



Perceptions of child physical discipline among Burmese migrants living in Mae Sot, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite the United Nation's disapproval of child physical discipline and its association with numerous negative outcomes, physical discipline continues to be used globally and is often present in countries experiencing financial or political instability. Burmese migrants living in Mae Sot, Thailand experience instability due to their experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage, cultural and religious discrimination, and forced migration. Exploring the perceptions of child physical discipline in this at-risk population could elucidate reasons for its use and provide direction for future educational and child protection interventions.

Objective: The main objective of this study is to explore parenting in adverse circumstances. In particular, this paper aims to understand the attitudes and beliefs regarding child physical discipline among Burmese migrants in Mae Sot.

Participants and Setting: This analysis included 80 micro-narratives about a current or previous parenting experience from Burmese migrants who self-identified as a parent.

Methods: SenseMaker® technology was used to collect qualitative micro-narratives. Inductive thematic analysis and directed content analysis using the Grid-group theory was conducted.

Results: Physical discipline in this population frequently involved the use of a stick or other implement and was almost exclusively administered by family members. Thematic analysis revealed reasons for the use of physical discipline (including a desire for obedience and as a consequence of parental stress), conditions for its use (such as child's age and severity of their behaviour), and alternative disciplinary strategies (including discussion and explanation). The cultural environments presented in the Grid-group theory (hierarchical, fatalistic, individualistic, and egalitarian) each align with the aforementioned themes, suggesting that there is a spectrum of acceptability of child physical discipline in this population.

Conclusions: A three-pronged approach that focuses on establishing legislation, shifting cultural attitudes, and addressing social determinants should be considered to address the use of child physical discipline in this migrant population. Legislation should explicitly prohibit child physical discipline in all settings, including the home. Educational interventions on the long-term harms associated with child physical discipline could help shift cultural attitudes on its use. Lastly, chronic stress and insecurity in this population could be alleviated by providing Burmese migrants with permanent legal status.

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1. Introduction

The use of physical discipline on children is a complex issue with implications in the fields of law, public health, human rights, child welfare, and parenting (Durrant, 2019). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines physical punishment as “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light” (Committee on the Right, 2007). It can include hitting, spanking, and slapping children with a hand or implement such as a whip, stick, belt, kicking, shaking or pinching among others. In academic literature, the terms physical punishment, corporal punishment, and physical discipline are often used interchangeably (Thomas & Dettlaff, 2011). For the purposes of this paper, the term physical discipline will be used.

Historically and globally, physical discipline has been accepted as a useful disciplinary tool. For centuries, the use of physical discipline on children was considered normal as children’s rights were rarely considered and it occurred in a context where corporal punishment on adults was also frequently accepted (e.g., public floggings) (Durrant and Smith, 2010; Forehand & McKinney, 1993). While these trends have diminished substantially, and almost entirely in some countries, the use of child physical discipline remains a contentious issue (Gershoff, 2010). In fact, prevalence of and support for the use of physical discipline can be seen across continents and contexts. In North America, the prevalence of physical discipline has been declining in U.S. schools, with 4% of all schoolchildren experiencing physical discipline in 1978 and less than 0.5% experiencing it in 2016 (Gershoff & Font, 2016). However, certain religious groups continue to support the use of physical discipline, suggesting that this issue is a contentious one (Miller-Perrin, 2017). Additionally, a 2018 press release from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reveals that 1 in 10 adults in Latin America consider physical discipline an adequate tool to educate children ((2018). *Comprehens*, 2018). In Sierra Leone, the Child’s Rights Act, enacted in 2007, empowers parents to “reprimand their children as necessary” using “justifiable correction”. This provides another international example in which physical force is accepted as a disciplinary strategy (*Global Initiative to End*, 2020a; Lansford et al., 2017). In Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, the Criminal Codes essentially state that physical discipline can be used to any extent as long as the parent believes they are benefitting the child and it does not result in the child’s death (*Save the Children* (2010)., 2010). Together, these studies and legislations from various continents paint a global picture of spaces in which physical discipline continues to be sanctioned.

While the values and opinions in support of physical discipline remain rooted in individuals and cultures around the world, immense efforts have been made to shift attitudes and enact legislation to support the eradication of physical discipline. The global shift away from previous ideologies which supported the use of physical discipline started as early as 1979 when Sweden made history as the first country to legally prohibit all forms of child physical discipline (Durrant, 2019; Frehsee et al., 2011; Janson et al., 2009). In recent years, this movement has continued to gain traction, exemplified by additional legislation put into place to protect the rights of children across nations. Countries as different as Togo and New Zealand both outlawed physical discipline in 2007 (Lansford et al., 2017). Most recently, in 2019, Georgia, France, and Kosovo prohibited all forms of physical discipline on children (*Global Initiative to End*, 2019).

The efforts to eliminate all forms of physical discipline on children align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a 1989 legislation which conclusively states that physical discipline of children is a complete violation of human rights regardless of the reasons for its use or the setting (Cutland, 2012). Academic literature further supports the UN’s viewpoint on child physical discipline, with many studies highlighting the associated negative outcomes. Physical discipline has been associated with increased aggression and acting out (Canady, 2019; Lansford et al., 2005; Sege & Siegel, 2018;

Thompson et al., 2017) increased anxiety (Lansford et al., 2005), poor parent-child relationships (Sege & Siegel, 2018), decreased cognitive capabilities and poor mental health (Salhi et al., 2021; Sege & Siegel, 2018). Despite these research findings and the ratification of the UNCRC by 193 UN members, global studies conducted 17 years after the UNCRC suggest that over 50% of children continue to experience physical discipline in their homes. (Cutland, 2012; Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012; Pinheiro, 2006; Runyan et al., 2010; Santini & Williams, 2016; Straus, 2010; Zanoliti-Jeronymo et al., 2009).

