

### Abstract

The physical disciplining of children is widespread globally. To work towards ending physical disciplining, we need to understand this practice's local and contextual justifications. In this article, we explore Cambodian mothers' rationales for the physical disciplining of their children, as we seek to address two questions: 1) How do Cambodian mothers perceive physical discipline? and 2) How do they negotiate and justify physical disciplining practices? Based on 10 group interviews with mothers of small children and in different communities in Cambodia, we found that physical disciplining is a common practice that is used to correct behaviours that are considered unhelpful, impolite, or disrespectful. There are, however, ambivalent attitudes towards this. This suggests that physical discipline is not a static practice but is rather one that is constantly negotiated. We argue that Barbara Rogoff's concept of *cultural scripts* for parenting is well suited for making sense of how physical discipline is justified amongst Cambodian mothers.

*Keywords:* Cambodia; parenting practices; mothering; physical discipline; cultural scripts for parenting

### **Mothering Practices in Cambodia: Making Sense of Physical Disciplining**

Domestic violence, including violence against children, is a global concern. The United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) unite all signatory nations in an aim to end all forms of violence against women and girls (Target 5.2) as well as abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and the torture of children (Target 16.2). Despite this international commitment, close to 300 million children aged 2–4 years (an estimated two in four) experience violent disciplining, and around 250 million (an estimated 6 in 10 children) are punished physically (UNICEF, 2017: 19). An estimated 1.1 billion caregivers say that physical punishment is needed to properly educate and raise children (Ibid).

Cambodia is no exception. A survey about violence against children, which was conducted in 2013, revealed that many of Cambodia's children experience physical violence at home (Ministry of Women's Affairs, Cambodia et al., 2014). Moreover, this survey revealed that mothers were the most common perpetrators of the first incident of a child's physical and emotional violence; this is a finding that resonates with a UN multi-country study on the pathways between childhood trauma and harsh parenting (Fulu et al., 2017).

In this article, we explore Cambodian mothers' rationales for physically disciplining children. How do Cambodian mothers perceive physical discipline? How do they negotiate and justify physical discipline practices? Based on 10 group interviews with Cambodian mothers in different communities, we present how they justify and practice the physical disciplining of their children. Mothers remain the main caretakers in Cambodia, which is why we have chosen to focus on mothering, rather than parenting (Surtees 2003:31, Brickell 2011b: 1362). We suggest that Barbara Rogoffs' (2003) concept of *cultural scripts* for parenting is well suited for making sense of how physical discipline practices are justified. Rogoff's theory underlines that parenting practices are socially constructed and 'make sense' in a local context. In the upcoming analysis of physical disciplining practices in Cambodia, we start by characterising

the values that Cambodian mothers claim to be important when bringing up their children. We then describe how the mothers sanction behaviours that deviate from these values and how they justify physical disciplining as part of their parenting script. The analysis reveals an ambivalence amongst the mothers when it comes to the physical disciplining of their children.

### **Understanding Physical Disciplining**

The terms ‘violence,’ ‘child maltreatment,’ ‘corporal punishment,’ ‘harsh parenting,’ and ‘physical discipline’ are often used interchangeably. The World Health Organisation (WHO) broadly defines child maltreatment as ‘all kinds of abuse and neglect:’

*Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence, and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power (WHO, 2016).*

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006) defines ‘corporal’ or ‘physical’ punishment as...

...any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involve hitting ("smacking", "slapping", "spanking") children, with the hand or with an implement—a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. (General Comment No. 8).

Meanwhile, ‘discipline’ can be defined as ‘behaviour by parents in response to and intended to correct misbehaviour by the child’ (Douglas and Straus, 2007: 304). Physical discipline can thus be understood as physically coercive actions aimed at correcting the behaviours of children.

Although corporal punishment is widespread, according to Douglas and Straus, it is the most controversial aspect of discipline. These authors concede that the difference between corporal punishment and physical abuse, in practice, hinges on whether the child is injured seriously enough for the case to be classified as abuse by child protective services, regardless

of the parent's intent (Douglas and Straus, 2007: 305). Thus, the perception of what may be defined as discipline and abuse is relative to contextual (i.e., legal and cultural) variations.

