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“911” among West African immigrants in New York City: A qualitative study of parents’ disciplinary practices and their perceptions of child welfare authorities

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Abstract

Immigrant parents’ perceptions of child protective services may have important implications for their engagement in public institutions that are central to their children’s well being. The current study examined West African immigrants’ perceptions of child welfare authorities and the role of disciplining and monitoring in these communities’ meaning making. A multiethnic group of 59 West African immigrants (32 parents and 27 adolescent children) living in the United States were interviewed in 18 focus groups and eight individual interviews between December 2009 and July 2010. Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach; strategies for rigor included triangulation (multiple interview formats, varied composition of groups, multiple coders for each transcript), verification (follow-up interviewing, feedback to community-based organizations), and auditability. Primary among parents’ concerns were “911” (used to refer to the police and child protective authorities), the loss of collective child monitoring networks, and threats to their children posed by “American” values and neighborhood violence. Children were concerned with parents’ close monitoring that resulted in boredom and a sense that parents did not recognize them for adhering to their families’ values. Feedback from CBOs suggested that parents got their information about child protective policies from children but that although misinformed they were accurate in their negative assessment of contact. Not unlike in other urban populations, West African immigrants’ disciplinary tactics are instrumental, oriented towards protecting their children from the multiple dangers perceived in their surroundings, but may also put them at risk for contact with child protective services. Results suggest that “911” results from a “loss spiral” (Hobfoll, 1989) that begins as West Africans resettle without collective child monitoring networks, leading to increased concern for their children’s safety, and interacting with a school-home disciplinary mismatch that may increase the likelihood of contact with child protection.

Hobfoll, S. (1989). Conservation of resources theory: A new attempt and conceptualizing stress. *American Psychologist*, 44(3), 513–524.

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Keywords

USA; West African immigrants; child welfare; corporal punishment; discipline; immigration

Disciplinary practices are central to families' functioning and associated with a large part of the variance in children's educational outcomes and emotional well-being (Gershoff, 2002). Liberal states in North America and Western Europe have made the regulation of these practices a legal interest for over a century, with particular attention paid to preventing corporal punishment. Regulation often involves legally mandating educators and health professionals to report if they suspect any such activity. For immigrants this regulation may be foreign, and the perception of the government's beneficence regarded with suspicion. Immigrant parents' perceptions of child welfare authorities are important in determining their willingness to engage with public institutions like hospitals and schools and as such may have important effects on health and education outcomes of their children. The current study examines these perceptions and describes disciplinary practices among members of some of the newest immigrant communities in the United States (U.S.), West Africans.

Tension between child welfare authorities' interest in the well being of immigrant families and the immigrants themselves has been present from the beginnings of child welfare in the U.S. A common children's game among European immigrants in the early 1900s was one in which "the Cruelty" – a nickname for the Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children – threatened to steal them from their parents (Hasci, 1996; McGowan, 1983; Pine & Drachman, 2005). With more recent waves of immigrants originating in countries in which government is simultaneously absent from family life and perceived as a source of corruption and violence, it is likely that U.S. child welfare authorities' beneficence is not obvious. Given the current climate surrounding immigration, it may be reasonable for immigrants to believe that any contact with state actors has the potential to result in negative outcomes (e.g., arrest and deportation).

Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are among the fastest growing immigrant demographics in the U.S. (Kent, 2007; Terrazas, 2009; Thomas, 2011), with the more than a million arriving since 2000 representing an increase of 88% (Capps, McCabe, & Fix, 2011). New York is the state with the highest numbers of African immigrants, with Maryland and Texas close seconds (Capps et al., 2011). Although a wide variety of national and ethnic groups are represented among West African communities, almost all are more socially conservative than the mainstream U.S. In ethnic media serving these communities, discussion surrounding disciplining children involves general disdain for the permissive practices of "American" parents, which are perceived to result in rampant crime, recreational drug use and sexual experimentation, and an elevation of respect for elders and educational accomplishment (e.g., Ogeihor-Enoma, 2010). In general, discipline in West African cultures includes teaching children socially conservative values, close monitoring, and the legitimacy of instrumental (as opposed to impulsive) corporal punishment (Lansford, Chang, Dodge, Malone et al., 2009; Gershoff, 2002).

Despite the dramatic rise in immigration from West Africa to the U.S., there has been little research on family functioning within West African immigrant communities and virtually nothing on their perceptions of U.S. institutions that regulate family life. Social-ecological factors that may be important include collectivist identity and neighborhood surveillance. African cultures are generally collectivist, valuing social support coupled with social responsibility over individualism (Akinsulure-Smith et al., 2009; Charlés, 2009; Guerin et al., 2006; Whittaker et al., 2005). Collective responsibility for childcare in West Africa is reflected in the common practices of distributive care and child fostering, in which parents

send their children to be raised temporarily by other family members or close friends. Transnationally child fostering represents a normative means of alleviating childcare demands in the intense immigrant work settings and may provide expanded educational opportunities for children in home countries through remittances (Coe, 2011a).