It is worth exploring contributing factors that may account for the differences in physical discipline use among the signatories of the UNCRC. Some authors propose that cultural values and significance assigned to discipline may possibly govern the interpretation and acceptance of physical discipline. For example, in many African countries, children view physical discipline as parental investment and a facet of care and therefore there is less acting out in response, whereas the opposite effect is observed in many European countries (Lansford et al., 2004). Cultural and sociopolitical circumstances have also been identified as accurate predictors for higher instances of physical discipline. Country-level factors such as higher Human Development Index (HDI) score, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, and Human Security Index (HSI) scores were associated with lower country-level prevalence (Beatriz & Salhi, 2019). Data from UNICEF’s Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS4) was used to categorize 32 diverse low- and middle-income countries based on wealth index scores (Beatriz & Salhi, 2019). This analysis found that, compared to the wealthiest quintile, caregivers in the poorest quintile were more likely to report using any physical discipline (Beatriz & Salhi, 2019). Non-peaceful societies and unstable governments are also potential social indicators of nations in which child physical discipline is practiced (Ember & Ember, 2005). These findings can be explained by the family stress model which identifies the impact of societal and economic family pressures on parental stress which increases the use of violent disciplinary strategies (Beatriz & Salhi, 2019). Furthermore, it is suggested that the negative correlation between HDI score and prevalence of physical discipline may be due in part to parental education (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012).

Asian countries in particular report widespread use and acceptance of physical discipline. A 2012 systematic review from UNICEF revealed that lifetime prevalence of moderate physical discipline (e.g., hitting, slapping, pinching, spanking with a bare hand or object and shaking) ranged from 39.5% to 66.3% in the East Asia and Pacific Region ((2012). *Child Malt*, 2012). In addition to the prevalent use of physical discipline, research has also shown that there is a higher approval for these practices in Asian countries compared to Western/European countries (Douglas, 2006). Within Southeast Asia, Thailand and Myanmar represent two countries in which legislation and policies surrounding physical discipline are ambiguous and open to its continued use. Myanmar recently adopted a new Child Rights Law in 2019, which is meant to prohibit all forms of physical punishments in children (*Global Initiative to End*, 2020). However, the effect of this law on practice has not yet been ascertained and legal analysis is ongoing. It is currently understood that corporal punishment is legal in the home, alternative care settings, daycares, and prisons (*Global Initiative to End*, 2020). In Thailand, physical punishment is legal in the home, alternative care settings, and daycares (*Global Initiative to End*, 2020b; Nelson et al., 2009). The current legislation and practice in Thailand and Myanmar are not consistent with the UNCRC which prescribes a complete elimination and abolishment of physical discipline. The fact that physical discipline continues along the Thai-Burma border is supported by the presence of several non governmental organizations, including our research partner, Mae Tao Clinic’s Child Protection Unit, as well as others such as Help Without Frontiers and the Committee for Protection and Promotion of Child’s rights, which are actively working to eliminate physical discipline, along with other child protection concerns (*Help without Frontiers* (2, 2021; Mae Tao Clinic (2021). Ch, 2021; Committee for Protection, 2021). In this study, physical discipline practices in the home

will be explored among Burmese refugees in Thailand as they represent a unique population of migrants that sits at the physical and cultural intersection between Thailand and Myanmar.

Since the late 1980s, people have been crossing the border from Myanmar to Thailand fleeing the violence and economic consequences of one of the longest running civil wars in the world. Members of ethnic minority groups have fled to escape active armed conflict and human rights violations perpetrated by the Burmese military on groups seeking to increase self-determination and independence (Green et al., 2008). Members of the majority Bamar group have fled to escape economic devastation, as well as political and human rights abuses related to the intense repression of the Burmese government towards its people (Refugee Agency (2020)., 2020; Brenner & Schulman, 2019; Save the Children (2014)., 2014). While some members of ethnic minority groups live in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, many migrants live in border communities, providing inexpensive labor in industries such as garment factories, farming, construction, hospitality, and fishing (Save the Children (2014)., 2014; Seiden et al., 2018). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) estimate that 70% of Burmese migrants are women. These migrants often experience exploitation, low wages, and unsafe conditions (Arnold & Hewison, 2005). Additionally, Burmese refugees often have a precarious legal status within Thailand. In fact, Thailand's lack of national legislation on refugees and their lack of involvement in the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees means that asylum seekers and refugees are technically considered to be illegal migrants (Moretti, 2015; Vungsiriphisal et al., 2013). Therefore, Burmese migrants are only accepted as displaced persons on a humanitarian basis, but they could be subject to arrest or deportation by Thai authorities. The Royal Thai Government (RTG) also considers displaced persons to be a national security issue (Moretti, 2015; Vungsiriphisal et al., 2013). Furthermore, their children have variable access to education either in the mainstream Thai system or in the alternative migrant school system that has been set up to teach children in their native languages (Tyrovoutis, 2019).

Mae Sot, in the Tak province of North-Western Thailand, has long been a hub for migrants crossing the border from the neighboring Karen State, Myanmar (Brenner & Schulman, 2019). It is a melting pot of cultures, religions, and languages from inside Myanmar as well as from Thailand. Because of the combination of cultural and legal intersections (Thai and Burmese, as well as various Burmese ethnic and religious groups), socioeconomic disadvantage among the migrant population, discrimination based on ethnic and national background, as well as ongoing experience of conflict in their native country and relatively recent history of forced migration, this is a population whose family and parenting systems might be expected to be under strain (Seiden et al., 2018; Help without Frontiers (2, 2018).

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of parenting in these adverse circumstances. The present paper is a sub-analysis of a broader data set. The overarching research question was: What are the attitudes and beliefs surrounding child physical discipline among Burmese migrant parents living in Mae Sot, Thailand? The principles of Grid-group theory are applied to the findings to elucidate the cultural norms related to parenting and discipline styles, with the goal of understanding parenting disciplinary behaviour and identifying potential points of intervention to support child health and rights in accordance with the UNCRC (Donnelly & Straus, 2008; Mamadouh, 1999).

2. Materials and methods

The data used for this study is a subset from Mae Sot, Thailand of a larger, multi-country, cross-sectional, mixed methods study exploring parenting in adversity in a variety of contexts across Thailand, Mongolia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Canada. The survey tool was designed to be applied across international contexts, by a team of international researchers from Canada, Thailand, Mongolia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Thailand, data were collected during

March and April 2019. In Mae Sot, data were collected in collaboration with the Child Protection Unit affiliated with the Mae Tao Clinic, Tak Province. The Mae Tao Clinic is a nongovernmental organization that provides support for migrant children in the Mae Sot area. They provide child protection activities within the home, school, and work environments including positive discipline training packages for teachers and parents.

