



Chibuzo Leonard Agu

Nwaja:
The effects of family structure
on the phenomenon
of physical child abuse
in Igboland, Nigeria

**WISSENSCHAFTLICHE BEITRÄGE
AUS DEM TECTUM VERLAG**

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my late father Lawrence N. Agu
and to children in general especially the abused children

Abbreviations

PCA	Physical Child Abuse
BMS	Behaviour Modifying Strategy
CPSA	Child-Parent-Society-Approach
ANPPCAN	African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect
ELCS	External Locus Control Syndrome
ILSC	Internal Locus Control Syndrome
DSD	Delayed Self-order Differentiation
UNN	University of Nigeria Nsukka
MWASD	Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development
UN	United Nations
OAU	Organization of African Unity
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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Chibuzo Agu

Horn-Bad Meinberg, Germany

November 2013

Nwaja: The effects of family structure on physical child abuse in Igboland

Part One

Ethnographic Research in Igboland

This part of the dissertation consists of four major chapters. The first chapter dwells on the formulation of the problem of our research endeavour, establishing the antecedents to the choice of our study and its ethnographic justification. Chapter two concentrates on the research methodology, techniques, and theoretical perspectives.

Chapter three seeks to understand the ethnographic profile of the Igbo people, their basic social and political institutions. Finally, chapter four gives insight into the economic activities and realities of the Igbo. The aim is to underpin their social and cultural values through an insight into the interconnectedness of the several basic institutions. Grappling with the fundamental social and cultural values of the Igbo is the key to understanding the social and cultural identity of the people. This paves the way for comprehending Igbo family and its structure, which is taken up in part two of this research work.

Generally, this part unveils the position of the *village* as a social space for power and domination. The social and domestic functions of the family at the micro-level are taken over by the village at the macro-level. In this connection, the village, through its politics and social programmes, makes enormous contributions in shaping the future of the citizens. There exists a kind of group syndrome empowerment which is at the base of the on-going struggle for social mobility and identity among the Igbo people.

Chapter One: Issues and perspectives

1.1 Introduction, problem and its significance

The dynamics of physical child abuse in a culture where physical punishment thrives

Child abuse consists of anything which individuals, institutions, or processes do or fail to do which directly or indirectly harms children or damages their prospects of safe and healthy development into adulthood.

Physical child abuse includes non-accidental injury of all kinds where the injury is caused as a result of actions or omissions on the part of a carer (Hobbs 2003: 62–63).

At the beginning of the year 2006, UNICEF reports that in the rich countries of the world an estimated number of 3500 children die every year as a result of child abuse and neglect. In Germany, an average of 2 children die every week just as in England, 3 in France, 4 in Japan and 27 in the United States of America. In Nigeria the number is much higher. Children under the age of 1 year are particularly at risk.

Since the 1970s, the number of children dying as a direct result of child abuse has slightly gone down in 14 out of 23 industrialised countries. UNICEF attributes this to ever-growing public sensitivity and awareness, expanded and better organised prevention and protection programmes, and above all, the progress made so far in emergency medical services. Let us not forget that the focus here is on the number of children who die as a direct or even indirect result of child abuse. UNICEF, however, underscores the fact that cases of actual child abuse not leading to death are ever on the increase. The actual incidence of child abuse from a physical viewpoint (physical punishment) is the real concern of the present ethnographic research project.

It is of little help to argue as if there could be a vivid distinction between physical child abuse and physical punishment. One of the most important questions for the present research concerns the role of culture in domestic circles. The role of culture in shaping childrearing practices is so fundamental that it permeates several aspects of parenting norms. It has nothing to do with cultural relativistic view which tends to be

amplified by some to provide cultural justification for unabated physical child abuse. Neither culture nor any other factor is considered in this work as a rational reason whatsoever for any manner of physical child abuse. Research findings indicate that the phenomenon of physical child abuse could be everyone else's sickness. The important question is: how do we position ourselves in the face of such social problem. What kind of response could be appropriate? Physical punishment may not be about culture, but it has something to do with culture. This is part of the driving incentive behind the current ethnographic research endeavour – how does cultural influence on the use of physical punishment play out on the relationship between family structure and physical child abuse in Igboland? To put it more succinctly: What are the effects of family structure on the phenomenon of physical child abuse in Igboland? The problem posed by divergent cultural interpretations of issues surrounding children motivated the United Nations many years ago to seek a kind of common ground that will help safeguard and protect children across cultures. Child development programmes in Igboland are deeply rooted in cultural practices and convictions showcased by Igbo families, irrespective of structure and status.

In Igboland, physical child abuse would hardly be getting serious attention, as it is today, were it not to be supported, informed and encouraged by other entrenched cultural dynamics. One of such cultural dynamics, that is vital for this research work, is the practice of physical (corporal) punishment in rearing children. In some cultures, severe physical punishment has been considered as a necessary ingradient for maintaining discipline and inculcating other societal values and skills. This is the case in Igboland, where such a practice has been a long-aged component of childrearing habits and processes. Igbo culture, in particular, considers *severe* physical punishment as an *excellent* corrective measure which aims at *helping* children to learn approved societal values and customary codes needed for acquiring responsible membership within the society (Tzeng 1991: 3). This long-aged practice which lies at the heart of Igbo understanding of discipline vis-à-vis childrearing will be considered severally in course of the current research work. It is not as though physical punishment is the only factor aggravating physical child abuse in Igboland. There are other causes such as economic hardships, child labour (hawking activities), the definition of a child, the conception of a person/hood, family structure, inappropriate expectations on both sides (parents and children), etc. in Igbo culture. However,

maltreatment in the form of physical punishment accounts for more than half of the reported cases. It is a major factor and it translates more often than not into one kind of physical child abuse or the other. Other contributing factors do not necessarily translate immediately into PCA – a lot depends on the nature and intensity of the posited action. Parents who employ physical punishment depend most often on the use of force for “effective punishing exercise”.