Whether collectivism leads to seeing child welfare authorities as extensions of healthy communities or as threats to collective practices is unclear. In addition to collectivism, surveillance likely contributes as well. In major urban areas, African immigrants have settled primarily in low-income neighborhoods (New York City Department of Planning, 2009). Many such neighborhoods have historically been subject to increased attention on the part of child welfare authorities, with disproportionate rates of positive case findings and removal (Drake & Pandey, 1996), and hostility towards child welfare workers. There may also be neighborhood effects on perceptions of what constitutes child abuse, with residents emphasizing neglect over corporal punishment (Korbin, Coulton, Lindstrum-Ufuti, & Spilsbury, 2000).

In addition to ecological influences on perceptions, West African immigrant children may be at heightened risk for actual involvement in child protective systems. Although reliable figures for black immigrant children involved in child protection do not exist (Lincroft & Resner, 2006), black children in general are overrepresented in child welfare systems (Roberts, 2001; Yu, Landsverk, Ellis-Macleod, Newton, et al., 2004) so it is reasonable to suspect that black immigrant children are overrepresented also. Corporal punishment is a legitimate disciplinary tactic in West African cultures, which likely puts families at further risk for involvement (Crouch & Behl, 2001). Moreover, as almost 30 percent of Sub-Saharan African immigrants entered the U.S. as refugees or asylees (Kent, 2007) greater exposure to traumatic events may increase risks of involvement. Higher rates of trauma sequelae among parents can have negative emotional and behavioral consequences for children and parents alike (Caselli & Motta, 1995; Jordan, Marmar, Fairbank, Schlenger, et al., 1992; Ruscio, Weathers, King, & King, 2002).

The current study drew on focus group and interview data to examine West African immigrants' reports of challenges to family well being. Primary among these were perceived threats posed by child welfare authorities. Contextualizing our population of interest as both immigrants and family members, we drew heavily upon Sluzki's (1979) theory of migration and family conflict, which outlines an inverted U-shaped curve of family well being across stages of migration: anticipatory *preparation*, hopeful *migration*, post-migration *decompensation*, and reactive *transgenerational phenomena* in which historical factors interact with family members' renegotiated identities and differential social capital. We also drew upon conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989; 2001) to conceptualize the stress that results from losses occurring due to migration. COR posits that the primary determinant of stress concerns loss or the anticipation of loss and that individuals seeking to alleviate stress do so by seeking compensatory resources. When compensatory resources are not available, individuals experience more distress and respond by increasing resource-seeking behavior, resulting in "loss spirals." A general framework of social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Sameroff & MacKenzie, 2003) helped us track the multiple spheres of influence in participants' accounts. Because there is very little literature on our population of interest, methodologically we analyzed our qualitative data using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Methods

Our interest in the broad topic of conflict within families in West African communities derived from the authors' history of clinical work with forced migrants in a large public

hospital and from the second author's experiences as a member of the Sierra Leonean immigrant community. Our study design was constructed so as to maximize opportunities for participants to share salient information about challenges facing West African families. As group discussion is the preferred mode of discourse in many African societies and several clinical practitioners have found that this extends to emotional and psychological content as well (Smith, 2003), focus group design was appropriate. However, as we knew from our clinical work that there were topics that were not often shared in group settings, we decided to supplement focus groups with individual interviews with participants who we thought might be marginalized (e.g., domestic violence survivors, disobedient youth). In order to situate our findings within a framework where they would be of use, we consulted advocacy and community-based organizations (CBOs) before and after formal data collection.

Generating sensitizing concepts

In mid 2009 the authors met with staff members of West African CBOs, their colleagues in health advocacy groups, and members of legal defense organizations with West African clients in order to generate sensitizing concepts. Salient topics directly related to family functioning included arguments between parents and children concerning "American" culture and fear of children "calling 911" to report their parents to child welfare authorities. Other topics included poverty and immigration status. We kept this stakeholder advisory network apprised of our progress and solicited research questions throughout the course of research.

Recruitment and data collection

Focus groups and individual interviews were held at several locations throughout New York City and northern New Jersey. Recruitment of the sample was purposive, conducted with the help of the stakeholder network. Network members were asked to refer one parent and one adolescent who they thought would be vocal about family challenges. Network members were not compensated for referrals.

Upon arrival, participants were welcomed, informed of the purpose and content of the project and their right to refuse participation, asked for their consent for themselves and their children (children were asked for their assent), and asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. For parents this questionnaire included age, gender, ethnic group, country of origin, principal reason for coming to the U.S., ages and locations of children, and others living in the home; for children it included age, gender, ethnic group, country of family's origin, school of attendance, and others living in the home. The decision as to whether a participant would be in a focus group or individual interview was made based on the information in the short demographic questionnaire. Following interviews, participant families received \$40.00 for transportation and, for those reporting that they felt unsafe (e.g., domestic violence survivors), referral to relevant services. Study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of New York University School of Medicine and the City University of New York.

