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## Force Signs: Ideologies of Corporal Discipline in Academia and the Marshall Islands

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*Corporal discipline is often called the most frequent form of violence against children. This conclusion comes from an extensive body of research that supposedly shows that corporal discipline is both harmful and pervasive. But this research is biased by three ideologies of language and signs—or semiotic ideologies—that distort the collection and interpretation of data: assumptions that speech functions mainly to refer; views of signs and the physical world as distinct; and interpretations of force signs as indices of deviant relationships. In contrast, in a village in the Marshall Islands reported force has multiple functions, people combine multiple different types of signs in disciplinary interactions, and force signs often index not deviance but healthy relationships. The harms to children and families created by these misinterpretations of signs go far beyond producing incorrect estimates of the frequency of corporal discipline. On the one hand, these ideologies pathologize people who frequently produce force signs as well as the kinship systems associated with them; on the other hand, misunderstood communicative patterns may lead researchers to miss harms that people do experience. Researching corporal discipline requires an analysis of force signs in context—an ethnography of communication of force. [Violence, children’s rights, language materiality, semiotic ideology, Oceania]*

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“Are you scared of mama?”  
 “Yes,” the twelve-year-old girl responded.  
 “And papa?” I asked.  
 “Yes,” Catherine said.  
 Eventually, I pressed further: “Why are children scared of their mothers and fathers?”  
 “Because, they are fierce; they will hit them.”

Catherine’s responses are examples of speech that indexes force, or “force speech.” I define “force” as any use of physical power including, but not limited to, hitting, spanking, pulling ears, or hitting with an implement. Force speech and other signs that index force—or “force signs”—are pervasive in Jajikon, a small 250-person rural village in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI).<sup>1</sup> Every child with whom I spoke claimed fear (*mijak*) of at least one elder. Like Catherine, most children explicitly explained this fear as stemming from elders’ use of force as discipline. Children also

heard and produced verbal and material threats of force as well as reports of force. Finally, they reenacted force during pretend play.

This pervasiveness of force signs makes it seem as if children constantly either experience or are under the immediate threat of force. But in Jajikon, instances of force are far less common than force speech (Carucci 1990, 97). The occasional slaps and swings of sticks that I witnessed pale in comparison to the frequent and often severe forms of force that Nutter (2013) and Morton (1996) describe seeing in parts of Morocco and Tonga. Moreover, in Jajikon force and force speech are tied in subtle ways. For example, despite the ever-present threat, "I am going to really punch your mouth in!" I never saw or heard of a child being punched in the mouth. People debated every incident of reported force. "Why did Tito say [your mother] hit you?" I asked a girl. "Tito is lying," she responded. Finally, claims of fear and claims of force did not always correlate. A woman told me that her younger sibling feared her because she could punch her. "Really?" I asked. "No," she responded. "I wouldn't really do it."

These examples reveal that force speech in Jajikon is not a valid source of data on the existence, rate, or nature of corporal discipline. Although definitions of "corporal discipline"—also known as "corporal punishment," "physical punishment," or "physical discipline"—vary, most define it as a physical action performed with the intention of disciplining, causing pain, or both (Ember and Ember 2005, 609; Ripoll-Nunez and Rohner 2006, 241; Straus and Donnelly 2005, 3; UNICEF 2014a, 4). For example, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2007, 4) defines corporal punishment as "any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light." To investigate this physical phenomenon, many rely not on observation but on speech, specifically reports of force. In transnational humanitarian organizations' analyses of violence against children, reported force is typically the only source of data (e.g., UNICEF 2014a). Humanitarians then conclude that that corporal discipline is "the most common form of violence against children" worldwide (UNICEF 2014a, 94).

Anthropologists of childhood argue that some humanitarian campaigns reflect culturally specific views of childhood that stigmatize local childrearing practices (Korbin 2003; Nutter 2013; Rosen 2007). I agree, but argue that the humanitarian campaign against corporal punishment reflects ideologies of not only childhood but also language, interaction, and signs (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2007; UN General Assembly 1989). Three "semiotic ideologies," or "basic assumptions of what signs are and how they function in the world" (Keane 2003, 419), influence the research on and interpretations of discipline described above. First, widespread uses of reported force as data reflect referential ideologies in which people assume that speech functions mainly to refer (Briggs 1986). Second, the categorization of discipline according to the presence or lack of force, creating a phenomenon known as corporal discipline, reproduces long-standing views in Western thought that signs and the physical world are two separate domains (Robinson 2017). Finally, interpretations of reports of force as accurate minimum estimates of rates of corporal discipline reflect views of force signs as indices of violence. Since force is inherently bad, the reasoning seems to be, then people will conceal its use. Consequently, anyone who speaks of force must be telling the truth.

All of these ideologies misinterpret aspects of how Jajikonians produce or interpret force signs. First, reported force in Jajikon has multiple functions. In addition to referring to supposed past events, it may also index age and kin relationships, perform stances of deference or authority, or be a form of play. Second, one need not categorize discipline according to the presence or lack of force. Jajikonians combine many different types of force signs and engage many different "semiotic fields" (Goodwin 2000, 1490) when disciplining children. Finally, Jajikonians often interpret force signs as indices of not disordered but rather legitimate relationships. Although Jajikonians criticize elders who misuse excessive force, signs of appropriate force often index healthy age and kin relationships as well as stable family systems.

Marshall Islanders, like many other people, frequently produce force speech. But the meaning of such speech for what researchers are often concerned about—the frequency, nature, and effects of corporal discipline—depends on local communicative practices. One question is whether or not corporal discipline harms children (Benjet and Kazdin 2003; Gershoff 2002; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016; Larzelere 2000); an even more basic question is how much corporal discipline actually occurs in the many societies and communities surveyed solely through reported force. The harms to children and families created by such semiotic blinders are multiple. On the one hand, these ideologies pathologize people who frequently produce force signs as well as the kinship systems associated with those signs. Unsurprisingly, these supposedly disordered parents are often indigenous people or, in the United States, poor parents or parents of color (Krug et al. 2002, 63; Straus and Stewart 1999, 61–64). On the other hand, a lack of attention to the communicative patterns surrounding force signs may lead people to miss harms that people do experience, such as the widespread phenomenon of people dismissing claims of sexual assault (Ehrlich 2014). I do not argue that researchers should automatically start mistrusting narratives of force. Rather, I argue that such narratives must be interpreted in context and that the meaning will vary depending on local ideologies and uses of force signs. What is required is an analysis of force signs in context—an ethnography of communication of force.

I start by analyzing the semiotic ideologies produced by the academic and humanitarian literature on corporal punishment. After introducing my methods and the RMI, I examine how people in Jajikon use force signs in disciplinary interactions, how people interpret reported force, and the indexical meaning of force signs. Finally, I suggest some new methods for the study of force signs.

