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BRIEF REPORT

Parenting and Socialization of Only Children in Urban China: An Example of Authoritative Parenting

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ABSTRACT. The authors report a semistructured interview of 328 urban Chinese parents regarding their parenting beliefs and practices with respect to their only children. Statistical analyses of the coded parental interviews and peer nomination data from the children show none of the traditional Chinese parenting or child behaviors that have been widely reported in the literature. The parenting of only children in urban China was predominantly authoritative rather than authoritarian. The parenting strategies and beliefs were child-centered, egalitarian, and warmth-oriented rather than control-oriented. Chinese parents encouraged prosocial assertiveness and discouraged behavioral constraint and modesty. The parenting of only children was also gender egalitarian in that there were few gender differences in child social behaviors and little gender differential parenting and socialization of these only children. Together with other recent studies, these findings and conclusions challenge the traditionalist view of Chinese parenting and beliefs and behaviors about child socialization.

Keywords: child socialization, only-child, parenting belief, urban China

The past 20–30 years have seen extensive applications of Western parenting theories on Chinese populations (Q. Wang & Chang, 2009). Most notable among the existing Western parenting theories are Baumrind's authoritative-authoritarian parenting framework (Baumrind, 1989) and the parental acceptance-rejection

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paradigm (Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2005). Both theories address parenting in terms of child-supportive (e.g., being warm and responsive) versus child-restrictive (e.g., being controlling and punitive) behaviors on the part of the parents and positive and negative functional outcomes on the part of the children. Whereas most of these applied studies support theoretical and functional similarities between Chinese and Western parenting (Q. Wang & Chang, 2009), there are controversies about Chinese parenting that may or may not be fully explained by Western parenting frameworks.

One particular area of controversy pertains to parental control. Despite the empirical evidence suggesting cross-cultural similarities that have been reported in both the Chinese (Y. Wang & Chang, 2008) and the English literature (Q. Wang & Chang, 2009), the view persists that Chinese parenting is authoritarian and restrictive, and parent–child relationship is authoritarian rather than egalitarian consisting of one-way parental demand and control (Chao, 2001). This presumed Chinese focus on control is attributed to Confucianism. Researchers have argued that due to the Confucian heritage, Chinese children may react to control positively, and thus, parental control and warmth may have different meanings in Chinese contexts (Chao, 2001). Another controversy concerns Chinese children's social behavior and the related socialization beliefs of their parents. There is a stereotyped belief that Chinese children are more reserved, inhibited, and shy than their Western peers and that being so does not represent maladjustment but is encouraged in the Chinese socialization process, including parenting (Chen, Dong, & Zhou, 1997). Social inhibition was found to be positively associated with peer acceptance and other adjustment indicators, including leadership roles (Chen et al., 1997). This belief prevails despite research showing that Chinese socialization beliefs were similar to the socialization beliefs of the West in terms of promoting prosocial leadership and discouraging social inhibition (Chang, 2004; Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005) and withdrawn Chinese children were not popular but were rejected or ignored and had no social influence (Y. Wang & Chang, 2008). A third area of contention concerns potential gender differential parenting and gender differences in children's social behavior. For example, it is commonly believed that Chinese are less gender egalitarian (see Eaton, 1998) and Chinese parents treat sons and daughters more differentially than Westerners (Su & Hynie, 2011).

These traditional views about Chinese parenting may no longer be true in the context of the rapid social development, including the single-child policy. The purpose of the present study was to help resolve these controversies about Chinese parenting by focusing on the unique context of the single-child policy and on the characteristics of Chinese only children. We conducted semistructured interviews of a sample of urban Chinese parents about their parenting behavior and beliefs and about their children's social behaviors. The parenting behavior component of this study addressed both how Chinese parents conceptualized and practiced parental warmth and control and the extent to which the parental exercise

of warmth and control also respected the child's autonomy and independence. The belief part of this study included both parental goals and expectations for their children's social development and parental beliefs about carrying out these goals. One specific area of investigation was the extent to which Chinese parents anchored their socialization goals on traditional Confucian values versus modern or Western ideologies. Gender-related parenting beliefs and views were sought and analyzed to assess the long-held belief that Chinese parents are particularly gender nonegalitarian. These parenting and child social development issues were examined within the context of single-child and thus single-gender parenting.

