

# *Attitudes toward corporal punishment of children: the role of past experience, dark tetrad traits, and anger rumination*

Article

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# CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

## **Abstract**

Despite corporal punishment being associated with negative developmental outcomes for children, it is commonly practised in Malaysian courts, schools, and homes. This study examined the relationships among the Dark Tetrad personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, sadism), anger rumination, and attitudes toward corporal punishment of children. Two hundred and sixty-three participants from a university and community sample in Malaysia completed measures of attitudes toward child corporal punishment, the Short Dark Tetrad, and the Anger Rumination Scale. Participants also answered questions about whether they received corporal punishment at home and at school as children. Correlation analyses showed that Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism were positively associated with acceptance of corporal punishment. Further regression analyses revealed that having received corporal punishment at home – but not at school – during childhood as well as trait Machiavellianism and sadism predicted accepting attitudes toward corporal punishment. Identification of factors that influence people’s attitudes regarding corporal punishment and discipline behaviours could yield new insights into parenting education programmes and policies.

## **Keywords**

corporal punishment, violence, attitudes, Dark Tetrad, personality, anger rumination

# CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

## **Introduction**

### **Corporal Punishment: Discipline vs. Abuse**

According to a theoretical review by Gershoff (2002), corporal punishment refers to the use of reasonable physical force to intentionally inflict bodily pain without injury to correct, control, and/or punish undesired child behaviour. Commonly reported forms of physical punishment include spanking, slapping, pinching, or hitting with an object (Zolotor & Puzia, 2010). The acceptability of such means has been challenged increasingly around the world, mainly due to its associations with negative behavioural, psychological, and social outcomes in childhood and adulthood (Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2018). According to Gershoff's (2002) review (see also Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016), corporal punishment has been shown to improve immediate compliance, but those who have received corporal punishment as children also reported increased aggressive, criminal, and antisocial behaviour, as well as decreased mental health.

There are debates about where to draw the line between reasonable forms of physical punishment and actual abuse. According to Zolotor et al. (2008), parents who frequently spank children are three times more likely to report harsh punishment acts akin to physical abuse, and nine times more likely if an object was used. Furthermore, an act that may be perceived as normative punishment and appropriate parenting (e.g., spanking) can also be considered abusive when escalated (e.g., spanking on the head, multiple episodes of spanking per day) (Gershoff, 2002). These findings are in line with the continuum of violence position, which posits that punishment and abuse are only quantitatively different, varying in severity or degree of injury (Gonzalez et al., 2008).

However, the practice of corporal punishment is prevalent, and indeed accepted in many parts of the world. In Malaysia, while the Child Act 2001 deems any individual who “abuses, neglects, abandons or exposes the child in a manner likely to cause him physical or

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

emotional injury” to have committed an offence, physical punishment of children not resulting in a substantial and observable injury is not legally (and culturally) prohibited. Moreover, while Malaysia has acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1995, its government currently maintains five reservations to the CRC provisions, due to variance between the CRC articles and national and Syariah laws (to illustrate, judicial caning is used as a form of legal punishment for criminal offences under both civil and Syariah laws in Malaysia). A study by Kumaraswamy and Othman (2011) revealed that 63% of Malaysian participants remembered experiencing corporal punishment at home as children, in which 3% of them reported receiving punishments that resulted in welts, bruises, fractures, or deep cuts – a form of physical abuse by definition. Participants in the study however, generally reported fairly favourable attitudes toward corporal punishment.

### **Dark Tetrad and Acceptance of Violence**

In light of the continued use of corporal punishment and the debate concerning parents’ right to its use, research has identified several factors that may place an individual at risk of using harsh discipline on children. Among these predictors is-are favourable attitudes toward corporal punishment, and personality is arguably a key individual differences variable that predicts the adoption of such attitudes. In particular, four interrelated traits collectively known as the Dark Tetrad – Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism – are considered socially aversive (Paulhus, 2014), and may therefore relate to more accepting attitudes towards the use of physical punishment.