### **Semiotic Ideologies of Corporal Discipline**

Many studies of corporal punishment are actually studies of reported force (Benjet and Kazdin 2003, 211; Ripoll-Nunez and Rohner 2006, 232–233). Sixty-nine of the 75 psychological, sociological, and epidemiological studies of spanking analyzed by Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016, 11) rely on reported force. Transnational humanitarian organizations not only cite such analyses but also often reproduce such methods in their own studies (e.g., Pinheiro 2006, 52). For example, a recent UNICEF report assesses whether Marshallese homes are “increasingly free from violence” through questions such as, “In the past 1 month, how often was a child in your household physically punished, hit, smacked, spanked, [or] kicked?” (DeFarla et al. 2012, 99, 114). This question is similar in form to Straus et al.’s (1998, 269) parental–child conflict tactics scale in which parents assess how often they administer various forms of discipline. The Straus et al. (1998) scale is the basis for innumerable investigations of corporal discipline in the United States, has been adapted for use cross-culturally, and is the methodological basis for several recent analyses of violence against children across cultures produced by organizations such as UNICEF and the WHO (Krug et al. 2002, 62–64; Lansford et al. 2014; Sadowski et al. 2004; UNICEF 2014a, 96–108, 2014b; Zolotor et al. 2009).

Reported force also plays a major role in ethnographies. Many articles about corporal discipline cite only reported force (Archambault 2009; Imoh 2012; Rydstrom 2006); some articles rely mostly on reports (Perry 2009); and in longer ethnographies data from speech and observation often come together in ways authors do not explicitly explore (e.g., Einarsdottir 2004; Morton 1996; Nutter 2013; Whiting 1941; Wolf 1972). Morton (1996, 187–201) begins her discussion of corporal punishment with a survey of reported force; discusses a nineteen-year-old’s claim that she was still beaten once a week; and then moves to a five-year-old’s beating. As with this beating, the source of ethnographers’ reports of force is often unclear (e.g., Archambault 2009, 291; Last 2000, 373). Only 14 out of 38 sources in Ember and Ember’s (2005) cross-cultural analysis of corporal punishment cited any specific observation as data.<sup>2</sup> These 14,

with the exception of Whiting (1941), also included many passages in which they either do not identify their data or cite reports. For example, Korbin (1990, 13) discusses a native-Hawaiian father who severely beat all of his children but does not mention whether she heard about these beatings, saw them, or both.

These research methods reflect and reproduce several semiotic ideologies. First, the heavy reliance on reported force reflects “referential ideologies” in which researchers interpret speech largely according to its supposed referential content (Briggs 1986).<sup>3</sup> Referential ideologies manifest themselves in the prevalence of interviews that produce reported force as data (Briggs 1986, 3). If claims that corporal discipline is a daily form of punishment in some societies and families are accurate (Straus et al. 1998, 253), there are other methods of documenting corporal punishment such as participant observation or spot observations. At the very least, such methods could validate (or invalidate) reported data. Referential ideologies also manifest in conflation of reported force with corporal discipline. Scholars whose data come from reports write things such as “the data show a high prevalence of each of the types of child maltreatment in the Kurdistan Province” (Stephenson et al. 2006, 243); or “fourteen percent of young children were physically abused” (May-Chahal and Cawson 2005, 979). Rydstrom (2006, 329) claims to analyze “men’s use of punishment” but actually analyzes reports; Archambault (2009, 282–283) investigates the “practices and meanings of corporal punishment in Maasai homes and schools” but then only ever cites words as data. In these sentences scholars erase the reports themselves, extracting only the perceived referential content of the interview and treating the meaning of that content as stable as opposed to produced in interviews as communicative events. By substituting the reported event for the reporting event, this language reflects an assumption that the idealized function of reported force—its ability to refer to a supposed real event—is the actual function of reported force (Rumsey 1990, 356).

But what people say is not necessarily the same as what they do (Benjet and Kazdin 2003, 211). On the one hand, people may avoid speaking about force that they have experienced or performed, such as mothers who falsely claim that they have no history with child protection services (Bennett, Sullivan, and Lewis 2006). This underreporting is what many seem to assume if they do explicitly comment on the problems of using speech as data: Straus et al. (1998, 261) argue that since corporal punishment is socially undesirable, their scale is “a minimum estimate of child maltreatment”; UNICEF (2014a, 17) asserts that “some respondents may not feel comfortable disclosing experiences of violence.” On the other hand, people may also over-report force. For example, “beating and threats of beating are almost universal in the childhood memories of !Kung adults,” but “observational research has shown that . . . physical punishment is almost never witnessed” (Shostak 1981, 49–50). Similarly, three sisters gleefully and consistently told a false story about their brother beating his wife (El Ouardani 2015). Consequently, several psychologists note widespread methodological problems in research on corporal discipline (Baumrind, Larzelere, and Cowan 2002, 580–581; Benjet and Kazdin 2003, 209–211; Ferguson 2013; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016, 3; Larzelere 2000, 200; Ripoll-Nunez and Rohner 2006). Such criticisms, however, have not stopped humanitarians or many academics from using reported force to argue that parents around the world engage in violence against children.<sup>4</sup>

While the focus on reported force reflects referential ideologies, interpretations of verbs like “hit” as referring to physical discipline reflects another: the view of signs and objects as inherently distinct. Researchers often categorize discipline according to whether or not it includes force: Straus et al. (1998, 269) separates out corporal punishment from force threats; UNICEF (2014a, 4) describes “threatening” as a form of “mental violence” in contrast to “physical violence”; Montgomery (2009, 159–165) calls a section of her textbook “physical punishment” (see also Lancy 2015, 197–198). But recent research on “language materiality” shows that different types of sign vehicles interact with each other (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012). Gifts must be

appropriately packaged in speech to be received (Keane 1997); people's dialects can index their socioeconomic status and create socioeconomic possibilities (Bourdieu 1977, 1982); and the material organization of space—such as the position of a rock on a hopscotch board or a woman's pregnant belly—creates a framework for action and makes certain types of speech possible (Berman 2014a; Goodwin 2000). Similarly, Jajikonians combine different types of force signs when disciplining children. Disciplinary interactions create a temporal connection between these signs, a connection that leads some force signs to not only index but also resemble force. As a result, the referent of force verbs like "hit (*mane*)" or "beat (*deñōte*)" is often ambiguous. People may interpret such words as referring to instances of force, to force threats, or to some combination of the two. Interviewers who interpret such verbs as referring solely to physical discipline may thus apply different "referential frames" than those they study (Briggs 1986, 51–54). Methodological criticisms of research on corporal discipline, however, rarely question whether respondents might conflate in their reports not only different levels of force but also force and force signs (but see Benjet and Kazdin 2003, 211).

