



Beliefs in the legitimacy of decision authority among Chinese adolescents and parents: A person-centered approach



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A B S T R A C T

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The present study examined Chinese parents' and adolescents' beliefs in the legitimacy of decision authority with reference to specific issues from the prudential, conventional, multifaceted, and personal domains. The sample included 698 adolescents aged 12–15 and their parents from southern China. Parents and adolescents reported on their own beliefs respectively. Subgroups of parent and adolescent participants characterized by distinct patterns of beliefs across issues were identified with latent class analyses (LCA). Further, configural frequency analyses (CFA) were conducted to examine the match between parent subgroups and adolescent subgroups. In addition, the LCA-derived subgroups varied across residency status, sibling status, and child gender, and were linked to adolescent depressive symptoms and school misconduct. These associations with external variables provided evidence for the distinctiveness of the latent classes. Results were discussed in light of social domain theory and the socio-historical context where the participants were situated.

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Authority is a central issue in cultures influenced by Confucianism. Research and theoretical writings on the parent–child relationship in China tended to treat it as a family-level example of authority–subordinate relationships in the Confucian tradition (Ho, 1986; Hwang, 1999, 2001; Lin & Fu, 2008; Wu, 1996), which inevitably involved obedience to authority as an essential socialization goal. Nevertheless, it is not clear to what extent within-group variability is taken into account in the depiction of such images of Chinese family socialization.

According to classical Confucianism, filial piety is considered to be the proper response towards parental authority. Confucius asked that individuals not only take care of parents' material needs, but also do so deferentially and sincerely (Lau, 1979). Nevertheless, young children and adolescents in contemporary Chinese families, especially singletons, are far from demonstrating any tendency or willingness to be deferential (Fong, 2004). As such, the traditional Confucian model of authority–subordinate hierarchy might be too simplistic to be representative of parent–adolescent relationships in contemporary China, where recent decades of economic development and transformation in the political system have resulted in a great deal of diversity in education, occupation, family tradition, and lifestyle (Kohn, Li, Wang, & Yue, 2007; Slote & de Vos, 1998).

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Therefore, rather than presuming a single cultural image derived from Confucianism, this study is designed to explore the variability in Chinese parents' and adolescents' beliefs regarding authority issues by investigating what parents and adolescents actually think, using a person-centered approach. As the goal of a person-centered approach is to describe individuals in a holistic manner, it is the subgroups of individuals who demonstrate similar belief patterns across multiple issues that this analytic approach is focused on, rather than the response frequencies on individual issues concerning decision authority. By examining the interrelationships of data elements, recognizing that the meaning of a particular data element lies in its relationships with other elements, a person-centered approach is uniquely suited to reveal the heterogeneous patterns in authority beliefs among Chinese parents and their adolescent children.

Specifically, the purpose of this study is to identify subgroups of parents and adolescents characterized by distinct patterns of beliefs in the legitimacy of decision authority over everyday issues, examine which parent subgroups tend to coexist with which adolescent subgroups within families, and investigate how the subgroups vary in their demographic background and relate to adolescents' socioemotional outcomes. As such, the literature review revolves around beliefs in the legitimacy of decision authority according to social domain theory, together with their associations with adolescent outcomes and demographic markers.

Social domain theory: decision authority varied by domain

Social domain theory suggests that both adolescents and parents tend to believe that parents should retain authority over conventional and prudential issues, but not personal issues (Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005; Smetana & Daddis, 2002; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). Such domain-delineated beliefs in the legitimacy of decision authority have been widely replicated with participants from diverse backgrounds, including China. Therefore, it is expected that a similar pattern would emerge with the current sample.

Additionally, other patterns of beliefs in the legitimacy of decision authority are possible. Cumsille, Darling, Flaherty, and Martínez (2009) used a latent transition model to reveal three distinct patterns in a Chilean sample of adolescents – *parent control* (characterized by believing in the legitimacy of parental decision authority over issues of all domains), *shared control* (characterized by believing in domain-delineated decision authority), and *personal control* (characterized by believing in the legitimacy of adolescent decision authority over all or most issues). Moreover, adolescents demonstrated stable patterns over time. Although Cumsille et al. used only six issues to represent three domains (personal, multifaceted, and prudential), their results certainly provided support for the more uniform, or extreme, patterns of beliefs regarding the legitimacy of decision authority across all domains.

Further, adolescents desire more decision authority than their parents are willing to consider reasonable (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004). Chen-Gaddini (2012) found that Chinese adolescents were more likely to refer to personal jurisdictions for parent–adolescent conflicts than their mothers were. In other words, they were more likely than their mothers to consider an issue to be a personal one. Thus, it is expected that, within families, adolescents generally consider more issues to be part of the personal domain.

Authority beliefs and adolescent socioemotional outcomes

In reference to the relationship between authority beliefs and developmental outcomes, too much parental control in the personal domain was associated with adolescent perceptions of parental psychological control (Smetana & Daddis, 2002), which in turn was associated with adolescent depressive symptoms (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Soenens, Park, Vansteenkiste, & Mouratidis, 2012). Conversely, longitudinal research suggested increased autonomy over personal and multifaceted issues predicted less depression in adolescents (Smetana et al., 2004). Therefore, it is hypothesized that when parents demonstrate a pattern characterized by believing in parental authority not only in prudential and conventional domains, but also in personal and multifaceted domains, adolescents might report higher levels of depressive symptoms, because parents who demonstrate such belief patterns are likely to refrain from granting decision authority to their adolescent children, and hence perceived by their children as engaged in psychological controlling behaviors. It is unclear, however, whether a comparable linkage would emerge when adolescents themselves consider parental decision authority over issues of all domains to be a reasonable scenario.

Nonetheless, research has suggested that adolescents tend to be engaged in less misconduct when they consider parental decision authority to be legitimate. Cumsille et al. (2009) found that Chilean adolescents with few problem behaviors were more likely believe in parental decision authority over all issues (i.e., the *parent control* pattern) at Time 1, and also more likely to remain in the *parent control* pattern at Time 2. Similarly, Juang and Nguyen (2009) found that Chinese American adolescents with later autonomy expectations were engaged in less misconduct. Also, Wang and Supple (2010) found that parental teaching and expectations predicted respectful attitudes towards parents, which in turn predicted less school misconduct reported by Chinese adolescents. Based on these findings, it is hypothesized that misconduct is associated negatively with adolescent beliefs patterns characterized by believing in the legitimacy of parent decision making over a wide range of issues. It is hypothesized that similar associations will be revealed for parental belief patterns as well.

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