Harsh punishment and aggressive behavior in Vietnamese adolescents: The role of gender of parents and adolescents

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Abstract Recent studies have highlighted the detrimental effects of harsh punishment on psychopathology development in Vietnam, predominantly focusing on the father’s role. However, there remains a gap in understanding how harsh punishment impacts children based on parental gender and child gender differences. The current study aims to address this gap by examining the influence of parental gender on harsh punishment in Vietnamese parents and assessing the association between paternal and maternal harsh punishment and aggressive behavior in boys and girls. There were a total of 1011 Vietnamese adolescents (48.2% girls and Mage = 12.9, SD = 1.16, range = 11.0 – 16.1) taking part in the study. Results suggested that fathers and mothers exhibited similar levels of harsh punishment in their parenting. Additionally, harsh paternal punishment is linked equally to aggressive behavior among boys and girls. In contrast, maternal harsh punishment is linked more to aggressive behavior in boys than to aggressive behavior in girls. The findings underscore the widespread use of harsh punishment in both Vietnamese fathers and mothers and highlight that harsh paternal punishment is more related to aggressive behavior in children compared to harsh maternal punishment.

Keywords: harsh punishment, parental gender, child gender, aggressive behavior, measurement invariance

1. Introduction

Harsh punishment encompasses various forms of physical discipline, including slapping and spanking, employed by parents to control their child’s behavior (De Clercq et al., 2021; Janssens et al., 2015). While parental gender has been identified as a factor influencing the use of harsh punishment, its impact varies across different countries (Lansford et al., 2010). For instance, Lansford et al. (2010) found significant differences between fathers and mothers regarding corporal punishment in certain countries but not in others. Moreover, prior research emphasizes the importance of establishing measurement invariance for parenting scales before comparing parental behaviors across genders (Van Leeuwen et al., 2012; Van Heel et al., 2019). However, such studies predominantly focus on Western countries, highlighting the need for additional empirical evidence on the influence of parental gender on harsh punishment in non-Western contexts. Simultaneously, efforts should be made to establish measurement invariance for harsh punishment measures in these non-Western populations.

Previous research has demonstrated a significant association between harsh punishment in the family setting and the development of behavioral problems, particularly aggressive behavior, in adolescents (Pinquart, 2021, Le et al., 2024). Notably, gender-related factors, such as parental gender and child gender, have been identified as influencing this association (McKee et al., 2007). However, findings regarding the effect of gender on this association have been inconsistent across studies. For instance, one study revealed a link between aggressive behavior in both boys and girls and paternal harsh punishment, while maternal harsh punishment showed no significant association (Chang et al., 2003). Conversely, another study found that both fathers’ and mothers’ use of harsh punishment, including verbal and physical discipline, equally contributed to the development of aggressive behavior in adolescents (McKee, 2007).

In Vietnam, harsh punishment as a parenting practice has been identified as widespread (Cappa & Dam, 2014). For example, Cappa and Dam (2014) found that three out of four Vietnamese children experienced violent punishment from their parents. Despite this prevalence, there is limited research on the extent of physical punishment by Vietnamese fathers towards their sons (Rydström, 2006), and little attention has been given to the roles of both fathers and mothers in parenting practices, including harsh punishment. This gap in research complicates the evaluation of parental gender roles in parenting dynamics. Furthermore, the impact of parental gender and child gender on the relationship between parenting practices and adolescents’ aggressive behavior has not been thoroughly examined in Vietnam. However, it is suggested that gender roles play a significant role in addressing harsh punishment in parenting (Armstrong et al., 2018). Therefore, investigating the influence of parental...
gender on parenting behaviors, particularly harsh punishment, is crucial for informing Vietnamese policymakers about gender-sensitive interventions aimed at reducing the prevalence of harsh punishment in the country.