Sample

We conducted 18 focus groups (ranging from two to 12 members, $M = 3.50$) and eight individual interviews between December 2009 and July 2010. Eleven sessions were follow-up sessions that were held no more than two weeks following initial interviews. Participants were 59 West African immigrants across 13 focus group cohorts and five interviews. The sample was more female (19 mothers, 14 daughters) than male (13 fathers, 13 sons); eight focus groups were mixed gender (three parents' groups, five children's), six female-only (five mothers', one daughters') and two male-only (one fathers', one sons'); six individual

interviews were with females (five mothers, one daughter) and two with males (one father, one son). Four of the individually interviewed mothers were self-identified survivors of domestic violence; the one daughter was a child of one of these women (the other individual interviews were done because of sparse recruitment at their sites). Demographics are presented in Table 1.

Ages of parents ranged from 22 to 83 ($M = 37.33$) and children from 12 to 25 ($M = 16.22$). Among the participants were eight pairs of parents and children. Parents reported that they had on average of 3.59 children (range 1 to 7), with an average age of 17.14 (range 0.08 to 58; 18 had missing data for their children's age). Parents reported that 40 of these 54 lived with them; of the remaining 14 children, five lived elsewhere in the U.S., and nine lived in countries in West Africa. Other individuals living in the home were reported as spouses ($n = 14$), unmarried partners ($n = 3$), extended family members ($n = 4$), and unrelated individuals ($n = 2$).

The sample was majority Muslim ($n = 34$), and diverse in terms of ethnicity (17 different groups). Eleven different countries of origin were represented (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Chad) but over two-thirds of the sample was from Sierra Leone ($n = 25$) or Liberia ($n = 16$). The 32 parents' reasons for migrating were grouped into forced (i.e., reported "war," "refugee," or related phenomena) and voluntary (did not mention these things) migrant categories; the majority were forced migrants ($n = 20$). Migration dates ranged from three months to 19 years prior to interviews ($M = 7.86$ years; $SD = 5.31$).

Interview guide, data collection and transcription

Our interview guide did not differ between focus groups and individual interviews. Our interviews began with a request to describe a challenge in participants' families in the previous two weeks. Following participants' descriptions, others were encouraged to comment (in interviews this was a request to comment further on the challenges), with moderators steering conversation using probes based on literature on immigrant family conflict. After 20 minutes, moderators asked participants to describe where they usually went for help with these problems. After another 20 minutes, moderators focused the initial query by mentioning "bad days or stress" and opened the time horizon by not specifying a time period. After another 20 minutes the moderator again asked participants to identify where they sought help for these problems. Focus groups and interviews lasted between 75 and 90 minutes.

All interviews and focus groups were audiorecorded using two digital audiorecorders (Olympus WS-400 S) with external table microphones. Each focus group was attended by both a moderator and a note-taker. Note-takers were charged with recording the order of speakers and notable behaviors. Moderators took minimal notes during focus groups in order to track conversation. Note-takers did not attend individual interviews; instead, moderators took detailed notes during and immediately following interviews.

Note-takers transcribed audiorecordings (for interviews, either interviewers or research assistants transcribed) using a transcription manual detailing notation based on conventions in Agar and McDonald (1995). Transcribers listened to both audiorecordings in order to insure that content was transcribed correctly. Spoken content, tone, emphasis, notable behaviors, and the lengths of pauses between utterances longer than three seconds were noted. Moderators reviewed transcriptions while listening to audiorecordings and then met with transcribers to discuss inconsistencies and finalize transcriptions.

Data analysis

Analysis began immediately following the first focus groups, with investigators listening to recordings and identifying salient themes. Following four focus group cohorts and five individual interviews, investigators returned to the first three transcripts to begin open coding. Transcriptions were entered into ATLAS.ti software (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2009). Investigators coded the transcript of one focus group, and then met to examine overlap in open codes. Following consensus on codes, the team coded transcripts of the second and third focus groups and met to finalize codes. Codes relevant to the current manuscript are presented in Box 1.

The coding procedure followed a step-by-step process meant to foster trustworthiness and credibility of our coding (i.e., reliability). Two coders independently coded each transcript. Coders then merged their coded documents (using “same PD same codes” merge procedure of separate, single-document “hermeneutic units” in ATLAS.ti) and discussed each portion of coded text in order to come to consensus. Consensus documents were then merged with documents that had been coded along one methodological axis – whether the text represented a focus group or individual interview – and four theoretically-relevant demographic axes: gender, religion, forced or voluntary migration. All documents were merged into a single hermeneutic unit for thematic analysis. The intersection (using adjacency operators “within,” “encloses,” “overlapped by,” “overlaps,” “follows,” “precedes,” and “co-occurs”) of the codes “disciplining and monitoring” and “911” with other codes listed in Box 1 presented relevant data for the current study. Data in the current manuscript is presented by participants, who are identified by gender and age in transcriptions; moderators are identified by their initials (see Results, below).

Strategies for rigor

Strategies to ensure trustworthiness of our data included triangulation, verification, and auditability (for a review, see Padgett, 2008). Triangulation included the use of multiple disciplinary perspectives (psychology and sociology), multiple interview formats (focus groups and individual interviews), multiple perspectives of participants (parents and children), purposeful composition of groups regarding gender and forced versus voluntary migration history (mixed and single-attribute), and multiple coders (two per transcript). Verification involved conducting follow-up interviews and reviewing themes and preliminary conclusions with our stakeholder network. Our audit trail included dates and content of team meetings, interview schedules, relevant email messages, and stakeholder meetings.

