

How Do Parenting Practices Explain Children's Misbehaviors? A Methodological Consideration

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Abstract: *Several studies have shown that there is a strong relationship between how parents discipline their children and their children's behavior. While some researchers indicate that each parental behavior separately determines how the children behave, others assign the importance to the combined effect of these parental practices. This paper aims at examining how the techniques employed by parents to discipline their children affect their children's behaviors in the school setting. The study collected the necessary data from seventh and eighth graders through a questionnaire. The findings indicated that each of the two parental behaviors (warmth/love and control/demandingness) does not account for any unique variance in children's misbehavior separately. Instead, the study suggests that it is the interaction of the parental behaviors that explains, to a substantial degree, children's involvement in wrongdoing in the school setting. The study particularly showed that a very close relationship between parents and their children marked by consistent love and warmth combined with high control and demand tend to lower the frequency that children will engage in wrongdoing.*

Introduction

Different parents tend to employ different methods of child rearing. While some parents prefer to use reasoning and explanation to gain compliance, others employ harsh forms of discipline. Whereas some parents are overly restrictive, others tend to be excessively lax. In spite of their preference for different techniques, however, almost all parents appear to have the same objective: to contribute positively to their children's development. But the question is, is it possible to achieve this objective by using methods as diverse as punishment and indulgence? Or does this variation in parenting practices bring

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about differences in children's behaviors? Put differently, do children's behaviors vary in accordance with differences in parental behaviors? Psychologists and sociologists have been preoccupied with these and other related questions for a long time. At present, however, there appears to be general consensus that child-rearing practices play a significant role in shaping children's behaviors and adjustment at home and in other settings.

The issue that has not yet been resolved is the way these parental practices affect children's behavior. Several studies (e.g., Baumrind & Black, 1967) have shown that each parental behavior taken separately would determine or predict whether a child behaves in one way or another. This means that the studies are concerned with the main-effects of the parenting practices. Others (e.g., Lamborn, et. al., 1991), however, argue that even if each parental behavior may sometimes predict a child's behavior, this is not most of the time the case. Instead, they suggest that it is the interaction of the parenting practices that predicts children's behaviors relatively more accurately. Consequently, they prefer to investigate the effect of parenting styles on children's behavior and adjustment by combining some dimensions of parental behaviors. In brief, while the former studies emphasize the main-effects model, the latter argue for a model that considers interaction effects along with the main effects.

This paper, without making the choice between the two models, attempted to explore both models to find out the one that better explains children's misbehaviors. In addition to examining the contribution of the two parental behaviors (warmth/love control/demandingness), the study investigated the contribution of student characteristics (sex and academic achievement) in explaining variations in students' self-reported school misbehaviors (hence simply misbehaviors). In particular, the study attempted to answer the following questions.

- Are the two parental behaviors (warmth/love and control/demandingness) important in explaining variations in students' misbehaviors separately or is it their interaction that accounts substantially for the variation?
- Does sex independently account for the variation in misbehavior or is it the interaction with other variables that explains the variation, if at all?

Methods

Design of the Study

The study was designed to investigate the role of some selected variables in explaining the variations in students' misbehaviors. The dependent variable of the study was thus school misbehavior as reported by the subjects themselves in response to items of a questionnaire. The independent variables included academic achievement, sex, and the two dimensions of parental behaviors (warmth/love and control/demandingness).

Sample

The sample of the present study comprised 560 grade seven and eighth students (281 boys and 279 girls) with a mean age of 14.13 years. They were randomly selected from four junior secondary schools in Ethiopia.

Instrument

A questionnaire, consisting of three sets of items, was used for the present study. It was part of the questionnaire employed in a previous study (Seleshi, 1998). The first set was concerned with demographic characteristics of the subjects such as sex, age, and grade level. The second part included seven items, which dealt with the subjects' self-reported misbehaviors in school. The items asked subjects to

indicate whether they had been involved in misbehaviors (theft, cheating during examinations, truancy, insulting teachers, fighting with other students, going out of school illegally, and vandalism) during the semester the data were collected. The students were required to indicate their response on a two-point scale (agree or disagree). The items were taken from a previous study (Steinberg et. al., 1989) and translated into Amharic.