The above examples reveal that the meaning of force signs depends on how different types of signs get linked through inter-event semiosis. "Inter-event semiosis" extends arguments that speech events in different times and places are indexically linked—"interdiscursivity"—to semiotic events as a whole (Agha 2005, 4; Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Dunn 2006; Jakobson 1970; Silverstein 2005). While one obvious form of inter-event semiosis is reported force, such reports are not the only or even the most common type of inter-event semiosis that shapes Marshallese interpretations of force signs. Some signs, such as children's claims of fear or general discussions of being hit, index relationships between people. Other signs, such as threats of force, recruit youth into action while positioning speakers as higher in status than their interlocutors.

Interactions between all of these signs in Jajikon link force to age, authority, and caregiving (see also Bledsoe 1990; Ember and Ember 2005; Kavapalu 1993; Korbin 1990; Last 2000; Morton 1996; Nutter 2013; Perry 2009). In the Jajikonian age hierarchy, older individuals care for those who are younger. Youth, in return, obey their elders' commands (Berman, forthcoming). Ideologically, elders' power to command and youths' obligation to obey come from the care elders provide and their ability to enforce their commands through physical coercion. People who claim fear mark themselves as deferent, younger kin; people who threaten or report on hitting mark themselves as not only authoritative but also caring older kin. This connection between force and care means that elders should use limited degrees of force and those who fail to care lose their right to force. Similarly, corporal discipline in a Tahatni village indexes care and protection (Nutter 2013); parents in Taiwan, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Samoa believe fear is necessary for socialization (Morton 1996; Ochs 1988; Whiting 1941; Wolf 1972); and force signs are more common in hierarchical societies, possibly because they convey that some people "are much more powerful than others" (Ember and Ember 2005, 615).

The academic and humanitarian literature, in contrast, often ties force signs only to illegitimate relationships and "violence"—an indexical link that is the third semiotic ideology that influences research on corporal discipline. Marshallese has no word that translates as "violent" (see also Kowalski 2016, 66; Nutter 2013, 15–16). In English, however, "violent" is a negative word that marks force, people, or interactions as illegitimate or bad (Mider 2013). Sometimes people apply the word "violent" only to unsanctioned force such as murder by a lay person. Sanctioned force—such as when a police officer arrests a murder suspect—is not violence but simply force. Increasingly, however, scholars use a broad definition in which all force is "violent," especially force performed by authorities such as the army or parents (Mider 2013; Riches 1986, 3).

This ideology arises partly through scholarly literature on corporal discipline that creates indexical links between force and "violence" as well as other negative



concepts such as abuse. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2007, 3) calls corporal discipline a form of “cruel or degrading” punishment. Others describe physical punishment as “abuse” or “maltreatment,” sometimes simply by publishing articles about corporal discipline in journals with the names *Child Maltreatment* or *Child Abuse & Neglect* (e.g., Frechette and Romano 2017; Kobulsky, Kepple, and Holmes 2017; Lansford et al. 2016). Scholars regularly call the use of force “physical abuse” or “physical violence” (Hahm and Guterma 2001, 171; UNICEF 2014a, 11, 25). UNICEF defines “physical violence” as including “all corporal punishment,” while Defarla et al. (2012, 8) argue that Marshallese children are “vulnerable because of the widespread use of physical violence as a form of discipline.” This potentially unconscious substitution of “violence” for “punishment” or “discipline” is also common in ethnographies: Last’s (2000) article about corporal punishment in Nigeria is titled “Children and the Experience of Violence”; Morton’s (1996, 174) chapter on corporal discipline is titled “Sanctioned Violence”; Carucci (1990, 97) describes corporal punishment on a Marshallese atoll as “minor acts of violence”; Lancy (2015, 197) attributes a lack of corporal discipline to a ban on “the display of violence.” Many also extend “violent” to emotional and structural harm through phrases like “violent speech”—i.e., words that harm—or “structural violence” (Farmer 2004; Lagorgette 2011). These uses of “violent” with nonphysical harms create an additional indexical link between force and harm, delegitimizing all force signs as well as the parents who deploy them.<sup>5</sup>

These ideologies—of reported force as solely referential, of physical and nonphysical punishment as distinct, and of force signs as indices of deviance and harm—are potentially independent. People can, but need not, hold all of them. Together, however, the ideologies have a profound effect on research into corporal punishment. The belief that force speech references actual corporal discipline depends partly on a belief that since corporal punishment indexes negative parenting, reported force must under-report as opposed to over-report (or do something else entirely). Interpretations of physical and nonphysical punishment as distinct lead people to overlook the interplay of force signs during disciplinary interactions, and as a result to misinterpret reported force. In Jajikon people use and interpret these force signs in a very different manner than that implied by these ideologies.

## Methods

This article is based on over 80 hours of audio and video recordings of interactions, 89 recorded interviews with children and adults, and 1,500 pages of fieldnotes gathered during 14 months of fieldwork in Jajikon between 2008 and 2013. Virtually everyone spoke to me in Marshallese, including during transcription sessions. Most of the data on disciplinary interactions come from recorded interactions; most of the data on signs that point to those interactions come from recorded interviews. Rather than representing these interactions as transcripts, I (mostly) embed them into the article as dialogue in order to represent action along with speech in a readable format. I mark any recorded speech with double quotation marks (“”) and any speech that I wrote down in my fieldnotes but did not record with single quotation marks (”).

## Histories of Force in the RMI

The RMI’s reputation as a “violent” or “nonviolent” society has changed over the centuries. Early voyagers avoided the islands because the Marshallese gained a reputation for massacring foreign ships (Hezel 1983, 197–210). Conversely, in the mid-20th century Mahoney (1974, 23) argued that there was a “virtual absence of violence altogether in the Marshalls,” based on crime statistics that showed no homicides, and only three aggravated assaults, over seven years. While the RMI’s reputation may swing back and forth between extremes, force signs themselves have

long been influential. Marshallese society was divided into two classes: chiefs and commoners (Kiste 1974; Rynkiewich 1972; Spoehr 1949; Walsh 2003). The word for commoner, *kajoor*, means “strength.” Commoners served as chiefs’ “strength” through their economic labor and physical might in battle, linking social and physical power. In turn, the chief was supposed to be a generous warrior who gave liberally and physically defended the land.