Results

“911”

Parent perspectives—Among parents, the most frequent initial topic of focus groups was the perception that teachers taught their children to call police when they tried to discipline them. A 50-year-old Gambian Muslim man of Mandingo ethnicity:

M50: You bring your family here, the children, and then, put them in school. They go to school, they educate them about 911, number 1, and then if you happen to touch the child, if he goes to school the teacher will have to ask, “Have you been beaten? Have you?” If he said, “Yes,” immediately the police are called, called for you.

A 54-year-old Sierra Leonean Muslim woman and a 48-year-old Mauritanian Muslim woman, both Fulani:

F54: //[[leans forward, opens hands then puts them together] Because, kid is a kid... sometimes if they do something you leave it there, tomorrow they do same thing, you leave it there, it's gon, they gonna stay and do it again , again, again. They think it's good. You think it's bad, you have to rectify them. [knocks the table] But here I do that [knocks the table] they say, "Child abuse, [opens eyes] abuse a child," and they try to take it away from you.

F48: [softly] It's no good//...

F54: //No, no you cannot do it, you can let that kid, they gonna go at school tell their teacher and they gonna, "Oh! Her mother abuse her, her mother didn't want her to do what she like to do."

F48: [Laughs] ... Call 9-1-1 [Laughs]

"911" intersected with school-related codes and in some cases represented a barrier to interacting with schools. A 38-year-old Guinean Muslim Mandingo man reported that he regularly received calls from his son's school:

M38: Every day them call me, "Your child do this, he do that, he-he go, he-he run he..." You know. Okay. When I call him, I tell him, "Don't do this, don't do that." He wanna tell me, "I call 991... My teacher told me, if you beat me here, I have to call 99—I have to call 911." I say, "Okay, ... now, no more, I don't answer your-your teacher over there, when she call me again, I-I-I never answer her. Because she-she teach you to call 911 to come and take me."

Often "911" intersected with the sentiment that whereas in home countries children were taught to be respectful, "Americans" were indulgent of children. A 46 year-old Liberian Christian Krahn woman:

F46: Our children back home, you have our culture that our children, you have to respect your parents... so long the person is older than you, you have to give the person that respect. ... Like my little-my little daughter I have home, [*name*], well she's turned elev-uh eleven last week.... she started a little attitude because of the children she move with, going to school, telling them, "You have your right," that, "You don't have to do certain things" ... Some of them will take telephone and call 911 police on their door... and when the police come they don't listen to you, actually they will listen to the child.

M35: Yeah. Whatsoever that child say.

F46: Whatsoever the child says, that's what they gonna take as truth.

There was only one instance of a participant whose view of state intervention was nuanced. A 32-year-old Sierra Leonian Muslim Mandingo woman noted that the intention of child protective services was not to victimize the parents: "Yes, you know sometimes when you hit a kid, if they say something, like, like, 'Don't. Stop beating your kid,' it's a advice."

"911" was only a topic in focus groups. In individual interviews with parents, "911" concerning children was completely absent. Although discussion of disciplinary practices was not uncommon, none of this discussion involved the interference of school or police in discipline.

Children's perspectives—Children who mentioned parents' disciplinary tactics rarely used the term "911," although several referred to the topic of children calling police in response to parents' punishment. Calling the police in response to parents' discipline came with costs. Two Liberian Christian girls, ages 18 and 13, Vai and Krahn (respectively),

discussed the practice of sending children back to home countries in response to disciplinary problems:

F18: If you call the//

F13: //Yeah//

F18: //police on your parents//

F13: //getting involved in//

TC: //What?

F18: If someo—if someone, okay—If a person call the police on their parents [looks at TC]//

TC: // What did the parents do?

F18: Uh-m probably hit them, beat them, so... they call the police. If someone call the police on their parents//

TC: //Uh-uh//

F18: //If the parents don't go to jail, do you think that parent's gonna keep that child? No they're going back [hand gesture].

Children's responses to "where do you go for help" concerning parents' harsh discipline were based in family networks. A group of Sierra Leonean Mandingo and Fulani boys, ages 13–15:

AR: So when-when you have a disagreement with your mom or dad and they just keep going at it, you just let it alone, try to explain it//

M15: //Yeah yeah.

AR: When, where do you guys go for help when you have a conflict like this?

M14: // I go to my other relatives//

M13a: I go to my brothers [pats M13b on shoulder]...

M14: Like my aunt, my uncle, even my cousin, they're real helpful, even even my grandfather.

AR: Oh really? How is he helpful?

M14: He tells me, "You know, sometimes your parents can jump to conclusions because that's what they usually do, parents," uh-uh, "I-I-I think like literally every parent in the world has at least jumped to a conclusion at least once, to things that like mattered this big [hands close together] but think that it mattered this big [hand wide apart] so, you just got to make sure that, you don't make it, you don't make it a big thing, yeah you don't say nothing."

No children reported that teachers or police were helpful in addressing conflict with parents.

