

# Parenting Style and Adolescents' School Performance in Mainland China

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Parenting style, as a widely studied topic, has been used by researchers and educators in the US to predict students' academic achievements. Despite its theoretical and practical significance, no much work has been conducted to test the generalizability of parenting research framed in the Western culture to the Chinese population. Parenting styles in this study were measured by the PAQ (parenting authority questionnaire) filled out by 122 eighth graders in mainland China and the relationship between their school report grades and the parenting styles they received was examined. Our results indicate that although authoritative parenting style may be universally beneficial to the human species including the Chinese population, authoritarian parenting style, as one of the most popular parenting styles among Chinese parents, is closely associated with high school performance of adolescents.

*Keywords:* parenting styles, school performance, adolescents

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether western framework on parenting style was valid for the Chinese population, the relation between parenting styles and Chinese adolescents' school performances, and how different family members view the parenting separately. Because parenting has been extensively studied in the US but not China, this study sets the foundation for Chinese parenting research. Also, since Chinese American students tend to perform better academically than other ethnic groups, the study is also an attempt to examine whether parenting of Chinese parents is different from that of European American parents.

## Theoretical Framework

There are a lot of researches on differential school performance across ethnic groups, including Chinese, Latino and African American students (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). There is a broad agreement that Chinese Americans obtain more years of schooling and higher achievement test scores than other ethnic groups, regardless of social class (CHAO & Sue, 1996; Kim & Chun, 1994). Explanations that have been proposed to for these differences include: (1) differences in motivation to improve life (Buriel & Cardoza, 1988); (2) differences in parents' education levels and socioeconomic status (Laosa, 1978; 1982); (3) differences in parental expectations for children's achievement (Wong, 1990); and (4) differences in the congruence between the cultural practices of the home and that of the school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Trueba, 1988). These explanations all involve parental influence in some way.

### Western Conceptual Framework of Parenting Styles

For years, researches on parenting have focused primarily on the effects of parenting styles on students' developments. The concept of parenting style was initiated by Baumrind (1971; 1978). According to her classification, parents were divided into four categories on the basis of the two dimensions of demandingness and responsiveness. Parental responsiveness refers to the extent to which parents flexibly attend to their children's needs and opinions in an accepting and supportive way. Parental demandingness refers to the degree to which parents expect and demand their children to behave in a desirable manner (Baumrind, 1991a; 1991b). As shown in Figure 1, the four categories of parents are: authoritative parents (both responsive and demanding), authoritarian parents (demanding but not responsive), permissive parents (responsive but not demanding) and rejecting parents (neither demanding nor responsive). The rejecting parenting style was not included in the present study because of the extremely low percentage of rejecting parenting style among parents (Shaffer, 2001).

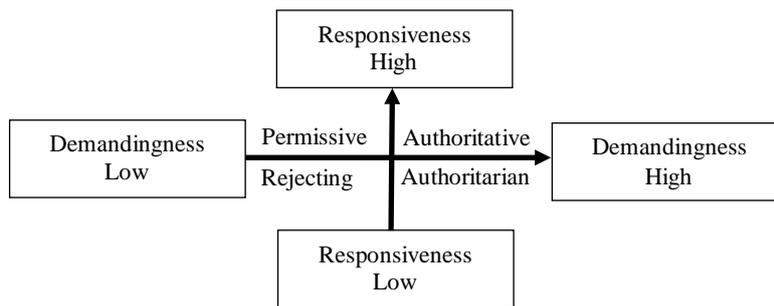


Figure 1. The four categories of parents.

The literature provides consistent evidence that parental warmth, emotional support, appropriate granting of autonomy and clear, bidirectional communication—the features of the authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 1971; 1978; 1991a; 1991b)—lead to positive developmental outcomes in children and adolescents (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Youngsters with authoritative parents tend to have high scores on school performance, social development and self-esteem (Baumrind, 1991a, 1991b, 1989; Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

An authoritarian parenting style emphasizes blind obedience and favors punitive discipline. Empirical studies showed that children with authoritarian parents tended to exhibit anxious and withdrawn behaviors, lack self-reliance, rely on authority figures to make decisions (Baumrind, 1971, 1967; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Baumrind & Black, 1967), and were more extrinsically motivated in learning (Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993). A combination of these factors may lead students to perform less satisfactorily than those who experience authoritative parenting.

A permissive parenting style features little control over children's behaviors, rare use of punishment in homes and excessive permission in letting children make their own decisions. Children reared by permissive parents tend to be less self-reliant, less tolerant of frustration, less likely to persist on learning tasks (Baumrind, 1971, 1967; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Baumrind & Black, 1967), and less likely to be intrinsically motivated (Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993). Not surprisingly, children with permissive parents tend to obtain lower academic performances than other children.

### Is This Framework Valid for the Mainland Chinese Population?

The above discussion suggests that authoritative parenting is closely related to children's better school performance, whereas authoritarian and permissive parenting tended to be associated with less satisfactory

school performances (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). However, these results are based on European American students and may not apply to other ethnic groups, such as Chinese Americans. In fact, the parenting styles of Chinese American parents tend to be authoritarian, but their children have higher GPA (grade point average) and more years of schooling than other ethnic groups including European American students (Baumrind, 1968). This raises the question that why Chinese American students, whose parents tend to be more authoritarian, have better school performances.