We subscribe to an understanding that perceptions of physical discipline are socially constructed and that societal acceptance and normalisation of such practices are established and maintained within the family. This notion builds on research that depicts how parental practices are transmitted between generations, despite their potentially harmful effects (e.g., Fulu et al., 2017). Douglas and Straus refer to studies that discuss whether the harm of corporal punishment is lesser in societies where it is approved and deemed necessary; this is because children in these societies do not mistake it for rejection, but rather perceive it as a form of good parenting (Douglas and Straus, 2007).

Physical discipline arguably implies that the rationales of adults in terms of physical disciplining might become 'colonising' and 'restrictive' upon children (Pérez et al., 2016). We acknowledge that even though physical discipline might be culturally acceptable in local contexts, it violates children's rights. Moreover, regardless of societal acceptance, children might experience physical discipline as being painful or humiliating. In this article, we focus on Cambodian mothers' justification and practice of physical discipline, and not on how physical discipline might occur in arenas outside of the home, such as in schools.<sup>1</sup>

### **Cultural Scripts for Parenting**

An important dimension of socialisation is *culturalisation*, or the adoption of culturally specific norms and values (Frønes, 2016). Implicit in this understanding is the acknowledgement that parents in diverse societies might have different ideals and goals for their children, and what is considered appropriate in one context might be inappropriate in another. This might be the case even if there is a universal international agreement about an

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<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that we do not suggest that there is a link between physical discipline and sexual abuse. The focus of the article is solely on physical discipline of children at the domestic arena.

overall aim, for instance, that children should be protected from violence, as stated in the UN SDGs and the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). Setting aside potential conflicts of interest, the key question relates to the interpretation of how a phenomenon, such as child violence, might be understood by both researchers and social service practitioners and how children's interests might be realised.

Barbara Rogoffs' theories on the cultural nature of human development is relevant to shed light on how Cambodian mothers understand and justify physical disciplining of their children. What her theory brings to the table is a perspective of how cultural practices need to be studied as embedded in and shaped by the social and cultural environment in which they take place. Rogoff claims that there are *cultural scripts* for upbringing in various contexts and that these might be very different from international ideals. The Western, middle class ideas of upbringing, which have become somewhat normative, are linear and treat childhood as a preparation phase for adulthood. Viewing mothering practices in light of this ideal, only focusing on how they differ from the Western golden standard, will render us blind to how parenting practices make sense in the context in which they are situated. Rogoff underlines the need to go beyond ethnocentrism when trying to understand how and why parents in different cultural contexts raise their children. She claims that children develop as participants in local communities and their development can only be understood in light of the cultural practices of their communities, which is constantly changing (Rogoff, 2003, p. 3)

Rogoff understands cultural development as interactive and underlines how we are all culturally situated. Accordingly, she warns against seeing one cultural practice as superior to another, claiming instead that scholars need to understand cultural aspects and variations in human development in order to find practical reasons and understanding human development worldwide (Rogoff, 2003, p. 7). In each community human development is guided by local goals, prioritizing learning to function within the technological context of that specific community (Rogoff, 2003, p. 23). We use Rogoff's perspective to open the perspectives of what Cambodian mothers do when they physically discipline their children, and more importantly, *why* they do it. By

looking for the mother's own justifications of how and when to use physical disciplining we acknowledge that such practices, in line with Rogoff's thinking, emerge from, and make sense in the context in which they are applied. We have similarly, in line with her advice, attempted at studying physical disciplining as a culturally situated practice, thereby challenging an ethnocentric stance which would immediately have led to discussions of how physical disciplining should be avoided.

Similarly, the concept of *parental ethnotheories*, associated with Harkness and colleagues (2007), refers to the cultural models that parents hold about children and families, including their role as parents (Harkness et al., 2007: 67). Parental ethnotheories are key to understanding the strategies that parents apply when raising their children (Harkness et al., 2007: 66). Harkness et al. have studied parents from different communities and found that various communities hold very specific understandings of children's intelligence and personalities. It is through the theoretical perspectives of Rogoff and Harkness et al. that we explore Cambodian mothers' perceptions of physical discipline and their practices in upbringing their children.

