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Research article

Parenting stress and harsh discipline in China: The moderating roles of marital satisfaction and parent gender[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the relationships between parents' parenting stress and their harsh discipline (psychological aggression and corporal punishment) and the moderating effects of marital satisfaction and parent gender in Chinese societies. Using a sample of 639 Chinese father–mother dyads with preschoolers, findings revealed that both mothers' and fathers' parenting stress were directly associated with their harsh discipline. Mothers' marital satisfaction attenuated the association between their parenting stress and harsh discipline. However, fathers' marital satisfaction did not moderate the association between their parenting stress and harsh discipline. Findings from the current study highlight the importance of considering how the dyadic marital relationship factors may interact with individuals' parenting stress to influence both maternal and paternal disciplinary behaviors.

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Introduction

Research indicates that many parents throughout the world endorse harsh discipline as a child disciplinary practice (World Health Organization, 2002). In childhood, psychological aggression and corporal punishment were the most common forms of parental harsh discipline (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998; Wang & Liu, 2014). Many studies have found that parental use of harsh discipline is positively related to a number of negative developmental outcomes (e.g., aggression, delinquency, anxiety, and depression) in children (Miller-Perrin, Perrin, & Kocur, 2009; Xing & Wang, 2012; Xing, Wang, Zhang, He, & Zhang, 2011). To prevent and intervene on parental harsh discipline, researchers have tried to identify the causes of parental harsh discipline. One line of investigation has focused on the family contextual factors of parental harsh discipline. Research in this area has repeatedly linked parents' parenting stress with harsh discipline. Deater-Deckard and Scarr (1996), for example, found that both mothers' and fathers' parenting stress were positively related to their authoritarian discipline, including use of physical punishment. Similarly, Anthony and colleagues (2005) also found that parents who reported greater parenting stress tended to acknowledge using more harsh discipline, such as corporal punishment.

To date, most research examining the relationship between parenting stress and harsh discipline was conducted in Western settings; little is known about this issue in Chinese societies. Given some unique Chinese social and cultural approaches to parenting, it has been speculated that Chinese parents may experience high levels of parenting stress and have high acceptance of harsh discipline, which may contribute to more use of harsh discipline such as psychological aggression and

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corporal punishment. Specifically, traditional Chinese parents may have high expectations for their children (Hong, Yufeng, Agho, & Jacobs, 2011; Shek, 2007; Wong, Chen, Goggins, Tang, & Leung, 2009), as indicated by a Chinese proverb, which states “wang zi cheng long” (wishing the child to become a “dragon”—the symbolically successful and glorious animal in the Chinese mind). Especially, the implementation of the one-child policy since 1979 may heighten parental expectations for the family’s sole child (Wong et al., 2009). These high expectations may in turn create high parenting stress on Chinese parents. Meanwhile, parental harsh discipline is highly accepted in traditional Chinese societies because parental psychological aggression and corporal punishment are often accepted as expressions of love and concern in traditional Chinese societies; as the Chinese proverb goes, “Beating and scolding is the emblem of love” (Chao, 1994; Simons, Wu, Lin, Gordon, & Conger, 2000). A recent study with Chinese samples found that parental harsh discipline is prevalent in China: approximately 80% of mothers and 75% of fathers reported psychological aggression toward children in the previous year, and 54% of mothers and 48% of fathers reported corporal punishment (Wang & Liu, 2014). Thus, under conditions of high parenting stress, Chinese parents may be more likely to implement harsh discipline to ensure their children’s satisfactory performance.

Marital Satisfaction as a Moderator

Despite consistent correlations between parenting stress and harsh discipline, however, at least one issue remains largely unresolved. That is, not all parents who experienced parenting stress implement harsh discipline toward their children. Indeed, previous studies have shown that parenting stress explains only a small to moderate proportion of the variance in the parents’ harsh discipline (Anthony et al., 2005; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996). This heterogeneity in response to parenting stress suggests that additional variables may play a role in moderating the link between parents’ parenting stress and their harsh discipline. One possibility, stemming from research in the fields of family psychology, is that marital satisfaction may condition the effects of parenting stress on harsh discipline.

Family systems theory has been used to understand the relationship between marital relationship and parenting. According to this theory, families are organized systems with interrelated subsystems including parent–child, marital, and sibling subsystems, each of which influences and is influenced by the others (Cox & Paley, 1997). Spillover hypothesis suggests that malfunction from one subsystem (e.g., marital subsystem) can spill over to another subsystem (e.g., parent–child subsystem) in the family system (Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999). Specifically, parents who are in satisfying marital relationships may respond more positively to their children’s actions. In contrast, when parents are dissatisfied with their marital relationship, the resulting negative emotion and behavior may transfer to the parent–child interactions (Erel & Burman, 1995). Indeed, numerous previous studies have shown a spillover between marital relationship and parenting (Chang, Lansford, Schwartz, & Farver, 2004; Cui & Conger, 2008; Stover et al., 2012). For example, using data from 158 mothers with elementary–school children in Hong Kong, Chang and colleagues (2004) found that marital quality were significantly and negatively associated with harsh parenting. Similarly, Cui and Conger (2008) analyzed data from 451 American families and also found that marital distress and conflict were significantly associated with higher levels of negative parenting in fathers and mothers. However, most prior research has focused primarily on the main effects of marital satisfaction on harsh discipline, and there is a dearth of literature examining the moderating role of marital satisfaction in the link between parenting stress and harsh discipline. Nevertheless, there are important theoretical reasons for expecting marital satisfaction to influence the degree of association between parents’ parenting stress and their harsh discipline. For example, parents with maladjusted marital relationships generally experience higher level of negative emotions like anger, anxiety, and distress. In these negative emotional states, parents with parenting stress would be more sensitive, more overreactive, and more likely to use harsh discipline (Cummings, Keller, & Davies, 2005). Conversely, parents’ parenting stress may be less likely to evoke their harsh discipline when in the context of well-adjusted marital relationship. Thus, it is possible that the marital satisfaction can moderate the relationships between parents’ parenting stress and their harsh discipline. The main aim of the current study is to explore this issue.

Parent Gender Differences in the Moderating Mechanism

Previous studies have suggested that parents’ parenting stress, marital satisfaction, and harsh discipline may vary systematically on the basis of parent gender. Compared to fathers, mothers experienced higher levels of parenting stress and lower levels of marital satisfaction, and used more harsh discipline toward children (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Beckman, 1991; Tang, 2006; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007). Although previous studies have documented the parent gender differences in parenting stress, marital satisfaction, and harsh discipline, little research has examined whether the moderating effects of marital satisfaction on the relationships between parenting stress and harsh discipline differ by parent gender.

However, the fathering-vulnerability hypothesis has suggested that fathers may be more vulnerable to the stress of marital maladjustment than mothers (Coiro & Emery, 1998; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Raymond, 2004). One possible explanation for the hypothesis is that men may be less able to clearly differentiate the roles of father and husband, and thus may apply a general or similar pattern of relating to their spouse and children (Coiro & Emery, 1998). Thus, when fathers experience negative marital relations, they may make more negative responses (e.g., psychological and physical aggression) to their children in parent–child interactions. According to this perspective, the associations between marital satisfaction and harsh discipline may be different for mothers and fathers. Indeed, in the few studies that investigated the spillover effects

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