



# Mother-child discrepancy in perceived parental control and adolescent filial piety in poor single-mother families



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## ABSTRACT

Based on a sample of 432 poor Chinese single-mother families (mean age of adolescents = 13.7 years; 51.2% girls; mean age of mothers = 43.5 years) in Hong Kong, the interaction effect of mother-reported and adolescent-reported maternal control on filial piety of Chinese adolescents was examined. Results of polynomial multiple regression analyses showed that the interaction between mother-reported and adolescent-reported maternal control predicted perceived filial piety in adolescents. At high levels of mother-reported maternal control, high adolescent-perceived parental control was associated with higher filial piety. At low levels of mother-reported maternal control, filial piety increased initially and then decreased when adolescents reported higher levels of maternal control. Using multiple group analyses, these associations were found to be stable across gender and age. The present findings provide insights on how congruencies and discrepancies between mother-reported and adolescent-reported maternal control predict filial piety of Chinese adolescents growing up in poor single-mother families.

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## 1. Introduction

In the Chinese socialization practice, parents exercise parental control to train their children to be obedient, demonstrate proper conduct and impulse control, and meet filial obligations to the family (Wu, 1996). As a unique feature of Chinese parenting (Chao & Tseng, 2002), parental control has raised immense interest, curiosity and controversy for scholars, social science theorists and researchers in the Chinese and global contexts.

Parental control is generally defined as rules, requirements and restrictions that parents apply to their offspring (Smetana & Daddis, 2002). However, it is noteworthy to differentiate parental control from punitive or harsh parenting. In the Chinese culture, parental control contains strong elements of “training” and “monitoring”, as illustrated by the indigenous connotations of “*jiao xun*” (to train) and “*guan*” (to govern; Chao, 1994). “*Jiao xun*” is related to “teaching” of moral conduct and virtues by the parents to their offspring, whereas “*guan*” refers to parental monitoring of the offspring in compliance to the rules and standards. “*Guan*” (i.e., monitoring), in the Chinese understanding, contains a strong sense of parental commitment, love and devotion for the upbringing and benefits of their children (Chao, 1994; Stewart et al., 1998).

In the literature on parenting, parental control typically includes behavioral control and psychological control. Behavioral control is defined as the rules and regulations that parents use to monitor and regulate their children’s behaviors (Smetana &

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Daddis, 2002), whereas psychological control is regarded as the parents' attempt to control the child's activities through manipulating their psychological world (Smetana & Daddis, 2002). Majority of studies showed that behavioral control was a positive predictor of adolescent wellbeing and development, whereas psychological control negatively predicted adolescent positive development (e.g., Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005). With reference to the Chinese culture, Yang (1981) identified several features of parental control strategies intrinsic to the Chinese culture, including training on conformity, modesty, self-suppression and self-contentment, use of shame, punishment orientation, and parent-centeredness. These strategies blur the boundaries of behavioral and psychological control exercised by parents (Wang, Pomerantz, & Chen, 2007). In summary, Shek (2007b) highlighted three important characteristics of Chinese parental control. First, parental control combines both behavioral control and psychological control in order to build up unquestionable obedience of children towards their parents. Second, there is a high standard of morality to avoid any disgrace of the family's name. Third, strict and firm rules are set up so as to enforce parental expectations and standards. Previous studies indicated that parental control was positively associated with adolescents' achievement motivation and psychosocial development in the Chinese communities (Leung & Shek, 2013a, 2013b).

Embedded in the Confucian thoughts, parents are obliged to "train" and monitor their children in compliance to rules and standards. In response, children are expected to obey and respect their parents out of filial piety (Yeh & Yang, 1997). Filial piety is the dominant principle for regulating intergenerational conduct in the Chinese culture (Ho, 1994), which entails the obligations of the children/descendants to the superiors under "the same roof" in the Chinese ethical system (Hwang, 1999). Filial piety is a Chinese virtue that requires children/descendants to show respect and care for their parents/ancestors, follow the instructions of the superiors, build prestige of the family, and avoid bringing bad reputations to the family name (Ho, 1996). Previous studies showed that adolescents having higher levels of filial piety had better relationships with parents and were more ready to take up family obligations (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). Besides, filial piety was positively related to adolescent psychosocial development and life satisfaction (Yeh & Bedford, 2003; Yeh, Yi, Tsao, & Wan, 2013).