Disciplining and monitoring

Parent perspectives—Disciplinary strategies described by parents and children included a wide range of non-corporal strategies, including behavioral reinforcement and punishment, family meetings, confinement to the home, and responsibility of all community members to monitor and correct children's misbehavior. In an individual interview a 43 year-old Mauritanian Muslim Fulani father described the way he used financial control to discipline his 18 year-old son:

M43: My kid's calling, he got his own cell phone, I have to pay it. ... And if he do something wrong, I have to act, I know—I'm not going to beat him, no—But I have to know how to act. I gonna cut off his line.

AR: Mm hm.

M43: First of all, no text-text-text-texting.

AR: Mm hm.

M43: No more. I know how to do it.

Close monitoring of behavior in order to avoid danger was a common theme. A 42-year-old Gambian Muslim Fulani mother living in suburban New Jersey explained how she scheduled her children's time in order to protect them:

F42: Their soccer team there, they play for the school, like Tuesdays and Thursdays they go on soccer exercise, //

AAS: //Okay. //

F42: //from five to seven. And my husband will go and pick them from the field. Sundays they normally have matches. Now there is a tournament on, they like it. So at least, they normally go there. But if want to-from school to the house, 24-7 they will not even have the chance to peep through the window or so. ... like my son, when he's late five minutes from school I am crazy.

The concern for safety was not limited to unsafe neighborhoods, and in many cases seemed to be connected to children's relative independence in the U.S. A 70 year-old Sierra Leonean Christian Krio grandmother expressed concern about her adolescent granddaughter living in a suburban neighborhood in Texas:

F70: She wants to, you know, to have her own, you know, independence. ... They have the keys. "When I come from school, I go home." And I'm here, I'm always on edge, thinking the worse scenario, you know.

AR: Mm hm.

F70: Oh my goodness, that house. The neighborhood is very good, but in this country you don't have to go to bad neighborhoods. [AR laughs] Things happen in good neighborhoods – mostly in bad neighborhoods, but even in good neighborhoods.

Collective responsibility for disciplining and monitoring was common. However, unlike other strategies, the primary message of this discussion was that whereas in home countries disciplining and monitoring other people's children was encouraged, in the U.S. it was actively discouraged. Two Sierra Leonean Christian Krio grandmothers (83 and 70 years old) described local children's reaction to their attempts to correct their behavior:

F83: But the children here [grimaces], "Why are you coming for me?" //

F70: // "Why are you talking to me, do you know me?"

F83: Yes.

F70: Yeah, that, you cannot say that in Africa. If now the two kid is in the street doing something, you say, "Well what are you doing here?" They run. They, and they say, "Sorry, I don't going to do it, please don't tell my parents." They beg you, [hands together in front of face] not to tell their parents.

AR: Hm.

F70: But here, if you did that, you give them spank. ... Yeah, if they go home, “Okay, Mommy, somebody give me spank,” you did something wrong...

The loss of collective disciplining and monitoring networks was often coupled with perceptions of a moral corruption, neighborhood dangers and economic pressures that forced both parents to work. For parents with small children, this meant searching for private childcare that was both affordable and trusted; for parents of adolescents, this meant putting increased pressure on adolescents to care for younger siblings and frequent phone calls to check that they returned home after school.

Children’s perspectives—Discussion of challenges related to discipline among children frequently concerned close parental monitoring of behavior and appearance, and at times included references to harsh corporal punishment. A 13 year-old Sierra Leonean Muslim Mandingo boy (with commentary by other boys):

M13a: I remember one time-one time I left my house with my pants below my waist//

M13b: // [laughs, hits table]

M13a: I left like, I had no belt on, so my pants kept on falling. So anytime my dad sees some type of, anything that has boxers or underwear exposed, he takes a big belt, wrap it and wrap it around his hand and goes boom.

M13b: [fakes hitting 2008 on head]

M15: //Yeah my dad will not let me leave the house with my pants down. //

M14: //[unintelligible] Americanized//

M13a: //I said, “My pants are like that because I ain’t got no belt.” He said, “Go get a belt.” I said, “I have no belt.” He said, “You just trying to act like the kids in the street ‘cause you want to be like them, trying to sell things in the street.” I said, I said, “In what life would I ever sell things in the street?”

These boys found both the reference to corporal punishment and the reference to the father’s fears about his son selling drugs amusing, something to laugh at as part of a shared experience of close monitoring and harsh disciplinary style.