Just as a chief’s power came from a combination of generosity and physical might, elders’ right to command youth comes from their supposed greater strength and the care they provide. Accepted forms of force that mark legitimate authority thus differ from what people call *kaeñitaan*, “causing suffering.” Adults described as *kaeñitaan* cases in which adults hit too often, too hard, or in the wrong way, as well as times when adults burden children with too much work or fail to adequately care for them (Berman 2014a). Korbin (2003, 434) would classify such cases as “idiosyncratic departure[s] from cultural standards that result in harm to a child.”<sup>6</sup>

People filter globalizing discussions of corporal punishment through these local understandings of legitimate force. A signatory of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the RMI nominally claims to be opposed to corporal discipline. Corporal discipline is supposedly forbidden in school (Islands 2013, 18); the lead researcher of the UNICEF (2012) child protection study is a Marshallese scholar and current president of the RMI; and a 2009 conference in the RMI featured a Marshallese speaker discussing the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This speaker, however, gave a perspective on force more consistent with Marshallese approaches than the blanket ban advocated by the UN: “There is a right way to reprimand children,” she explained. “We can do it like this and spank (*deñōt*) them a little.” But “some children, their body is covered in cuts . . . this is the type of punishment we are talking about.” In contrast with “spank[ing] them a little,” such excessive force indexes a lack of care.

### Force Signs in Disciplinary Events

Elders employ many different types of force signs in disciplinary events. This fluid melding of different semiotic fields is particularly clear when people in Jajikon discipline children in early childhood. Stuck inside on a rainy day with their mother and grandmother, two bored two-year-olds started playing with boxes of food.

“Ah,” one of the adults threatened, “I am hitting the two of you (*ñā ij man komiro*).”

The children ignored her. Deina, their mother, smacked one child on his butt as she commanded, “lie down (*babu*).” She grabbed the other child’s arm, pulled him away from the food, and smacked him on the butt as well.

Ignoring her, one boy returned to the boxes.

“Kuba,” his grandmother threatened, “get away from there because I am going to spank/whip you (*etal jen jene bwe inaa j deñōte yok*)!”

Kuba did not move.

Deina picked up a creamer bottle and pretended to whack Kuba’s legs with it. “Get away from there (*tan jene*).” She motioned at his legs; Kuba lifted his leg out of the way.

“Come here (*tok ñan ijo*),” his grandmother commanded.

Kuba walked slightly away from the food but not far enough.

“Ah,” Deina said, “Go (*tal*)!” She lightly hit the other boy on his arm. “Go (*tal*),” she repeated, lightly hitting Kuba as well.

Kuba started to obey, but then returned to play with the boxes.

“Kuba, I am really going to beat you if you leave from here (*ñā ilukkuun naaj dreñōte yok ñe kwetal ñan jen*),” Deina threatened. “Sit (*jijet*)!” She lightly hit him on the arm, then pulled him toward her and slapped him on the other arm.

Kuba smiled.

These two adults produced many different types of signs in their attempt to get the children to leave the boxes alone: verbal threats (“I am hitting the two of you”); physical threats (Deina motioned with the creamer bottle); physical control (she

pulled the children away from the food); and hits. How should one classify these signs? Common definitions of corporal punishment focus on the presence or lack of force. According to such a classification, the light hits and physical control would be different types of discipline than the verbal and physical threats. But there are many other ways of classifying these signs. First, one could classify according to function. The only time when Deina changed the children's physical position was when she pulled Kuba away from the food. Everything else functioned like Deina's imperative "*tal* (go)"—to recruit the children into the action of leaving the food alone. Second, one could classify according to how the signs point to the future. Here, we might distinguish the two verbal threats that included the future tense marker *naaj* from not only the hits but also the grandmother's first utterance in which she used the present tense suffix *j*: "*ah na ij man komiro* (I hit/I am hitting the two of you)." This present tense, common in force threats, evokes the idea that the speech itself is a form of hitting, creating a resemblance between speech and force. Third, we might classify according to felt pain. Since it is not clear that any of the slaps hurt, here we might lump all of these signs together as non-painful force signs or, potentially, try to separate out harder slaps from lighter ones.

We could also, like many definitions of corporal punishment, classify according to Deina's and the grandmother's intentions to punish or cause pain. It is unclear, however, not only whether Deina's slaps hurt but also whether she intended to cause pain. Even when children do react with signs of pain, such as when a daughter burst into tears after her mother hit her, elders may not intend to cause such pain. Jajikonian children have a lot of agency to remove themselves from difficult situations (Berman 2014a). A child may spend the night at a relative's house to avoid a tongue-lashing or run away from discipline. I once saw a mother throw some rocks at her 13-year-old daughter (Carucci 1990, 94–95). This mother's raised tone of voice, forceful flinging of rocks, and frowning, angry facial expressions keyed her threat as serious and suggested that she was legitimately mad (see also Ochs 1988, 150–153). But the pebbles did not hit her daughter because the girl skipped over the rocks and ran away. Similarly, a grandmother swung a stick at her granddaughter's legs to punish the granddaughter for swimming; the granddaughter jumped over the stick and ran away. Often physical threats differ from force that connects (painful or otherwise) not because of adults' intentions but because of children's reaction times.

Just as children's agency challenges distinctions based on intentions to cause pain, the fine line between play and discipline challenges classifications based on intentions to discipline (Nutter 2013, 127–132). Force and force signs are important resources in play. Sometimes verbal threats are obviously play—as when a child who found some glass while playing ball said, "I am going to stick you with a sharp object!" Other threats are more clearly discipline—as when, after exhorting a younger sibling several times not to cry, his elder sibling finally threatened, "I am going to punch your face." On many occasions, however, threats could be either play or discipline or, most likely, both. "If you keep on raising your eyebrows I will shave them off!" a mother threatened when her ten-year-old son responded to her commands by raising his eyebrows—Marshallese for yes—instead of running the errand. "Do you want me to shave your eyebrows until you have no eyebrows?" The mother's threats recruited her son into obedience while also creating the comical image of an eyebrowless boy. She produced five more force threats over a period of nine minutes, but did not hit anyone. This type of interaction—where force speech outnumbers other types of force signs—seemed to be typical in interactions with older children (Morton 1996, 189).

The form of these threats is often tied more closely to past infractions than to future potential actions. When a child inappropriately raises his eyebrows his mother threatens to shave them off. When a child cries his sibling threatens to punch his face: "If you lie I am going to punch your face". Similarly, "Ah you shouldn't yell; I am going to really punch your mouth in!" Rather than threats of future pain, these forms of speech are sometimes markers—and often playful ones—of past infractions.