2.1. Survey instrument

SenseMaker® is a mixed methods data collection tool that allows for the rapid collection of large numbers of qualitative micro-narratives on a particular topic. Respondents are given the opportunity to reflect upon their own narrative and answer follow-up questions, allowing for personal interpretation. Patterns of response can then be examined across the group of respondents. In one-on-one interviews, Research Assistants (RA) asked participants to choose one of three narrative prompts, shown in Table 1, and then to share a micro-narrative (approximately three to 5 min) about a current or previous parenting experience in their local context. Respondents could tell a first-person narrative, or a narrative about another family. After narratives were audio recorded, participants quantitatively plotted their interpretation of the shared experiences on a mobile device provided by the RA in response to a variety of pre-determined questions about parenting. Participants also responded to multiple choice demographic questions regarding interview location, parents' age, child's age, child's sex, wealth level, and respondent self-identity. All data was uploaded to a secure server.

For the purposes of this study, the original English interview questions were translated into Burmese and Karen, the primary languages of the migrant population of Mae Sot. These translations were reviewed with team members (first language Burmese and Karen speakers) for errors and potential areas of misunderstanding. Local research assistants were trained in survey administration and the translated surveys were piloted in Mae Sot. The survey intentionally did not ask for narratives specific to situations of adversity, however participants were recruited from settings pre-identified as having high potential for adversity and the survey asked sociodemographic questions about various types of adversity faced. Likewise, the survey did not intentionally ask about physical discipline, rather narratives emerged naturally from the broader lived experience, and physical discipline was a dominant theme.

2.2. Participant recruitment

Study participants were recruited as a convenience sample by our local partners and as such may not be representative of the entire migrant population of Mae Sot. Local partner organizations supported recruitment due to their ability to access difficult to access groups, the trust they have with the local community, and cultural and linguistic similarities. Any individual who self-identified as a parent was eligible to participate. "Parents" were defined as men or women (including adolescents) who were living with and raising a child, or who had lived with and raised a child in the past. All participants in Mae Sot had migrated from Myanmar. Three groups were targeted for recruitment due to the sociodemographic and cultural differences between them: Karen ethnic group (minority ethnic group in Myanmar living in the state bordering Mae Sot, usually Christian or Buddhist), Bamar ethnic

Table 1
Narrative prompts given to respondents during interviews.

1. Think of an example of successful or unsuccessful child rearing in this community. Describe an example for a specific child.
2. Think about what makes it easier or more difficult to raise a child in this community. Describe a specific parenting situation that illustrates this for a particular child.
3. Think of a time of when you were proud of or disappointed in your parenting or the parenting of someone you know. Tell us that story as it relates to a specific child.

group (dominant ethnic group in Myanmar, predominantly Buddhist), and Muslims (ethnically and religiously distinct from the other groups and often the recipient of discrimination within the migrant population). Six RAs were part of the research team, identified by the Child Protection Unit to ensure that they spoke the participants' languages and that they would be viewed as acceptable and accessible to participants. All interviews were conducted in either Karen or Burmese, depending on the spoken language of the participant. Participants were recruited by RAs in the field, in places where parents were known to congregate (as is traditional with Sensemaker studies), such as dwelling spaces near factories and places of employment, community spaces, and homes. RAs were instructed to collect a minimum of 100 narratives for each subpopulation (Burman, Karen, and Muslim). In total, 371 narratives were collected among migrant parents in Mae Sot.

2.3. Data analysis

Narratives were translated from spoken Burmese or Karen into written English, translations were checked for quality and accuracy by a second local bilingual speaker. Respondents analyzed their own qualitative narratives by responding to follow-up questions which encouraged the respondent to reflect upon the priority of parents in their narrative, the external factors at play, and the parenting strategies used. This allowed for an exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding physical discipline among parents in the migrant population in Mae Sot. As part of the follow up questions, participants

were asked to rate the perceived short-term and long-term effectiveness of physical discipline in their narrative. If the respondent did not input an answer to this question, their narrative was excluded on the assumption that physical discipline was not discussed. This left 219 narratives for inclusion in this study. A keyword search was conducted on these narratives to identify those that mention physical discipline. Keywords were physical punishment, corporal punishment, physical discipline, beat, hit, slap, spank, pull, push, shove, throw, smack, whack, pinch, kick, punch, twist, grab, hurt, whip, strike, knock, squeeze, shake, shook, bruise, and cut. Five duplicates were identified, likely as a result of transcription errors. After duplicates were deleted and the keyword filter was applied, 119 narratives remained for analysis. The keywords in each narrative were reviewed to identify if they were used in the context of physical discipline. Eighty narratives remained following this screening to yield the final set of narratives used for this analysis. The narrative sampling method is displayed in Fig. 1.

The eighty narratives were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis followed by directed content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Inductive thematic analysis establishes themes and patterns from raw data to identify people's lived experiences with a particular phenomenon (Elkatawneh, 2016; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this case, the phenomenon was the use of physical discipline on children. This approach is useful in this context as it avoids forcing preconceived ideas onto the results. Each narrative was read line-by-line in its entirety. Using inductive thematic analysis, these narratives were analyzed and open coded by one researcher (SB). The researcher then identified