1.1. Role of parental gender in harsh punishment and its associations to aggressive behavior in boys and girls

In recent years, there has been significant research attention on the role of parental gender in predicting the use of harsh punishment (e.g., Lansford et al., 2010; McKee et al., 2007; Mehlhausen-Hassoen, 2022). Some scholars anticipate that mothers may be more inclined to exhibit aggressive behavior towards their children than fathers (Huerta et al., 2013). This expectation stems from the notion that mothers, often engaged in more multitasking and spending more time with their children compared to fathers, may encounter more challenging interactions, leading to a higher frequency of harsh parenting behaviors (Craig, 2006). Cross-cultural studies have supported this view, showing that mothers tend to employ harsher punishments compared to fathers (e.g., Lansford et al., 2010). However, feminist theorists argue that harsh parenting behaviors may be more prevalent in fathers, as they can be seen as expressions of masculinity, power, and dominance (Nobes & Smith, 2000; Stark & Filitcraft, 1988). Empirical evidence supports this perspective, with studies indicating that fathers use harsh punishment more frequently than mothers (McKee et al., 2007). Discrepancies between the findings of studies such as McKee et al. (2007) and Lansford et al. (2010) may reflect differences in cultural backgrounds or other controlling factors considered in the research. Therefore, further studies are needed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of parental gender in the use of harsh punishment.

Previous research has indicated that harsh punishment is a risk factor for the development of aggressive behavior in adolescents (Pinquart, 2021). Studies examining the association between harsh punishment and aggressive behavior in boys and girls have suggested that harsh punishment is more likely to be linked to aggressive behavior in boys compared to girls. This finding may be attributed to the observation that boys often struggle more with obedience to their parents than girls, leading parents to resort to harsh punishment as a means to enforce compliance (Mehlhausen-Hassoen, 2022; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1978; Parke & Slaby, 1983). Consequently, it is reasonable to anticipate that the impact of paternal and maternal harsh punishment on aggressive behavior may be more pronounced in boys than in girls.

1.2. Harsh punishment in Vietnam

In Vietnam, traditional family structures remain predominant, with fathers typically assuming central roles (Mestechkina et al., 2013). Within these traditional frameworks, employing harsh punishment to discipline boys is often viewed as necessary to reinforce their future leadership within the family (Rydstrøm, 2006). Studies indicate that fathers are more prone to utilize harsh punishment, including physical discipline, as a method of teaching their children (Mestechkina et al., 2013; Rydstrøm, 2006). However, it is important to acknowledge that fathers generally spend less time with their children compared to mothers (Locke et al., 2012). Consequently, mothers may encounter more frequent and challenging interactions with their children, leading them to resort to harsh punishment, such as physical discipline, to address behavioral issues. These observations prompt inquiries into the equality of harsh punishment usage between Vietnamese fathers and mothers in child-rearing practices. Despite these considerations, there remains a dearth of research specifically examining both paternal and maternal harsh punishment in Vietnam.

Limited research has explored the role of both Vietnamese fathers and mothers in predicting the use of aggressive behavior in Vietnamese adolescents, irrespective of gender. However, it is suggested that both Vietnamese fathers and mothers hold higher expectations for the development of boys compared to girls (Mestechkina et al., 2013; Rydstrøm, 2006). Traditionally, harsh punishment has been perceived as an appropriate method of child-rearing in Vietnam (Rydstrøm, 2006), aligning with a prevalent philosophy encapsulated in the idiom, “If you love someone, give them a whip; if you hate them, give them something sweet.” Consequently, both Vietnamese fathers and mothers may be inclined to employ harsh punishment more frequently with boys than with girls. As a result, it is conceivable that harsh punishment by both fathers and mothers may be more strongly associated with aggressive behavior in boys than in girls.

The current study investigated potential differences in harsh parenting practices between Vietnamese fathers and mothers. Given the possibility that paternal and maternal harsh punishment may impact boys and girls differently, we examined how both parental figures’ disciplinary approaches correlate with aggressive behavior in both genders. Additionally, age and cohabitation status were included as controlling variables, as previous research has indicated their association with aggressive behavior (Vu et al., 2023). We hypothesized that Vietnamese fathers and mothers contribute equally to the use of harsh punishment, and that both paternal and maternal disciplinary methods would influence aggressive behavior. Furthermore, we anticipated that paternal harsh punishment would exhibit a stronger association with aggressive behavior compared to maternal harsh punishment. More specifically, we tested three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Fathers score higher factor latent mean scores in harsh punishment than mothers do.
Hypothesis 2: There were no significant differences in the strength of the link between paternal harsh parenting and boys’ aggressive behavior and the link between paternal harsh punishment and girls’ aggressive behavior.
Hypothesis 3: There was a significant difference in the strength of the link between maternal harsh parenting and boys’ aggressive behavior and the link between maternal harsh punishment and girls’ aggressive behavior.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The study included 1011 Vietnamese adolescents, with 48.2% being girls and with a mean age of 12.9 years old (SD = 1.16, range = 11.0 – 16.1) participated in the study. The majority of participants reported living with their biological parents (79%). The adolescents attended two secondary schools with grades ranging from sixth grade (30.6%), seventh grade (27.1%), eighth grade (26.1%) to ninth grade (16.2%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Physical punishment

