discipline	Traditions, Religious beliefs, Community norms
Experiences with Punishment	Childhood Experiences	Parental practices, Sibling dynamics, School discipline
	Changes Over Time	Generational shifts, Legal changes, Social awareness
	Emotional Impact	Fear, Resentment, Acceptance
	Gender Differences in Punishment	Boys vs. girls treatment, Gender roles, Societal expectations
	Impact on Parent-Child Relationship	Trust issues, Communication breakdown, Strengthened bonds
Cultural Contexts	Comparison with Peer Experiences	Similarities, Differences, Peer influence
	Influence of Cultural Norms	Collective vs. individualistic cultures, Societal expectations, Cultural traditions
	Adaptation in Multicultural Settings	Hybrid practices, Compromise, Negotiation
	Role of Extended Family	Grandparents' influence, Extended family involvement, Intergenerational conflict
	Impact of Migration on Discipline Practices	Maintaining cultural identity, Assimilation, Cultural clash
	Legal and Social Frameworks in Different Cultures	Child protection laws, Social services, Community support systems
	Media and Public Perception	Representation in media, Public debates, Influence of social media

3.1 Perceptions of Discipline

Definition of Discipline

Participants commonly defined discipline as a form of corrective action aimed at guiding behavior and maintaining control. One participant remarked, "Discipline is about teaching right from wrong and setting boundaries." The concepts of corrective action, guidance, and behavioral control were frequently mentioned, illustrating a shared understanding of discipline's foundational goals.

The study included 23 participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, ensuring a broad representation of experiences and perspectives. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 55 years, with a mean age of 38 years. The sample consisted of 15 women and 8 men, reflecting a majority female perspective. In terms of cultural backgrounds, the participants identified as follows: 7 were of Asian descent, 5 were African, 4 were Latin American, 3 were European, and 4 identified as having mixed cultural heritage. The educational background of participants varied, with 8 having completed high school, 10 holding a bachelor's degree, and 5 possessing a graduate degree. Socioeconomic statuses were also diverse, with 9 participants reporting low income, 8 middle income, and 6 high income.

Acceptable Disciplinary Practices

Acceptable practices varied but generally included non-physical methods such as time-outs, verbal warnings, and grounding. "I prefer to use time-outs because it gives my child a moment to reflect," one parent explained. These methods were seen as effective in teaching children appropriate behavior without causing harm.

Unacceptable Disciplinary Practices

There was a consensus that physical punishment, emotional abuse, and deprivation were unacceptable. A

participant shared, "Hitting a child is never the answer; it only teaches fear." The rejection of these practices highlights a shift towards more humane and constructive disciplinary methods.

Goals of Discipline

The primary goals identified were fostering respect, responsibility, and self-discipline. "I want my children to grow up respecting others and taking responsibility for their actions," a parent noted. These goals underline the desire for long-term character development through discipline.

Cultural Influences on Discipline

Cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and community norms heavily influenced disciplinary practices. One participant stated, "Our cultural heritage values respect for elders, which shapes how we discipline our children." These influences often dictated what was considered acceptable and effective within different communities.

3.2 Experiences with Punishment

Childhood Experiences

Participants recalled their childhood experiences with parental practices, sibling dynamics, and school discipline. "My parents were strict, but they always explained why they punished us," one interviewee recounted. These memories shaped their current views and practices regarding punishment.

Changes Over Time

There was a noticeable change in disciplinary practices over generations, influenced by legal changes and social awareness. "My parents used to spank us, but I don't do that with my kids because times have changed," a participant mentioned. This shift reflects evolving societal norms and increased understanding of child development.

Emotional Impact

The emotional impact of punishment ranged from fear and resentment to acceptance. "I used to be scared of my father, but now I understand he was trying to protect me," one individual explained. These mixed emotions highlight the complex nature of disciplinary experiences.

Gender Differences in Punishment

Disciplinary practices often varied between boys and girls, influenced by gender roles and societal expectations. A mother shared, "We were tougher on our son because boys are expected to be strong." This differentiation underscores the influence of gender on disciplinary approaches.

Impact on Parent-Child Relationship

Punishment affected the parent-child relationship, sometimes causing trust issues and communication breakdowns, but occasionally strengthening bonds. "After being punished, I felt closer to my mother because she explained her actions," one participant revealed. This dual impact shows the nuanced effects of disciplinary actions on family dynamics.