Girls further complicate the distinction between play and discipline when they use force signs in a pretend play game called *lijjikin*. The game involves animating shells on the sand; the shells represent buildings, clothes, food, and people. The most notable part of the game is when girls repeatedly throw a shell in their hand against another shell in the sand, animating someone who scolds someone else. For example, nine-year-old Sisina said, while throwing shells against each other (Sisina played all the roles in the dialogue and CLANG is the sound of shells hitting):

1	Older sibling:	You really disobey CLANG me girl! <i>Kwōn lukkuun wōtan tok nān CLANG nā luweo</i>
2	Younger sibling?	CLANG aaah
3	Older sibling	CLANG Why are you so very naughty girl! <i>Kwōn baj wōtan wōt le!</i>
4	Narrator:	The girl is very mad and puts her clothes on and <i>Lie elukkuun līlu im kōḥak nuknuuk e an</i>
5	Older sibling:	CLANG You girl <i>Kwe le</i>
6		CLANG
7		What are you doing <i>Kwe itin ta?</i>
8		CLANG
9	Younger sibling:	I am not scared of you girl! <i>Ijjab mijak yok luweo</i>
10	Older?	CLANG
11		CLANG
12		(pause)
13	Older sibling:	CLANG [CLANG]/[Ooooh] girl! <i>[Edded] luweo</i>
14		CLANG
15		You are so very disobedient to me CLANG girl! <i>Kwōn baj wōtan wōt nān jōḥan CLANG ḥe le</i>
16		[CLANG]/[I can] throw rocks at your head over there <i>[Imarōḥ] kar baram nān ḥeḥe</i>
17	Younger sibling?	[CLANG]/[Oooo] <i>[Edded]</i>
18		[CLANG]/[I am not] scared of you girl <i>[Ijjab] mijak yok luweo</i>
19	?	CLANG
20	Older sibling	[CLANG]/[you are] so belligerent... <i>[Kwōn] baj wōtan wōt nān jōḥan ḥe</i>
21	?	CLANG
22	?	You girl <i>Kwe luweo</i>
23	Narrator:	You really hit CLANG your younger sister <i>Kwelukkuun kajoor man CLANG leddik ḥe jatum</i>

Sisina's dialogue ties verbal threats to the clangs that punctuate them. Some of the clangs are clearly part of the elder's discipline: in lines 12–15 Sisina pauses, throws the shells two times quickly with the second clang overlapping her exclamation "oooh," throws the shell one more time, and scolds: "you are so very disobedient to me CLANG girl!" Later, Sisina produces a CLANG immediately following the word "hit": "you really hit CLANG your little sister" (line 23). My research assistant said that Sisina produced this story because her older sister hits her frequently, an interpretation suggesting that she sees this monologue as indexing force.

But exactly what type of force, or force sign, do the CLANGs or the word "hit (*mane*)" represent? Light taps or hard ones, ones that connect or ones when the children run away, or verbal threats? The answer depends partly on how people classify signs. While I suspect that many interpret "hit" as referring to Deina's hits, if

we classified according to pain, "hit" may refer to none of the signs Deina produced, while if we classified according to function, the word "hit" could encompass both Deina's slaps and her verbal threats. These different possible classifications result partly from how both Deina and Sisina created a temporal connection between different types of signs: Deina combined verbal force signs with hits; Sisina combined a CLANG sound with verbal scolding and narrated force. These connections gave these different signs similar qualities—a representation of the power to exert control. This iconic similarity between force speech and force is not unique to Jajikon. The authors of the most popular corporal discipline survey scale remarked on people's tendency, in response to questions about hitting, to report on verbal threats of force (Straus and Gelles 1990, 51–59). Whiting (1941, 185) argued, about a similar discipline pattern in Papua New Guinea, that "since a pupil is always scolded while he is being punished, the words come to symbolize a beating as well, and thus gain the power to evoke feelings of fear."

Classifying according to function, felt pain, or present orientation is not necessarily better than classifying according to the presence or lack of force, and vice versa. Rather, the choice of how to classify is simply a semiotic decision, one that reflects a semiotic ideology of what makes signs similar to or different from each other. Such classification systems do, however, have consequences. First, they affect research agendas—in this case creating a phenomenon called corporal discipline that researchers study and humanitarians criticize (as opposed to, for example, studying and criticizing signs that recruit children into action). Second, they potentially produce competing referential frames concerning the referent of force words such as "hit (*mane*)" or "beat/slap/spank (*drenōte*)."

### Interpreting Reported Force

Interpreting reported force thus requires coming to a common referential frame about what people view as the referent of words like "hit." But for most instances of reported force in Jajikon, the referent is ambiguous. Consider the following example: Ten-year-old Kinta, who lived with her grandparents and her classificatory mother Lacy, was one of my focal children during my research in Jajikon. She apparently let my attention get to her head because, although previously a model student, she started acting up in class. She also became disobedient at home—ignoring her elders' instructions and running away from chores. So Lacy told me, 'I hit her.' Lacy continued, 'I said to Kinta, 'Now that you are working with Elise you are showing off with [your teacher]?!' And I hit her.'

What did Lacy mean by her claim to have hit Kinta? First, the claim could simply be false. Someone debated every single report of force I heard in Jajikon, and Lacy's claim is no different. Another individual in Lacy and Kinta's house said that Kinta's grandfather hit Kinta. Kinta's grandmother told me that she herself was going to hit Kinta. (It is possible that all three people hit Kinta.) But Lacy's claim need not be false to be misinterpreted by researchers such as myself or UNICEF invested in uncovering the rate and nature of corporal discipline. When Lacy claimed to hit Kinta, did she mean that she hit her hard enough to make her cry, or that she gave her a light swat? Was she referring only to scolding and threatening to hit? Did Lacy swing her arm hard, but then Kinta ducked and ran away?

All of these interpretations are consistent with uses of force speech and reported force in Jajikon. Children and adults can and do distinguish between threats and hitting. One teenager said that while his parents hit him, his older brother only says that he "is going to hit him," i.e., verbally threatens to hit. Twelve-year-old Sylvia told me that her father does not actually hit her but only threatens to do so. When she disobeys her father, Sylvia said, he "scolds me. He says, 'don't,' he acts like he is going to hit me . . . he threatens."

I laughed. "Do you run away?"

"I don't run away. He is lying."<sup>7</sup> Sylvia had no need to run away because her father was not actually going to hit her.

But although people may distinguish threats and action, they also sometimes conflate them or, at least, view other people as conflating them. One day I overheard Tito excitedly tell his mother about Regina. Tito claimed that Regina's mother hit Regina because she had lunch at a friend's house instead of returning home. Shortly after this conversation I interviewed Regina. I asked about Tito's story.

"Is it true that you went and ate lunch at [the friend's] house?"

"That's right," the small girl said.

"And did your mother hit you?" I asked.

"She didn't, she just scolded me," Regina responded.

"Oh, she scolded you." I paused. "Why did Tito say that she hit you?"

"Tito is lying."

Assuming that Regina's mother actually did discipline her in some manner, either Regina characterized hitting as scolding or Tito (or whomever he got the information from) characterized scolding as hitting.

Unlike Sylvia and Regina, other children solely discussed hitting when asked how elders disciplined them. I asked Charles (age ten), "If you disobey Karen [Charles' older sister] what does she do?"

"Hit me," Charles responded.

"And if you don't obey [Susan]?"

"She hits me."