Physical punishment was measured by the scale of Harsh Punishment (HP) of the Parental Behavior Scale-Short form (PBS-S, Van Leeuwen and Vermulst, 2004). The HP consists of five single items (e.g., “I spank my child when he/she is disobedient or naughty”), with answers ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The PBS-S was validated in Vietnamese (Van Heel et al., 2019b). All five items of the HP were summed up to form a total score, with a high score indicating a higher level of physical punishment. In the present study, the participants were asked to show their thoughts about their fathers and mothers’ use of physical punishment by filling out both the paternal version and maternal version of the HP. Therefore, the subject words were changed to fit with each version. For example, with the item “I spank my child when he/she is disobedient or naughty”, we changed the subject word “I” to “My father” and “My mother” for the paternal and maternal versions, respectively. As a result, the “I spank my child when he/she is disobedient or naughty” was changed to “My father/My mother spank me when I am disobedient or naughty” for both versions. The same method was applied to the other items of the HP. Cronbach’s alpha was sufficient for the paternal version (α = .88) and the maternal version (α = .91) in the present study.

2.2.2. Aggressive behavior

Aggressive behavior was measured by the Aggression Scale (AS) which was developed by Orpinas and Frankowski (2001) to examine overt, direct aggressive behavior that adolescents used in the last seven days. The AS consists of 11 single items (e.g., “I pushed or shoved other students”), with answers ranging from 0 (time) to 6 (6 times or more). All 11 items were collapsed into a total score, where a higher total score suggests a higher level of aggressive behavior. The AS was validated in Vietnamese (Vu et al., 2019). Cronbach’s alpha was sufficient for the AS in the present study (α = .87).

2.2.4. Procedure

Participants were recruited from two schools where they were enrolled as students. A researcher initiated contact with school authorities, including directors and teachers, to obtain permission to conduct the study within the school premises. Subsequently, the researcher sought consent from parents or guardians of the students to allow their children to participate in the survey. Upon receiving signed consent forms, students were briefed on the study’s objectives and procedures, ensuring they understood its nature. Subsequently, they were administered a questionnaire through an online survey platform, which took place within the students’ classrooms.

2.2.5. Analytic Strategies

Confirmatory Factor Analysis was used to evaluate the fit of the single-factor model of the paternal and maternal physical punishments. Model fit was evaluated using the fit indices of comparative fit index (CFI, ≥ .90), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA, ≤ .08), and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR, ≤ .10) (Brown, 2014, Byrne, 2013). Since the present data was not a normal distribution, the maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors was used for the CFA.

Then Measurement Invariance (MI) analysis was conducted to examine whether the single-factor structure of the physical punishment was invariant across parental gender (e.g., fathers and mothers). In the MI analysis, three consecutive nested models were compared (configural model vs. metric model, metric model vs. scalar model). (Meredith, 1993; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). First, we considered if the configural model was fit based on the CFI (≥ .90), RMSEA (≤ .08) and SRMR (≤ .10) (Brown, 2014, Byrne, 2013). The fit of the configural model would suggest the single latent factor of the HP to be invariant across fathers and mothers. Then the factor loadings of the items on the single factor were constrained across groups of fathers and mothers to form the metric model. If the metric model would not significantly differ from the configural model, it could be concluded that the factor loadings were invariant across the group of fathers and mothers. Finally, the item intercepts of all the items in the metric model were constrained across the group of fathers and mothers to form a scalar model. If the scalar
model would not significantly differ from the metric model, it could be concluded that the item intercepts of all the items in the scalar model were invariant across the group of fathers and mothers. If the scalar model is held, then differences in latent mean across paternal and maternal physical punishment could be compared. In the scalar model, the latent mean of a group (e.g., fathers) was set to be zero and the latent mean of the other group (e.g., mothers) was set to be free. The changes of CFA, RMSEA and SRMR were used to evaluate differences across pairs of the models (i.e., configural model vs. metric model; metric model vs. scalar model). The metric model is considered not to significantly differ from the configural model if the change of CFI < .01, RMSEA < .015 and SRMR < .030. The scalar model is considered not to significantly differ from the metric model if the change of CFI < .010, RMSEA < .015 and SRMR < .010 (Chen, 2007).