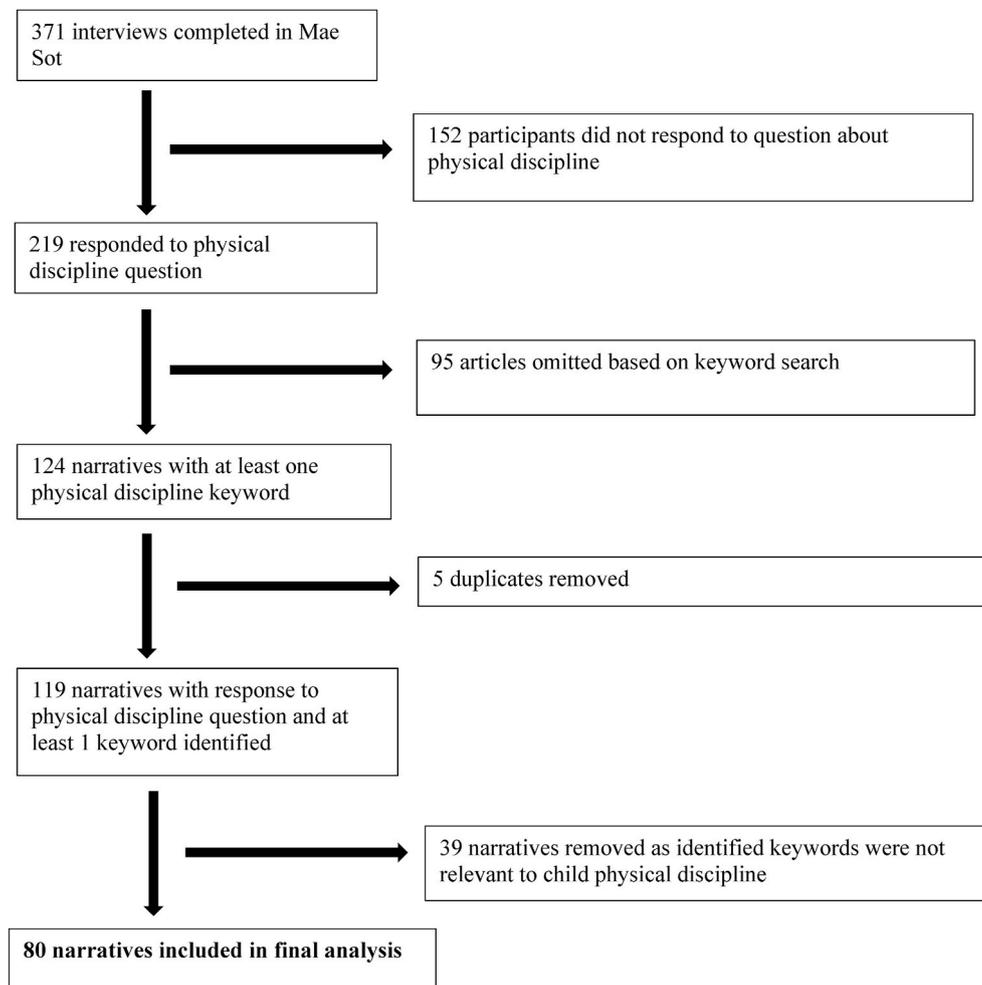


Fig. 1. Narrative Sampling Process A flowchart showing the process used to arrive at the 80 narratives used for analysis in this study. Reasons for exclusion included duplicate stories and usage of keywords in a different context. Reasons for inclusion were relevant use of at least one keyword and response to physical discipline follow-up question.

and organized thematic nodes with the support of NVivo (Version 12) software. A second researcher (EP) coded a subset of narratives to assess the relevance and appropriateness of the identified thematic nodes. No adjustments to the thematic nodes were needed following this validation process. During the second cycle of coding, preliminary codes were combined into themes and sub-themes. Frequent debriefing among researchers was undertaken to ensure the findings and groupings were consistent and reasonable.

Directed content analysis involves the application and extension of a theory or framework to the results and subsequent analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this study, the purpose of directed content analysis was to locate an otherwise very specific and unique parenting context (that of migrant parents along the Thai-Burma border) within the broader parenting literature. Following thematic analysis, several parenting theories were explored, and Grid-group theory was identified as the theory that best reflected the themes identified by parents in our study. For example, parents mentioned varying degrees of acceptability of physical discipline. This is captured along one of the dimensions in the Grid-group theory which categorizes the approval for external regulation. The directed content analysis using Grid-group theory provided a framework within which to understand and contextualize the cultural and situational approaches associated with our themes. Grid-group theory offers a description of cultural environments, which promote distinct values influencing variations in parental disciplinary strategies (Donnelly & Straus, 2008; Mamadouh, 1999). Within this theory, cultures can exist along a spectrum of two dimensions, grid, “the need for and legitimacy of external prescription to control behaviour” and group, “the desirability of affiliation with others”. Based on this, four types of social environments and parenting styles can be generated: (1) Hierarchical, (2) Fatalistic, (3) Individualistic, and (4) Egalitarian (Fig. 2). The application of the Grid-group theory in this study is supported by previous research which uses this theory to explain physical discipline behaviours within family structures (Donnelly & Straus, 2008; Giles-Sims

& Lockhart, 2005; Westby, 2007).

2.4. Study participants

A total of 80 self-interpreted narratives that included information about physical discipline as a parenting tool in the migrant population in Mae Sot, Thailand were included. Tables 2 and 3 display demographic information on the respondents and subjects of the narrative, respectively. Respondents were predominantly aged 24–44, with 33.75% of respondents aged 25–34 years and 32.5% of respondents aged 35–44 years. Sixty percent of narratives were about a male child and 40% were

Table 2
Demographics characteristics of respondents.

Characteristic	Number of Respondents (%) (N = 80)
Age of Respondents	
18–24	8 (10.00%)
25–34	27 (33.75%)
35–44	26 (32.50%)
45–54	14 (17.50%)
55–64	3 (3.75%)
65 or older	2 (2.50%)
Sex of Respondents	
Male	13 (16.25%)
Female	67 (83.75%)
Ethnicity	
Burman	40 (50.00%)
Karen	25 (31.25%)
Muslim	15 (18.75%)
Child in Narrative	
My child	65 (81.25%)
A child in my extended family	2 (2.50%)
A child in my community	13 (16.25%)
A child I heard or read about	0 (0.00%)

