The role of perceived parenting styles in thinking styles

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to explore the relationships between parenting styles and thinking styles after controlling for students' gender, academic major, and socioeconomic status. Three hundred and forty-one university students from mainland China responded to the Thinking Style Inventory — Revised II and the Parenting Style Index, and provided a range of demographic information. Results indicated that the dimension of parental acceptance/involvement was positively associated with students' creativity-generating styles (known as Type I thinking styles) and styles that could be either creativity-generating or norm-conforming (known as Type III thinking styles). Moreover, in terms of the specific types of parenting styles, students who perceived their parents as using the neglectful parenting style had significantly lower scores in Type I thinking styles than students who perceived their parents as using the other three parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, and indulgent). Implications and limitations of this study were discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

As an individual-difference variable in human performance, the style construct, defined as people's preference for processing information and dealing with tasks (Zhang & Sternberg, 2005), has appealed to considerable researchers and practitioners. However, this field has been fragmented rather than unified (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004), with various style constructs that overlap as well as being distinct from one another. Many scholars have realized the necessity of integrating existing style theories in order to advance the development of style research (Rayner, 2011; Riding, 2000). Among these endeavors of integration, one of the recent integrative models is the threefold model of intellectual styles (Zhang & Sternberg, 2005). In this threefold model, the term "intellectual styles" is used as an encompassing term that represents various existing style constructs, including cognitive styles, learning styles, personality styles, and thinking styles, among others. These style constructs mostly fall into three traditions: cognition/ability-centered {e.g., Witkin's (1962) field dependence/independence}, activity-centered {e.g., Biggs (1978) learning approaches}, and personality-centered {e.g., Myers and McCaulley's (1988) personality types} (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995).

In the threefold model, intellectual styles are classified into three types according to the nature of styles manifested in numerous studies. Type I intellectual styles are normally characterized by cognitive complexity, nonconformity, autonomy, and low degrees of structure (e.g., field independence, deep learning approach). In contrast, Type II intellectual styles are normally featured by cognitive simplicity, conformity, authority, and high degrees of structure (e.g., field dependence, surface learning approach). Unlike Type I and Type II styles, Type III intellectual styles' characteristics are not static. They manifest the characteristics of either Type I or Type II styles depending if individuals are interested in the tasks or if the stylistic demands of the tasks are favored. Among these three types of intellectual styles, Type I styles are considered to carry more adaptive value than Type II styles, Type II intellectual styles tend to be less adaptive in many situations than Type I styles, and Type III styles tend to be value differentiated, depending on the nature of the task (Zhang & Sternberg, 2006). Also in this threefold model, three major controversial issues concerning the nature of styles were explicitly identified. The present study concerned one of the three issues: whether or not styles can be socialized or modified, known as the issue of style malleability. To contribute to the discussion of this issue, it is necessary to identify potential antecedents of styles firstly. One of the possible socialization factors was parenting style (Sternberg, 1997).

1.2. Parenting styles

It is well known that family is one of the proximal environments where individuals' socialization or development takes place (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Among various socialization factors in family environment, parenting styles, defined as "a constellation of attitudes towards the child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together, create an emotional climate in

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which the parent's behaviors are expressed" (Darling & Steinberg, 1993, p.488), have been widely studied.

Early work on parenting styles has been conducted through using the dimensional approach. Various parenting dimensions were proposed at that time, such as emotional warmth/hostility and detachment/involvement (Baldwin, 1948); love/hostility and autonomy/control (Schaefer, 1959); and, warmth and indulgentness/strictness (Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957). However, some scholars such as Baumrind (1966, 1971) noticed that the dimensional approach has limitations in detecting the interactional influence of different parenting dimensions and began to adopt the typological approach to study parenting styles. The most widely used taxonomy of parenting types nowadays is from Maccoby and Martin (1983) based on Baumrind's (1966, 1971) work. They categorized parenting styles based on two dimensions: responsiveness (warmth) and demandingness (control). The dimension of responsiveness is characterized by affection, acceptance, and care. The dimension of demandingness is characterized by restriction, intrusion, and discipline. The intersection of these two dimensions creates four types of parenting styles: authoritative parenting style (high in both demandingness and responsiveness), authoritarian parenting style (high in demandingness but low in responsiveness), indulgent parenting style (high in responsiveness and low in demandingness), and neglectful parenting style (low in both responsiveness and demandingness).