To enable the evaluation of measurement invariance across fathers and mothers, we created a new data frame including the five variables of Harsh Punishment and a factor variable of parental gender. First, all the items of the paternal Harsh Punishment were assigned to the group of fathers. For example, the item “My father spanks me when I am disobedient or naughty” was assigned to the group of fathers. Similarly, all the items of the maternal Harsh Punishment were assigned to the group of mothers. As a result, the parental group consisted of two factors ‘father’ and ‘mother’. Finally, we created a new data frame including five variables of Harsh Punishment and a factor variable of parental gender.

Next, hierarchical multiple regression model analysis was performed to examine the associations between paternal and maternal physical aggression and aggressive behavior. Two separate hierarchical multiple regression models for two subsamples of boys and girls were considered. Age and cohabitation were put as covariates in both models. The Fisher r-to-z transformation was used to compare differences in regression coefficients obtained from the hierarchical multiple regression models for boys and girls.

Finally, the CFAs, and MI analyses were performed using robust maximum likelihood estimation for the current data (Rosseel, 2012). CFA and MI analyses were conducted using the package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012). The CFA and MI and the other analyses (e.g., descriptive analysis, bivariate correlation analysis, multiple hierarchical regression analysis) were performed in RStudio.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for Paternal Physical Punishment, Maternal Physical Punishment, and Aggressive Behavior. All three variables exhibit non-normal distributions. Bivariate correlation analysis reveals significant correlations among the three variables.

Additionally, the distributions of mean scores for Paternal Physical Punishment, Maternal Physical Punishment, and Aggressive Behavior were examined, with results displayed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
<th>1. F_PUN</th>
<th>2. M_PUN</th>
<th>3. AB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>6.50 (3.15)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>11.97</td>
<td>.72***</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.43***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>6.60 (3.39)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>9.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>6.51 (3.16)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>7.41</td>
<td>.72***</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.43***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. F_PUN: paternal physical punishment; M_PUN: maternal physical punishment; AB: aggressive behavior. ***p < .001.

Table 2 Distributions of Mean Score of the Main Study Variable by Gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender*</th>
<th>Boys (N = 519)</th>
<th>Girls (N = 487)</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. F_PUN</td>
<td>6.77 (3.51)</td>
<td>6.23 (2.70)</td>
<td>6.51 (3.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median [Min, Max]</td>
<td>5.00 [5.00, 25.0]</td>
<td>5.00 [5.00, 25.0]</td>
<td>5.00 [5.00, 25.0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. M_PUN</td>
<td>6.73 (3.54)</td>
<td>6.48 (3.25)</td>
<td>6.61 (3.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median [Min, Max]</td>
<td>5.00 [5.00, 25.0]</td>
<td>5.00 [5.00, 25.0]</td>
<td>5.00 [5.00, 25.0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. AB</td>
<td>6.00 (9.24)</td>
<td>5.86 (8.60)</td>
<td>5.93 (8.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median [Min, Max]</td>
<td>2.00 [0, 66.0]</td>
<td>2.00 [0, 65.0]</td>
<td>2.00 [0, 66.0]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. F_PUN: paternal physical punishment; M_PUN: maternal physical punishment; AB: aggressive behavior. *Missing values were excluded from the stratification of Gender.
3.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was employed to assess the fit of the single-factor structure models for both paternal and maternal Harsh Punishment. Results revealed that both models adequately fit the data. Specifically, all fit indices, including CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR, met the predefined cutoff values outlined in the analytical approach. For the paternal model, the values of CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR were .976, .049, and .028, respectively. Similarly, for the maternal model, the corresponding values were .961, .062, and .030, respectively. Therefore, the single-factor structures of both paternal and maternal Harsh Punishment models were deemed suitable for further analyses.

3.3. Measurement Invariance Analysis

Measurement invariance analysis was conducted across parental groups for the single-factor structure of Harsh Punishment, with fathers serving as the reference group. Results revealed that the configural model was supported by the data. Moreover, the metric model did not significantly differ from the configural model, indicating measurement invariance at the metric level. Similarly, the scalar model did not significantly differ from the metric model, suggesting measurement invariance at the scalar level. In the scalar model, the latent factor mean of paternal Harsh Punishment was constrained to zero, while the latent factor mean of maternal Harsh Punishment was freely estimated. Comparison of latent factor means indicated that Vietnamese mothers did not score significantly higher than Vietnamese fathers on the Harsh Punishment scale (Mdiff = .032, p = .471, see Table 3).