Children reported instances in which their appearance and behavior was monitored by parents’ associates as well as themselves. In an individual interview a 15 year-old Sierra Leonean Muslim Fulani girl reported that a friend of her father’s told her father that she was behaving inappropriately at a wedding:

F15: We didn’t do nothing. I mean he don’t really like wear-uh-m having weave and stuff on my head//

TC: //Uh-huh//

F15: //so or dancing – or maybe he saw me – the guy told him I was dancing with somebody and then he got all... he really is overprotective too much, like//

TC: //So he doesn’t like you having a weave//

F15: //M-hm. Which I don’t really have one, ‘cause I don’t really like it//

TC: //M-hm//

F15: //so he don’t like me dancing too//

TC: //He doesn’t let you dance//

F15: //and that I have my hair done for the wedding//

TC: //Uh-huh//

F15: //so [laughs] I think the guy told him that, and then about the whole dancing thing so... He – if he's gonna believe the guy over me, then let him believe the guy. [mouth click]

Like parents, children understood close monitoring as rooted in parents' perceptions of safety. A 15 year-old Sierra Leonean Muslim Mandingo boy reported that his mother's close monitoring was motivated by their Bronx neighborhood:

M15: Yeah my mom does not agree with me going outside because, like, most of the time like, when she does go out, right? Like, like something happens, like for example, um I think it was like three days ago she went out with my little brother. And a lady was getting she-she was um, she was jumped by some people and got beat up.

AR: A lady got jumped in your neighborhood?

M15: Yeah she got beat up by kids in the train and my mom, like, she ran across the street to escape the problem and um she came home and told me the story and said, "See I don't want you guys to go outside everyday something happening." ...

AR: Uh-huh. So it sounds like your mother is pretty worried about what happens in the neighborhood.

M15: Yeah.

AR: Yup.

M15: And when we go out like, weekend, because she's there and she can like, rush to the problem if like we fall something, then she's there.

In a focus group that occurred several months prior, this young man's mother (32-year-old Sierra Leonean Muslim Mandingo) had been more succinct: "You don't see them by themselves because I am scared."

Close monitoring typically led to complaints of boredom and frustration with parents' suspicions. A 17 year-old Liberian Christian Bassa boy explained his frustration with his father's control of his whereabouts (with comments from a 13 year-old girl):

M17: But if I call and tell him like, "Hello, I am about to go somewhere." "Is that necessary you go there?" [Staring at the table and playing with his shirt]

TC: Oh he'll say that?

M17: Yes. All right, two minutes later, "No stay home..." So I don't know.

F13: [laughs] Well //

M17: So, I just don't go, and stay home //

F13: // Watching TV //

M17: // and when he come he ask me why am I sleeping all day.

TC: [laughs]

M17: "I don't know, 'cause I be bored."

Children regularly reported that because of their parents' concern about neighborhood peers they spent most of their non-school hours indoors. Common activities were spending time online and watching television.

Comparison across other demographic variables

We examined responses grouped by males and females, by Muslims and Christians, and by forced and voluntary migration history. Two women who were survivors of domestic violence reported that they had some skepticism about harsh discipline of children following their own abuse experiences, but that they too felt there were times when children needed corporal punishment. No discernible patterns emerged across religious affiliation or migration history.

Stakeholder reactions and supporting policy documents

During stakeholder feedback, several members of CBO organizations told researchers that parents they worked with mentioned they felt that they would be bad parents if they did not use the full range of disciplinary tactics described in focus groups. Not controlling their children would make them subject to shame in their own communities, objects of ridicule for becoming “American.” In addition, many reported that many families felt that “American” interest in their family life through schools and social workers was a direct challenge to their home culture, and not an attempt to protect their children.

New York State law allows parents to use corporal punishment: “A parent, guardian, or other person entrusted with the care and supervision of a person under the age of twenty one ... may use physical force ... upon such person when and to the extent that he reasonably believes it necessary to maintain discipline or to promote the welfare of such person” (Penal Law § 35.10). It is the use of *excessive* corporal punishment that warrants a finding of child abuse: “‘Abused child’ means a child less than eighteen years of age whose parent... inflicts or allows to be inflicted upon such child physical injury by other than accidental means which causes or creates a substantial risk of death, or serious or protracted disfigurement, or protracted impairment of physical or emotional health or protracted loss or impairment of the function of any bodily organ” (New York Family Court Act, FCA § 1012). This has generally been operationalized as punishment that leaves a mark on the child’s skin. However, in stakeholder feedback, Family Court attorneys reported that judges often ordered West African clients to refrain from any corporal punishment whatsoever, even extending this to physical exertion (e.g., push-ups as punishment). Attorneys at this organization reported that when West African families came before judges, judges often interpreted the law in as strict a manner as possible in order to send a message that their illiberal family practices in their relatively isolated communities had been discovered and were not to be tolerated.

Although “911” was clearly a narrative passed along through community networks, a persistent question for our research team concerned how information about the consequences of corporal punishment entered these networks. A review of New York City Board of Education policy revealed a mandate for the establishment of school-level “Child Abuse Prevention and Intervention Teams” charged with designing and implementing “educational programs on child abuse prevention for school personnel, parents, and students” (Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education, 2009; p. 10). No participants or stakeholders in the current study mentioned outreach on the part of children’s schools. Three principals of schools serving many immigrant children (one retired) reported that these teams were usually formed on paper only; information about the illegality of harsh corporal punishment and how to call police in cases of abuse was generally related informally, usually in response to some abuse incident in the school community. One noted that at her school she used parent outreach to increase participation in children’s academic lives, and that although she was clear about the limits of corporal punishment, she had several other topics that took priority. A caseworker in our advisory network reported that for many parents with limited English, children were the only connection to school

authorities and so were able to translate information about abuse and neglect in any way that served them best.