Consistent evidence has shown positive associations between the individual Dark Tetrad traits and self-reported aggressive/violent behaviour. Machiavellianism features a cynical disregard for morality, and has demonstrated relationships with bullying behaviour (Baughman et al., 2012); narcissism is associated with a grandiose sense of self-importance,

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

and has been found to predict child physical abuse (Crouch et al., 2015); psychopathy is characterised by antisociality and callousness, and has shown links with intimate partner violence perpetration (Tetreault et al., 2018); whereas sadism applies to people who derive enjoyment from inflicting suffering on others, and such individuals generally aggress physically, even when unprovoked (Buckels et al., 2013).

Of the Dark Tetrad traits, narcissism has been found to predict more accepting attitudes towards violence (Blinkhorn et al., 2016), while sadistic and psychopathic traits have demonstrated positive relationships with militant extremist attitudes, particularly the advocacy of violence as a means for goal achievement (Međedović & Knežević, 2018). However, no existing studies have examined whether all Dark Tetrad traits are related to attitudes towards physical punishment of children.

### **Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment**

Thoughts and attitudes that endorse corporal punishment and imply its expedience are theorised to increase the likelihood of its practice, thus the investigation of such attitudes is key to understanding childrearing behaviour. A significant predictor of opinions toward the use of corporal punishment appears to be one's own experience of such physical discipline in childhood. For instance, Simons and Wurtele (2010) found that parents who experienced frequent spanking as children reported higher tendencies to approve of its use as a discipline strategy. Past experience may influence social cognitions, which in turn affect subsequent behaviour.

### **The Role of Anger Rumination**

It has also been established in the literature that aggressive cognitions play a key role in the perpetration of aggressive/violent behaviour (Bowes & McMurrin, 2013). In a study by

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

Eckhardt et al. (2012), male offenders involved in domestic violence were shown to have more positive implicit associations toward violence than non-violent men. Among adolescents who report antisocial behaviour, aggression in automatic cognitions has been found to be positively associated with dating violence perpetration, even after accounting for more consciously controlled, self-reported attitudes about dating violence (Jouriles et al., 2011). Individuals with elevated sadistic and psychopathic tendencies have also demonstrated stronger implicit affective associations to violence (Međedović, 2017; Snowden et al., 2004).

Within general aggression research, anger appears to be related to aggression-related cognitions (see Anderson & Bushman, 2002), but the evidence suggests that ruminative thinking may mediate the relationship between anger and aggression (e.g., Denson et al., 2011). Anger rumination refers to ‘the tendency to engage in unintentional reoccurring thoughts about anger episodes’ (Sukhodolsky et al., 2001). In the study by Denson et al. (2011), anger rumination was shown to deplete self-control and augment the likelihood and severity of aggression upon provocation. Studies have reported anger rumination as a potential moderator between aversive personality traits and aggression (e.g., Guerra & White, 2017). However, the concepts of anger rumination and aggression have not been extensively studied in relation to the Dark Tetrad and corporal punishment attitudes.

### **The Present Study**

This study examined dispositional traits and past experience of physical discipline as predictors of attitudes toward corporal punishment. In light of the literature, the following hypotheses were posited:

- H1. The Dark Tetrad traits are associated with favourable attitudes toward corporal punishment of children.

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

- H2. Experience of corporal punishment in childhood is associated with favourable attitudes toward corporal punishment of children.
- H3. Anger rumination is associated with favourable attitudes toward corporal punishment of children.
- H4. Anger rumination mediates the relations between the Dark Tetrad traits and attitudes toward corporal punishment of children.

The current study was not based on samples drawn from Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010), and was conducted in Malaysia, a Southeast Asian country with a complex multiracial Asian population. In Malaysia, it is not uncommon to hear of parents and teachers using physical discipline on children. It is therefore of interest to investigate whether personality, cognitive, and social factors influence attitudes towards corporal punishment within a community where its practice is prevalent.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

The online study was advertised on the [University] research participant pool and social media networks of the researchers. Using convenience sampling, 272 participants were recruited. Participants who did not complete at least 80% of the measures were excluded from analysis. The remaining participants comprised 129 males and 125 females (8 preferred not to reveal their gender), aged 18 to 64 ( $M = 24.45$ ,  $SD = 9.57$ ). The majority of the sample were ethnic Chinese (70.3%), followed by ethnic Malay (12.5%), ethnic Indian (6.8%), other ethnicities (5.3%), whereas 4.6% of the sample preferred not to say. Of these participants, 66.2% reported that they have received corporal punishment at home, 22.1% did not receive such treatment, 6.5% did not remember, and 4.9% preferred not to say. Seventy-three percent



## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

of the sample reported that they have received corporal punishment at school, 19.8% did not, 4.9% did not remember, and 1.9% preferred not to say.