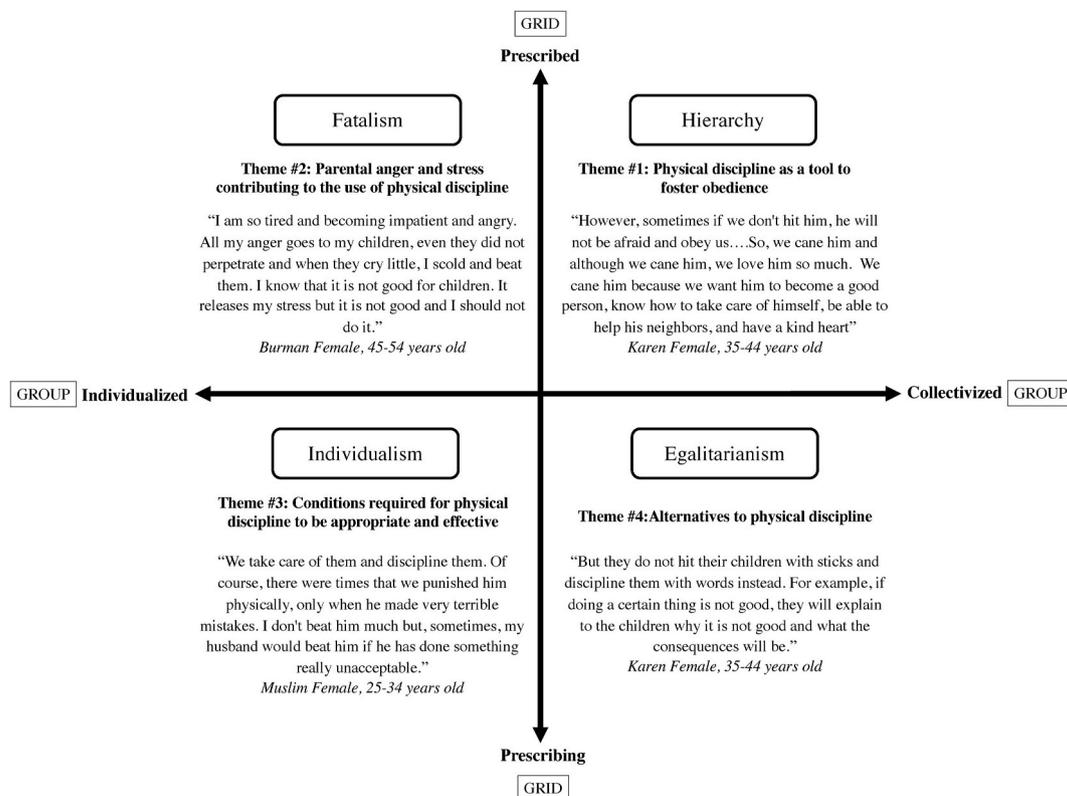


Fig. 2. Grid-Group Theory Analysis Selected quotes from respondents are used to exemplify the four parenting types (hierarchical, fatalistic, individualistic, and egalitarian) as explained by the Grid-Group theory.

Table 3
Demographic characteristics of narrative subjects.

Characteristic	Number of Narratives (%) (N = 80)
Age of Child	
1–5	15 (18.75%)
6–11	26 (32.50%)
12–18	27 (33.75%)
19+	12 (15.00%)
Sex of Child	
Male	48 (60.00%)
Female	32 (40.00%)
Age of Mother	
19–40	51 (63.75%)
40+	25 (31.25%)
No mother in narrative	4 (5.00%)
Not sure	0 (0.00%)
Age of Father	
19–40	40 (50.00%)
40+	27 (33.75%)
No father in narrative	10 (12.50%)
Not sure	3 (3.75%)
Ethnicity	
Burman	40 (50.00%)
Karen	25 (31.25%)
Muslim	15 (18.75%)
Relative Household Wealth	
Poorer	44 (55.00%)
Same Money	34 (42.50%)
Wealthier	2 (2.50%)
Degree of Adversity	
None	6 (7.50%)
Very Little	16 (20.00%)
Some	18 (22.50%)
A lot	23 (28.75%)
Extreme	16 (20.00%)
Not sure	1 (1.25%)
Adverse Childhood Experiences	
Orphan	1 (1.25%)
Physical neglect	11 (13.75%)
Emotional neglect	15 (18.75%)
Incarceration of parent	1 (1.25%)
Mental health of attempted suicide of parent	1 (1.25%)
Substance abuse of parent	6 (7.50%)
Loss of parent through divorce/separation/death	23 (28.75%)
None	41 (51.25%)

about a female child. The distribution of ethnic groups was as follows: 50% Burman, 31.25% Karen, and 18.75% Burmese Muslim. Of participants, 55% self-rated their household as being poorer than others in the community (which might include Thai households as well as other migrant households), while 42.5% self-identified as being the same wealth level, and only 2.5% self-identified as being wealthier. We identified adverse childhood experiences (ACES) for children in the narratives: 29% of the narratives discussed loss of parents through divorce, separation, or death; 19% of the narratives reported emotional neglect; and 14% mentioned physical neglect.

2.5. Ethics approval

This study was approved by Queen's University Health Sciences and Affiliated Hospitals Research Ethics Board, the Mae Fah Luang University (MFU) Board in Thailand, as well as the Community Ethics Advisory Board in Mae Sot, an organization designed to review all research studies exploring issues of relevance to the Burmese migrant community in North Western Thailand as well as the ethnic minorities in Eastern Myanmar. No identifying information was collected from participants. Informed consent was reviewed in the language of survey administration (Burmese or Karen) and confirmed by study participants by tapping a consent box on the handheld device. A small compensation was offered to participants in the form of soap powder with a monetary value of approximately 2USD.

3. Results

3.1. Thematic analysis

The qualitative analysis revealed details about how physical discipline is carried out among this population. A significant proportion of narratives mentioned the use of an object or stick when a child was physically disciplined. In all narratives where physical discipline was reported, the discipline was performed by the child's biological parents, adopted parents, stepparents, or grandparents. Specifically, no narratives described physical discipline administered by a non-family member.

In addition to descriptions of more technical aspects surrounding the use of physical discipline in the migrant population in Mae Sot, respondents addressed factors that contributed to and modified the use of physical discipline – the “why” and “when”. Three prevailing themes regarding the opinions and use of physical discipline were identified from the data: 1) Physical discipline as a tool to foster obedience, 2) Parental anger and stress contributing to the use of physical discipline, and 3) Conditions required for physical discipline to be appropriate and effective. Respondents also discussed 4) Alternatives to physical discipline.

Theme 1 - Physical discipline as a tool to foster obedience: This theme elucidated a potential motive for the use of physical discipline as a parenting tool by study respondents. In many narratives where physical discipline was used, the respondent suggested that the desired outcome was for the child to obey instructions (Table 4). Parents justified using physical discipline in this context by suggesting it would guide their children's future actions and mold them into respectful and independent adults. However, this was contradicted by other parents who felt that physical discipline had a limited impact on long term behaviour changes.

Some narratives further explained the nature of this relationship between the input, physical discipline, and the output of obedience. The evocation of fear in the child as a result of physical discipline was identified as the cause for their obedience. In some cases, the mere threat of physical discipline elicited a similar response in children and was felt to work equally well in fostering short term obedience. There was no further discussion on whether this short-term obedience was associated with the long-term desired outcomes including independence and respect.

Theme 2 - Parental anger and stress contributing to the use of physical discipline: Many narratives indicated that the act of physical discipline was a direct result of parental stress or anger (Table 5). Often, there was no clear association between the child's behaviour and this disciplinary response. However, in a few cases, parental anger was caused by the child's actions such as crying or not responding to a question. A few individuals indicated guilt or regret when using physical discipline in this way. Physical discipline was also used in contexts of parental stress when parents reported being tired or preoccupied with other tasks and work. One respondent also mentioned that they have

Table 4

Respondent quotes exemplifying theme 1: physical discipline as a tool to foster obedience.