Table 3 Measurement Invariance Analysis of the Single Factor Structure of Harsh Punishment for Parental Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental groups*</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>ΔCFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>ΔRMSEA</th>
<th>SRMR</th>
<th>ΔSRMR</th>
<th>Mdiff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Configural</td>
<td>.968</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metric</td>
<td>.966</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scalar</td>
<td>.959</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.032b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *fathers is the reference group; ΔCFI: change in comparative fit index; ΔRMSEA: change in the root mean square error of approximation; ΔSRMR: change in standardized root-mean-square residual.

3.4. Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Two hierarchical regression models were analyzed separately for boys and girls. Controlling for age and cohabitation effects, both paternal Harsh Punishment and maternal Harsh Punishment scales emerged as significant predictors of Aggressive Behavior in both gender groups (see Table 4). Upon comparing the regression coefficients between boys and girls for paternal Harsh Punishment using an online Fisher r-to-z transformation calculator (http://vassarstats.net/rdiff.html), no significant differences were found between the two coefficients (z = 1.24, p = .22). Conversely, utilizing the same test, it was observed that the regression coefficient in the model for boys was significantly higher than that in the model for girls regarding maternal Harsh Punishment (z = 2, p < .05).

Table 4 Multiple Hierarchical Regression Analysis for the Study Variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample of boys</th>
<th>Sample of girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>β</td>
<td>R²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitation*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with biological father</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with biological mother</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with biological mother and step father</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with biological mother and step father</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitation*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with biological father</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with biological mother</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with biological mother and step father</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with biological mother and step father</td>
<td>-.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal Harsh Punishment</td>
<td>.28***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Harsh Punishment</td>
<td>.29***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Live with biological parents is the reference group

"p < .01. "p < .001.
4. Discussion

The aims of this study were twofold: firstly, to assess the single-factor structure of Harsh Punishment and investigate its measurement invariance across parental gender, facilitating the comparison of factor latent mean scores between fathers and mothers in harsh punishment. Secondly, the present study examine differences in factor latent mean scores of paternal and maternal harsh punishment. Furthermore, the current study considered if there was difference in the strength of the link between paternal harsh parenting and boys’ aggressive behavior versus the link between maternal harsh punishment and girls’ aggressive behavior. The difference in the strength of the link between maternal harsh parenting and boys’ aggressive behavior versus the link between maternal harsh punishment and girls’ aggressive behavior was also considered.

Concerning the CFA for Harsh Punishment, we found robust support for the single-factor structure of the scale in both paternal and maternal models, based on our current dataset. Additionally, the single-factor structure of the Harsh Punishment was found to be invariant between the group of fathers and mothers. These findings provide empirical validation for utilizing the single scale of the Harsh Punishment from the PBS-S to assess harsh parenting behaviors. Moreover, our results underscore the applicability of the Harsh Punishment scale in capturing both paternal and maternal disciplinary practices. Notably, the establishment of measurement invariance across parental genders facilitates a nuanced understanding of parental influences on harsh parenting behaviors, distinguishing between fathers and mothers. This contribution adds to the existing literature on the measurement invariance of parenting scales across diverse cultural contexts, encompassing both Western and non-Western settings.

The comparison results revealed no significant disparity between fathers and mothers regarding their utilization of harsh punishment in parenting, presenting an additional case of parental influence in harsh parenting across different countries (Lansford, 2010). Consistent with expectations, our findings indicate that both Vietnamese fathers and mothers employed similar levels of harsh punishment with their children, thereby offering further insights into the disciplinary practices of Vietnamese parents. Previous studies in Vietnam predominantly concentrated on examining harsh punishment in fathers rather than mothers. Hence, these current findings suggest that, akin to fathers, mothers in Vietnam are equally inclined to employ harsh punishment to a comparable level.

Next, we examined the distinct impacts of harsh punishment administered by fathers and mothers on the manifestation of aggressive behavior in boys and girls. Our anticipation was that paternal harsh punishment would exhibit a similarly strong association with aggressive behavior in both boys and girls, while maternal harsh punishment would display a stronger link to aggressive behavior in boys compared to girls. Our findings revealed that paternal harsh punishment was equally associated with aggressive behavior in both boys and girls, consistent with prior research indicating fathers’ equitable use of harsh punishment across genders (e.g., McKee et al., 2007). Conversely, in terms of maternal influence, we observed that harsh punishment administered by mothers was more strongly associated with aggressive behavior in boys than in girls. This observation diverged from the findings of McKee et al. (2007), who reported an equal association between maternal harsh punishment and aggressive behavior in boys and girls.