### Measures

#### **Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment of Children**

The Corporal Punishment of Children domain of the Velicer Attitudes toward Violence Scale (VATVS; Anderson et al., 2006) assessed explicit attitudes toward physical punishment. Eight statements were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and the mean of all items was calculated. An example item is ‘*Young children who refuse to obey should be whipped*’. Higher scores indicated a more favourable attitude toward child corporal punishment.

#### **Dark Tetrad**

The Short Dark Tetrad (SD4; Paulhus et al., 2020), a 28-item self-report measure, assessed Machiavellianism (e.g., *It’s not wise to let people know your secrets*), subclinical narcissism (e.g., *I have some exceptional qualities*), subclinical psychopathy (e.g., *I tend to fight against authorities and their rules*), and everyday sadism (e.g., *Some people deserve to suffer*). The four subscales contained seven items each. Items were responded to on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The average of all items in each subscale was obtained, with higher scores in each subscale reflecting higher levels of that particular trait.

#### **Anger Rumination**

The Anger Rumination Scale (ARS; Sukhodolsky et al., 2001) that contains 19 items was used to measure the extent to which people focus on angry moods and experiences. It has

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

a four-point Likert scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 4 (*almost always*). Average scores were calculated. Higher scores corresponded to greater tendency to engage in anger rumination.

### Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the [University] Research Ethics Committee. Data ~~was~~ were collected anonymously via an online platform, Microsoft Forms. After informed consent was obtained, participants completed the VATVS, SD4, and ARS. Participants then answered questions about their age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, whether they have received corporal punishment at home and at school as children, as well as the form of punishment. Participants were presented with a debrief sheet upon completion. The English questionnaires were not translated, as English is reasonably widely understood and spoken in Malaysia.

### Results

SPSS was used for data analyses. Table 1 shows reliabilities, means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all measures. Machiavellianism, psychopathy, sadism, and anger rumination were associated with more favourable attitudes toward child corporal punishment, albeit the correlations were small to medium, ranging from  $|0.18|$  to  $|0.29|$ .

There were no violations of assumptions related to normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. It is acknowledged that interpretative issues may arise from using multivariate statistical approaches to analyse highly overlapping constructs (see Sleep et al., 2017), hence four separate regression analyses were conducted to predict attitudes toward corporal punishment of children from receipt of corporal punishment as children, each of the Dark Tetrad traits, and anger rumination. Each full model was statistically significant:  $F(8,252) = 4.87, p < .001, adj. R^2 = .11$  for Machiavellianism,

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

$F(8,252) = 2.29, p = .02, adj. R^2 = .04$  for narcissism,  $F(8,252) = 2.63, p = .009, adj. R^2 = .05$  for psychopathy, and  $F(8,252) = 2.88, p = .004, adj. R^2 = .06$  for sadism; all effect sizes were small. Table 2 shows a summary of each model. Receipt of corporal punishment at home as children was a significant predictor of more favourable attitudes toward physical punishment in all models. The individual analyses also showed that Machiavellianism and sadism were predictors of more favourable attitudes toward corporal punishment. In the regression model that included narcissism, anger rumination added statistically significantly to the prediction. The correlation between narcissism and anger rumination appeared to be weaker than that of the other dark traits and anger rumination. Meanwhile, in the model that included Machiavellianism, receipt of punishment at school was a predictor of less favourable attitudes towards physical punishment.

Exploratory analyses using the PROCESS macro model 4 were conducted to determine whether anger rumination mediated the effect of each Dark Tetrad trait on attitudes toward corporal punishment of children. Figure 1 shows the mediation model diagrams for each dark trait. There were significant indirect effects of anger rumination between narcissism and attitudes toward corporal punishment, *indirect* = .06, SE = .03, 95% CI [.01, .14] as well as between psychopathy and attitudes toward corporal punishment, *indirect* = .10, SE = .05, 95% CI [.004, .22]. However, there were no significant indirect effects of anger rumination between Machiavellianism and attitudes toward corporal punishment, *indirect* = .08, SE = .06, 95% CI [-.03, .19] as well as between sadism and attitudes toward corporal punishment, *indirect* = .09, SE = .05, 95% CI [-.01, .19].