There are several possibilities, one of which is peer influence. Chinese parents tend to choose students who perform well in school as friends for their own children. For Chinese adolescents, the primary way to compete for teachers' attention and peers' friendship is to perform better in school (CHAO, 1994; M. McBride-Chang & L. McBride-Chang, 1998). With the help of the friends chosen by parents, students learn good study habits and self-identify as the excellent students. The second contributing factor may be the importance of education in the Chinese culture and Chinese parents' high expectations to their children. Compared with European American parents, who generally expect their children to graduate from college, Asian American parents expect their children to obtain a graduate or professional degree. In addition, Asian American parents are less satisfied with grades of B's and C's than European and Latino American parents, and attribute success in school to effort rather than innate ability (Kim & CHUN, 1994; Hollway, 1988; Stevenson, Lee, CHEN, Stigler, Hsu, & Kitamura, 1990). The third contributing factor may be that the authoritarian parenting style is deeply rooted and highly desirable in the Chinese culture. "The subordinate member is required to display loyalty and respect to the senior member, who is required to responsibly and justly govern, teach and discipline the younger members" (CHAO, 1994, p. 1113).

### **Parental Perception of Parents and Adolescents**

Although there are some studies on parenting either from parents' or children's perspective, the majority of research has been focusing on how children view the parenting they received from parents. For example, most studies on parenting styles relied on children's self-reports on the parenting they were receiving, without considering the parents' opinions of the parenting they were providing. Smetana (1995) claimed that adolescents tend to view the parenting they receive from the family as more permissive or more authoritarian than their parents, but there was no empirical evidence to support this statement.

A related question is that whether different family members view parenting in the same way. Although CHAO (1994) examined mothers' beliefs about their roles of parenting in children's school performances, he did not compare mothers' perceptions of their parenting with children's perceptions of the parenting they received.

Chinese adolescents may view the parenting they receive differently from European peers because of Chinese culture, which values obedience to parents and also believes "some aspects of strictness may be equated with parental concern, caring, or involvement" (CHAO, 1994, p. 1112). CHAO claimed that Chinese adolescents might interpret the parenting received as more loving and less demanding than their European American peers, although he did not support this statement with empirical evidence.

Another issue that has not been addressed is the differentiation of fathers' and mothers' parenting within the families. Researches have often focused on the parenting of only one parent (usually the mother), neglecting the unique and sometimes differential influence of fathers on children (Block, 1983; Demo, Small, & Savin-Williams, 1987; Lamb, 1997). Although Buri developed the PAQ (parental authority questionnaire) to measure fathers' and mothers' parenting separately, no further studies have used in this questionnaire to

examine the different roles parents might play in child-rearing activities (Buri, 1991).

The present study examined two issues: (1) whether Chinese parents and adolescents differ in their perceptions of parenting styles; and (2) how parenting styles of Chinese parents are associated with adolescents' school performances.

### Experiment

The present study was a correlation study investigating the relationship between Chinese parents' parenting styles and adolescents' academic performances. Parenting styles were measured using the PAQ (Buri, 1991). Information on adolescents' school performances was obtained from school reports and included three core subjects (i.e., Chinese, English and mathematics). One hundred and twenty-two eighth graders were recruited from a middle school in North China. The average age of the participants is 14.7 with a standard deviation of 2.1. Thirty of the parents were high school graduates, 52% were two-year college graduates, and 9% were four-year university graduates.

The PAQ, based on the original attributes of parenting styles derived by Baumrind (1971), was designed to solicit adolescents' perceptions of mothers' parenting. Five other versions of PAQ were developed for this study: a version to examine adolescents' perceptions of the parenting they received from fathers, two mothers' versions to examine mothers' perceptions of their own parenting and their spouses' parenting respectively, and two fathers' versions to examine fathers' perceptions of their own parenting and their spouses' parenting respectively. All of the questionnaires were translated into Chinese prior to administration. The Chinese versions were back-translated twice to correct subtle shifts in meaning.

### Results and Discussion

Internal reliabilities for the three styles of parenting were 0.67 (permissive), 0.74 (authoritarian) and 0.75 (authoritative). Compared with Buri's (1991) report, the reliabilities are adequate, considering the translation is Sue. The PAQ was administered a second time four weeks after the first administration with 60 students. The two testing sessions yielded the following test-retest reliabilities ( $N = 60$ ): 0.63 (permissive), 0.75 (authoritarian) and 0.70 (authoritative).

The distribution of parenting styles was generally consistent with Smetana's (1995) study. In our study, the three-type classification worked very well: 84% of the parents were classified as permissive, authoritarian or authoritative, whereas the remainder (16%) of parents were classified as "undifferentiated" (neither authoritarian and authoritative, nor permissive).

According to both mothers' and students' reports, students with authoritarian mothers scored significantly higher than those with authoritative and permissive mothers on the total of core courses (Chinese, English and math),  $F_{(2, 44)} = 4.4$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), and the English score,  $F_{(2, 103)} = 3.3$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). According to adolescents' reports, students with permissive mothers scored significantly lower than those with authoritarian and authoritative mothers on the total of core courses,  $F_{(2, 58)} = 3.5$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). Using adolescents' reports, there is no effect of fathers' parenting on any school performance measures.

Adolescents viewed their mothers' parenting as more authoritative than their fathers' parenting. Mothers viewed themselves as less authoritative than fathers' and adolescents' view on mothers' parenting. Fathers view themselves as both more permissive and authoritarian than mothers' and adolescents' view on fathers' parenting.

### Educational and Scientific Significance

The present study tested the generalizability of parenting research framed in the Western culture to the Chinese population by using the traditional methodology of aggregating the dimensions to form parenting styles. The current study sets the stage for further examination of parenting research on Chinese population and also indicates the possibility of benefiting Chinese population with western parenting study results.

The study also shows that Chinese culture may be the key factor influencing the interpretation and impact of parenting styles. Although authoritative parenting style may be universally beneficial to the human species including the Chinese population, authoritarian parenting style, as one of the most popular parenting styles among Chinese parents, is closely associated with high school performance of adolescents.

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