The third part of the questionnaire, consisting thirty-five items, was concerned with parental behaviors. The items asked students to rate their parents in terms of two dimensions of parenting practices: warmth/love and control/demandingness. The warmth/love subscale included eighteen items that were related to parental warmth, acceptance, and closeness to youngsters. This subscale measures the extent to which the student perceives his/her parents as loving, responsive, and warm.

On the other hand, the control/demandingness subscale, containing seventeen items, assessed perceived parental demands and control, including monitoring and limit setting as well as parental pressure and encouragement. Like the scale for misbehaviors, the two parenting style subscales asked students to rate the statements on a two-point scale (agree or disagree). The two subscales were adopted from several sources (Dornbusch et. al., 1987; Baumrind & Black, 1967; Becker et. al., 1962; Becker & Krug, 1964; Schaefer, 1965).

In addition, academic achievement was collected from official school records. For each student, the average achievement scores for four years (yielding four average scores) were gathered. Thus, in this study, the academic achievement score for each student is the mean of these four average scores.

Results

An initial examination of the data suggested a regression model that included the interaction effect rather than a model containing the main

effects only. A further exploration of the relationship between sex and the dependent variable (misbehavior) indicated a significant correlation. Nonetheless, despite its strong correlation with misbehavior, sex failed to emerge as a significant variable in a regression model that included only the sex main effect, a reason for suspecting the possibility of interaction with at least one other independent variable. This was later confirmed and it provided additional support for the regression model with interaction effect.

The mean and standard deviation of the two measures are given in Table 1 below. The zero-order correlations among all the variables are also shown in Table 2. One can see from the coefficients that almost all variables are significantly related to each other.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations on Misbehavior and Achievement Measures

Measure	N	Mean	SD
School misbehavior	560	4.11	1.05
Academic achievement	560	54.87	6.60

Most importantly, the relationship between the dependent variable on the one hand and each of the four independent variables on the other is statistically significant, suggesting at least tentatively that it is worth investigating the contribution of each variable in explaining the variations on the dependent variable.

Furthermore, the non-significant correlation between the two subscales of parental behavior (warmth/love and control/demandingness; $r = -0.035$, $p > 0.05$) indicates that the two measures are independent of each other, dealing with two different dimensions of behavior. The fact that the relationship is almost zero, in addition to being non-significant, also supports this argument.

Table 2: Intercorrelations Among the Study Variables

	Misbehavior	Achievement	Control/ Demand	Warmth/Love
Misbehavior	-			
Achievement	-0.502 ^a	-		
Control/Demand	-0.453 ^a	0.404 ^a	-	
Warmth/Love	-0.450 ^a	0.462 ^a	-0.035	-
Sex	-0.223 ^a	0.142 ^a	0.108 ^b	0.221 ^a

^a $p < 0.01$

^b $p < 0.05$

The results of the regression analysis are given in Table 3 below. As indicated earlier, different (that is, main-effect and interaction-effect) models were first examined. That examination favored the interaction-effects model. The regression analysis using this model showed that each parental behavior taken separately did not explain any unique variance in children's misbehavior. However, their interaction explained a considerable proportion of the variance. The interaction of warmth/love and control/demandingness yielded four combinations of parental behaviors. Children who categorized their parents as high on both dimensions reported lower level of misbehavior.

Another result worth noting from this analysis concerns sex. Separately, sex emerged to be a significant contributor of the variance in students' misbehavior. Boys (Mean = 4.35, SD = 1.08) reported involvement in relatively more misbehaviors compared to girls (Mean = 3.88, SD = 0.96) ($t = 5.396$, $df = 558$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, its interaction with one of the perceived parental behaviors (warmth/love) explained a significant amount of variance in misbehavior. A closer examination of the interaction of the two variables showed that the difference in misbehavior between boys and girls varies from those who reported high parental love and warmth to those who reported low parental behavior on the scale. The difference was larger for the former group.