<p>“However, as she grows up, I have to discipline her because she is naughty sometimes. I had beaten her once or twice to discipline her. later on, she becomes obedient” - Burman Female, 25–34 years old</p> <p>“However, sometimes if we don't hit him, he will not be afraid and obey us [...] So, we cane him and although we cane him, we love him so much. We cane him because we want him to become a good person, know how to take care of himself, be able to help his neighbors, and have a kind heart” - Karen Female, 35–44 years old</p> <p>“But sometimes, if I ask him to get something for me he will not do it. So, I sometimes threaten him by using a rubber band to hit him. He knows that hitting him with rubber band is painful so he is scared of it.” - Burman Female, 25–34 years old</p>

Table 5

Respondent quotes exemplifying theme 2: parental anger and stress contributing to the use of physical discipline.

- "I am so tired and becoming impatient and angry. All my anger goes to my children, even they did not perpetrate and when they cry little, I scold and beat them. I know that it is not good for children. It releases my stress but it is not good and I should not do it."
- *Burman Female, 45–54 years old*
- "I have a habit that when I'm angry, I scold him, shout at him or beat him. That's my nature. So I have to control myself very hard. I really couldn't control myself before. But I had to practice and try again and again. Seems like I have to practice it for myself. Because beating them alone wouldn't make them understand things."
- *Burman Female, 35–44 years old*
- "Sometimes, I am so stressful and happened to beat her up. After I beat her, I was so sad and decided not to beat her again"
- *Karen Female, 45–54 years old*

since made efforts to control themselves in these situations because they recognize that physical discipline alone may not be an effective method of teaching children what is right and wrong. It was fairly unanimous among respondents that this use of physical discipline was inappropriate, and that physical discipline should not be used in the context of parental anger or loss of self-control.

Theme 3 - Conditions required for physical discipline to be appropriate and effective: Conditions in which use of physical discipline was perceived to be appropriate were identified by respondents. Several narratives mentioned that the frequency and severity of physical discipline should be considered (Table 6). In general, gentler and less frequent physical discipline was preferred. The reasons for this varied. Some respondents expressed that they did not wish to cause serious harm to their child. Others indicated that they refrained from consistently using physical discipline because its effectiveness decreases with overuse.

Some respondents reported that physical discipline could be used in exceptional cases only if the child had behaved really unacceptably. This supports the idea that physical discipline should be used sparingly and was not readily condoned by all respondents. The child's identity and the relationship between child and disciplinarian were also important factors to consider when determining if physical discipline was appropriate. Respondents felt that physical discipline may not be appropriate for older children, children with disabilities, or when performed by non-biological family members.

Theme 4 - Alternatives to physical discipline: In the discussion of disciplinary strategies, potential alternatives to physical discipline were highlighted (Table 7). In these narratives, physical discipline was not used as a method of punishment or instruction. In fact, the majority of respondents who reported and preferred using alternatives to physical discipline indicated that physical discipline had never been used on the children in their narrative. Additionally, consistent with previous themes, some respondents indicated that other disciplinary strategies

Table 6

Respondent quotes exemplifying theme 3: conditions required for physical discipline to be appropriate and effective.

- "When she plays with her aunty and argues, the worst thing I do is hitting a little with dry lemongrass or dry small bamboo stick. I just hit her legs and hands. I never make her big pain. Because if I hit her to get pain repeatedly, she will not be afraid of hitting."
- *Burman Male, 65+ years old*
- "We take care of them and discipline them. Of course, there were times that we punished him physically, only when he made very terrible mistakes. I don't beat him much but, sometimes, my husband would beat him if he has done something really unacceptable."
- *Muslim Female, 25–34 years old*
- "Her step-mother doesn't hit her at all. Just shouts at her. Just that. Because my daughter is sickly, I told my daughter to be a good girl. I also told her step-mother that my daughter is sickly. So she just disciplines her with words. She doesn't hit my daughter with hand or anything."
- *Karen Female, 35–44 years old*

Table 7

Respondent quotes exemplifying theme 4: alternatives to physical discipline.

- "But they do not hit their children with sticks and discipline them with words instead. For example, if doing a certain thing is not good, they will explain to the children why it is not good and what the consequences will be."
- *Karen Female, 35–44 years old*
- "Even if I hit her there would be no benefit for her. It will just cause pain to her skin. If I hit her and after sometimes the pain will be gone so instead it's better to give punishment. For instance, if she didn't work she will not get what she wants or get to eat the thing she wanted. So if she wants something she knows she needs to work."
- *Muslim Female, 25–34 years old*
- "Sometimes, I change the type of punishment by asking him to do the sit-ups. We start with 10 [...] sit-ups"
- *Muslim Female, 25–34 years old*

were used because the impact of physical discipline was only temporary, and therefore not necessarily effective.

One alternative highlighted frequently was the use of words and explanations as methods to control and direct behaviour. Respondents expressed that parents or caregivers would describe the reasons the child's behaviour or attitude was unacceptable, along with emphasizing the consequences of their actions. Other alternatives included different types of physically oriented punishment such as asking the child to do push-ups, sit-ups or other physical exercises. Refusing to give into the child's wants was also mentioned as a valid approach.

3.2. Directed content analysis: Grid-Group theory

The Grid-group theory functions as a framework on which the qualitative results from this study can be assessed and understood within the broader parenting literature. The four quadrants arise from the intersection of two axes which are used to explain two dimensions of social preferences. The horizontal axis, named "group", ranges from individualized to collectivized. It measures the strength of affiliation with others and an allegiance to a defined group, increasing from left to right. Group identity can relate to familial structures, religious institutions, cultures, or professional roles. The strength with which one associates with and is devoted to a group determines whether they have a preference for individualized or collectivized behaviour and ideals. The vertical axis, named "grid", ranges from prescribing to prescribed. This measures the extent of approval for regulation and the assumed legitimacy of external prescription, increasing from bottom to top. Near the prescribing end of the axis, freedom of choice is greatly preferred over strict regulation. Alternatively, at the prescribed end, respect for rules is high. The position of individuals and cultures on this grid reveals distinctive preferences regarding social relationships which can explain how preferences for parental disciplinary strategies are formed (Donnelly & Straus, 2008; Douglas, 2013). Fig. 2 displays key quotations from study respondents which demonstrate how the observed variations in parenting strategies by respondents in this study can be seen as existing within this Grid-group theory framework. This analysis can be helpful to understand parenting and the use of physical discipline through a cultural lens.