Some reported cases of physical punishment will convince the reader of the overriding tendency in this connection. At Enugu, a mistress was so enraged that she poured boiling water on her househelp after physically insulting the latter. Just for stealing bread from the fridge, another househelp was burnt with a pressing iron on the back. Another mistress chained her househelp to the railing for many days without food. In the same city, one master beat up his apprentice with iron rod for stealing petty things (Odigie 2000: 242). These examples could be summed up through the observation of Newell in his introductory remarks on human rights and physical punishment. He writes:

Corporal punishment is a direct assault on the human dignity of the child and a direct invasion of the child's physical integrity (2011: 9).

The nature of the above reported cases suggests that physical punishment is accompanied frequently by the use of force. It is widespread among several social and ethnic groups. And the measure of force used is sometimes out of proportion resulting very often in serious injuries. Many parents and guardians who indulge in the use of corporal punishment aim at disciplining the children, at least theoretically. But one can easily see that the nature of the cases presented above depicts rather punishment borne out of profound anger. In this regard, one can hardly equate discipline with punishment. Disciplining somebody does not mean punishing him. As Macauley (1979) argues, discipline is not synonymous with punishment. Discipline is the control one gains by enforcing obedience, on the one hand, and on the other, punishment is a penalty inflicted on the other which must not involve pain (cited in Mudiare 2000: p. 144). Mudiare also agrees that in Nigerian culture pain is always involved in physical punishment. I will go a step further than Macauley in arguing that discipline should not be gained through *enforced obedience*. Discipline ought to be gained rather by persuasion and rational appeal to the conscience of children. This will not only legitimize parental demand for discipline, but also it will transform the ac-

quisition of it into something desirable and worthwhile for proper upbringing of children. Effort should be focused on helping children to acquire rather than comply to laudable patterns of behaviour. Thinking along the same line, Feshback (1980: 57) insists that it is much better to urge parents not to use corporal punishment than to empower them to differentiate between socially acceptable and socially unacceptable infliction of pain. Presenting their research findings on physical punishment of children, Ellimana and Lynch underscore some striking effects of physical punishment on the overall development of the child. They write:

The effects of physical punishment on behaviour and development, and links with aggression, mental health problems, child abuse, and so forth are so interrelated in such a complex manner with so many potential causes that the contribution of physical punishment may seem impossible to unpick. Furthermore, because corporal punishment of children is so common it is hard to identify control groups of non-smackers (2000: 2).

The answer to the question of whether the intended discipline of the child is achieved, remains a topic for debate. The answer is up in the air because children do not perform best under duress. Thus, while they may comply to the demands of parents in the face of (physical) punishment whichever shape that might take, they do not necessarily learn the desired good behaviour. Most often children comply to the desired good behaviour in the event of a continuous threat of the use of corporal punishment. Frankly speaking, it is unimaginable that most parents would willingly bargain for such continuous appeal to the use of force which does not fundamentally characterize the loving-warming atmosphere associated with families. That being said, there are grounds to suggest that the overall consequences of corporal punishment on child's development appear to deserve thoroughgoing scrutiny. Once again, Ellimana and Lynch confirm what many have long known, that:

The use of corporal punishment is associated with significant increases in physical abuse, long term antisocial behaviour, and later as an adult the abuse of a partner or child, as well as significant decreases in beneficial outcomes including moral internalisation, conscience, and empathy (2).

When moral internalisation, conscience and empathy decrease, it reduces the effectiveness of desired behaviour originally imposed through physical punishment. This is what the above authors refer to as “an-in-built risk of escalation”, maintaining that, physical punishment of children appears to be a universal phenomenon compelling researchers and others to view child abuse as something other people do (3). In other words, people consciously prefer not to recognise corporal punishment as explicit child abuse, for many reasons. Hence, the practice remains in vogue, being as aggressive as ever in some quarters in cultures across the world. What seems to emerge gradually on the social landscape is the undiminishing negative impact of physical punishment on the overall development of the child in general, and on physical child abuse, in particular. The cultural force behind the practice in Igboland is very strong. In some quarters, discussions on physical punishment and physical child abuse can easily turn poignant generating fertile ground for noisy arguments. For example, this is how one Nigerian born German academician reacted to the research findings, in an ad hominem manner.

Cultural sensitivity and Ad hominem approach¹

Cultural issues are sometimes powerful and sensitive that they command unreflected loyalty from members of the group. The use of physical punishment in Igboland appears to be one of such sensitive cultural issues. On reading the research findings concerning the culture of physical punishment, one Igbo scholar responded in the following manner:

Your reporting of the Nigerian situation is critically unballanced. Is the act of flogging a child peculiar to Igbo culture? Have not the Europeans and other people be doing it until recently, when law forbids it? The residue of historical anomaly cannot be accredited as a way of life to a people who is struggling to overcome the same like every other people is doing (Bremen, October 2011).

1 Ad hominem fallacy occurs when somebody in responding to a question or an opinion appeals to one’s prejudices and special interests, rather than to facts and reason. That is, when somebody accuses the other person of doing the same thing. It smacks of uninformed approach to issues. It normally defies known logical rules of engagement.