### **Physical Discipline in the Context of Cambodia**

Cambodia is demographically one of the youngest countries in Southeast Asia, with more than one-third of the population (estimated to be nearly 15.5 million) aged below 14. The living conditions for most Cambodian children are harsh, often with a high risk of mortality and stunting. The vast majority of Cambodians live in rural areas, with only about 20% residing in urban areas. The literacy rate of the total population is less than 80%.<sup>2</sup>

Corporal punishment is not yet fully prohibited in Cambodia, neither at home nor in daycare or alternative care centres (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children and Save the Children, 2017). Although little research on parental ideals and practices

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<sup>2</sup> Demographic data were retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/kh>.

in Cambodia exists, there is reason to assume that the physical disciplining of children is widespread. A 2013 survey on violence against children, conducted by the Cambodian Ministry of Women's Affairs and UNICEF, revealed that many of Cambodia's children experience physical and emotional violence as well as sexual abuse (Ministry of Women's Affairs, Cambodia et al., 2014). Physical violence appeared to be particularly common. More than half of both females and males aged 18 to 24 reported at least one experience of physical violence before the age of 18. For the 13- to 17-year-old age group, around 60% had experienced physical violence; nearly 30% of these teenagers, of both genders, had experienced emotional violence from a parent or caregiver. This survey further revealed that mothers were the most common perpetrators of physical and emotional violence (Ministry of Women's Affairs, Cambodia et al., 2014). This finding corresponds to the aforementioned UN multi-country study on violence in Asia and the Pacific, which reveals that, compared with fathers, mothers more commonly smack their children as a form of discipline (Fulu et al., 2017). The authors suggest that this might reflect the fact that mothers take the primary responsibility for child-rearing.

This concurs with studies on the key features of contemporary Cambodian culture and their implications for child protection. For example, the Christian charity organisation, Tearfund, surveyed 1314 Cambodian school children in 2007 and found that child ill-treatment was widespread (Miles and Thomas, 2007: 394). Amongst the children surveyed, 43% reported having, at some point in their lives, experienced physical punishment by their parents; 29% experienced physical punishment by their teachers, and 37% experienced bullying by their peers. Moreover, 16% of the children in the survey said that they had been touched on the genitals since their ninth birthday, and a remarkably high number, 22%, reported having witnessed the rape of a child by an adult (Miles and Thomas, 2007: 394).

Statistical analysis drawn from the 2014 Cambodian Demographic and Health Survey of 1809 women indicates that the mothers' agency is a significant mediating factor in decreasing their justifications of child abuse (Grace, 2019: 1). This suggests that mothers have an important role to play in healthy child development and in ensuring that children are protected from harm.

It is commonly assumed that the so-called 'communitarian' beliefs frequently associated with Asian family values, such as obedience, hard work, and helping others, are strong amongst Cambodians; this is also true when residing abroad (e.g., Baudinet, 2018; Brickell, 2010; Tajima and Harachi, 2010). Several studies indicate that, amongst Cambodians, there has been a historically strong reliance on hierarchical family structures, which involve a high tolerance for physical discipline. This is particularly manifest in studies on Cambodians in exile wherein the norms pertaining to family life are challenged. For instance, a study of cultural considerations in Cambodian child-rearing, conducted amongst Cambodian refugees in the US<sup>3</sup> in the mid-90s, revealed that the family was the most important structure in the life and identity of a Cambodian, and that life was ordered within a hierarchical structure (Kelley, 1996). One consequence was that Cambodian mothers were more reluctant than Western mothers to cuddle and nurse their newborn baby. Furthermore, Cambodian mothers paid little attention to the different stages of child development, and they seldom distinguish between different developmental phases (e.g., infancy, toddlerhood, pre-school age, etc.).

Similarly, a more recent study on the child-rearing beliefs and physical discipline practices of first-generation Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants to the US found that, amongst the Cambodian respondents, obedience was considered the most important value to teach children (Tajima and Harachi, 2010). This same study revealed that more than half of the respondents have used physical punishment with their child (e.g., spanking, slapping, or hitting

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<sup>3</sup> A large number of Cambodians settled in California after the Khmer Rouge regime came into power.



with an object) and found evidence of intergenerational transmission of physical discipline. This finding corresponds with the UN multi-country study (Fulu et al., 2017).

