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Chinese adolescents' reports of covert parental monitoring: Comparisons with overt monitoring and links with information management



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ABSTRACT

This study compared Chinese adolescents' reports of covert parental monitoring with the overt strategies of solicitation and control. We investigated these behaviors in terms of unique associations with adolescents' perceived privacy invasion and the information management behaviors of disclosure and secrecy. High school students ($N = 455$, 61.5% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 17.39$, $SD = 0.83$) from a predominantly rural province of Mainland China reported a high incidence of covert monitoring (60.40%). Covert monitoring predicted privacy invasion more strongly than solicitation or control. Solicitation positively predicted disclosure, while covert monitoring negatively predicted disclosure and positively predicted secrecy. Privacy invasion fully mediated links between covert monitoring and information management. These latter effects were significantly stronger for girls than for boys. Similar to Western adolescents, Chinese youth might apply selective resistance when parents violate their personal domain. The findings suggest linkage between some parental monitoring behaviors and disruptions in Chinese family communication.

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Parents' active monitoring behaviors appear to be weaker predictors of parental knowledge and adolescent well-being, compared to adolescents' own disclosures (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Additionally, such surveillance sometimes prompts feelings of privacy invasion (Hawk, Becht, & Branje, 2016; Hawk, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2008), which have been linked to youths' problematic communication and conflict with parents in European and North American families (Hawk et al., 2013; Hawk, Keijsers, Hale, & Meeus, 2009; Hawk et al., 2016; Laird, Marrero, Melching, & Kuhn, 2013). Research conducted in these contexts has also shown that *covert* parental monitoring (e.g., searching through belongings or eavesdropping on conversations without permission), labeled as "snooping" in some prior studies (e.g., Hawk et al., 2016), is a distinct form of monitoring that holds particularly strong associations with invasion perceptions and adolescent-parent relationship disturbances (Cottrell et al., 2007; Hawk et al., 2016; Petronio, 1994). Some parental efforts to remain informed and maintain closeness might therefore be counterproductive, at least in cultural contexts emphasizing adolescent individuality and autonomy. It is unknown, however, whether similar associations exist in cultures that traditionally deemphasize adolescents' independence. The present study addressed this issue by investigating links between Chinese adolescents' reports of overt and covert parental monitoring, perceptions of privacy invasion, and disclosure and secrecy.

As a psychological construct, some have characterized privacy as a universal human need (Altman, 1977; see also; Nucci, 1996) that is increasingly integral to healthy functioning (Margulis, 2003; Pedersen, 1997; Petronio, 2002). Individuals and

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groups from both traditional and industrialized societies utilize privacy for purposes of security, identity exploration and expression, impression management, and the delineation of central versus peripheral relationships (e.g., Altman, 1977; Pedersen, 1997). Across varied operational definitions of privacy, control over information, space, and property have consistently been central themes (e.g., Margulis, 2003; Newell, 1995; Westin, 1970). Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM; Petronio, 2002, 2010) proposes that individuals view themselves as owning their “personal” information, and construct metaphorical boundaries and strategically manage access to maintain desired separation versus closeness in relationships. Privacy boundaries expand into adulthood in terms of both scope (i.e., issues defined as private) and permeability (i.e., abilities to manage boundaries). Adolescence is a period in which privacy boundaries are particularly in a state of flux; youths often expand the scope of “private” issues faster than parents might wish (e.g., Rote & Smetana, 2016; Smetana, 2005). At the same time, their overall ability to deny parents access remains relatively low (Munro & Madigan, 1993; Parke & Sawin, 1979). This sets the stage for repeated experiences of privacy invasion, which prompt renegotiations and eventual realignments of adolescent-parent expectations for privacy (Collins & Luebker, 1994; Hawk et al., 2008; Petronio, 2010).