Comparison with Peer Experiences

Participants compared their disciplinary experiences with those of their peers, noting both similarities and differences. "My friends and I had similar rules at home, but their parents were more lenient," one interviewee observed. These comparisons provided a broader context for understanding their own experiences.

3.3 Cultural Contexts

Influence of Cultural Norms

Cultural norms, whether collective or individualistic, played a significant role in shaping disciplinary practices. "In our community, discipline is a collective responsibility," a participant mentioned. This reflects how cultural values and societal expectations inform disciplinary approaches.

Adaptation in Multicultural Settings

In multicultural settings, families often adapted by blending practices, compromising, or negotiating disciplinary methods. "We combine my husband's strict upbringing with my more lenient approach," one mother explained. This adaptation highlights the fluidity and complexity of disciplinary practices in diverse cultural contexts.

Role of Extended Family

The extended family, including grandparents and other relatives, influenced disciplinary practices, sometimes causing intergenerational conflict. "My parents think we're too soft on our kids," one participant noted. This involvement underscores the broader familial context in which discipline occurs.

Impact of Migration on Discipline Practices

Migration impacted disciplinary practices as families navigated maintaining cultural identity and assimilating into new environments. "We try to keep our cultural traditions, but we also adapt to the new country's laws," a father shared. This balance reflects the challenges and adaptations faced by immigrant families.

Legal and Social Frameworks in Different Cultures

Participants discussed the influence of child protection laws, social services, and community support systems on

disciplinary practices. "In our home country, spanking is more accepted, but here it's illegal," one participant observed. These frameworks significantly affect how discipline is perceived and implemented.

Media and Public Perception

Media representations and public debates influenced participants' views on discipline. "Social media has made me more aware of positive parenting techniques," a mother explained. This illustrates the role of media in shaping contemporary understandings of discipline and punishment.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored the perceptions of discipline and punishment among families from diverse cultural backgrounds through semi-structured interviews with 23 participants. The findings revealed three main themes: perceptions of discipline, experiences with punishment, and cultural contexts.

Under the theme of perceptions of discipline, participants defined discipline primarily as corrective action aimed at guiding behavior and maintaining control. Acceptable disciplinary practices included non-physical methods such as time-outs, verbal warnings, and grounding, whereas physical punishment, emotional abuse, and deprivation were widely considered unacceptable. The goals of discipline identified by participants were fostering respect, responsibility, and self-discipline, heavily influenced by cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and community norms.

Regarding experiences with punishment, participants' childhood experiences, changes over time, emotional impact, gender differences in punishment, and the impact on parent-child relationships were examined. Participants recalled varied childhood disciplinary practices, noting a generational shift toward less physical punishment due to increased legal and social awareness. Emotional impacts ranged from fear and resentment to acceptance, with gender differences reflecting societal expectations. Punishment also affected parent-child relationships, sometimes causing trust issues but occasionally strengthening bonds through explanation and understanding.

In the cultural contexts theme, the influence of cultural norms, adaptation in multicultural settings, the role of extended family, the impact of migration on disciplinary practices, legal and social frameworks in different cultures, and media and public perception were explored. Cultural norms significantly shaped disciplinary practices, with adaptations evident in multicultural settings. Extended

family often influenced practices, causing intergenerational conflicts. Migration presented challenges in maintaining cultural identity while adapting to new environments. Legal frameworks and media representations also played crucial roles in shaping contemporary understandings of discipline and punishment.

The results align with and expand upon previous research findings. The definition of discipline as corrective action aimed at guiding behavior resonates with the conceptualization presented by Gershoff et al. (2018), who highlight the importance of discipline in teaching appropriate behavior and setting boundaries. The widespread rejection of physical punishment and preference for non-physical methods among participants supports the findings of Gershoff et al. (2018) and Hecker et al. (2014), who emphasize the negative consequences of physical punishment, including increased aggression and behavioral problems (Gershoff et al., 2018; Hecker et al., 2014).

