



Research article

Parental harsh discipline and adolescent problem behavior in China: Perceived normativeness as a moderator

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relations between parental harsh discipline (psychological aggression and corporal punishment) and adolescents' externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors and the moderating effects of adolescents' perceived normativeness of harsh discipline in Chinese society. Using a sample of 1158 Chinese middle-school students, our findings revealed that parental harsh discipline was associated with high levels of adolescent externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Adolescents' perceived normativeness of psychological aggression buffered the association between parental psychological aggression and adolescents' internalizing problem behaviors, whereas their perceived normativeness of corporal punishment buffered the association between parental corporal punishment and adolescents' externalizing problem behaviors. The findings from the current study highlight the importance of considering how adolescents' perceptions may influence the effects of parental harsh discipline on adolescent adjustment.

1. Introduction

Parental harsh discipline is highly prevalent in both Western and Chinese societies (Alampay et al., 2017; Wang & Liu, 2014), with psychological aggression and corporal punishment being the most common forms (Wang & Liu, 2014; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). According to Straus et al. (1998), psychological aggression refers to verbal and symbolic acts used by parents that are intended to cause psychological pain or fear on the part of the child (e.g., shouting, threatening, or yelling), whereas corporal punishment refers to the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior (e.g., spanking).

For a long time, the effects of parental harsh discipline on adolescent adjustment have widely concerned the academic world and even society as a whole. For example, “tiger mother” Amy Chua's (2011) book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* emphasized that Chinese parental harsh discipline had beneficial effects on adolescents' developmental and schooling outcomes. Similarly, “wolf father” Xiao's (2011) book *Therefore, Peking University Brothers and Sisters* showed that as a successful father, Chinese “wolf father” Baiyou Xiao usually beat and scolded his children. In such a harsh disciplinary environment, all three of his children were admitted to Peking University—the best university in China. These cases of a “tiger mother” and “wolf father” triggered a large discussion about the effects of Chinese parental harsh discipline on child and adolescent development.

In recent decades, significantly more empirical attention has been directed to the relations between parental harsh discipline and

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adolescent development. A large body of research has demonstrated that adolescents who experience parental harsh discipline exhibit higher levels of externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors (Lapr   & Marsee, 2016; Wang, Wang, & Liu, 2016). For example, Lapr   & Marsee (2016) found that corporal punishment was associated with externalizing problems in adolescents. Similarly, Wang et al. (2016) found that paternal and maternal psychological aggression significantly and positively predicted anxiety in children and adolescents. Given that externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors are prevalent psychiatric disorders encountered during adolescence (Roberts, Roberts, & Chan, 2009) and that adolescents with problem behaviors are at a higher risk of subsequent adjustment problems (Crogetti, Klimstra, Rd, Koot, & Meeus, 2013; Mcleod, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2016), understanding the relations between parental harsh discipline and adolescents' problem behaviors and the mechanisms responsible for these relations may have implications for prevention and intervention efforts aimed at reducing these problem behaviors.

According to Gershoff's (2002) process-context model, a wide array of contextual factors, such as stable parent factors, child factors, family factors, and social-cultural context factors, may serve as moderators of the processes linking harsh discipline (e.g., corporal punishment) and child behavior. However, most of this research has focused on parent factors (i.e., parental support, parental warmth, parental hostility, and maternal sensitivity), family factors (i.e., family climate), and social-cultural context factors (i.e., race and neighborhood climate) (Alink et al., 2010; Aucoin, Frick, & Bodin, 2006; Callahan, Scaramella, Laird, & Sohr-Preston, 2011; Lansford et al., 2014; Lapr   & Marsee, 2016; Mendez, Durtschi, Neppi, & Stith, 2016; Xing & Wang, 2017). In contrast, relatively few studies have examined which child factors, especially regarding child and adolescent perceptions, may moderate the relations between parental harsh discipline and problem behaviors in adolescents.

