



Parental attachment, self-control, and depressive symptoms in Chinese and Italian adolescents: Test of a mediation model



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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the relationship between parental attachment and depressive symptoms as well as the mediating effect of self-control in two different cultures. Samples were 1305 Chinese and 1327 Italian adolescents. They completed the Inventory of Parental and Peer Attachment, the Self-Restraint Subscale of the Adolescents' Self-Consciousness Scale, and the Children's Depression Inventory that assessed parental attachment, self-control, and depressive symptoms, respectively. Results showed that: (1) Few cultural differences in depressive symptom were observed. (2) Parental attachment and self-control were negatively related to depressive symptoms in both cultures. (3) Self-control mediated the relations between parental attachment and depressive symptoms in both cultures. (4) The direct and indirect effects were invariant across cultures. In conclusion, parental attachment and self-control are important for adolescents' depressive symptoms in Chinese and Italian adolescents.

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Depression is an emotional problem frequently occurring during adolescence (Buist, Deković, Meeus, & van Aken, 2004), with an estimated one year prevalence of 4–5% in adolescents (Costello, Egger, & Angold, 2005; Costello, Erkanli, & Angold, 2006). It is a worldwide mental health problem that disturbs adolescents and is a major risk factor for suicide for this age group (Lopez, Mathers, Ezzati, Jamison, & Murray, 2006). Therefore, investigation of this issue is highly necessary and important.

Positive parenting process (e.g., parental warmth, autonomy granting, parental support) have been found to be negatively linked with adolescents' depressive symptoms (Donnelly, 1999; Herman-Stahl, 1999; Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2006). Among a number of parenting factors, parental attachment is an important one. It has been discovered that secure parental attachment (or high attachment quality with parents) is negatively related to adolescents' depressive symptoms in different cultures (Delvecchio, 2013; Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000; Zhang, Zhang, Yang, & Zhang, 2010). In addition to this direct association, some studies have also revealed that parental attachment influences depressive symptoms through different self-related variables (Delvecchio, 2013; Kenny, Moilanen, Lomax, & Brabeck, 1993; Lu & Zhang, 2008).

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However, there is scarce study that has directly compared the relationships between parental attachment, the self, and depressive symptoms in adolescents in different cultures. To fill the gap in the literature, the current study aimed to investigate the relationships between parental attachment and depressive symptoms as well as the possible mediating effect of self-control in Chinese and Italian adolescents.

We chose self-control as mediator with theoretical and practical concerns. First, Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory assumes that secure attachment with caregiver may help children establish a positive internal working model of the self, which therefore reduces subsequent internalizing problems such as depression. Some studies have supported this model by examining the role of self-esteem (Delvecchio, 2013), self-efficacy (Lu & Zhang, 2008), and self-view (Kenny et al., 1993). However, the self is a complicated construct which includes not only self-evaluation but it also comprises self-experience and self-control (Nie, Li, Dou, & Situ, 2014). Therefore, investigation of the role of self-control may provide further support for the attachment theory. Second, some studies have revealed that self-control can be improved (e.g., Muraven, 2010) and thus may decrease subsequent undesired problems (e.g., Denson, Capper, Oaten, Friese, & Schofield, 2011). In this sense, increasing one's self-control may be beneficial to the intervention for adolescents' depressive symptoms.

Relationships between parental attachment, self-control, and depressive symptoms

Parental attachment refers to an affectional bond with parents (Bowlby, 1969). Interactions with attachment figures are stored in one's memory as mental representations of attachment figures' response (working models of others) and representations of the self (working models of self), which may impact subsequent emotional and behavioral problems (Bowlby, 1969, 1980). There is strong empirical evidence that insecure attachment with parents (or low attachment quality) leads to increased internalizing problems, such as depression (Armsden, McCauley, Greenberg, Burke, & Mitchell, 1990; Delvecchio, 2013; Kobak, Sudler, & Gamble, 1991; for a review see Greenberg, 1999; Groh, Roisman, van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Fearon, 2012). These findings consistently suggest that secure parental attachment is a protective factor of adolescents' depression symptoms.

Self-control refers to the ability to change or override one's inner responses (e.g., thought, feelings, and impulses) to interrupt the tendencies of acting on undesired behaviors (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). DSM-IV lists a set of disorders (including mood disorders) whose hallmark feature focuses on poor self-control (cf. DeWall, Gilman, Sharif, Carboni, & Rice, 2012). Prior studies have consistently found that people with high self-control report fewer depressive symptoms (DeWall et al., 2012; Nie et al., 2014; Tangney et al., 2004). Some scholars have also revealed that adolescents with depressed mood show lower self-control than the ones without such symptoms (Cataldo, Nobile, Lorusso, Battaglia, & Molteni, 2005). Collectively, these findings suggest that self-control is negatively related to depressive symptoms.

The relationship between parental attachment and self-control could be understood in two theories. First, as noted above, attachment theory proposes that early attachment may influence later emotional problems through internal working model of the self (Bowlby, 1969). Several variables related to internal working model are thought to be potential mediators in the relations between attachment and adolescents' problem behaviors, and some of them (e.g., emotion regulation) particularly center on self-control (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010). Previous study has demonstrated that through repeated successful interaction with caregivers, individuals may develop a sense of self-worth about themselves and better emotional control ability, which in turn helps to regulate inappropriate emotions in later life (Cassidy, 1994). Recent study has supported the view that emotional regulation may mediate the relationships between attachment to parents and depression in adolescents (Kullik & Petermann, 2013). The second framework is Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory. Although this criminological theory focuses on the effect of low self-control on criminal and deviant behavior, it appears to be very appropriate to understand the relationship between parenting and self-control. The self-control theory assumes that parents' monitoring and recognizing of the child's undesired behaviors and disciplining such behaviors help increase the child's self-control ability (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Furthermore, this theory also considers that a close parent–child relationship (i.e., parental attachment) may promote parents to spend more time with their children so that they have more opportunities to socialize them. This may make parents' monitoring, recognizing and disciplining of the child's unwanted behaviors more effectively, which suggests that parental attachment is a distal precursor of self-control. Several findings have demonstrated that secure parental attachment and positive parenting process promote self-control ability and self-regulation behaviors during adolescence (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007).

Cultural similarities in the relationships between parental attachment, self-control, and depressive symptoms in adolescents

Although little has been done to directly compare the complete associations between adolescents' parental attachment, self-control, and depressive symptoms in different cultures, some comparative researches have addressed the links between parenting process, self-control, and psychological adjustment (e.g., Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2006, 2007), which shed light on the present study.

First, previous parallel studies have examined the role of parental attachment in depressive symptoms in different cultures and nations, finding that secure attachment with parents is negative associated with reduced depression (Delvecchio, 2013; Lu & Zhang, 2008). Furthermore, Vazsonyi and Belliston (2006) directly compared the influence of parenting process on

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