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# Child as Father to the Man [sic]: The Political Psychology of Spanking

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**Abstract.** This article describes political psychological aspects of the ongoing controversy about the consequences of spanking as a child-rearing technique.

The vast majority of social science theories bearing on human functioning explicitly posits or seems to imply that childhood experiences have significant effects on adult psychological and social functioning. Even Marxist and neo-Marxist theories (that assert the psychological primacy of macromolecular economic phenomena) and biological theories (that back the salience of evolutionary and genetic factors) also make room for the psychological significance of micromolecular contingencies and intrapsychic experiences in childhood.

Given the assumed significance of childhood to adulthood, one should not be surprised that individuals who wish to make the world a better place and/or in their image might seek to influence public policies affecting child development. In fact, many of these individuals--e.g., so-called conservative and progressive educators; religious cultists; and political revolutionaries of anarchistic, fascist, and communist stripes--have focused on child-rearing practices in the home and in nursery schools and child day care as targets of socio-therapeutic praxis in the quest to develop the ideal man [sic]. In fact, some of these individuals have focused on their own children in their own homes. Others actually have developed and run nursery schools and day care centers. And one issue of note within this socio-therapeutic praxis has been that of the consequences of spanking.

There have been a number of information sources informing public discourse on spanking. The history of political philosophy contains many formulations on child rearing that explicitly and implicitly bear on spanking through the vehicles of asceticism, Epicureanism, materialism, and so on. For example, one may be told to spare the rod and spoil or roil the child or to spare the rod and allow unspoiled Truth to royally emerge. The history of behavioral and other psychological research--empirical and experimental--outlines three poles of advocacy: spanking leads to noxious consequences, to beneficial consequences, and to myriad consequences depending on yet other factors. Given that--as Habermas has contended--the situatedness of political philosophy and much empirical and experimental research within the public space seems to be ever decreasing, one should, however, note the salience of other more situated information sources including religious dicta, the Word of mass media stars and local social and cultural authorities, memories of one's own childhood experiences, anecdotal data from self and others on "what seems to work," and seeming exemplifications of de facto and formal worldviews. The "what seems to work" criterion is especially problematic in that it is often dependent on the temperamental matching of parent and child and may comprise requiring children to be "good" as catatonic; as extremely agitated; or, indeed, as any other possibility.

Yet, as far as empirical and experimental research does or can lead to significant change in spanking practices, one may, unfortunately, note significant shortfalls in this research's conception. These shortfalls may have contributed to the phenomenon of dueling experts who contend that spanking leads to juvenile delinquency, spousal abuse, and lowered mental ability on the one hand and to responsible

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love, social commitment, and cultural competence on the other. Most of these shortfalls relate to difficulties in defining spanking.

Researchers may focus on some behavioral combinations of the force of the hand doing the spanking, where the hand strikes the body of the spankee, how many strikes occur, and how long the hand remains on the body per strike. Researchers may focus on what brings on the spanking according to combinations of the (1) self-report of the spanker, spankee, and other observers and (2) the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious awareness of spanker and spankee as inferred by associates and observers of the spankers and spankees.

There also are differences in what aspects of what environments in which spanking occurs are attended to by researchers. These aspects include combinations of the previous history of spanking within a family in the present and/or past generations; the myriad facets of family life including interpersonal styles and temperament matches between and among family members; and the local, regional, national, and international consensuses concerning spanking.

Of most concern, however, are approaches to demonstrating causal linkages between spanking and later phenomena. Departing from William James's notion of the hugely complex and continuous notion of consciousness to a similarly delineated life-space of an individual, one can only wonder at a researcher's strong advocacy for what spanking has spawned based on fragile and, at best, very modest correlational data. One may also suspect that researchers' own conscious, preconscious, and unconscious psychologies may have quite a bit to do with their respective advocacies--as well as their choice of research field and how they go about effecting their research.

So, what to believe? Some readers may conclude that it is the researchers and other experts that may deserve to be spanked. This conclusion may contain a kernel of truth--not so much about the viability of spanking as a child-rearing technique as about the omnipresence of violent tendencies in us all. (See Flynn, C.P. (1998). To spank or not to spank: The effect of situation and age of child on support for corporal. *Journal of Family Violence*, 13, 21-37; Goode, E. (August 25, 2001). Findings give some support to advocates of spanking. *The New York Times*; Habermas, J. (1991). *Structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT Press; James, W. (1950). *The Principles of Psychology Vol. 1*. Dover; Larzelere, R. E. (2000). Child outcomes of nonabusive and customary physical punishment by parents: An updated literature review. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 3, 199-221; Whaley, A.L. (2000). Sociocultural differences in the developmental consequences of the use of physical discipline during childhood for African Americans. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 6, 5-12.)(Keywords: Spanking, Violence.)