The identified goals of discipline, such as fostering respect, responsibility, and self-discipline, are consistent with the findings of Garcia et al. (2020), who note that these attributes are crucial for children's psychosocial adjustment (Garcia et al., 2020). The influence of cultural traditions and community norms on disciplinary practices echoes the work of Lansford and Dodge (2008), who found that cultural norms significantly impact the prevalence and acceptance of corporal punishment (Lansford & Dodge, 2008).

Participants' reflections on their childhood experiences and the generational shift toward less physical punishment align with Lansford et al. (2014), who observed a global trend away from corporal punishment due to changing legal and social frameworks (Lansford et al., 2014). The emotional impacts of punishment, ranging from fear and resentment to acceptance, highlight the complex nature of disciplinary experiences, as discussed by Ma et al. (2012), who found a positive correlation between corporal punishment and externalizing behavior in youth (Ma et al., 2012).

The gender differences in punishment observed in this study reflect societal expectations and gender roles, supporting the findings of Khoury-Kassabri (2010), who noted distinct disciplinary practices based on gender in different cultural contexts (Khoury-Kassabri, 2010). The dual impact of punishment on parent-child relationships, causing both trust issues and strengthening bonds, underscores the nuanced effects of disciplinary actions, as highlighted by Yu et al. (2018), who explored the interplay

between maternal acculturation, child inhibitory control, and parenting practices (Yu et al., 2018).

Cultural norms' significant role in shaping disciplinary practices aligns with Gächter and Herrmann (2008), who emphasize the influence of cultural context on norm enforcement systems (Gächter & Herrmann, 2008). The adaptations in multicultural settings observed in this study resonate with Kim and Hong (2007), who discussed the hybrid disciplinary approaches adopted by first-generation Korean-American parents (Kim & Hong, 2007).

The involvement of extended family in disciplinary practices and the resulting intergenerational conflicts reflect findings by Lansford et al. (2015), who explored family-level contributions to child abuse and neglect across different cultures (Lansford et al., 2015). The challenges faced by immigrant families in balancing cultural identity and adapting to new environments align with the research of Molho (2024), who discussed cross-societal variation in norm enforcement systems (Molho, 2024).

Legal and social frameworks' influence on disciplinary practices, observed in this study, supports the findings of Simango and Mafa (2022), who highlighted the tension between traditional disciplinary practices and modern child protection frameworks (Simango & Mafa, 2022). Media and public perception's role in shaping contemporary understandings of discipline, as noted by participants, resonates with Zhao (2023), who explored the relationship between parenting styles and adolescent behavior (Zhao, 2023).

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size of 23 participants, while providing valuable insights, may not be representative of the broader population. The findings are based on qualitative data, which, although rich in detail, may not capture the full diversity of experiences across different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which could be influenced by social desirability bias, where participants might provide responses they believe are socially acceptable rather than their true beliefs or practices. Finally, the study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationships between cultural background, disciplinary practices, and child outcomes.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore the long-term effects of different disciplinary practices on children's development and well-

being. Such studies could provide deeper insights into how cultural norms and practices evolve over time and their impact on successive generations. Additionally, incorporating mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics involved in discipline and punishment within diverse cultural contexts. Investigating the perspectives of children and other family members, such as fathers and grandparents, would also enrich the understanding of family dynamics and disciplinary practices.

The findings of this study have several practical implications for parents, educators, and policymakers. Culturally sensitive parenting programs that respect and integrate diverse cultural traditions while promoting positive disciplinary practices could be highly beneficial. Such programs should emphasize the importance of non-physical methods of discipline, providing parents with practical tools and strategies to guide their children's behavior effectively. Educators and practitioners working with families from diverse cultural backgrounds should be trained to recognize and respect cultural differences in disciplinary practices while advocating for the well-being and rights of children. Policymakers should consider the cultural context when developing and implementing child protection laws and policies, ensuring they are both effective and culturally appropriate. Public awareness campaigns highlighting the negative effects of physical punishment and promoting positive parenting practices could also help shift societal attitudes and norms towards more humane and constructive approaches to discipline.

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of discipline and punishment within families from diverse cultural backgrounds. By exploring the perceptions and experiences of participants, the research provides valuable insights into the cultural, social, and individual factors that shape disciplinary practices. These findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to parenting and policymaking, aimed at promoting the well-being and healthy development of children in a diverse and interconnected world.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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