A study on public knowledge, attitudes, and practices pertaining to children's rights in Cambodia revealed the prevalence of traditional beliefs and practices, which emphasise family and parental reputation or 'honour' (Gourley, 2009). Power differentials between elder–younger family members are hierarchical and pronounced in traditional Cambodian culture. As Ovesen, Trankell, and Öjendal argue, in Cambodian culture, 'all relations are hierarchically ordered' (1996: 36). This is manifested in daily life and epitomised in rituals and greetings in which younger people are expected to bow to their elders (*bong*) who have authority and status. Moreover, gender differences are pervasive, and the moral norms of conduct differ markedly between men and women.<sup>4</sup> Miles and Thomas (2005: 395) found that human rights ideals, despite gaining some acceptance in Cambodian culture, 'have also been subsumed under traditional hierarchies of deference, so that parents are seen to have more rights than children.' It has been argued that Cambodian parents do not encourage conflict resolution through apologising, because this would involve loss of 'face' for both the child and parents. A Khmer proverb says, 'Do not take fire from the inside to the outside;' thus, appearing as a victim may mean loss of 'face' (Miles and Thomas, 2007: 396).

Although these values are at odds with modern ones and may serve as obstacles to the realisation of children's rights in many areas of family life, it seems reasonable to argue along with Gourley, who stated that, rather than imposing modern values into a society that presumably is not prepared for it, a 'middle way' is needed in which the value of the parents' traditions (on the one hand) and children's rights (on the other hand) are acknowledged and

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<sup>4</sup> The traditional moral codes of conduct, known as *chbap srei* (for women) and *chbap proh* (for men) were taught in Cambodian schools until 2007. These codes feature proverbs valuing a girl's purity and virginity. For instance: 'Boys are like gold; girls are like cloth: gold can be washed clean but once cloth is stained, it is ruined.' Although these codes are no longer recited in schools, their normative influence on how girls and boys are raised cannot be rejected (Brickell, 2010a, 2011b).

respected (Gourley, 2009). Our study takes a similar stance. Although we firmly believe that physical discipline is detrimental to a child's well-being and development, we acknowledge that such practices are widespread and even considered necessary in certain cultural contexts (Douglas and Straus, 2007). Our intention in this article, therefore, is to explore Cambodian mothers' justification of physical discipline in order to understand the rationale behind it.

### **Methodology**

The data presented in this article consist of 10 semi-structured group interviews with Cambodian mothers in three different locations in Cambodia: a remote area consisting mainly of self-sufficient households, a semi-rural area with some degree of industrialisation, and in Phnom Penh, the urban capital. These group interviews included between 6 and 10 participants. The mothers were all from low- and middle-income families. The interviews conducted in the remote and rural areas transpired in local community houses; in Phnom Penh, they took place at the office of the independent research institute, Indochina Research Limited (IRL). Our motivation for selecting a mixed sample was to reveal a variation of experiences. Due to the relatively low number of participants, the sample is not fit for a comparative analysis. The participants were offered monetary compensation<sup>5</sup> for their participation in the study.

The group interviews were conducted in the Khmer language by experienced facilitators from IRL. The interview guide was developed by this article's authors. Before the interview process, the facilitators received a two-day training that focused on how to conduct group interviews and the related ethics. The translation and conceptualisation of specific words and phrases were discussed with the facilitators, back-translated, and finally underwent revisions.

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<sup>5</sup> The compensation was 15 USD each. We acknowledge that monetary compensation for research participation is controversial. Generally speaking, we think payment should be avoided as an incentive for participation but can be offered to compensate for time use. To avoid self-selection to be based on the prospects of payment we did not inform the interviewees about this prior to the interviews.

The interview questions emerged from our initial curiosity about how early childhood development ideals, as promoted by international development agents and non-governmental organisations, correspond with local notions of childhood and parenthood.<sup>6</sup> We did not initially set out to conduct a study on physical discipline as a mothering practice but rather on mothering from a broader perspective. Reading through the interview transcripts, however, we discovered that physical discipline was a contested topic amongst the interviewees and that it could provide an interesting angle for addressing mothering ideals and values. Apart from a pragmatic need to delimit this research's scope, the choice to focus exclusively on mothering, instead of parenting more broadly, derives from the fact that women remain the main caretakers in most Cambodian households.

Group interviews are appropriate for conducting explorations and revealing peoples' values and attitudes. Group interviews might elicit 'thicker information since group members will respond to what the other say' (Repstad, 2007: 99). In our opinion, such interviews are also suitable for gaining insights into how participants negotiate their ideas and opinions about ordinary practices and uncontested topics, such as parenting. We are particularly interested in norms related to parenting, and group interviews are well suited to eliciting such norms. However, it should be noted that some participants might feel more inhibited from speaking freely when participating in a group, and this could pose a possible limitation to the findings we present here.