The observation that paternal harsh punishment equally correlates with aggressive behavior in both boys and girls can be explained by the dynamics of emotional relationships between fathers and their children. Research in Vietnam has indicated that fathers exhibit poorer attachment with their children compared to mothers (Vu et al., 2022), resulting in diminished sensitivity to their children’s emotional needs and reduced mutual understanding. Consequently, children may interpret paternal harsh punishment as a form of aggression, fostering normative beliefs that aggression is an acceptable method for resolving conflicts (Choe et al., 2022). Thus, this finding substantiates the assertions of Vu et al. (2022), suggesting that insecure attachments, such as avoidant attachment, between fathers and children serve as predisposing factors for behavioral issues, including aggression, as corroborated by our present study.

Similarly, our findings revealed that maternal harsh punishment exhibited a stronger association with aggressive behavior in boys as opposed to girls. As previously mentioned, within traditional family structures, boys typically hold primary roles, often perceived as the familial leaders (Mestechkina et al., 2013). Consequently, it’s plausible that both fathers and mothers are inclined to employ more severe disciplinary measures, including harsh punishment, with boys compared to girls, aimed at fostering the boys’ resilience in navigating life’s challenges. Regrettably, harsh parenting practices have been implicated in the emergence of behavioral issues, such as aggressive behavior, in adolescents (Pinquart, 2017).

The present study utilized self-reported data on aggressive behavior, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias. Given that aggressive behavior is not socially accepted, adolescents might underreport their actual aggressive tendencies (Peet & Kikas, 2006). Although efforts were made to mitigate this bias by ensuring participant anonymity and employing a reliable measure of aggressive behavior, future research should incorporate multiple informants to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, the study’s reliance on cross-sectional data precludes the determination of causality between parental harsh punishment and adolescent aggression. While prior research suggests a predictive role of harsh punishment in aggressive behavior, longitudinal studies employing prior aggression as a control variable are warranted to elucidate this relationship further. Additionally, future longitudinal research could explore the influence of emotional...
relationships and normative beliefs regarding aggression, shedding light on the mechanisms underlying adolescents’ aggression development, both Vietnam in specific and internationally in general.

This study has several limitations. The reliance on self-reported data for assessing aggressive behavior may introduce social desirability bias, as adolescents might underreport their tendencies. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality between parental harsh punishment and adolescent aggression, necessitating longitudinal studies for confirmation. The use of a single informant for data collection might not provide a comprehensive understanding, highlighting the need for multiple informants in future research. Additionally, the findings are specific to the Vietnamese cultural context, which may limit generalizability. While the study found measurement invariance across parental genders for the Harsh Punishment scale, other demographic variables were not considered. The influence of emotional relationships and normative beliefs regarding aggression was not explored in depth, warranting further investigation. The sample size and diversity might also limit generalizability, and potential confounding variables were not accounted for, which could affect the findings. Retrospective reporting for parental harsh punishment might be subject to recall bias, and the study’s focus on aggressive behavior does not consider other potential outcomes of harsh punishment.

5. Conclusion

The Harsh Parenting scale provides a comprehensive measure of parental discipline, exhibiting measurement invariance across paternal and maternal gender in Vietnam, representing non-Western contexts. This enables a direct comparison of disciplinary practices between fathers and mothers. Our study reveals equal use of harsh punishment by Vietnamese parents, with both fathers and mothers employing similar disciplinary approaches in child rearing. Notably, harsh parenting by both parents significantly predicts aggressive behavior in Vietnamese children. However, the impact of harsh punishment on aggression varies by gender. While paternal harsh punishment predicts aggression equally in boys and girls, maternal harsh punishment demonstrates a stronger association with aggression in boys compared to girls. These findings emphasize the importance of developing interventions to enhance parental awareness of the adverse effects of harsh punishment on children’s psychosocial well-being, particularly aggressive behavior. Targeted parenting interventions should prioritize fathers, recognizing their crucial role in parenting dynamics (e.g., Thomas & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007).

Ethical considerations

The study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Science and Technology at Hanoi National University of Education, Hanoi, Vietnam, under the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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