"And are your parents mad at them because they hit you?"

"They aren't because they are ordering me."

Since by middle childhood every child in Jajikon experiences more verbal and physical threats than actual hits (light or otherwise), claims such as Charles's represent either an erasure of scolding or a conflation of hitting and scolding. This conflation is particularly probable for claims that elder siblings hit, since children could get in trouble with their elders for hitting younger children (Berman 2014b; Carucci 1990, 97). These conflations or erasures of different type of force signs make the potential referent of force verbs ambiguous.

### The Meaning of Force Signs

Interpreting reported force requires not only coming to a common referential claim, but also thinking about what the reports, as well as other forms of force speech such as claims of fear, do within speech events themselves.

#### Indices of Force

First, claims of fear and reports of force index force. Like Catherine, who said that children feared adults because "they will hit them," many explicitly talked about *mijak* as a fear of their elder's physical power. Kinta said that she was more scared of Lacy than her grandmother because her grandmother "does not always hit me hard." A boy said that he did not hit his sibling because "he is older than me." So, the boy explained, he feared his sibling "because he is old, if he were younger then I would not be scared of him." These uses of hitting to explain fear (*mijak*), and uses of fear (*mijak*) to explain hitting or its absence, connect force speech to the various force signs embedded in disciplinary interactions.

But although claims of fear and discussions of hitting index force, people also often see them as independent of instances of force. Several people claimed to fear others whom they said did not hit them. The woman mentioned in the introduction said that her younger sister feared her because she could hit her, but that she would not actually do so. Sylvia said that since her father merely threatens to hit her, she does not run away from him. Many would interpret such a statement to indicate that

Sylvia did not fear her father. But when I asked, "And are you scared of [your father]?" Sylvia responded, "I am scared of him. . . . Because he is my father."

### *Indices of Relative Age Relationships*

As Sylvia's response suggests, force speech not only points to the force signs employed in disciplinary interactions but also indexes speakers as subordinates in child-parent/grandparent or younger sibling-elder sibling relationships. First, claims of *mijak* (fear), like emotion terms throughout the Pacific (Lutz 1982, 1988; White and Kirkpatrick 1985), do not refer to inner or even physical states (such as pain) but rather index actions. Specifically, claims of fear index the action that subordinates owe to the elders—obedience. A woman complained that some small girls were "naughty (*bōt*)" and did not obey her. When I asked why, she explained that they were not "afraid (*mijak*)" of her, presenting their disobedience as causally connected to their lack of fear.

Such claims also index the relationships tied to those actions. Force speech can mark gender: children frequently said that they feared their fathers or grandfathers more than their mothers and grandmothers. But even more than gender, such claims mark relative age. A boy responded to me in surprise when I asked why he feared two bigger boys, stating "but they are old." The "but (*ak*)" marked my question as strange since the reason for his fear was obvious. Earlier in the *lijjikin* game Sisina had the pretend younger sister say, "even though you are my older sister I am not scared of you." The phrase "even though (*jekdōon ta*)" marks her lack of fear of her elder sibling as abnormal, again showing that fear and relative age relationships point toward each other.

Nine-year-old Roli not only consistently claimed fear of people she saw as older but also rejected fear of people whom she did not see as older. "Do you talk back to your mother?" I asked Roli. "Why not?"

"I am scared (*mijak*) of her."

"And do you talk back to your father?"

"I am scared of papa; I am scared of adults."

"All of them? Jina?" I asked, naming Roli's classificatory mother who shared her household.

"I am scared of her."

I named a classificatory father in her household. "Samuel?"

"I am scared of him."

"Umm, Lance?" I asked. Lance was a teenage relative of Roli's.

"I am scared of him."

"You are scared of Lance?"

"I am scared of him because he is older than me."

"What about Mojej?" I asked, picking a child in her class at school.

"I am not."

"You aren't scared of him? What about Cara?" Cara and Roli shared a household complex.

"I am scared of her because she is older." Roli explained her fear by referring to Cara's elder status, presenting her fear as causally tied to, or as an index of, her youth relative to Cara.

While every child claimed fear of some, many also denied fear of others seen as relatively close in age and status. For example, Kinta claimed that she was not scared of her friends, even ones whom she admitted were slightly older. "I am not, I am not afraid of Catherine," Kinta said, referring to a companion who was in the next grade up at school. "Because the two of us wrestled and I really went, BAM! I immediately threw her down, on the ground. As for Caroline, the two of us were doing handstands and I just took her head and pushed it into the wall. You could say that we, um, you know that lock that goes CLICK? . . . I pushed Caroline's head into it." Similarly, a boy used force speech to challenge people's statuses, in this case to tease

his younger sister's relationship with her friend. "[You are] scared of Cate," he teased, naming a girl with whom his sister spent many of her waking hours.

"Am not. [You are] scared of Jotol," the sister responded, naming a boy close to her brother's age. "Scared of Jotol!"

"Scared of Cate."

"Scared of Mama!" his sister accused. "Are you scared of Mama?"

"I am not." Engaged in a verbal competition of strength, the brother denied fear of his mother.

But while denying fear of friends is acceptable, denying fear of one's mother is not. "Mama!" the sister tattled to their mother. "He says that he isn't scared of you!"

In reports of force as with claims and accusations of fear, then, people negotiate their age and status relative to others. When a boy claimed that his elder sibling "hits me" but that he "does not lay his hand on her because she is older," he constructed himself as a younger sibling and presented that youth as causally linked to his report of force. Similarly, returning to Lacy's claim that she hit Kinta, through her report of force Lacy constructed herself as Kinta's authoritative elder kin invested in teaching Kinta to behave. Adults often say that force is a necessary part of children's moral education. "How can we teach children not to be naughty?" I asked. "Hit them," an older woman responded. Another woman called a mother who was rumored to have hit her daughter for sneaking out at night to meet a boy "good," because the daughter should not sneak out. In some ways, if Lacy did not claim to have hit Kinta she would delegitimize her status as Kinta's caregiver, particularly because Lacy and I had had several prior conversations about Kinta's increasingly bad behavior. By making such claims, Lacy positioned herself as a good caregiver and a person of moral authority.

In Lacy's case (as in others), her use of reported force to mark her legitimacy as a caregiver was tied not only to the force she claimed but also to other aspects of the speaking context, including her status as an elder relative in Kinta's household and her criticism of Kinta as "showing off." People do not always interpret reported force as an index of legitimate forms of hierarchy and care. For example, most people in Jajikon severely criticized a woman who was said to have cut her daughter's hand with a knife, not only because of the supposed type of force but also because she already had a reputation as a bad mother (Berman, forthcoming, chapter).