Method

The sample consisted of 328 primary school first-grade children (M age = 7.26 years, $SD = 1.03$ years; 190 boys) and their parents in Shenzhen, China. The average age of the fathers was 35.92 years ($SD = 6.30$ years) and of the mothers was 33.40 years ($SD = 4.56$ years), and 43.49% of the fathers and 38.31% of the mothers had obtained a college education. The parents were asked eight open-ended questions that focused on parental beliefs about child socialization, the parent–child relationship, and parenting behaviors. The questions and responses are reported later in the study. Two coders independently coded the open-ended responses. Interrater agreement was above 90% for all of the ratings. The children filled out 12 peer nomination questions. The items were derived from the literature and have been used with Chinese children elsewhere (e.g., Chang, 2004). There were four prosocial-leadership items (e.g., kids who are leaders), five withdrawal items (e.g., kids who are often alone), and two aggression items (e.g., kids who start fights). For each item, the students were asked to nominate up to three children from the class. All of the nomination items were standardized within classes. The internal consistency reliability based on z scores was .91 for prosocial-leadership, .77 for social withdrawal, and .76 for aggression. The children were also asked to nominate those children whom they considered friends. This single-item unlimited nomination formed the peer acceptance variable.

Results and Discussion

Parental Perceptions of Child Social Behavior

The parents were first asked to describe what they see as desirable or their perceived strengths of their children's social behavior and what they see as undesirable or their perceived weaknesses of their children's social behavior. The desirable behaviors were coded into two variables, prosocial-leadership and traditionally good child. Prosocial-leadership was identified by such exemplary comments as "good at making friends; gets along with others; has many friends." A traditionally good child was identified by such exemplary comments as "quiet and reticent;

self-constraining; keeping to oneself." All 328 parents provided valid responses to this question. Of the total, 284, or 87%, reported prosocial-leadership characteristics as desirable. Only 44, or 13%, of the parents did not believe these types of prosocial-leadership behaviors to be social strengths. In contrast, only 86, or 26%, mentioned traditional good child characteristics as social strengths, whereas the majority, or 74%, of the sample did not mention these characteristics as desirable social strategies. A chi-square test (McNemar's test), $\chi^2(1, N = 328) = 171.72$, $p < .001$, suggested significant differences in these response patterns. Fifty-five, or 17%, of the respondents mentioned both types of behaviors as social strengths. Two hundred twenty-nine (70%) reported only prosocial behaviors and 31 (9%) reported only traditional behaviors as desirable.

Parental perceived weaknesses were coded into three variables, which were externalizing problems (e.g., having fights, verbally aggressive, disruptive), internalizing problems (e.g., shy, timid, fearful), and single-child problems (e.g., selfish, spoiled, disrespectful). Of 328 valid respondents, 47, or 14%, of the parental responses fell into the single-child problem category; 104, or 32%, of the parents reported externalizing problems, whereas 203, or 62%, did not report externalizing problems; and 168, or 51%, reported internalizing problems, whereas 160, or 49%, did not report internalizing problems. In a comparison of internal and external problems McNemar's test), $\chi^2(1, N = 307) = 16.40$, $p < .001$, showed significant differences, with more respondents reporting internalizing problems. One hundred fifty-three (47%) mentioned only internalizing problems, 89 (27%) reported only externalizing problems, 15 reported both internalizing and externalizing problems, and 50 reported neither problem.

These results support our view that contemporary Chinese parents are not as traditional as depicted in some of the existing literature. Chinese parental beliefs about social competence are highly consistent with the reported beliefs of Western parents, and, contrary to the belief about the sanctioning of shyness in Chinese children, Chinese parents do not endorse social withdrawal or behavioral constraints in socializing their children. These results are consistent with the recent finding that shyness is a disadvantage to the new generation of urban children in China (Chen et al., 2005).

Parental Perceptions of Parent–Child Relationships

The parents were then asked to describe the strengths and weaknesses of their parent–child relationships. The strengths were coded according to two variables. One, labeled as the egalitarian relationship, exemplified more egalitarian and two-way parent–child relationships that were respectful of the child's interests (e.g., we believe in two-way communication; our relationship is two-way and democratic; parents have authority but also respect the child's interests). The other variable, which was labeled as the authoritarian relationship, exemplified traditional, authoritarian, and one-way parent–child relations (e.g., parents command and the

child listens; a child must be obedient; child should obey the parents). Out of 328 respondents, 250, or 76%, reported parent–child relationships that can be defined as egalitarian, whereas 78, or approximately one fourth, of the responses were not characteristic of egalitarian parent–child relationships. One hundred thirty-eight, or 42%, were classified as authoritarian and 184, or 56%, were not classified as authoritarian. These response patterns were significantly different than equal distribution, $\chi^2(1, N = 322) = 54.52, p < .001$. Considering these two classifications together, 81, or 25%, of the responses represented both egalitarian and authoritarian characteristics. One hundred sixty-nine, or over 51%, could be defined as only egalitarian, whereas 57, or 17%, could be defined as only authoritarian.