As suggested by parental acceptance-rejection theory (Rohner, 1986; Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2005), the effects of parental discipline on child adjustment may depend on how parental discipline is perceived and its acceptance, such as through adolescents' perceived normativeness of parental harsh discipline. Specifically, if adolescents perceive parental harsh discipline as normative within their community, they may interpret their parents' harsh discipline as appropriate and acceptable. In this condition, the parents' disciplinary behaviors may be less likely to have deleterious effects on the adolescents' behavior. In contrast, if adolescents perceive parental harsh discipline as nonnormative, they may interpret their parents' disciplinary behavior as parental rejection, and the parents' disciplinary behaviors will negatively affect the adolescents' behaviors. That is, adolescents' perceived normativeness of parental harsh discipline may buffer the associations between parental harsh discipline and adolescents' problem behaviors.

To the best of our knowledge, two empirical studies have focused on the moderating role of children's and adolescents' perceived normativeness of parental harsh discipline in the relations between parental harsh discipline and children's and adolescents' problem behaviors in six countries (China, India, Italy, Kenya, Philippines, and Thailand) (Gershoff et al., 2010; Lansford et al., 2005). Specifically, using a sample of 336 mother-child dyads (with the children's ages ranging from 6 to 17 years) in six countries, Lansford et al. (2005) found that children's and adolescents' perceptions of the normativeness of physical discipline (spank or slap, grab or shake, and beat up) attenuated the associations between maternal physical discipline and the children's and adolescents' adjustment. Similarly, using a sample of 292 families (mothers and their 8- to 12-year-old children) drawn from the complete project sample of 336 families participating in the Lansford et al. (2005) study, Gershoff et al. (2010) also found that the relationships between maternal corporal punishment, expression of disappointment, and yelling or scolding with children's aggression or anxiety were attenuated by the children's perceived normativeness of each disciplinary technique.

However, several limitations of the above two studies should be noted. First, although previous investigations of the moderating role of perceived normativeness of parental harsh discipline included Chinese families, the samples of Chinese families included in the two studies were relatively small ($n \leq 50$). These relatively small samples may limit their power to draw solid conclusions about the moderating role of normativeness as perceived by the children and adolescents. Given the unique characteristics of Chinese social and cultural settings, we speculated that the moderating role of perceived normativeness of parental harsh discipline might be more clearly demonstrated in Chinese society. Specifically, since China adopted its reform and opening-up policies in 1979, many new cultural values and ideologies (including Western parenting values and behaviors) have been introduced into China from Western countries (Zhang, Wang, & Fuligni, 2006). Under the influence of Western culture, some parents have changed their parenting values and behaviors. They may use less harsh disciplinary behaviors, because they may believe that parents should be nurturing but not too controlling (Simons, Wu, Lin, Gordon, & Conger, 2000). In contrast, other parents may retain their traditional parenting styles. Parental psychological aggression and corporal punishment are highly accepted in traditional Chinese society, because Chinese parents and children tend to perceive psychological aggression and corporal punishment as indications of involvement, concern, and love; as the Chinese proverb says, "Beating and scolding is the emblem of love" (Liu & Wang, 2015; Simons et al., 2000; Wang & Liu, 2018). Thus, under the influence of traditional Chinese parenting beliefs, Chinese parents may be more likely to adopt harsh disciplinary practices to motivate their children to achieve high academic, social, and moral goals. In the case of greater variability in parenting styles, Chinese adolescents' perceived normativeness of parental harsh discipline may also have greater variability. Thus, we speculated that evaluating the greater variability in adolescents' perceived normativeness of parental harsh discipline in Chinese society might help us better understand the moderating role of perceived normativeness in relations between parental harsh discipline and adolescents' problem behaviors.

Second, the previous two studies investigating the moderating role of perceived normativeness have predominantly included only mothers (Gershoff et al., 2010; Lansford et al., 2005). However, in two-parent families, adolescents experience a home environment that blends both maternal and paternal influences (Martin, Ryan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007). The family systems theory has emphasized that both mother-child and father-child relationships are important for child adjustment (Cox & Paley, 2003). Thus, considering the combined effects of both mothers' and fathers' parenting styles on adolescent behavior within a family systems framework may more closely approximate adolescents' lived experiences and have more relevance for better understanding adolescent adjustment.

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