Reported force's ability to index legitimacy thus rests on how people represent not only the force itself but also the relationship. Consider how Kinta used reported force to mark Lacy as a poor caregiver but her grandfather as a good one. (This conversation took place after Kinta started acting up but around a month before Lacy supposedly hit her.) Kinta said that Lacy is "bad." In contrast to Kinta's grandmother who "does not hit me hard," Lacy "goes like this," Kinta said as she pulled her ear.

"Oh," I responded. "Just like that or does she also spank/whip you?"

"She does this, and this," Kinta said as she slapped her own shoulder and then reached over to pinch me.

"With a stick or only her hand?"

"Her hand, but she really does it like this." After a while, Kinta went on, "I hate her . . . , because she is bossy. . . . Because she always hits me, and she tells me to do that thing, and she always hits me."

We started talking about Kinta's grandfather. "Do you like your grandfather?"

"Yes, and grandma."

"But does your grandfather also boss you around?"

"He doesn't."

"He doesn't?"

Kinta explained. "If we are naughty, he spanks/beats us." Apparently, he uses "a long [stick], but skinny." This stick "doesn't hurt, he doesn't do it hard because, he says I shouldn't be naughty."

Kinta seems to argue that, in contrast to her grandfather, Lacy is a bad caretaker because she uses too much force. Kinta describes Lacy as a "bad" and "bossy" person



who hits “hard,” and Kinta “hates” her. In contrast, she likes her grandfather, whose force is not “hard” and does not “hurt.” But in some ways Lacy’s force is less hard than Kinta’s grandfather: the grandfather used a stick while Lacy only used her hand. Nonetheless, according to Kinta her grandfather’s force is *better*: Lacy is a bossy person who orders and hits Kinta for no reason; Kinta’s grandfather is not bossy (even though later on Kinta does say that he frequently “commands” her) and only hits Kinta because she “shouldn’t be naughty.” Kinta further delegitimizes Lacy by saying that her grandparents discipline Lacy herself. When Lacy hits too hard, “I tell grandma,” Kinta told me. “And she says that [Lacy] should not do that because she should not hit me hard.”

**Toward an Ethnography of Communication of Force**

Force signs in Jajikon come in many different shapes and sizes. They may be reports of force or claims of fear, swings of a stick or slaps on the butt, threats to shave eyebrows or gestures with a creamer bottle. Using Ochs’ (1992, 342–343) distinction between direct and indirect indices, where indirect indices operate “through other social meanings indexed,” all of these signs directly index and resemble force while indirectly indexing and resembling, through force, differential relationships of age, strength, and care (see Figure 1).

First, in disciplinary interactions the production of force signs is asymmetrically distributed. It was Deina and the grandmother who threatened, pulled, and hit the two little children; in the *lijjikin* game it was the pretend elder sibling who scolded her younger sibling with force threats, “I could throw rocks at your head.” The pretend younger sibling claimed to lack fear but did not threaten her pretend elder; youth may obey or disobey but they do not produce force signs as forms of discipline (Berman 2014b). Elders’ production of force signs connects their age, rank, and power to their ability to coerce others through the use of force, creating the possibility for an indirect indexical link between force and age.

These disciplinary interactions point to past and future uses of force signs, while reports of force and claims of fear point to future and past acts of discipline. In such reports and claims, people speak as if they interpret force signs as indices not only of power but also of age, hierarchical status, and caregiver status. Through such speech people perform stances of deference or authority and position themselves as respectful younger kin or respected and responsible older kin.

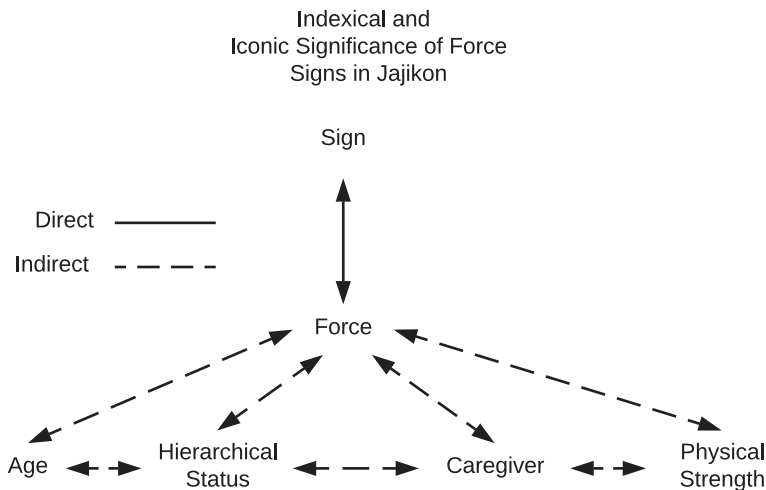


Figure 1. Indexical and Iconic Significance of Force Signs in Jajikon.

Finally, in this complex maze of signs and links between them, force signs come to resemble not only each other but also the people who wield them. Different types of force sign are temporally linked, similar in function and quality, and often conflated in reports. In turn, through what Irvine and Gal (2000, 37) have called “iconization” or “rhematization” (Gal 2005, 35), indexical links between speech and social status, such as the link between a threat to hit and elder status, often get interpreted as iconic reflections of people’s inner nature. Catherine said that children feared adults because “they are fierce (*relāj*)”; a girl said that she was scared of her father “because he is very strong (*kajoor*)”; a boy explained that he was more scared of his father than his mother because “he is big (*ekilep*).” Elders become powerful and strong themselves, resembling the force signs that they produce.

### Research on Corporal Discipline

The use, function, and meaning of force signs in Jajikon challenge researchers’ often uncritical reliance on speech as data in studies of corporal discipline. In some ways, the question of what people in Jajikon view as the referent of reported force is irrelevant. If different types of force signs often have similar functions, indexical properties, and iconic resemblances, then it does not matter what people interpret as the referent of reported force. Moreover, Jajikonians are not the only people who conflate force and force signs—researchers do it too. Goldstein’s (1998, 404–408) case study of corporal punishment in a Brazilian favela includes no actual observations but does include reports of discipline and observations of threats. Morton’s (1996, 184, 187) claims that “in childhood, as in infancy, threats are more common than actual punishment,” and that “physical punishment is the most common form of discipline used in Tonga,” suggest that she may also sometimes combine force threats and instances of force into a single category. Physical punishment and threats cannot both be the most common form of discipline unless the two types of discipline are viewed as one and the same.

Despite this slippage, it seems clear that many academic authors often *think* they are studying instances of force as opposed to other types of force signs. Corporal punishment is defined as exclusively physical and distinct from other forms of discipline (Gershoff 2002, 540; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016, 2; Straus et al. 1998; UNICEF 2014a, 4). The mistaken assumption that researchers are studying corporal discipline, as opposed to what they are actually studying—which is usually some form of force sign—challenges the conclusions of a range of studies: ethnographic, psychological, sociological, epidemiological, and humanitarian.