The perceived relationship weaknesses were coded into five categories, which were dependency problems (e.g., the child is too dependent on parents), communication problems (e.g., our child and we have difficulty communicating), disobedience problems (e.g., the child disobeys the parents), aggression problems (e.g., the child fights the parents), and single-child problems (e.g., the parents indulge the child). The last three categories received fewer responses and were collapsed into one category to simplify the analyses. Ninety respondents did not provide answers about weaknesses. Out of the remaining 238 responses, 64 (27%) reported communication problems, 72 (30%) believed that a child should not be too dependent on the parents, and 102 (43%) reported disobedience, aggression, and single-child problems. These response patterns were significantly different across the three categories, $\chi^2(2, N = 238) = 10.12, p < .01$. The parents perceived far more disobedient or externalizing problems than the other two types of parent–child relationship problems.

These results support our prediction that Chinese parents believed in an egalitarian rather than an authoritarian parent–child relationship. The parents preferred two-way communication over one-way parental authority in resolving parent–child conflicts and viewed communication and parent–child interaction as the main focus areas for improving parent–child relationships. Similar to their Western counterparts, Chinese parents also perceived their child's excessive dependence or disobedience as potential parent–child relationship problems.

Parental Beliefs About Parenting

The parents were asked to list the strengths and weaknesses in their parenting behavior. The responses about perceived parenting strengths were grouped in two categories of control and discipline and warmth and support. Each of these two categories was coded on two dimensions, reciprocal parenting behavior and unilateral parenting behavior. Reciprocal parenting behavior indicated whether the desired parenting behavior was reciprocal and interactive and involving the child's input (e.g., respecting the child's views for warmth and listening to him or her first before punishing for control). Unilateral parenting behavior indicated a unilateral action taken by the parent alone (e.g., being nice to the child and being supportive

of the child for warmth and being strict and setting and enforcing rules for control). For warmth, out of 323 valid responses, 154 (48%) emphasized unilateral warmth without an emphasis on child input, 120 (37%) indicated parental warmth that also reflected respect for the child, and 49 (15%) did not mention warmth as a parenting strength. For control, 105 respondents (32%) reported parental control strategies on the part of parents without emphasizing parent–child communication, 128 (40%) reported parental control that also emphasized understanding on the part of the child, and 90 (28%) did not list any control behaviors as parenting strengths.

Answers to perceived parenting weaknesses were grouped into two categories, which were too harsh or cold (e.g., losing my temper too often, not showing enough love or care) and too lenient and indulgent (e.g., too yielding to the child and spoiling the child). Of 328 respondents, 92, or 28%, reported their parenting weakness as too harsh or cold, whereas 201, or 62%, reported their parenting weaknesses as too lenient or indulgent. Considering these two categories together, 148 (46%) reported only leniency-indulgence weaknesses, 40 (12%) reported only harshness-coldness weaknesses, 53 (16%) reported both types of parenting weaknesses, and 83 (26%) reported neither type of weakness.

Gender-Related Findings

To test our gender-related hypotheses, the above parental responses were further analyzed by gender. A series of gender by response contingency tables was conducted to determine whether parental response was independent of or correlated with child gender. There were no significant gender differences in the following measures: viewing prosocial leadership behaviors as a strength, $\chi^2(1, N = 328) = 3.27$, $p = .07$ (91% of the parents of daughters and 84% of the parents of sons provided affirmative answers); viewing traditional good child behaviors as a strength, $\chi^2(1, N = 328) = 2.18$, $p = .14$ (30% of parents of daughters and 23% of parents of sons provided affirmative answers); viewing internalizing as problematic, $\chi^2(1, N = 328) = 0.02$, $p = .87$ (51% of the parents of daughters and 52% of the parents of sons provided affirmative answers); viewing externalizing as problematic, $\chi^2(1, N = 307) = 0.11$, $p = .74$ (33% of the parents of daughters and 35% of the parents of sons provided affirmative answers); viewing the parent–child relationship as egalitarian, $\chi^2(1, N = 328) = 1.60$, $p = .21$ (79% of the parents of daughters and 74% of the parents of sons provided affirmative answers); viewing the parent–child relationship as authoritarian, $\chi^2(1, N = 322) = 0.27$, $p = .87$ (43% of the parents of daughters and 42% of the parents of sons provided affirmative answers); reporting perceived weaknesses in the parent–child relationship, $\chi^2(2, N = 238) = 1.21$, $p = .54$ (positive responses to communication, dependency, and disobedience were 39%, 33%, and 27%, respectively, from the parents of daughters, and 46%, 28%, and 27%, respectively, from the parents of sons); reporting unilateral versus reciprocal warmth, $\chi^2(2, N = 323) = 1.15$, $p = .56$;

