



Original article

Use of Foul Language Among Chinese Adolescents: Developmental Change and Relations With Psychosocial Competences



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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: The use of foul language becomes increasingly popular among youth, yet scientific research on this topic is grossly missing in the literature. This longitudinal study examined the developmental change of foul language use and its relations to emotional competence, social competence, and moral competence over high school years.

Methods: Data were from a six-year longitudinal study between grade 7 and grade 12 with an annual assessment on 3,328 Hong Kong adolescents (mean age = 12.59 ± .74 years). Multiple-group latent growth curve modeling based on six waves of longitudinal data were conducted.

Results: Results showed that the use of foul language increased, but the increase rate slowed down over time; males showed faster increase rate yet faster deceleration than did females. In addition, changes in emotional competence, social competence, and moral competence negatively predicted the change in use of foul language across males and females, respectively.

Conclusions: Adolescents are vulnerable to increasing their use of foul language. However, promoting emotional competence, social competence, and moral competence could be helpful to minimize the increasing trend of use of foul language.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

The use of foul language is naturally increasing over high school years. Given the negative relation between change in use of foul language and change in psychosocial competences (i.e., emotional competence, social competence, and moral competence), intervention that attempts to reduce adolescents' use of foul language should focus on the promotion of these psychosocial competences.

The use of foul language has become increasingly popular among adolescents in the Western society [1] and Chinese society [2]. It is integrated into the daily conversation of adolescents and even appears in adolescent literature and media [3,4]. Foul language is often termed as curse words, swear words, taboo words, or profanity in the literature. Although no common definition of foul language is present across academic studies [5], it usually refers to the utterance of emotionally powerful,

offensive words, or emotionally harmful expressions that are understood as insults regardless of the intention of the speakers [6,7]. Although cursing is primarily used for cathartic effect—expressing anger or frustration [5–7], for many parents and educational professionals, cursing is regarded as a sort of uneducated, rude, and even offensive behavior. Some researchers also regarded cursing as an indicator of adolescent problem behavior [8,9]. A previous study found that cursing was positively related to aggressive behavior among youth [10]. Despite the mounting concern about adolescent cursing, scientific studies about it are far from adequate.

First, research has yet to examine cursing behavior from a developmental perspective. Although children have picked up curse words since preschool years presumably from their parents [11], it is expected that the use of foul language reaches its high

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point in adolescence [7]. Adolescence is the period when identity formation is critical [12]. From the social constructionist perspective [13], cursing is particularly appealing to adolescents because it seems to be related to their social construction of identity during their interaction with peers. Adolescents who curse feel affiliated with peers who share the similar knowledge and usage of foul language and feel distinct from others who do not follow the same linguistic style [13,14]. During this process, they may obtain a sense of identity. However, it is not clear if cursing-related identity is adaptive. More important, cursing is neither the only way nor the healthy way to constructing identity, at least not the way to be recommended.

Second, what psychosocial factors are related to adolescents' use of foul language is not clear, whereas this question is critical for preventing foul language abuse. According to the positive youth development perspective, promoting adolescents' strengths including psychosocial competences would prevent them from engaging in problem behavior [15,16]. Competence usually refers to individuals' ability to adapt to the environment [17]. In general, higher psychosocial competence may prevent adolescents from externalizing their stress or negative emotion to problem behavior. According to this tenet, the use of foul language would be minimized when adolescents' competence is improved. Jay's [7] Neuro-Psycho-Social (NPS) model of cursing also implies that psychosocial competence may predict the likelihood of cursing. The NPS model maintains that the occurrence of cursing is subject to individuals' neurological state, psychological attribute, and sociocultural constraint, whereas psychological competence represents a psychological attribute.

Plentiful studies showed that emotional, social, and moral competences are related to reduced adolescent problem behavior [18–20]. It is possible that these competences are related to cursing as well, since cursing is often emotionally laden, used for communication, and morally controversial. Emotional competence refers to the ability to identify emotions and effectively deal with emotions and emotionally charged problems [21]. Social competence refers to the ability to achieve social or personal goals in a social context [22]. Moral competence refers to the ability to perform altruistic behavior toward others and the ability to judge moral issues at an advanced level of development [23]. Specifically, adolescents with higher emotional competence know how to express their emotions appropriately and manage their negative emotions skillfully [21]; adolescents with higher social competence are more empathetic, better at handling social relationship, and more apt in communication [22]; adolescents with higher moral competence are better at judging what is right and wrong and more sensitive to the possible harm to others [23]. As such, they are less likely to curse, which is often related to the cathartic expression of strong and negative emotion yet possibly elicits negative reactions in others or even hurts others [7,24].

Against this background, the objectives of this study were twofold. The first one was to examine the developmental change of foul language use over the high school years. We expected that foul language use would increase over the high school years. The second one was to study whether psychosocial competences would contribute to the change in foul language use over time. We expected that the initial level of emotional, social, moral competences would negatively predict change in adolescent foul language use over time. The change of emotional, social, moral competences would also negatively predict the change in adolescent foul language use over time.

All the hypotheses were tested using multigroup analyses [25,26], so as to determine the potential moderation by gender for all relations of interest. Previous literature has suggested that males generally curse more than females [9,11], while there lacks research documenting gender differences in the developmental change of cursing as well as the link between competence and cursing. Therefore, gender differences were explored without a priori hypothesis. As family demographic variables (i.e., economic status and family structure) may affect adolescent problem behavior [27], they were controlled as time invariant covariates.

Methods

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of high school students recruited from 28 high schools, which participated in a six-year longitudinal project in Hong Kong [27]. This project included annual assessments during the high school years (grade 7–12) to understand adolescents' personal and family well-being. There were 3,328 seven graders ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.59 \pm .74$ years; 51.7% male) at wave 1. The attrition rates for the succeeding waves of assessment ranged from 12.7% to 28.3% caused by students transferring schools, dropping out, or being absent on the day of assessment (see Table 1).

This study received approval from the ethics review from the Human Subjects Ethics Subcommittee of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. School, parental, and student consent was obtained. Participants completed a battery of questionnaires assessing adolescent development and family in a self-report manner in a classroom setting with a trained research assistant present.

Instrument

Emotional competence, social competence, and moral competence. Emotional competence, social competence, and moral competence were assessed by three subscales from the simplified version of the Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale [28], which measures 15 positive youth development attributes proposed by Catalano et al. [29]. Each construct was assessed by three items, which were loaded on the target constructs across the six waves of data, as showed by confirmatory factor analyses (see Table 1). Sample items of emotional, social, and moral competences are: "When I have conflict with others, I can manage my emotions," "I can interact with others in a harmonious manner," and "I have high moral expectation about my behavior," respectively. The internal consistency reliabilities of these scales exceeded the minimum standard of .70 [30] (see Table 1).

Use of foul language. Adolescents' use of foul language was assessed by a single item derived from a delinquent behavior scale asking the frequency of engagement in 12 delinquent acts, including speaking foul language, stealing, damaging others' properties, sexual intercourse, and trespasses [27]. Similar to a previous study [5], a single item was used to measure the frequency of cursing in this study (see Table 1).

Controlled variables. Adolescents' family economic status and family structure were controlled in the models. Poverty was indicated by receiving governmental subsidy—Comprehensive

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