These misleading conclusions have been shaped by scholars’ own semiotic ideologies and linguistic decisions. Widespread ideologies of meaning as referential have led to the prominence of the interview as a method in the social sciences as a whole and to interpretations of reported force as the same thing as corporal discipline (Briggs 1986). Such interpretations drive the linguistic form of articles that then create the impression that the scholars are studying corporal discipline even though they are not. Language has effects: When future researchers read a claim that “we found that almost all toddlers (94%) were hit by parents” (Straus and Stewart 1999, 64), they take it as an indication that the method in question shows that toddlers were in fact hit by parents. This then creates a cycle in which researchers use reported force in future studies (e.g., DeFarla et al. 2012; Krug et al. 2002; Pinheiro 2006), again often describing the results as “on average, about four in five children between the ages of 2 and 14 are subjected to some kind of violent discipline in the home” (UNICEF 2014a, 96). Similarly, when ethnographers use the passive voice, readers miss the fact that many claims come as much from reported force as from other forms of data. Through constant repetition, reported force increasingly becomes coextensive with corporal discipline, a further example of inter-event semiosis.

In turn, views of force as inevitably violent and classifications of discipline according to the presence or lack of force create potentially conflicting referential

frames. The Marshallese woman who explained the Convention on the Rights of the Child drew a classificatory line, but between discipline that does or does not cause marks rather than the presence or lack of force. Kinta distinguished between force produced by appropriate persons versus force produced by nonappropriate persons. Similarly, many Tahatni villagers in Morocco distinguished good and bad discipline according to who produced the discipline and why (Nutter 2013; Nutter-El-Ouardani 2014). The humanitarian and (frequently) academic dividing line between force and the lack of force, as well as the association of all force “however light” with “degrading” and inhumane punishment (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2007, 3), is cultural, not natural. This category distinction represents a semiotic ideology; it involves classifying and interpreting force signs.

There are many ways to research corporal discipline that would take more seriously the influence of semiotic ideologies on the research process and on disciplinary interactions. First, researchers could observe disciplinary practices and use such observations to validate survey scales or interview data, whether the interviews were formal or informal. Second, researchers could show a video of force (ideally within the society in question) to informants and ask them to comment on what they see. Researchers would then be able to compare people’s reported force to a visual record of that force to establish a common referential frame. Third, researchers could analyze the indexical meaning of force signs in a given context and use such ethnographies of communication to help interpret data. Fourth, researchers could model Bennett et al.’s (2006) and Lehrner and Allen’s (2014) mixed-methods approach and include qualitative interviews to check their interpretations of survey questions. Fifth, researchers could ask whether corporal discipline is a valid category of study at all in psychological analyses of the effects of disciplinary methods, humanitarian reports on harm against children, and anthropological accounts of child rearing.

Finally, given the prominence of arguments that corporal discipline is a form of violence, it is worth considering what effect these signs and ideologies might have on child socialization in the RMI and beyond. Most of the work on corporal discipline argues that it is inevitably harmful (Gershoff 2002; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016; Straus, Douglas, and Anne Medeiros 2014). Since the vast majority of the data comes from reported force, we could reinterpret such conclusions as arguments that high rates of reported force correlate with some sort of harm to children. A contingent of culturally conscious researchers, however, have argued that not only are the effect sizes small, but the influence of this discipline (or rather, reported force) changes depending on the meaning children ascribe to it and how the discipline is mediated by parental warmth (Deater-Deckard, Ivy, and Petrill 2006; Lansford et al. 2014; Ripoll-Nunez and Rohner 2006; Stacks et al. 2009). In other words, the effects of force signs may depend on how people speak about, use, and interpret them in context—or on their local semiotic practices and ideologies.

Although analyzing the effects of force signs on Marshallese child development would require a different comparative or experimental study, it seems likely that they do socialize children to sometimes use physical force as a childrearing, disciplinary, and anger-expression tactic. But these signs are also tied to aspects of the Jajikonian social system that, in other parts of the world, mitigate harm toward children. More than a century and a half of colonialism has led to rapid social and economic change, high levels of poverty and unemployment, and a breakdown of family structures—particularly in urban centers in the RMI (Ahlgren, Yamada, and Wong 2014; Alexander 1978; Opie 1991). While these characteristics are often risk factors for harm to children, rural Jajikon also maintains a form of social organization that seem to serve cross-culturally to protect children: hierarchy combined with multigenerational families and extended responsibility for children shared among all elder kin (Korbin 1981, 2003). In Jajikon, the social system that in other parts of the world mitigates such harm is created partly through force signs. Such force signs elevate caregivers, a powerful position that exists in direct contrast to the downgrading of caregivers

produced through various aspects of middle-upper class American speech (Ochs 1992). Perhaps what makes humanitarian observers uncomfortable with force signs, therefore, is not only force itself, but also the power relationships that such signs index and create.

Academic and humanitarian semiotic ideologies often profoundly misinterpret force signs in Jajikon. These semiotic ideologies can pathologize not only the signs but also the social structures tied to them. The only thing that criticisms of force signs clearly do is delegitimize Marshallese parenting in favor of an anti-hierarchical parenting ideology typical of middle-upper-class Americans. The categorical rejection of force signs in academic and humanitarian research indexes parents who use such signs as deviant, harming Marshallese children by discrediting Marshallese child-rearing practices.

### Notes

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1. Jajikon is a pseudonym.
2. I was unable to find eight sources and I looked only at cultures with corporal punishment scores above two.
3. Narrower than the linguistic concept of reference, referential ideologies do not include all of the different aspects of reference that linguistic anthropologists recognize, such as the ability of language to refer to itself.
4. This extensive use of the parent-child conflict tactics scale is stunning considering the complete lack of evidence that it measures reality (Baumrind, Larzelere, and Cowan 2002; Benjet and Kazdin 2003). Straus et al. (1998, 256–257) provide no evidence of the scale's validity except to refer back to a previous version, which also had severe validity problems (Dobash et al. 1992; Lehrner and Allen 2014).
5. I do not challenge the claim that sanctioned authorities can use their power to harm, but rather the way that discourses of the violence committed by such authorities have cast force signs themselves as inherently harmful.
6. I suspect that *kaeñtaan* occurs in Jajikon, although there is no good data on abuse rates in the RMI. Consistent with Korbin's (1981, 2003) claim that child abuse occurs more often in situations of poverty, unemployment, and rapid social change, Opie (1991) argues that *kaeñtaan* is more common in urban centers than in rural villages such as Jajikon. That said, Jajikonian families are also quite poor and the pressures of globalization, economic hardship, and rising seas make life in the islands increasingly precarious (Rudiak-Gould 2013).
7. *Riab* (lie) can refer to intentional deception or immoral speech, but can also simply mean "false" (Berman, forthcoming).

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