To facilitate a discussion on parenting, we introduced into the interviews drawings that show different situations of mother-child interactions.<sup>7</sup> According to Gillian Rose, visual methodologies, such as photo-eliciting strategies, are particularly useful for exploring everyday situations, as they visualise ordinary and taken-for-granted situations that can be difficult to

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<sup>6</sup> The project upon which this article is based is part of a larger research interest on Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) initiatives in the Global South. See Author 2 (2017) and Authors 2 and 1 (2019).

<sup>7</sup> The drawings were made by N o w h e r e Art Studio in Phnom Penh, in collaboration with the authors of this article and the facilitators (see Fig. 1 and 2).

portray by using abstract words (Rose, 2012: 305-306). Moreover, visualisation gives the participants a more independent and active role in the research process.

The drawings that we used depicted situations of parent-child interactions, which were assumed to be either positive or provocative: reading, playing, doing the dishes, feeding, hugging, scolding, and slapping. When a drawing was introduced, the mothers were asked what they thought the drawing depicted. Following up, they were asked what they thought about the depicted activity.

In writing this article, we have focused on the interview sequences preceding the introduction of two of the drawings (Fig. 1 and 2), addressing what we discovered to be a contested issue. Obviously, it poses a methodological shortcoming that we were not present during the group interviews and in the analysis had to rely on transcripts of translated interviews. Clearly, some nuances get lost in translation.<sup>8</sup> However, having access to 10 group interviews represents quite extensive and rich data material through which we, across the different interviews, were able to see patterns of topics. The facilitators of the group interviews were Khmer women who were well versed in contextual understandings of the topic. However, they were representatives of the urban middle class. Hence, a sense of identification and trust between facilitators and interviewees cannot be taken for granted.

Our analysis is essentially inductive and was carried out through a thematic categorisation of the interview data. We used NVivo 11 software to conduct this categorisation. A thematic analysis wherein we looked for repetition, similarities, differences, and local explanations allowed us to find patterns in the material (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

### **Values and Norms of Mothering Practices**

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<sup>8</sup> One example is the word 'child,' which has two corresponding terms in Khmer language. Moreover, concepts such as 'child violence' do not have an exact equivalent in Khmer. The quotes in this article are taken from the translated transcripts, which underwent proofreading by the transcribers.

During the group interviews, the Cambodian mothers were asked to reflect on what they thought their children need to have a good life. This was an open-ended question aimed at capturing the values that they thought were most important for their children to learn. The answers clustered around the following core values: being polite, listening to their parents, helping with household chores, attending school, doing homework, and not playing too much. These findings are in line with the so-called ‘communitarian’ beliefs (e.g., Baudinet, 2018; Brickell, 2010; Tajima and Harachi, 2010) and were found across all the groups, with slight variations in emphasis.

A majority of the mothers were preoccupied with the importance of politeness. A mother in an urban area explained this in the following way:

‘(...) In order to get along well with our society, we need to have good morals, good health, and be polite’.

In 6 out of 10 group interviews, the word ‘polite’ occurs as a description of a value. In some interviews, the mothers elaborate on what politeness means, linking it primarily to treating elderly people well.

A mother tied politeness to interaction with older people in the following way:

‘I teach [my children] to use polite words with older people, even with their own siblings (...)’

Another mother has similar reasoning, as she said:

‘We need to teach them, since they are kids. Tell them how to respect their parents and older people. Provide them with knowledge and tell them to choose the right ways to live.’

Helping with household chores seems to be closely connected to the value of politeness. When parents tell their children to help, the children are expected to comply. According to the mothers whom we interviewed, doing housework obediently is a core value.

The following reply from a mother underlines that helping with household chores and respecting older people are interlinked values:

‘My youngest child is always good to me because he always helps me do some housework, and [he] worries about me when I am sick.’

In a different group session, a similar connection between these two values is seen in the following expression from a mother. She had this reply when asked whether it is good to discipline your children:

‘It is good because children will have more responsibility. For example, they will help their mother with some housework, such as cleaning the house, bringing water, and watering vegetables and flowers.’

The value that Cambodian mothers place on politeness and being helpful exemplifies a cultural code that is indicative of a particular parental script of upbringing (Rogoff, 2003).

In the following section, we look at the sanctions that are imposed by parents towards the child when these values are breached. We show how the physical disciplining of children is invoked in instances where the children are seen to be disobedient or transgress values that have been underlined as important by the mothers.

