



## The role of adolescents' perceived parental psychological control in the links between shyness and socio-emotional adjustment among youth

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to explore the moderating role of perceived parental psychological control in the links between shyness and socio-emotional adjustment in Chinese adolescents. Participants were  $N = 462$  Grade 7 and 8 Chinese adolescents (246 boys,  $M_{age} = 13.42$  years,  $SD = 8$  months) recruited from four randomly selected public schools in Shanghai, People's Republic of China. Participants completed peer assessment measures of shyness and peer victimization, sociometric nominations of peer rejection, and self-report measures of loneliness, depression, and perceived parental psychological control. Among the results, shyness was positively associated with loneliness, depressive symptoms, and peer rejection among adolescents who perceived their parents as higher in psychological control, but no significant associations were found among adolescents who perceived lower levels of parental psychological control. Results are discussed in terms of the implications of parenting practices perpetuating adjustment problems among shy adolescents in urban China.

Shyness is a temperamental trait characterized by excessive wariness, unease, and self-consciousness in contexts of social novelty and perceived social evaluation (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). There is a growing body of research which shows that in contemporary urban Chinese society, shyness in childhood and adolescence is now associated with greater internalizing (e.g., depression, loneliness) and peer relationship difficulties (e.g., peer rejection, peer victimization) (e.g., Coplan, Liu, Cao, & Chen, 2017; Ding, Weeks, Liu, Sang, & Zhou, 2015; Liu et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2017).

Given the gamut of socio-emotional problems that shy children and adolescents face, there is increased research attention on the various risk and protective factors that may influence their adjustment (Rubin et al., 2009). In the present study, we focused specifically on adolescents' perceived parental psychological control. Psychological control refers to parents' control of their child's emotional and psychological development through guilt induction, love withdrawal, and shaming (Yu, Cheah, Hart, Sun, & Olsen, 2015). The goal of the present study was to examine the potential moderating role of adolescents' perceived parental psychological control in the relations between shyness and indices of socio-emotional adjustment among Chinese adolescents.

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## 1. Psychological control, socioemotional adjustment, and cultural context

In Western societies, psychological control is perceived as a manipulative parenting technique that interferes with the individuation process during adolescence (Barber & Harmon, 2002). As such, psychological control is thought to increase adolescents' risk for internalizing (e.g., depression) and peer relationship difficulties (e.g., peer victimization) (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005; Batanova & Loukas, 2014; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyten, Duriez, & Goossens, 2005; Werner, Van der Graaff, Meeus, & Branje, 2016).

However, in East-Asian cultures that emphasize interdependency, maintaining interpersonal relationships, and group harmony over independence and individual achievement, psychological control is used to teach children to behave in ways that are consistent with the society's values (e.g., Fung, 1999; Ho, 1986). Notwithstanding, growing evidence reveals that psychological control is associated with higher levels of socio-emotional problems among children and adolescents in East Asian contexts (e.g., Barber et al., 2005; Gershoff et al., 2010; Li, Zhang, & Wang, 2015; Shek, 2007; Soenens, Park, Vansteenkiste, & Mouratidis, 2012; Sun, Liang, & Bian, 2017; Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005).

## 2. Shyness and psychological control

Most of the research on Western children and adolescents has linked shyness to over-protective parenting (e.g., Coplan, Arbeau, & Armer, 2008; Hastings, Rubin, & DeRose, 2005; Rubin & Burgess, 2002; Rubin, Burgess, & Hastings, 2002; Rubin, Cheah, & Fox, 2001). Over-protective parenting refers to a parent's intrusive and excessive attention to a child's activities (Rubin & Burgess, 2002). Over-protective parents over-manage the situations children are exposed to, restrict children's behaviors, and discourage children's independence. It is purported that over-protective parenting contributes to a child's wariness and anxiety because it communicates that the world is a dangerous place over which the child has little control (Rapee, 2011). As well, over-protective parenting is believed to interfere with children's development of self-regulatory capacities and coping skills, which in turn, may exacerbate children's shyness (e.g., Hastings et al., 2005; Rubin et al., 2001; Van Zalk & Kerr, 2011).

Moreover, results from past studies have documented that shy children are at increased risk for internalizing and social difficulties when they are exposed to over-protective parenting. For example, Rubin et al. (2002) reported that shyness at age 2-years was predictive of greater social anxiety at age 4-years only for children with over-protective parents. Additionally, Coplan et al. (2008) found that in early childhood, shy children whose parents were over-protective experienced more loneliness and less peer acceptance.

Similar to over-protective parenting, psychological control is intrusive and inhibits autonomy (Barber & Harmon, 2002). However, little research has explored the association between shyness and psychological control. Nelson, Hart, Wu, and Jin (2006) found that psychological control (specifically shaming) was related to child shyness in China. Furthermore, few studies have examined whether psychological control influences the association between shyness and children's adjustment problems. Miller, Tserakhava, and Miller (2011) found that psychological control was associated with greater peer exclusion for shy Canadian girls but not for shy boys. Further, Zarra-Nezhad et al. (2014) reported that psychological control predicted increased internalizing problems for Finnish children with high levels of shyness. Notwithstanding these findings, it is less understood if perceived parental psychological control moderates the relations between shyness and socio-emotional adjustment among adolescents in non-Western societies.

## 3. The present study

The primary aim of the present study was to explore the moderating role of adolescents' perceived parental psychological control in the relations between shyness and indices of socio-emotional adjustment among Chinese youth. Drawing upon the theoretical and empirical literature, it was hypothesized that both shyness and adolescents' perceived parental psychological control would be positively associated with socio-emotional problems. It was further speculated that adolescents' perceived parental psychological control would moderate links between shyness and indices of socio-emotional difficulties. Specifically, it was anticipated that the relations between shyness and indices of maladjustment would be stronger among adolescents who reported higher levels of parental psychological control (i.e., exacerbating process) and weaker among adolescents who reported lower levels of parental psychological control (i.e., buffering process).

Some hypotheses regarding adolescents' gender were also forwarded. Drawing upon previous research, we expected Chinese adolescent girls to be rated as more shy (Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005; Chen, Wang, & Cao, 2011; Liu et al., 2015), experience higher quality peer relationships (e.g., peer acceptance) (Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2009; Liu et al., 2015), and report lower emotional distress than boys (Chen et al., 2009, 2011). As well, it was anticipated that boys would report more psychological control given that parents encourage more independent behaviors, to develop social relationships, and to achieve career success among boys whereas parents encourage dependency among girls (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Luyten, 2010). Finally, on a more speculative basis, we also postulated some moderating effects of gender. It was hypothesized that shy boys would perceive more parental psychological control than girls given that parents tend to discourage shyness in boys whereas parents are more accepting and more likely to reward shyness in girls (Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004; Eggum et al., 2009; Engfer, 1993; Simpson & Stevenson-Hinde, 1985). Further, because shy behaviors violate gender norms regarding male dominance and assertion (Doey, Coplan, & Kingsbury, 2014), it was anticipated that shyness would be more strongly associated with socio-emotional maladjustment (particularly in the peer domain) among boys compared to girls.

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