Discussion

The frequent intersection of disciplining and monitoring, “911,” and negative appraisal of U.S. society and suggests that many West African immigrants see their home cultures as under attack by public welfare institutions. This results in parental disempowerment and the perception that they are legally restrained from caring for their children. That this discussion emerged only in focus groups suggests that “911” is a way to express shared frustration over the loss of disciplinary control, and expressing this loss may serve to elicit some sense of solidarity that is irrelevant in one-on-one conversations with outsiders. Minimal disagreement over the motives of child welfare authorities may also be in part a function of the fact that focus group methods may favor consensus. Whether this is the case or not, “911” expressed a powerful group narrative among parents.

“911” may also be an opportunity to warn others. With the perception that host country institutions are engaged in the systemic removal of disciplinary supports at the same time that they are becoming more overtly hostile to immigrants in general, creating such opportunities to warn others may be critical to maintaining a healthy family life. From theoretical perspectives on immigration, acculturation (Berry, 1997; 2001), and family conflict (Sluzki, 1979), “911” served as a metaphor of discontinuity between home country collective values and U.S. individualism, a threat to the morphostasis and morphogenesis (i.e., sameness and continuity) that parents seek for themselves and their children at the same time that they seek positive changes in their financial well being and security.

To note that “911” was discussed solely in groups is not to say that it was not a real threat. Although at first we treated parents’ concerns that there were legal consequences to even “touching” their children as grossly exaggerated, Family Court attorneys informed us that this was indeed a possibility. This was due primarily to a sense that some Family Court judges felt that West African families represented a hitherto unknown illiberal culture that needed to be regulated for the sake of its own members. Stakeholder feedback and review of relevant documents provided a snapshot of a child welfare system that was inconsistent with stated policies in practice. Although participant parents made no references to the reliability of their information about child welfare and none referred specifically to racism or other discrimination at the hands of authorities, their comments indicated that they implicitly understood that it was well worth the effort spent to avoid the child welfare system.

A wide variety of disciplining and monitoring strategies were reported, and most were consistent with mainstream U.S. practices. Although most non-corporal strategies were effectively used by parents, several participants reported that monitoring by other community members was more difficult in the U.S. because of limited social contact and the structure of housing in New York City. Smaller social networks and noncommunal housing resulted in parents being more individually responsible for more monitoring than they would have been in their home countries. The loss of collective monitoring was a source of considerable stress for parents, and it seems likely that it may be the keystone element in a perceived loss spiral (Hobfoll, 1989) that results in fear of and perhaps even contact with child protective authorities – i.e., “911.”

Parents’ perceived loss spiral is presented in Figure 1. Social ecological factors are presented on the left side of the loss spiral and individual responses on the right, with interactions between the two presented in the center. The loss spiral that results in “911” begins when families emigrate from countries in which (1) the state has little interest in

family life and (2) the availability and value of corporal punishment is shared across disciplinary actors – parents, teachers, and community members alike. In the U.S. parents' perceptions of danger (both physical and moral) and heightened concern for safety interact with the smaller collective monitoring networks to reinforce fears of "American" antisocial behaviors. Similar to the use of harsh parenting in other urban populations (e.g., African Americans; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates et al., 1996; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003; Pinderhughes, Dodge, Zelli et al., 2000; Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster et al., 2001), parents may then rely on harsh discipline and close monitoring in order to counteract these concerns. Unlike teachers in home countries, teachers in the U.S. do not approve of corporal punishment and are mandated to report such disciplinary practices to authorities. This school-home disciplinary mismatch is well known by children, which may reduce the effectiveness of corporal punishment (Parke, 2002) and present them with an escape from their frustration with parental demands.

The loss spiral that leads to "911" is situated within a set of potential exacerbating factors (listed in the upper right hand corner of Figure 1). Although all of the factors listed likely have some effect on parents' perceptions of child welfare authorities (e.g., a history of antagonistic spousal relations seemed to explain the questioning of harsh disciplinary practices by two domestic violence survivors), effects of family separation are likely to be profound. Transnational parenting, which was considerable among our participants, has been shown to exacerbate existing concerns of family members (Coe, 2011b) and even restructure the emotional experience of parenting itself (Coe, 2008). It may be that for those parents separated from their children, the idea of unknown others being imposed upon their children's care deepens the pain of separation, in effect adding insult to injury. Given that family separation is by far the norm for immigrant families (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova & Louie, 2002), such reactions are likely to resonate with many immigrant parents. "911" thus not only expresses the potential for state intervention, but also represents a painful reminder of parents' present and past separation from their children.

Children's discussion of discipline was markedly unlike their parents' in two ways. First, although several acknowledged that they knew of peers who had called police or threatened to call police in order to win arguments with parents, few children used the term "911". That children did not use the term was reflected by the absence of police or child welfare authorities as legitimate resources for help in the face of harsh disciplinary tactics. Instead, children reported that they relied on older siblings or other family members for support – making them good collectivists.