The prediction of parental control on filial piety can possibly be explained by three mechanisms embedded in the Chinese familism. First, Ho (1994) used the term "authoritarian moralism" to illustrate the absolute authority of the parents in educating and monitoring their offspring to observe the moral standards. Chinese parents adopt a moral perspective in addressing the moral standards such as filial obligation and decent behaviors, rather than psychological orientation such as responding to the inner needs and emotions of offspring (Ho, 1994). In response, authoritarian filial piety (i.e., suppressing one's desire and obeying parents' rules in order to comply with the authority; Yeh & Bedford, 2003) is developed among Chinese children. Second, the indigenous parenting dimension of "guan" (i.e., monitoring) in the Chinese culture overlaps with parental warmth, which entails elements of parental commitment, involvement and investment that solely crave for the good and future of their offspring (Chao, 1994; Stewart et al., 1998). Adolescents who recognize the underlying meanings of parental control may feel the love, care and support from their parents. They may become more tolerant of parents' rule and comply with their parents' standards (Wong, Leung, & McBride-Chang, 2010). Third, parental control predicts filial piety by means of the use of shame strategies (Yang, 1981). Chinese socialization has been regarded as a "shame and guilt-oriented culture" that Chinese people are socialized to be sensitive to the others' views, and feel ashamed and guilty if there are disapprovals from others (Schoenhals, 1993). Hence, in response to parental control, adolescents usually follow parental standards and expectations. Otherwise, shame and guilt will be generated (Bempechat, Graham, & Jimenez, 1999). These mechanisms help to explain how parental control is used to build up adolescent filial piety.

One may ask the question of what would happen to adolescent filial piety if parents and adolescents perceive parental control differently. This is an important question as filial piety is a basic intergenerational conduct in the Chinese culture (Ho, 1994), and it also reflects adolescent obligations to their family. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, research studying the prediction of parent-reported and adolescent-reported parental control on filial piety is non-existent in the current scientific literature.

In the scientific literature, there are different theoretical accounts explaining the effects of parent-child discrepancies of family attributes on adolescent development. The developmental perspective suggests that parent-child discrepancies of perceived family attributes are normative developmental events where adolescents search for independence, autonomy and self-identity (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Steinberg, 1991). In contrast, the family systems perspectives propose that parent-child discrepancies are consequences of miscommunication among family members, family stresses and maladaptive interaction patterns (Minuchin, 1985; Olson, McCubbin, Larsen, Muxen, & Wilson, 1983).

In fact, there is empirical evidence showing that parent-adolescent discrepancies in parental monitoring and control were negatively associated with adolescent psychosocial development and achievement motivation (Guion, Mrug, & Windle, 2009; Leung & Shek, 2014) and positively related to adolescent risk behaviors such as mental health problems, delinquency, alcohol-related problems and substance abuse (Abar, Jackson, Colby, & Barnett, 2015; De Los Reyes, Goodman, Kliewer, & Reid-Quinones, 2010; Maurizi, Gershoff, & Aber, 2012; Pettit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001). In particular, Reynolds, MacPherson, Matusiewicz, Schreiber, and Lejuez (2011) found that greater adolescent-reported parental monitoring predicted lower adolescent delinquency than did parent-reported parental monitoring, and there was an interaction effect between parent-reported and adolescent-reported parental knowledge, with higher adolescent-reported parental knowledge predicted lower delinquency when parents also reported higher parental knowledge. Regarding family interactions, Juang, Syed, and Takagi (2007) also reported that parent-child discrepant views of maternal control among Chinese American families were linked to family conflicts.

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