3.2.1. Hierarchical parenting

Firstly, hierarchical parenting can be clearly observed in the group of respondents who report fostering obedience in children through physical discipline. This justification aligns with hierarchical thinking which maintains a collective approach and believes in external prescription as opposed to positive reinforcement as a way to control behaviour and promote social norms. The hierarchical worldview recognizes humans as unequal and values having differentiated roles in society and family. This translates to internal stratification in family structures. Parents are acknowledged as having more expertise and experience regarding the correct ways to conduct oneself in society (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). Children are considered at the bottom of this social hierarchy and subject to correction by parents. Furthermore, as successful societal

functioning and adherence to social norms are prioritized, parents within this hierarchical system may attribute limited value to allowing children to engage in trial and error processes to discover the correct way to function in society (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). Therefore, these parents are primarily concerned with their child's obedience and are likely to use methods such as physical discipline to immediately correct behaviours.

3.2.2. Individualistic parenting

Secondly, individualistic parenting is represented in this study by respondents who suggest that physical discipline should be used as punishment only under certain conditions. While aspects of family life are more likely to encourage perspectives with high group affiliation, individualistic patterns of thinking can still exist within family structures. Individualistic parents tend to be less demanding of their children due to their belief that everyone is capable of, and should be in charge of, their own fate (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). This individualistic approach does not hold external prescription in high regard and therefore, they encourage their children to explore trial-and-error efforts rather than frequently opting for disciplinary methods. While individualistic parents value self-regulation, the focus on children's practical achievements push disciplinary strategies to rely on previously used and effective strategies, which may be physical discipline in some cases. One frequently mentioned condition for the use of physical discipline in the results was the relative severity of the child's offence. Individualistic perspectives create a competitive environment, where the pursuit of personal rewards is prioritized. Therefore, individuals are adept at bargaining and bidding to obtain their desired outcomes (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). This can translate to parenting behaviours in which parents consider bribing their children to behave in accordance with their preferred outcomes and these parents may correlate the severity of punishment to the gravity of the transgression (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005).

3.2.3. Fatalistic parenting

Thirdly, respondents who reported using physical discipline as a result of anger or stress are likely employing a fatalistic method of parenting in which disciplinary strategies are inconsistent and impulsive. This strategy reflects the fatalistic perspective and support for external prescription held by proponents of this world view. The fatalistic perspective views all humans as inherently flawed and as a result, seeks to establish order to address this. Furthermore, fatalists recognize social constraints, however, they do not feel a sense of affiliation with the broader social landscape (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). For this reason, fatalists do not hold societal rules in high regard. In family structures, this lack of respect for societal establishments combines with the fundamental belief of human inadequacy to produce parents that are prone to devising and enforcing their own standards to address their children's perceived failings (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). As a result, these imposed rules are often inconsistent and mutable.

3.2.4. Egalitarian parenting

Lastly, egalitarian parenting can be seen in the respondents who disagree with the use of physical discipline and adopt alternative methods, such as discussing consequences and fostering an understanding with their children. This demonstrates their strong feelings of collectiveness and lack of support for external prescription. The egalitarian perspective values humans as equal and believes in natural human virtue. As a result, parents are not bothered by, and in fact encourage, children establishing their own ways of evaluating and behaving in the world (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). The strength of group affiliation that egalitarians experience extends specifically to their families which means that parents feel obligated to help their children. However, they do not share the dedication to social norms and internal family stratification seen in hierarchical settings. This allows for children to be viewed, not as subservient, but rather as companions

(Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). In fact, egalitarian parents typically rely on facilitating positive parent-child relationships focused on respect, equality, accountability, and self-directed growth rather than physical discipline. The intrinsic value that egalitarians place on all human life aligns with a human rights-based approach which suggests that physical discipline in any form violates human rights and produces inequalities. In this way, egalitarian parenting is most aligned with the UNCRF.

4. Discussion

A thematic analysis of the results revealed four prevailing themes and ideas regarding the use of child physical discipline. As outlined above, these four themes were superimposed on the quadrants of the Grid-group theory to show the different approaches to physical discipline and parenting strategies that exist within this population. This analysis allows us to see the range in how this population of Burmese migrants use and think about child physical discipline. This provided insight into our research question which aimed to understand how Burmese migrant parents feel and think about child physical discipline.

Burmese migrants living in Mae Sot are affected by conditions of adversity which have implications for family functioning, including their varying legal status, national, religious and ethnic differences with the dominant Thai population, relative and absolute socioeconomic deprivation, and loss of country through forced migration. The complexity of their situation is likely to impact parental stress, ability to provide parental guidance, family conflict, as well as physical and verbal disciplinary strategies (Puffer et al., 2017). Research suggests that Burmese culture generally relies on a hierarchical cultural view and this is applied to their parenting techniques (International Rescue Comm, 2011). This is demonstrated by the importance parents place on the correct usage of honorifics which support a hierarchical framework (International Rescue Comm, 2011). Limited social cohesion and the prevalence of negative influences (e.g., alcohol use) are identified by respondents in other studies as reasons contributing to maladaptive parenting among some Burmese migrant families (International Rescue Comm, 2011).

Despite the established cultural norm of hierarchical parenting, in this study, we saw parenting that spanned all four quadrants and extended beyond this traditional approach. Therefore, while the cultural and social landscape of Burmese migrants suggest that hierarchical parenting is the default, we saw variations of this in practice. In fact, the emergent themes from this study can be seen as existing along a spectrum of acceptance regarding physical discipline. A subset of the population supported its use for the purpose of encouraging obedience, another subset disagreed with its use and promoted non-violent alternatives, and a final subset sat in the middle suggesting its use was acceptable under certain circumstances and conditions.

In accordance with the UNCRF, we support and promote the movement away from the use of physical discipline, which is understood as a complete violation of human rights (Cutland, 2012). There are different ways to encourage this transition. Evidence relating to the Grid-group theory suggests that legislative interventions alone may not be effective in producing the desired practical change in the use of physical discipline. For instance, it has been proposed that legislative prohibitions on the use of physical discipline on children may only be effective in encouraging a small proportion of hierarchical parents to change their methods, as they hold the government's mandates in high regard compared to other parents (Donnelly & Straus, 2008). However, educational interventions may effectively convince individualistic parents to adopt a more positive disciplinary strategy as they are more open-minded to the results of research outlining consequences and effectiveness of physical discipline (Donnelly & Straus, 2008; Westby, 2007). Literature also suggests that the implementation of micro-social interventions for family intervention professionals is potentially beneficial (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). Reframing the beliefs and priorities of parents in any quadrant can stimulate the development of a bifocal

cultural bias in which an egalitarian approach can be used in parenting, but the remaining aspects of life can be ruled by a different cultural orientation (e.g., hierarchical, individualist, etc.) (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). This approach retains and respects the cultural norms of a given community without condoning the use of physical discipline on children. Studies also support the provision of additional socioeconomic supports and social programs addressing experiences of adversity for parents and families to encourage a more egalitarian style of parenting, which does not promote physical discipline (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005).

