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Harsh parenting and academic achievement in Chinese adolescents: Potential mediating roles of effortful control and classroom engagement[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study examined (a) the potential mediating roles of effortful control and classroom engagement in the association between harsh parenting and adolescent academic achievement, and (b) the potential moderating role of gender. Sixth through eighth graders in rural China ($n = 815$, mean age = 12.55 years) reported on harsh parenting, effortful control, and classroom engagement. Parents also reported on each other's harsh parenting. Academic achievement was assessed by students' test scores and teacher-rated academic performance. Results of structural equation modeling revealed gender differences in patterns of association among the model variables. Harsh parenting was negatively and directly associated with academic achievement for both boys and girls. It was also negatively and indirectly associated with academic achievement via effortful control and classroom engagement sequentially, forming a common indirect "path" for boys and girls. The indirect negative effect of harsh parenting on boys' academic achievement was mainly realized through the mediator of effortful control, whereas this same indirect effect for girls was mainly realized through the mediator of classroom engagement. Jointly, effortful control and classroom engagement precipitates more indirect effects for boys than for girls in the association between harsh parenting and academic achievement. The discussion analyzes the potential "paths" from harsh parenting to adolescent academic achievement, as well as gender differences in these "paths." The current study has implications for teachers and parents eager to improve students' classroom engagement and academic achievement.

1. Introduction

Harsh parenting and academic achievement in Chinese adolescents: Potential mediating roles of effortful control and classroom engagement. Parenting practices and how they impact children and adolescents' school performance have always been an interesting research topic (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Oxford & Lee, 2011). Although extant research has considered the roles of parenting (Mattanah, Pratt, Cowan, & Cowan, 2005), regulatory abilities (Liew, McTigue, Barrois, & Hughes, 2008), and motivational factors (Leung & Kwan, 1998) on students' academic functioning, few studies have integrated these literatures to test the more complicated and interesting relations among them. The self-system model of motivational development (SSMMD) provides an

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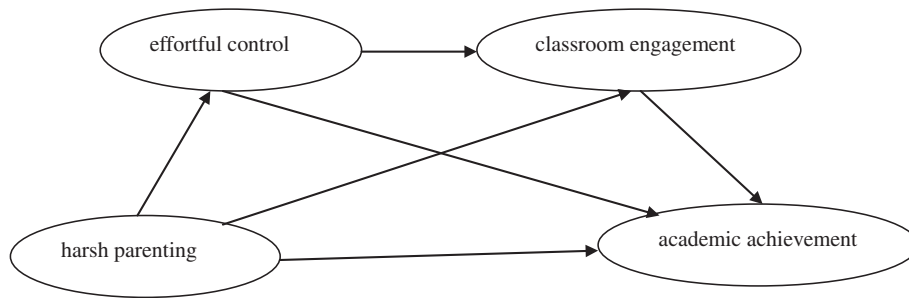


Fig. 1. The proposed model on the potential mediating roles of effortful control and classroom engagement in the association between harsh parenting and adolescent academic achievement.

appropriate rationale for integrating these diverse literatures. The model consists of four components: (a) social context, (b) self system, (c) individuals' action, and (d) development outcomes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Wellborn, 1997). An individual's social context is filled with various social partners including parents, teachers, peers and neighbors, who shape their developing self system. As relatively stable personal resources constructed through durable interaction between individuals and their context, the self-system factors could function as proximal predictors of engagement in an activity. An individual's level of engagement affects his or her developmental outcomes in various domains such as academic and social performance. The four SSMD components linearly form a context-self system-action-outcome sequence, suggesting that parenting may impact children's academic outcomes via their self-regulatory abilities and level of engagement in activities. Guided by the SSMD model and with the purpose of more accurately expounding how harsh parenting could be associated with students' academic achievement, we tested a model with effortful control and classroom engagement as potential mediators of the association between harsh parenting and adolescent academic achievement (see Fig. 1).

1.1. Harsh parenting and academic achievement

Researchers have long been focused on how parenting could be related to children's academic performance (Spera, 2005). Generally, with more autonomy support and less authoritarian control from parents, children tend to reach better academic attainment (Pomerantz, Grolnick, & Price, 2005). Although research often depends on Baumrind's (1991) typological approach when examining the role of parenting styles in children's academic functioning, we took a dimensional approach to examine the relation between harsh parenting practices and adolescent academic achievement.

Harsh parenting mainly involves parental discipline behaviors such as spanking, slapping, yelling and shouting toward the children (Hinnant, Erath, & El-Sheikh, 2015). Conceptually, these parenting practices parallel harsh forms of authoritarian parenting (i.e., physical or corporal punishment and verbal hostility) and physical forms of child maltreatment. Authoritarian parenting mainly comprises the diverse dimensions of non-reasoning, directiveness, physical punishment, and verbal hostility (Wang & Chang, 2010), with the latter two components corresponding to the conceptualization of harsh parenting in our study. Thus, harsh parenting could be regarded as a harsh form of authoritarian parenting, or as harsh authoritarian parenting as some researchers refer to it (Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006). By contrast, other dimensions of authoritarian parenting (i.e., non-reasoning and directiveness) constitute a more mild form of authoritarian parenting, which is more consistent with Chao's (1994) notion of *guan* (i.e., training) that tends to be perceived by Chinese children as parental support and concern. Characterized by parents' easy anger and overactivity (Wong, Gonzales, Montaña, Dumka, & Millsap, 2014) and lack of behavioral control, harsh parenting is associated with children's negative academic outcomes (Chen, Liu, & Li, 2000; Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993; Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1998). Notably, restrictive punitive discipline has been found to be longitudinally linked with declines in academic performance over seven elementary school years (Schwartz, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2013).

Researchers have begun to probe into why unfavorable parenting factors could be associated with academic difficulties. Martin and Rodeheffer (1976) uncovered that parents' harsh practices might undermine children's motivation for cognitive excellence, further imposing a detrimental impact on children's scholastic performance. Parents endorsing harsh parenting tend to have high expectations for children and place high emphasis on their achievement (Trickett, Aber, Carlson, & Cicchetti, 1991; Trickett & Susman, 1988). However, these parents also overly emphasize children's compliance and exert strong restrictions on free expression and intellectual stimulation, which might affect children's inclination to engage in classroom activities. This combination of stringent control and high expectations for performance has been found to be related to an extrinsic motivation, which is generally maladaptive for academic performance (Ryan, Connell, & Deci, 1985). Beyond these explanations, we intended to test the potential mediating roles of effortful control and classroom engagement in the association between harsh parenting and children's lower academic achievement.

1.2. Effortful control as a mediator

Effortful control, indexing one's regulatory capacity, represents a group of abilities concerning how well an individual could inhibit a dominant response, activate a subordinate response, make a plan, and detect errors (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Individuals

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