### **Why and How Cambodian Mothers Use Physical Disciplining**

As mentioned in the methodology section, stories about physical disciplining often came in response to showing the mothers two particular drawings (Fig. 1 and 2). This opened up possibilities for interesting and quite detailed accounts of why and how Cambodian mothers physically discipline their children.

One example can be taken from an interview where a mother explained what happens when her daughter refuses to help her with household chores:

Mother: In the morning I ask her to gather [her] younger siblings’ clothes and put it apart. She needs to wash her own clothes and then wash the dishes. For meals, I prepare [them] by myself, because I’m afraid she will spill our food.

Moderator: What happens if she doesn’t do these tasks?

Mother: I will use a rod to hit her arm or legs and ask her not to be like this next time.

This quote is interesting for at least two reasons. A justification for physical discipline is given: the mother can hit the child when she does not do what she is told (i.e., the child breaches values of politeness and respect for older people). Furthermore, there is an indication in the latter part of the quote as to what is considered appropriate punishment for breaching these values: a rod can be used to hit the arms and legs. As we shall see later, this specification of how physical discipline can be practiced is shared by many mothers. Using a bigger stick or hitting the face seems to be considered too harsh by many of the mothers whom we interviewed in this study.

Many of the mothers have clear justifications for how physical discipline can be practiced. Specifically, they depict which zones of the child's body are considered appropriate to hit (e.g., legs, arms, and butt) and which ones are not (e.g., head, face, and 'body'/torso). They also describe what kinds of tools they use for disciplinary measures.

After having been shown a picture of a mother slapping her child (Fig. 1), a group of mothers in an urban area had the following exchange:

- Moderator: How about this picture?  
 Mix: Child violence.  
 Moderator: Have you ever hit your children?  
 Mix: Yes.  
 Moderator: Which part of his body do you hit?  
 Mix: His butt, hands, and legs. We never hit his body.  
 Moderator: How about you?  
 Mother 1:<sup>9</sup> Hands and legs.  
 Moderator: Have you ever hit his butt?  
 Mother 1: Yes, I hit everywhere.  
 Moderator: Who has used a rod to hit their children?  
 Mother 2: I used my two hands.  
 Mother 3: When I used my hand to hit him, he [wasn't] afraid of me, so I needed to use a rod or incense stick.  
 Mother 4: I used a small [tree] branch.

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<sup>9</sup> Mothers 1,2,3 and so on, provide specific details in that group interview. This entails that mother 1 is not necessarily the same person as mother 1 in another interview transcript.

The focus on the hands and legs as acceptable body parts upon which a child can be hit was confirmed by several informants. The interesting part of this conversation is how specific these mothers are in outlining how physical discipline can be practiced. This suggests that, in this context, the cultural script for mothering contains provisions about which body parts can be targeted in physically disciplining practices.

### **Ambivalence Towards Physical Disciplining**

Some mothers are confident that the use of physical discipline is a good way of socialising children. As an example, in response to the image wherein the parent slaps her child (Figure 1), a mother from an urban area claims that:

‘I think it is good because it is a kind of teaching/advising, and it does not affect anything.’

Based on her attitude, it seems okay to hit a child if it is part of a socialisation agenda aimed at installing knowledge in the child. This seems to be linked to values that we identified earlier: (the children) being polite and listening to those who are older than them. However, not all of the mothers are this straightforward in their approach to physical disciplining.





Figure 1. Mother slaps child.

In the following section, we unpack how there seems to be a great deal of ambivalence amongst mothers regarding the use of physical disciplining.

In response to the drawing where a mother points a finger at a child's face, apparently scolding her for bad behaviour (Fig. 2), a mother says:

‘We cannot use violent action while teaching our children. Pointing a finger at their face is considered violence.’

However, later in the same interview, the same mother admits that:

‘I never hit, but I pinch sometimes.’



Figure 2. Mother scolding child

In phrasing it this way, the mother indicates that she is aware that she exercises some kind of power when disciplining her children; she even suggests that it can be considered a form of violence. Nevertheless, she will, if she deems it necessary, resort to forms of physical disciplining, such as pinching.

Some mothers initially displayed disdain at the prospect of physically disciplining their children. They see the harm that this practice can impose upon the mother-child relationship. Yet, just moments later, the same mothers admit that they are hitting their children. This is revealed in the following exchange that took place when the group was presented with the drawing where a mother slaps the child with an open hand (Figure 1):

- Moderator: Now I have some pictures to show you. What message does this picture try to show you?
- Mother 1: Don't use violence with children.
- Mother 2: A mother hits her child.
- Mother 3: A mother slaps her child's face. This is called "child violence."