Second, the primary association surrounding close monitoring was frustration that parents' suspected them of becoming too "American." Frequent phone calls and reports of their behavior to parents from other community members were troubling because children felt that they were not behaving inappropriately. In other words, for children close monitoring implied that parents did not recognize that they shared many of their values. The other consequence of close monitoring was boredom, which led to considerable frustration surrounding physical activity and social networking. Children's boredom may lead to a higher likelihood of arguments, which parents in turn perceive as threatening because it leads to "911." Although adverse mental health outcomes were not measured in the current study, there was little in the findings to suggest that parent-child conflict was substantially different from the type of conflict in other immigrant families that leads to adverse mental health outcomes (Szapocznik & Williams, 2000). A more direct connection to children's well-being concerned their ability to create social capital among their peers. Creating *bridging* social capital seemed to be in direct conflict with parents' emphasis on *bonding* social capital (for a discussion of bonding and bridging social capital, see Leigh & Putnam, 2002; Putnam, 1993). Although the effects of different types of social capital on well-being

are largely contextually defined (Cheong, Edward, Goulbourne, & Solomos, 2007), bridging is thought to be associated with more advantageous outcomes and effective integration (Uslaner & Conley, 2003).

There are limitations to the study design that should be acknowledged. The ethnic and national diversity of the sample may be seen as a limitation from an anthropological perspective that preferences cultural specificity. Although we value such approaches for the precision of their meaning-making, we purposefully included greater diversity because we thought that perspectives on child welfare authorities would not differ by ethnicity. They did not. Although the study was not intended as a study of collective child monitoring networks *per se*, we did not find that attitudes surrounding collective monitoring differed. We should emphasize, however, that convergent findings are specific to the topics presented here, and should not be taken to support generalizations about “West Africans” regarding other issues. Another limitation concerns the lack of information on the SES of our participants. Given that sub-Saharan African immigrants in the U.S. have a greater diversity of educational attainment than other immigrant groups (Capps et al., 2011), this information should be included in future studies.

Conclusions

The perceptions identified in the current study portray a conflict between home culture and host country norms, and in liberal social welfare systems in which the state has an expressed interest in family life this results in distrust of public authorities among parents in West African communities. For parents, “911” is part of a larger concern about discontinuity in disciplining and monitoring children between home country collective responsibility and host country individual liability. In an increasingly nativist – and for Muslim West Africans, an increasingly anti-Islamic – public environment, U.S. child welfare institutions become perceived as yet another arm of a society in conflict with home cultures. This has direct effects on parents’ willingness to engage in school activities and may negatively affect the behavior of their children. Schools and child welfare institutions should take note and put in place strategies to combat these perceptions. Information campaigns should be coupled with connections to religious institutions and CBOs, so as to capitalize on collective values and trusted sources of information.

Box 1: Open codes

“911”: in vivo code (i.e., must use term “911”)

Africa: Any references to “Africa,” home country or region, , “back home”

America: Any references to America, Americans, the United States, “here” when referring to things in the US or NY, American culture

Coping strategies: Any reference to efforts to handle problem situations (e.g., having patience, exercise to deal with stress, talking about a problem)

Disciplining & monitoring: any reference to purposeful efforts to control children’s behavior or keep track of what they are doing

Talking: Any reference to talking or communication

Cultural community support: community based organizations, community support networks, advice-giving elders, groups of friends from own culture

Education & schools: any reference to education, schools, school personnel, things that happen in schools, higher education, lack of education, education material; does not include after school programs or school-based sports

Extended family: references to other family members other than spouses, parents, kids, siblings, cousins

Extracurricular activities: children's structured activities outside of school, including after school programs and school-based sports

Gender roles: references to the roles of males and females; may be in family or outside of family, children or parents

Immigrating: reference to immigration, immigration authorities, means of migration, immigration documents

Interpersonal conflict: references to arguments, fighting, or general tension between people

Parent/child: references to parents, children, and interactions between them

Religion: reference to religion, religious leaders, spiritual belief, religious buildings, religious bodies, etc.

Sex & physical maturation: references to sexual contact, puberty, menses, etc.

US Secular/Institutional authorities: police (incl. "911"), Administration of Children's Services, school personnel, counselors, public benefits, hospitals, immigration officials, etc.

Violence: references to the use of violence, hitting, kicking, weapons, etc.

Research Highlights

- West African immigrants use strict discipline to protect children from negative peers and permissive "American" values.
- These parents refer to child welfare authorities as "911" and perceive that they undermine parents by privileging children.
- West African immigrant children understand parents' strict monitoring but find the lack of trust frustrating.
- "911" expresses the discontinuity between collective responsibility in home countries and individual liability in the U.S.

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Figure 1.
Parents' perceived "911" loss spiral

Table 1

Participant demographics

	n
Parents	32
Children	27
Gender	
Female	33
Male	26
Religion	
Muslim	34
Christian	21
Other	3
Ethnicity	
Fulani	14
Mandingo	8
Krio	5
Bassa	5
Other ethnicity (n = 3)	27
National origin	
Sierra Leone	25
Liberia	16
Gambia	6
Guinea	5
Other nationality (n = 2)	7
Migration history (parents)	
Forced	20
Voluntary	12
Born in U.S. (children)	5