Among research on parenting styles, it has been repeatedly found that parenting styles play an important role in various individual developmental outcomes (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). From a dimensional perspective, it was found that children's positive developmental outcomes were almost always related to parents' supply of nurture (i.e., warmth, responsiveness), encouragement of independence (i.e., democratic, autonomy), and proper control (e.g., Baldwin, 1948; Sears et al., 1957). From a typological perspective, the authoritative parenting style was repeatedly found to be the most beneficial for student development (e.g., self-esteem, psychological well-being, and academic performance) while the neglectful parenting style was repeatedly found to be the most detrimental for student development (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The indulgent parenting style was found to contribute to some positive developmental outcomes (e.g., self-confidence, social competence) and also some negative developmental outcomes (e.g., school misconduct, substance abuse) (Lamborn et al., 1991). Although the authoritarian parenting style has been found to be related to negative developmental outcomes (e.g., low self-esteem, negative self-concept, and poor skills with peers) of children in the Western context (Steinberg et al., 1994), it was claimed that in the Chinese context the authoritarian parenting style was not always detrimental to child development, especially regarding academic achievement (Chao, 2001; Spera, 2005).

Concerning the cultural difference in the effect of the authoritarian parenting styles on individual development, Chao (1994) proposed the Chinese concept of "guan" (training). Because the rationale of the authoritarian parenting style seems to be congruent with collectivist cultures that emphasize compliance to authority (Rudy & Grusec, 2001), children in the Chinese culture (a typical collectivist culture) tend to perceive "guan" as a manifestation of parental care and involvement (Chao, 1994). The argument of Chao (1994) was partially supported by empirical research demonstrating that the parenting dimension of "guan" was more correlated with parental warmth than with parental control in Chinese context (Stewart et al., 1998). However, the examination of the concept of "guan" among Western participants also suggested the positive relationship between "guan" and parental warmth (Stewart, Bond, Kennard, Ho, & Zaman, 2002), which implied that the positive perception of "guan" may be more universal than indigenous and this concept cannot fully explain the inconsistent results

regarding the different effects of the authoritarian parenting style on child development (especially academic achievement) across cultures. An alternative possible explanation about the positive relationship between the authoritarian parenting style and children' academic achievement could be that the authoritarian parenting style may influence children's development of Type II styles (norm-conforming styles) that have been found to positively contribute to Chinese students' academic performance (e.g., Cheung, 2002; Zhang, 2001, 2004a; Zhang & Sternberg, 1998). The examination of this speculation entails the examination of the relationship between parenting styles and intellectual styles.

1.3. Research on parenting styles and intellectual styles

Despite ample studies regarding the influence of parenting styles on various student developmental outcomes, research on the role of parenting styles in students' intellectual styles is still quite limited. Within these limited studies (e.g., Dreyer, 1975; Stansbury & Coll, 1998; Witkin & Goodenough, 1981), most studies explored the influence of different dimensions of parenting styles on field-dependence/independence (FDI, known as cognition-centered intellectual styles). Some studies indicated that paternal involvement and the children's autonomy granted by their parents had a positive effect on children's development of field independence (Type I style) (e.g., Dreyer, 1975; Dyk & Witkin, 1965; Laosa, 1980; Páramo & Tinajero, 1998). It was also indicated that punishment and coercion in parenting tended to encourage field dependence (Type II style) among children (Witkin & Goodenough, 1981). However, there are also some inconsistent findings. For example, Moskowitz, Dreyer, and Kronsberg (1981) found that parenting styles had no significant impact on children's FDI. In addition, FDI has been criticized that it actually represented ability rather than styles (McKenna, 1984; Zhang, 2004b).

Unlike other studies that explored the relationships between parenting styles and intellectual styles, one study (Stansbury & Coll, 1998) adopted the typological approach rather than the dimensional approach to examine parenting styles. Stansbury and Coll (1998) examined the association between types of parenting styles and personality types as assessed by Myers and McCaulley's (1988) Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Although the MBTI was designed to describe personality types, it has been treated as personality-centered intellectual styles in the field of styles because of its different tone from traditional theories of personality traits (Coffield et al., 2004). Stansbury and Coll (1998) found that the authoritarian parenting style (characterized by low responsiveness and high demandingness) was positively correlated with introversion (a tendency to focus on the internal world of oneself — a Type III style) and judging (a tendency to control life under structure — a Type II style). However, in Stansbury and Coll's (1998) study, the types of parenting styles were assessed by merely one question. The reliability and validity of this measure are questionable. In addition, the MBTI has been frequently criticized for its poor reliability and validity as well (Kozhevnikov, 2007).

The existing studies that investigated the relationships between parenting styles and intellectual styles have two major limitations. First, there is a lack of research that explored the relationships of parenting styles to intellectual styles by examining types of parenting styles as opposed to dimensions. To further explore the interaction of parenting dimensions, the present study adopted the typological approach as well as the dimensional approach. Second, all of the existing studies on the relationships between parenting styles and intellectual styles are based on limited models of intellectual styles (e.g., FDI, MBTI). These models are out-dated and both of them have been criticized for being too cognition-centered or too personality-centered (Sternberg, 1997). Therefore, as a recent and general model of intellectual styles that involves all of the three traditions (cognition-centered, personality-