- Mother 4: A mother is angry with her child, so she wants to hit her child.  
 Mother 5: This is violence. A mother hits her child.  
 Mother 6: Yes; this is violence.  
 Moderator: Do you think this picture is good or not?  
 Mix: Not good.  
 Moderator: Why?  
 Mother 6: [A] child may feel disappointed when his mother hits him like this.  
 Mother 5: We cannot hit our children.  
 Mother 4: Mothers cannot hit [their] children. We need to advise and console them [instead].  
 Mother 3: I think child violence is not good, because it can affect their health or they can become disabled children.  
 Mother 1: It is not good because [a] child needs us to console them. Anyway, they will imitate this action when they grow up.  
 Moderator: Have you ever hit your children?  
 Mix: Yes.  
 Mothers 1&6: I hit his hands and legs.  
 Mother 3: I hit his butt.  
 Mother 4: I hit his hands.

This interview's transcript reveals an interesting group dynamic when the topic of physical discipline is discussed. When the mothers are asked what they think of the drawing, they immediately say it is bad and some label it 'child violence.' They reflect on how physical disciplining can harm the relationship between a mother and her child. They display an insight into the harm that physical discipline can cause a child, both physically and psychologically. Yet, just moments after saying this, the same mothers admit that they hit their children.

How can such contradictory views co-exist? One explanation, which we articulate below, might be that these mothers subscribe to an ideal of parenting, passed on by global and national campaigns, that disfavours physical discipline, while simultaneously upholding a socio-cultural practice that is rooted in their own childhood experiences.

We suggest that this indicates a sense of ambivalence amongst the mothers when it comes to the use of physical disciplining. The mothers see it as bad and harmful but, at the same time, will use physical discipline as part of their mothering practice. This suggests a script for mothering that is flexible and subject to constant negotiations, in line with Rogoff's presentation of these scripts (Rogoff, 2003: 3). Physical disciplining seemed to be prevalent

amongst the mothers we interviewed, but how the mothers justify and negotiate their practices indicate dynamism and flexibility. It might also indicate an openness to change.

### **Final Reflections**

The analysis of Cambodian mothers' perspectives on and experiences with mothering has taken us one step closer to making sense of physical disciplining in this context.

In Rogoff's theory on human development, she underlines, as described earlier in this paper, that children develop as participants in local, dynamic communities (Rogoff, 2003: 3). Cambodian mothers' tolerance for physical discipline is rooted in ideals that favour politeness and respect for the elderly. Given that violence and physical discipline are widespread in Cambodia, one can assume that many of the mothers whom we interviewed have some sort of first-or second-hand experience with violent behaviours, entailing a certain normalisation of it. This is underscored by the observation that these mothers talked about physical disciplining as a matter-of-fact yet rarely seemed reluctant to admit that they hit, pinch, or use some other sort of physically coercive action towards their children. Paradoxically, however, during the interviews, exchanges about the importance of avoiding violence frequently occurred.

As exemplified in the final quote, there are several instances where the mothers seem to use an established term to characterise the portrayed action in the drawings (e.g., as 'child violence') and talk about it in pseudo-professional ways, for instance, depicting how it is detrimental to the child's health or social relations. This opens for the consideration that these mothers might be aware of current debates and knowledge about the harmful effects of physical discipline. As such, our findings give insight into emerging changes in the intersection between established ways of life and new knowledge.

Through this study, we have attempted to depict the locally rooted beliefs that rationalise the physical disciplining of Cambodian children. However, this study should not be read as a snapshot of the static parenting practices that depict the values and sanctions

imposed on children when these values are transgressed. To further explore the motivation behind the physical disciplining of children, a reflexive and dynamic approach is required. This view is in line with Rogoff's understanding of how dynamic cultural practices and scripts are the contexts that set the premises for the development of children.

As stated earlier, Rogoff claims that the understanding of human development has been on theory that is based on the social function of middle-class communities in Europe and North America (Rogoff, 2003: 3). These theories might be inadequate for explaining how values and new knowledge come into play in shaping parenting practices in other contexts, such as Cambodia. An important implication of our findings, thus, is the acknowledgement that practices that by large are perceived as detrimental might survive despite an emerging awareness of their harmfulness.

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