and unilateral versus reciprocal control as parenting strengths, $\chi^2(2, N = 323) = 2.48$, $p = .29$; and reporting harshness-coldness versus leniency-indulgence as perceived parenting weaknesses, $\chi^2(1, N = 323) = 0.54$, $p = .46$.

The results from the child social behavior variables also showed few gender differences. There was no statistically significant difference between boys and girls in peer acceptance (boys $M = –0.045$, $SD = .82$; girls $M = 0.000$, $SD = .83$), prosocial-leadership (boys $M = –0.067$, $SD = .84$; girls $M = 0.030$, $SD = .77$), or aggression (boys $M = –0.020$, $SD = .76$; girls $M = –0.150$, $SD = .80$). The latter finding is especially noteworthy as it contradicts existing Western (e.g., Ang, 2007; Ostrov & Keating, 2004) and Chinese evidence (e.g., Chen et al., 2005). There was only one gender difference, which was observed in social withdrawal (boys $M = –0.16$, $SD = .79$; girls $M = 0.110$, $SD = .85$), $t(326) = 2.96$, $p < .01$. Together, these results support our prediction about reduced gender differences in the socialized behaviors of Chinese only children and about reduced gender differential parenting and socialization of only children in China. Under the single-child policy, Chinese parenting and socialization tends to be more masculinized to achieve these reduced gender differences.

Conclusion

The present findings suggest the reverse of the stereotyped beliefs about Chinese parenting. The parenting of only children in China was predominantly authoritative, child-centered, and egalitarian. Chinese children reacted to parental harshness and warmth in ways that were similar to children's reactions as described in the Western literature. Similar to their Western counterparts, Chinese parents discouraged and frowned upon social reticence or behavioral inhibition. Parents' concerns about their children's behavior did not concern whether their children were socially modest enough but whether their children were assertive and exerted influence on their peers. The parenting of only children was gender egalitarian in that the same socialization strategies were equally applied to the only child, regardless of whether that child was a son or a daughter. This finding is consistent with other reports in which both parents were found to be less authoritarian and to give the strongest endorsement to masculine values, such as independence and self-confidence, and the lowest endorsement to obedience, as desired child qualities (Chang, Chen, & Ji, 2011). Other researchers attribute the change mainly to raising only daughters, the socialization of whom has also been described as masculinized (Y. Wang & Chang, 2008). Whereas nature normally bestows parents a second chance for a different gender of offspring if the parents so desire, the single-child policy eliminates this second chance. Despite the fact that a large number of Chinese parents may still prefer sons over daughters, once they have a daughter and there is no second chance, their gender views and corresponding parenting attitudes and behaviors change in favor of the traditionally disadvantaged gender (Chang et al., 2011). Together, these findings provide fresh insights into contemporary

urban Chinese parenting and help to resolve some of the controversies identified in the literature about Chinese parenting.

There were several limitations. First, the sample was taken from Shenzhen, which is among the best-developed cities in China and thus is not representative of the overall Chinese population. However, we believe that the sample is representative of the educated urban population. Second, the strength of this semistructured interview study that allowed relatively free responses also set constraints on the coding and analysis of the qualitative data. One specific limitation is that we coded almost all of the parental responses using a binary system by either counting or discounting a particular response as conforming to the coding criterion. This binary coding scheme disregarded and thus lost potential information on the extent to which the different responses met the coding criteria. However, this coding strategy protected reliability because different coders could agree about whether a specific content met the criterion more easily than the extent to which a response met the criterion. Finally, for the question on perceived weaknesses in the parent–child relationship, 90, or close to 25%, of the parents did not provide answers. The missing responses for other questions averaged approximately 10, or 3%, of the respondents. However, these missing data came from different respondents and there were no response differences between the respondents who missed a question and the respondents who answered the question.

AUTHOR NOTES

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