CPM theory also proposes that, when (threats of) boundary violations occur, individuals will proactively or retroactively exert behavioral controls in order to manage others' access. Accordingly, adolescent reports of privacy invasion predict less parental knowledge about children in Western contexts (Hawk et al., 2013; Laird et al., 2013), because youths attempt to fortify violated boundaries through reduced disclosure and increased secrecy (Hawk et al., 2013; Petronio, 1994). Across several cultures, however, adolescent disclosure has been consistently linked with positive adjustment, including higher relationship quality and trust (e.g., Cottrell et al., 2007; Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999; Qin & Pomerantz, 2013; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006; Yau, Tasopoulos-Chan, & Smetana, 2009; Ying et al., 2015), as well as less antisocial behavior, depression, and anxiety (Horesh & Apter, 2006; Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, & Meeus, 2010; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010; Laird & Marrero, 2010). Adolescent secrecy, in contrast, predicts increased emotional difficulties and problem behavior, as well as reduced relationship quality (Finkenauer, Frijns, Engels, & Kerkhof, 2005; Frijns, Keijsers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Keijsers, Branje, Frijns, Finkenauer, & Meeus, 2010). Identifying predictors of adolescents' privacy invasion perceptions and their information management behavior can inform parents', educators', and practitioners' efforts to promote adolescents' healthy relationships and better adjustment.

Particular parental monitoring strategies differ in their links with adolescents' perceptions of privacy invasion and their information management behaviors. Parental *solicitation* (asking youths about their whereabouts and activities) and parental *control* (explicit rules for what youths must disclose about their behavior) modestly predict perceived invasion among Northern European adolescents (Hawk et al., 2008, 2016). These overt monitoring strategies contrast sharply with covert parental monitoring; whereas both solicitation and control are reciprocal processes that afford youths some degree of flexibility in what information they choose to actually share, covert monitoring is an unpredictable, unilateral action that affords the other no control (Petronio, 1994). This greatly limits youths' available options to proactively manage their desired boundaries, which likely increases the severity of retroactive management (Hawk et al., 2016; Petronio, 1994, 2010). An initial comparison of (unspecified) overt monitoring and covert monitoring in North American families revealed that overt monitoring was positively associated with parental knowledge and open family communication, while covert monitoring held negative links with these constructs as well as positive associations with family communication problems (Cottrell et al., 2007). The only study to date that has directly compared covert monitoring with solicitation and control (Hawk et al., 2016) showed that covert monitoring, although relatively infrequent (see also Cottrell et al., 2007), held the strongest correlations with Northern European adolescents' perceived privacy invasion. Further, covert monitoring uniquely correlated with parents' suspicions of youths' antisocial behavior and dishonesty. In conjunction with solicitation, covert monitoring also predicted adolescents' reports of secrecy and dishonesty. These results seem to suggest, in line with CPM theory, that a link between parental monitoring and adolescent information management might be mediated by youths' perceptions of privacy invasion. To our knowledge, however, no single study has explicitly investigated such indirect effects. The present research examined this mediational model.

To date, empirical knowledge about covert monitoring comes almost entirely from research based in North America and Europe, where there is typically a greater focus on individualism and autonomy-granting. This contrasts sharply with more collectivist cultures, such as China, where family relationships are traditionally characterized by filial piety, prolonged power hierarchy, and incorporating family members in conceptions of the self (e.g., Cheung, Pomerantz, & Dong, 2013; Lam, 1997; Pomerantz, Qin, Wang, & Chen, 2009). It is currently unknown whether youths in such a socialization context would also show associations between covert monitoring and feelings of invasion, and whether they, too, might report reduced disclosure and increased secrecy in connection with such practices.

The concept of privacy in Chinese families appears to differ from those in Western cultures. Some have argued that the family, instead of the individual, is the basic unit of privacy within Chinese culture (Jin, 1994, as cited in Chan, 2000). Others have argued for the existence of individual privacy, but have clarified that it is asymmetrical and hierarchical within Chinese family relationships (Chan, 2000). The reciprocal management of privacy boundaries observed in Western cultures is instead largely unilateral, with higher-status family members having both the right and ability to acquire information from less dominant members. This corresponds to traditional socialization practices that emphasize obedience and familial interdependence (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). Adolescents' “private” information and property is therefore largely under parents' ownership, and youths feel obliged to comply with parental expectations (Cheung et al., 2013). From this perspective, parents might view adolescents' claims to privacy as a strategy for concealing information to which parents are entitled (Tang & Dong, 2006; see also; Warren & Laslett, 1977). Indeed, when Chinese parents view privacy as a method for maintaining secrecy as

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