Open-ended responses on the types of punishment participants received were coded. Of all who reported having received punishment at home, 82.2% reported being whipped or hit with an object (e.g., cane, belt, clothes hanger, rod), 26.4% reported having been slapped or spanked in the face or parts of the body, and 4% reported other forms of punishment such

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

as pinching, ear-pulling, food deprivation, and verbal punishments. Of those who reported having received punishment at school, 85.9% reported being beaten with an object (e.g., cane, ruler), 11.5% reported having been slapped or spanked, and 10.9% reported receiving other forms of physical punishment such as being asked to stand under the hot sun or squat for long periods of time.

### **Discussion**

The present study sought to assess the role of Dark Tetrad personality traits, anger rumination, and past experience of physical discipline in attitudes toward corporal punishment of children, within a Malaysian population.

Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism were among the Dark Tetrad traits that were associated with favourable attitudes toward child corporal punishment, indicating partial support for H1. A notable feature of psychopathy is that it confers an increased risk of instrumental aggression, also known as proactive or predatory aggression (Glenn & Raine, 2009). Instrumental aggression, typically premeditated, involves harming other(s) purposefully, with the intention of achieving a desired goal (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). While it could be argued that individuals high in psychopathy may perceive corporal punishment as being necessary to achieve instrumental parenting goals, the use of aggression among psychopathic individuals tends to be motivated by personal gain (e.g., Woodworth & Porter, 2002). Besides, the moral cognition and empathy impairments could mean that those high in psychopathy may easily engage in aggressive behaviours with little concern for potential consequences (Hare, 2003); what begins as an act of discipline thus becomes an act of violence. From the regression analyses it can also be seen that Machiavellianism and sadism significantly predicted favourable attitudes toward child corporal punishment. Individuals high in Machiavellianism tend to behave in a cold and insensitive manner, it is

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

therefore not surprising that their parental attitudes may contain elements of neglect and/or abuse (Láng, 2018). Sadism, characterised by a unique pleasure-driven form of aggression, is predictive of behaviours reflecting an appetite for cruelty (Buckels et al., 2013); the use of physical force to inflict pain on children is arguably a form of cruel treatment. A study by Jackson et al. (1999) found that beliefs that devalue children predicted attitudes that may bias parents towards abusive behaviours. Those high in sadism who are typically motivated by coercive control and dominance over others (e.g., O'Meara et al., 2011) may have more negative perceptions of children and may be more likely to use physically punitive measures of discipline. These interpretations suggest that aggressive/violent behaviour may be provoked by different triggers in different personality traits.

Narcissism did not predict acceptance of child corporal punishment, contradicting H1 and previous research. The null finding could potentially be attributed to the measurement of narcissism used in the current study. It is argued that the narcissism subscale of the SD4 captures only grandiose (as opposed to vulnerable) narcissism, which is related to more prosocial aspects of the construct (Paulhus et al., 2020).

The experience of corporal punishment at home in childhood predicted more favourable attitudes toward corporal punishment use, as expected in H2. This finding is bolstered by previous studies among parents as well as non-parents (e.g., Simons & Wurtele, 2010; Walker et al., 2018). There are, however, other factors that moderate this relationship, such as perceptions of parental warmth (Bell & Romano, 2012) and the severity of the punishment (Gagné et al., 2007), among others. For example, in a study by Gagné et al. (2007), adults who had been spanked – but not severely hit – as children were more likely to be in favour of such practice, whereas those who had sustained more severe forms of injuries were less in favour of the use of corporal punishment. Individuals who view corporal punishment as a type of expression of love that is not intended to harm the child may feel that

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

the positive outcomes from its use outweigh any pain it might cause. This may explain why the experience of corporal punishment at *school* predicted less favourable attitudes toward corporal punishment use. In Malaysia, school officials are often considered by parents as approximate authority figures with the right to discipline their children, but from the current findings it appears that this view is not shared by the children receiving the punishment. This pattern of results suggests that it is not the experience of receiving corporal punishment per se that leads to greater acceptance, but due to factors about the home environment in general (e.g., parental warmth) and/or presence of heritable traits shared by both parents and children (e.g., Dark Tetrad traits).

