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The associations between self-consciousness and internalizing/externalizing problems among Chinese adolescents

Yan-Gang Nie^{a,b,*}, Jian-Bin Li^{c,1}, Kai Dou^d, Qiao-Min Situ^e^a Department of Psychology, School of Education, Guangzhou University, 510006, China^b Psychological and Behavioral Research Center of Cantonese, Guangzhou University, 510006, China^c Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialization, University of Padua, 35131, Italy^d School of Management, Jinan University, 510632, China^e eBusiness College, Guangzhou Vocational College of Technology and Business, 511442, China

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ABSTRACT

Self-consciousness is considered as a multifaceted and hierarchical construct that includes self-evaluation, self-experience, and self-control. This study assumes that self-consciousness is a preventative factor of internalizing and externalizing problems among Chinese adolescents. 1202 Chinese adolescents from grade 7 to grade 12 participated in this study by completing a battery of questionnaires that assessed self-consciousness and internalizing/externalizing problems. The results showed that, after controlling demographic variables, some lower-order factors (i.e., *sense of satisfaction*, *sense of anxiety*, *social self*, *self-restraint*, *self-esteem*, and *self-monitoring*) and higher-order subscales (i.e., *self-evaluation* and *self-experience*) of self-consciousness significantly predicted internalizing problems, while externalizing problems were predicted by several lower-order factors (i.e., *self-restraint*, *sense of satisfaction*, and *self-monitoring*) and higher-order subscales (i.e., *self-control* and *self-experience*). In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Chinese adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems are related with different aspects of self-consciousness, which sheds light on the prevention into adolescents' problem behaviors.

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Introduction

Internalizing problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, etc.) are described as inner-directed and generating distress in the individual, while externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, delinquency, conduct problem, etc.) are described as outer-directed and generating discomfort and conflict in the surrounding environment (Forns, Abad, & Kirchner, 2012). These problems are common during adolescent period. Studies have revealed that the occurrence rate of internalizing problems (e.g., depression) among Chinese adolescents ranges from 23.5% to 44.2% (Lu & Zhang, 2008; Wang & Ding, 2003). Recent studies report that

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, School of Education, Guangzhou University, 510006, China.

E-mail address: niezi66@21cn.com (Y.-G. Nie).

¹ Yan-Gang Nie and Jian-Bin Li are co-first authors.

14%–29% Chinese adolescents show various externalizing problems and the trend of this issue is increasing year by year (Guo, Li, Huang, & Wang, 2012; Jing, 2010; Shi, Lu, & Liang, 2009). Therefore, it is of great significance to study Chinese adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems.

A great number of preventers of adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems have been identified, such as parenting style (Bayer, Sanson, & Hemphill, 2006), personality traits (Pursell, Laursen, Rubin, Booth-LaForce, & Rose-Krasnor, 2008), psychological resilience (Pietrzak, Johnson, Goldstein, Malley, & Southwick, 2009), parental attachment (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; Buist, Deković, Meeus, & van Aken, 2004), and perceived social support (Klineberg et al., 2006; Sun, Guan, Qin, Zhang, & Fan, 2013). In addition to these factors, we reckon that the *self* may be another important preventer of such problems. Studies addressing the links between self-related variables and internalizing and externalizing problems reveal that adolescents who have high level of self-esteem, self-control, self-concept, and self-worth are less likely to engage in internalizing and externalizing problems than those whose self-esteem, self-control, self-concept, and self-worth are low (Denson, DeWall, & Finkel, 2012; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Harter & Jackson, 1993; Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998; Lee & Stone, 2012; Renouf & Harter, 1990; Schwartz et al., 2006; Trzesniewski et al., 2006).

Although these findings provide insights into how the self is linked with adolescents' problem behaviors, we argue that it may not be completely suitable to apply the self theories and instruments developed in individualistic cultures to Chinese adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems because the self is a culturally-grounded construct and in different cultures the self may have distinct expression of cognition, affection, and motivation (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, it is demonstrated that the self in individualistic cultures (e.g., the U. S.) is independently construed while it is interdependently construed in collectivistic cultures (e.g., China). However, few studies utilize indigenous self theory and instrument to investigate problem behaviors among Chinese adolescents. To fill in this gap, the present study intends to employ an instrument developed in light of an indigenous self theory (i.e., the self-consciousness theory) to investigate how the self is associated with internalizing and externalizing problems among Chinese adolescents.

Overview of the self-consciousness theory

The self-consciousness theory is based on two primary premises: (1) The self is an agency to make evaluations, experience feelings, and exert self-control (Cheng & Zeng, 2000; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; Jia, 2001; Piers & Harris, 1977; Scheier & Carver, 1985), and (2) the self is a multifaceted and hierarchical construct (Harter, Bresnick, Bouchey, & Whitesell, 1997; Linville, 1985; Marsh, 1990; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976; Song & Hattie, 1984). In line with these premises, self-consciousness is defined as a multifaceted and hierarchical system that reflects the associations between the self and others and the world by means of self-evaluation, self-experience and self-control (Nie, Zhang, Peng, & Ding, 2007).

This theory postulates that self-consciousness includes three main components (i.e., *self-evaluation*, *self-experience*, and *self-control*) and each component is made up by three factors (Fig. 1). As the cognitive component of self-consciousness, *self-evaluation* refers to people's assessment toward different roles and aspects of the self, including appearance, socializing, and morality. *Self-experience* is the affective component of self-consciousness which refers to people's positive and negative feelings about themselves such as self-esteem, sense of anxiety, and sense of satisfaction. *Self-control*, the motor component of self-consciousness, refers to one's ability to make their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in line with social norms and personal standards, including initiative, self-restraint, and self-monitoring. Therefore, high level of self-consciousness can be indicated as positive evaluation about one's appearance (appearance self), socializing (social self), and morality (moral self), high positive experience (self-esteem and sense of satisfaction) and low negative experience (sense of anxiety), and high

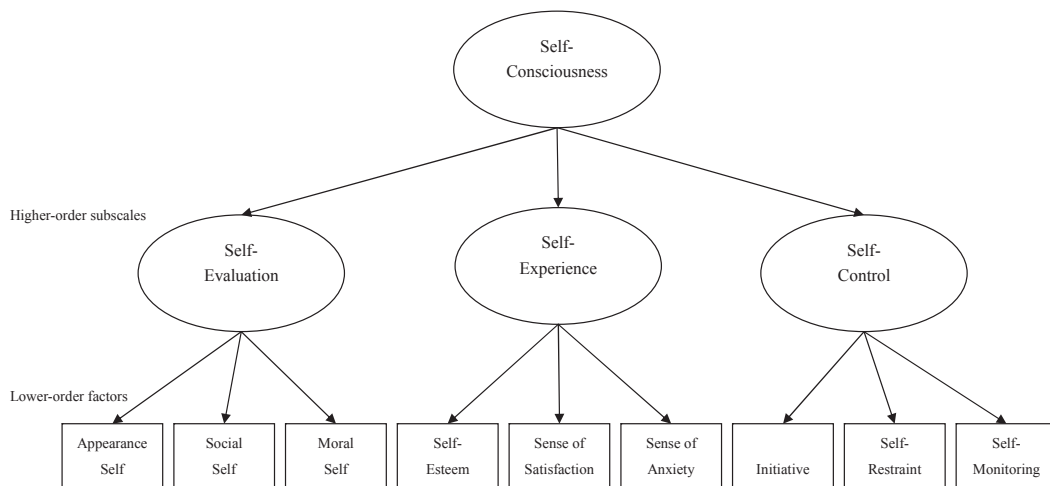


Fig. 1. The structure of the self-consciousness model.

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