Based on the aforementioned research findings and results from the current study, in this migrant population, we propose the idea of a three-pronged approach to reduce the use of physical discipline as a parenting strategy. Firstly, legislative interventions should be supported and required by the UNCRC. Countries who ratified the declaration are obligated to create or adapt legislation that consolidates the UNCRC articles, provide adequate funding to bodies responsible for the implementation of legislation, and establish organizations to monitor the progress and success of these legislative measures (Cutland, 2012). Thailand and Myanmar's governments should strongly consider enacting relevant legislation to address the use of physical discipline on children in the general population, as this would extend to the migrant communities under their jurisdiction. By imposing a legal framework, parents may be encouraged to reflect upon and seek out other alternatives to disciplinary strategies. In fact, our results demonstrated that a subset of parents in this setting have identified suitable parenting strategies, while others have not. Therefore, the goal of this approach is to establish child physical discipline as unacceptable which will hopefully provide a reason for Burmese migrant parents to explore these other disciplinary strategies. Secondly, a cultural shift in attitudes is necessary to ensure sustainable and permanent change in parenting practices. Bans on physical discipline are associated with declining support for and use of physical discipline (Zolotor & Puzia, 2010). Therefore, legislative interventions and transitions in cultural norms are closely related. Analysis from countries in which legislative interventions on physical discipline were enacted suggests that a change in perspectives actually predated the legal frameworks (Roberts, 2000). Therefore, altering cultural beliefs has been identified as an integral step to achieve a reduction in and ultimately, elimination of, physical discipline of children. The specific results of this study show a perception among Burmese migrants that child physical discipline is effective for obedience with varying opinions on its long-term impact. However, we know this not to be entirely true. This suggests that the cultural norms of this group may be modified by educational interventions which highlight the outcomes and harms associated with child physical discipline. Implementation of these endeavors should include built-in evaluation methods and the delivered content should prioritize reflective activities, address parent cognitions and attributions, support parent-child communication, and identify alternative disciplinary strategies (Morris et al., 2020; Scott & Dadds, 2009). This can be led by local organizations such as the Child Protection Unit and the Mae Tao Clinic, among others, that have the trust of parents and families. Thirdly, the adversity experienced by Burmese families should be addressed through various higher-level interventions to increase social, economic, and legal security (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005). Increased levels of adversity can lead to parental stress and emotional dysregulation (Beatriz & Salhi, 2019). The findings of this study suggest that parental stress is a contributing factor to the use of physical discipline. Therefore, if the root causes of chronic parental stress can be mitigated, it may be possible to achieve a reduction in the use of physical discipline in this population. For example, providing Burmese migrants with a more permanent legal status (as opposed to refugees) may reduce the insecurity they face, diminish their stress, and decrease the use of dysfunctional disciplinary techniques.

5. Limitations

There are a few limitations within this study. Firstly, the participants were taken from a convenience sample. These individuals who agreed to participate in this study may be meaningfully different from those that did not. Specifically, 83.75% of respondents were female, suggesting that the opinions of male respondents were not adequately captured. Therefore, caution must be taken when interpreting and applying the results to the entire population. Secondly, the nature of Sensemaker® limits the ability to obtain in-depth and interviewer-directed narratives. Respondents were able to share narratives that were meaningful to them in response to broad prompts, but these were often briefer than a full semi-structured interview may have been. We also do not assume to have captured the full extent of physical discipline in this population as respondents may have not chosen to speak about it. Lastly, this study only focused on the perspective of parents. However, input from children, social service providers, and other key stakeholders is valuable and should be included in future research for a more holistic picture. These studies should consider gathering in depth opinions from these stakeholders using different methods such as structured or semi-structured interviews. Additionally, similar studies in diverse global contexts should be conducted to identify context specific recommendations and actions. The strengths of this study include the larger pool of narratives which would not have been attainable using more detailed interview methods. Additionally, the lack of direct questioning allowed potentially sensitive themes to emerge organically, suggesting the relevance and importance of this topic to the study respondents. This may indicate that research on other potentially contentious or sensitive topics would benefit from using similar methods to this study using Sensemaker® technology. Lastly, participants assessed and interpreted their own experiences, reducing interpretation bias that may have arisen from the RAs.

6. Conclusion

The findings from this study provide insight into the perceptions surrounding the use of physical discipline on children among Burmese migrant families living in Mae Sot, Thailand. The qualitative analysis suggested that attitudes ranged from those who supported the use of physical discipline, to those who applied conditions to its use, to those who did not support the use of physical discipline and instead promoted alternative strategies. Superimposing these findings onto the Grid-group theory allowed us to see the existence of parenting behaviour beyond the traditional hierarchical approach. In fact, in this population, parenting strategies spanned all four cultural environments (hierarchical, fatalistic, individualistic, egalitarian), with each group holding a distinct view of physical discipline. To encourage compliance with the UNCRC and stimulate movement away from the use of physical discipline, a three-pronged approach should be considered. Firstly, clear legislation prohibiting the use of physical discipline in all settings should be implemented. Secondly, focus should be placed on stimulating a cultural transition surrounding norms of physical discipline. Thirdly, interventions to address social determinants of the use of physical discipline such as financial insecurity and parental stress should be considered. We propose that this three-pronged approach is a potential way forward in addressing the various factors contributing to the use of physical discipline among the Burmese migrant population in Mae Sot. Future research can build on the findings of this study by using similar methodology in other unique contexts of adversity. Additionally, researchers should consider exploring barriers and facilitators to implementing each of the three recommendations to ensure there is success in achieving a movement away from the use of child physical discipline.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sapriya K. Birk: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Colleen Davison:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Susan Bartels:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Heather Aldersey:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Nway Nway Oo:** Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Pue Pue Mhote:** Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Eva Purkey:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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