Furthermore, it has been postulated that the experience of corporal punishment prevents moral internalisation, which in turn contribute to the development of callous behaviours and Machiavellian traits (Láng & Lénárd, 2015); non-compliant children with high levels of callous behaviour may motivate parents to use harsher methods of punishment (Waller et al., 2012). This results in a vicious cycle in which both parent and child recurrently resort to physical coercion in their interactions, influencing the child's subsequent parenting beliefs and practices. This developmental explanation requires corroboration as the cross-sectional design of the current study was unable to test this empirically.

Another possible explanation for some of the findings is that individuals high in the Dark Tetrad traits are more accepting of corporal punishment as a way of enacting vengeance upon parents or teachers who inflicted punishment on them. In other words, they are personally motivated to punish others for their offence. For instance, in a study by Giammarco and Vernon (2014), Machiavellian individuals who were asked to decide on criminal cases reported a tendency to endorse vengeful decisions based on emotions.

With regard to H3 and H4, anger rumination was not a significant consistent predictor of attitudes towards corporal punishment, suggesting that the acceptance and use of physical

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

punishment are not necessarily driven by anger-related cognitions. The mediation analyses also supported this finding, whereby anger rumination mediated only the relations between two of the Dark Tetrad traits and attitudes toward corporal punishment of children. Due to the high rate of personal history of physical punishment, individual differences variables examined here might not be strong predictors compared to what could be observed in another sample where the cultural norms are different. Especially within a culture where physical discipline is normative and acceptable, it is likely that aggression is considered appropriate (and necessary) in some situations and need not be delivered in anger. The existing belief of “spare the rod and spoil the child” held by many is concerning, given the robust evidence showing the negative effects. This highlights the importance of attending to why particular cultural groups believe corporal punishment is necessary (or are against its use), when developing research agenda or educational efforts to decrease its use.

### **Limitations**

The sample of participants in the current study was relatively homogeneous, as participants were predominantly university students who do not yet have children. Since parents experience first-hand the challenges of childrearing, they have presumably witnessed and/or exercised physical disciplinary actions more than non-parents have, which could impact cognitions, perceptions, and practice. Moreover, the Dark Tetrad traits is dimensional in nature, but may only precipitate violence in clinical or forensic populations; a stronger attitude may be observed with people located at the extreme high end of the respective Dark Tetrad traits spectrum.

Further, the fact that the majority of the sample was of Chinese ethnicity is a limitation, given that Malays form the largest ethnic group in the country. While ethnicity has

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

not been considered as a variable of interest in the present study, future studies in ethnically diverse populations may need to take this possible confounding factor into account.

While the literature has suggested that approval of corporal punishment is a powerful predictor of its use, it should be noted that some individuals may attitudinally oppose corporal punishment, but still engage in such practice. Some may carry out corporal punishment as a last resort (or perhaps as a result of momentary helplessness); Taylor et al. (2011) in their study reported that parents spanked their children because it worked when nothing else did. It is unclear from this investigation whether attitudes towards child corporal punishment can predict real-world behaviour.

### **Conclusions**

While corporal punishment has emerged as a strong risk factor associated with many poor outcomes for children, it is a contentious issue, particularly in Malaysia, partly due to the perceived cultural normativeness. It is perhaps vital to support efforts to reduce its use as a discipline strategy, as the experience of physical punishment in childhood shapes attitudes that favour use of such practice.

Furthermore, this study sheds light on the extent to which the Dark Tetrad personality cluster is a driver of violent cognition, attitudes, and behaviour. Despite the high prevalence of corporal punishment among the current sample, the Dark Tetrad traits still contribute to the effects on attitudes towards corporal punishment, suggesting that personality traits of individuals are highly relevant even in a relatively more collectivist society such as Malaysia. Future research could identify other personality attributes that might be associated with different domains of aggression or violence.



## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN

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