Table 3: Regression of Independent Variables on Misbehavior

Variable	B	SE of B	β	t	p
Sex (A)	-0.455	0.123	-0.217	-3.696	0.000
Control/Demandingness (B)	0.384	0.333	0.160	1.154	0.249
Warmth/Love (C)	0.288	0.335	0.136	0.860	0.390
Achievement (D)	-1.53	0.007	-0.096	-2.338	0.020
CAXB	1.450	0.153	0.016	0.095	0.924
CAXC	0.225	0.065	0.259	3.464	0.001
BXC	-0.680	0.053	-0.721	-12.841	0.000
Intercept	6.369	0.780	-	-	-

$R^2 = 0.47$; $F = 98.94$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 560$.

The second significant effect is academic achievement. As can be seen from the regression coefficient, its contribution is negative. That is, the two variables are inversely related ($r = -0.502$, $p < 0.01$). This means that as their academic achievement gets higher, students' misbehavior gets lower; or alternatively, as their involvement in misbehavior decreases their academic achievement increases.

Discussion

The most important finding of the study is that each of the two parental behaviors (warmth/love and control/demandingness) does not account for any unique variance of children's misbehavior separately. It is their interaction that explains, to a significant extent, children's involvement in misbehavior in the school setting. This finding supports some scholars' (Maccoby & Martin, 1983) argument that the main determinant of children's adjustment and behavior, among other things, is the combination (or the interaction) of the two parental behaviors rather than their separate effects.

The interaction (or combination) of warmth/love and control/demandingness yields four categories of parental styles: authoritative (high on both subscales), authoritarian (low on warmth/love but high on control/demandingness), indulgent (high on warmth/love but low on control/demandingness), and neglectful (low on both subscales).

Confirming findings from other studies (e.g., Lamborn et. al., 1991), the present study proved that more positive outcomes in children is associated with authoritative style. It is generally believed that most parents, if not all, want their children to be successful as well as better adjusted in all settings. If this is the case, the result implies that parents need to be consistently warm and loving as well as controlling and demanding.

The other findings also corroborate previous results. For instance, the finding that boys misbehave more than girls is consistent with Berk (1991). The inverse relationship between achievement and misbehavior is also in line with general expectation. More often than not, children that are content with their academic achievement will have very little time to engage in misdeeds. That is, compared to their high achieving counterparts, students with low academic achievement are more likely to involve in misbehaviors, other things being equal.

Finally, in interpreting the results, readers should note that data regarding parental behaviors (that is, how parents behave toward their children) were secured from children, not from their parents. Thus, strictly speaking the variable is perceived parental behaviors rather than simply parental behaviors.

Summary and Conclusion

The present study based on a survey method examined whether or not parental behaviors explain children's misbehavior and the ways these parenting practices affect children's misbehaviors. The study first explored two regression models, one containing the main effects only and a second one including the interaction effects. This initial examination supported the interaction rather than the main-effects model.

Based on this model, the regression analyses disclosed the following results.

- A separate consideration of the two dimensions of parental behaviors (warmth/love and control/demandingness) could not explain the variance in misbehavior among students in any significant way. But their interaction accounts for a large portion of the explained variance ($r^2 = 0.45$ whereas the overall $R^2 = 0.47$).
- Of prime importance in the interaction of the two parental behaviors is the fact that parents should be warm and loving but controlling and demanding as well if they choose to have children that involve less frequently in wrongdoings. It appears that such a combination is associated with more desirable outcomes among children.
- The analysis also revealed that the gender of children, both separately and in interaction with one of the parenting dimensions (warmth/love), accounted significantly for the variance in the dependent variable.
- The study further showed that the explained variance due to differences in academic achievement among students (that is, whether students are high or low achievers) was statistically significant.

In conclusion, one can see from the results that parental behavior (that is, how parents behave towards their children), at least in part, determines how children behave. Consistent with other studies, the present study suggested that a very close relationship between parents and their children characterized by love and warmth combined with high control and demand on the part of parents seemed to lower the frequency that these children would be engaged in misbehaviors.

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