



Effects of Chinese parental practices on adolescent school outcomes mediated by conformity to parents, self-esteem, and self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the parental support and control affected school outcomes through conformity to parents, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in adolescence in Mainland China. The sample included 350 junior and senior high school students age ranging from 12 to 19 years, 48% of them were males. Using path model analysis, results showed that parental support but not reasoning predicted conformity and self-esteem which in turn predicted school motivation and grade point average. Parental control including autonomy granting and monitoring also predicted school outcomes mediated by both conformity and self-esteem. Some gender differences were found. Both parental support and control indeed have great impact on adolescents. The more salient effectiveness of parental control may be due to the Chinese cultural characteristics.

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1. Introduction

School performances are considered an index for future success. In recent years, accountability has been emphasized and measures have been taken to improve student performances in school. Students from Asian countries like Japan and Korea are frequently identified to have high academic success as well as stress. China is no exception. Parents have been found to play an important role for children's academic success. For example, in the United States, Chinese American students performed better academically than other ethnic minority groups in the United States (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1996); and this result has been accredited to higher parental expectations, and parents' perceptions of educational importance (Chen, 2001; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). Moreover, a higher degree of parent involvement in child education (Chao & Sue, 1996; Eng et al., 2008; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994), and the fact that Chinese parents emphasize the importance of education more extensively than other racial and ethnic groups (Hau & Salili, 1996).

To further understand the phenomenon, the purpose of this study is to examine how parental practices influence adolescents' school outcomes in Mainland China. Factors like self-esteem, self-efficacy, and conformity to parents are taken into consideration as mediating variables. Finally, this study also examines how the perceived behaviours of fathers and mothers have different effects on adolescent children of both genders.

2. Theory

2.1. Parental support and control

According to Peterson and Hann (1999), parental support and control are two dimensions that predict a youngster's social competence. Parental support refers to the warmth, verbal praise, and physical affection from parents. On the other hand,

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parental control includes both positive and negative elements. Positive parental control refers to *firm control* which involves such practices as induction and monitoring. Parental induction implies that parents communicate expectations or rules to their children by means of reasoning. Parental monitoring refers to the degree to which parents are aware of their child's companions, physical whereabouts, activities, and so forth. The negative aspect of control refers to *excessive parental control* with punitiveness being the most prominent strategy. It is defined as a form that "consists of either verbal or physical attempts to apply control, without the benefit of rational explanations (Peterson & Hann, 1999)". Finally, autonomy-granting is another parental control dimension indicating to what extent parents allow children to make their own decisions in life. A higher degree of autonomy-granting suggests more support from parents to encourage autonomy and social interactions.

Research on the links between these different aspects of parental support and control shows a relatively consistent pattern of findings. For example, parental support has been found to positively relate to child outcomes such as physical health (Wickrama, Lorenz, & Conger, 1997), self-worth, social competence and less internalizing problems (Rubin et al., 2004). Parental reasoning emphasizes the parent-child communication and has been found to reduce externalizing symptoms in young children (Kerr, Lopez, Olson, & Sameroff, 2004). Peterson, Rollins, and Thomas (1985), furthermore, report that parental support positively influences compliance but not internalization of their conformity whereas parental reasoning positively influences both compliance and internalization. Another investigation by Barber, Chadwick, and Oerter (1992) finds that parental support significantly influences the self-esteem of girls and boys; parental reasoning, on the other hand, has only impact on girls' self-esteem. Swenson and Prelow (2005) concluded that supportive parenting has positive influence on both self-esteem and perceived efficacy. Lower degree of parental monitoring results in a higher degree of problem behaviours such as drinking and drug use (Barnes & Farrell, 1992); closer monitoring also delays the onset of intercourse for older adolescents (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). Bush, Peterson, Cobas, and Supple (2002) report a positive effect of parental monitoring and reasoning on self-esteem of Chinese adolescents. Additionally, they found that parental punitiveness had a negative effect on self-esteem. On the other hand, excessive parental monitoring probably promotes more external conformity while hinders the development of self-concepts. While parental punitiveness has been known to cause negative outcomes, for example, lower self-esteem and higher aggressive behaviour (Bush et al., 2002; Sheehan & Watson, 2008), it is also found to be a positive predictor of external compliance (Peterson et al., 1985). Finally, autonomy-granting boosts child self-concepts such as self-esteem and social competence (Silk, Morris, Kanaya, & Steinberg, 2003).

2.2. School outcomes

Educational attainment is an important factor that predicts the future outlook of an individual. School grades, in turn, predict the educational attainment (Gottfredson, 1982). School outcomes in this study were assessed by school motivation and grade point average (GPA). GPA is a straightforward index indicating how successful students perform in school academically. School motivation, on the other hand, refers to a broader concept of how motivated students are to achieve in school, for example, academic goals that students wish to achieve, academic activities in which students are interested, how they appraise the importance of education, and how they adjust to school in general. Since "goals direct behaviour toward outcomes that individuals would like to achieve (Wentzel, 1998)" and research has found that motivation contributes to successful school performance (Duchesne & Larose, 2007), a positive relationship between school motivation and GPA is expected.

In addition to individual attributes such as general intelligence, parenting has also played a role in child's school achievement. Spera (2005) states that authoritative parenting is beneficial to school achievement. His own research demonstrates a positive impact of parental monitoring and involvement on school motivation (Spera, 2006). Parental responsiveness and involvement also relate to school motivation and achievement in early adolescents (Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001). The finding of Duchesne and Larose (2007) that attachment to parents influences school achievement suggests parental warmth and support have direct impact on children's school performances. However, most of the above cited research has been conducted in students from Western, individualistic-oriented societies; relatively little is understood regarding the role parenting in student achievement in non-Western, collectivistic-oriented societies.

2.3. Conformity, self-esteem and self-efficacy in the collectivist context

In order to understand Chinese parent-child dynamics, it is important to look at broader cultural issues that shape patterns of socialization. In spite of recent development, the People's Republic of China is considered a collectivist society where responsiveness to the interests of others is important (Tafarodi & Swann, 1996). Chinese parents tend to exercise more control and be more restrictive and they encourage less independence than do Caucasian parents (Chao, 1994; Chao & Sue, 1996; Lin & Fu, 1990). Certain collectivistic values like obedience and consideration toward others are taught to the youngsters early on. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Chinese adolescents are found to be more compliant than adolescents from individualistic-oriented societies (Zhang & Thomas, 1994) since both family and society approve and encourage such interdependent and cooperative attitudes. Moreover, because of the importance placed on education by Chinese parents and the society as a whole, conforming to parents' wishes probably insinuates that youngsters will identify with their parents, recognize the value of educational achievement, and work hard to achieve academic goals. In short, higher conformity to parents should be a positive predictor of school achievement for Chinese adolescents.

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