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Cross-cultural Differences in the Use of Disciplinary Methods among Chinese, Immigrant Chinese and English Mothers

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Abstract

Researchers have long studied parenting practices, and have recently paid increasing attention to cross-cultural differences. Unfortunately, most of the research has only examined self-report data; studies including both self-report and observational data are still very rare. This study examined the disciplinary methods of mothers (of 5- to 7-year-old children) in a cross-cultural sample ($N = 89$: 30 Chinese in Taiwan, 30 Chinese immigrants in the UK, and 29 non-immigrant white English in the UK) using both questionnaires and observational data. Cultural differences were found between groups both in reported, as well as observed parenting. The Taiwanese mothers reported greater use of Chinese-specific parenting methods as well as physical coercion and were observed to use more (gentle and assertive) physical intervention than the Chinese immigrant and English mothers. The Chinese immigrant mothers reported a higher degree of granting child autonomy than the Taiwanese and English mothers. These findings provided valuable insights into parenting in different cultural contexts, underscoring the importance of examining both reported and observed behaviour, in order to understand human development from a holistic perspective.

Introduction

As the largest ethnic and national group in the world, Chinese practices have begun to attract an increasing amount of attention within the last two decades. However, cross-cultural parenting research including Chinese and Chinese immigrant population is still limited in the methodology, with most of the results based on self-report data. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to shed light on Chinese parenting using a cross-cultural sample with self-report as well as observed behavioural data.

Parenting and issues in cross-cultural parenting research

Parents play a crucial role in their child's development. They support their child's physical, emotional, social and intellectual development and provide the first and all encompassing environment for their child to grow up in. The parenting typology- authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent and neglectful parenting (Baumrind, 1967; 1996, Maccoby & Martin, 1983)- has been widely researched and cited. Like many other aspects of human behaviour, parenting practices are influenced by society and culture (*e.g.*, Berndt, Cheung, Lau, Hau, & Lew, 1993; Lai, Zhang & Wang, 2000). However, Baumrind's typology has mainly been based on European American population, and researchers have been questioning whether it can be applied to cultures or ethnicities beyond European American groups (Baumrind, 1996; Chao, 1994; Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

Other than conceptualisation issues, cross-cultural research on parenting practices is often compromised by the type of data acquired. Although cross-cultural differenc-

es have been extensively discussed in parenting research, most of the findings are based on parental self-reports, reports on spouses (*e.g.*, Deater-Deckard et al., 2011; Keller, 2006), children's reports (*e.g.*, Chao, 2001; Deater-Deckard et al., 2011), or teacher reports (*e.g.*, Ho, Bluestein, & Jenkins, 2008). Cross-cultural research involving observational data is still rare, especially in Chinese population. Moreover, the correspondence between belief and behaviour has always been controversial in social psychology research (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; 2005), and the relationship between parenting beliefs and behaviour is similarly contested (Bornstein, Cote & Venuti, 2001). Because of the problematic correlation between reported beliefs and actual behaviour suggested by past research, and the lack of multi-method assessment in cross-cultural parenting research, the current study was designed to use both self-report and behavioural observation measures in order to assess parenting more comprehensively in a cross-cultural context.

Chinese Parenting

The socio-cultural context in Chinese societies is still heavily influenced by the Confucian tradition. The active instantiation of filial piety, maintenance of interpersonal harmony, and unique perspectives on morals, social expectations, and achievement motivation begins early in life (Lieber, Fung & Leung, 2006). Researchers have reported that the parenting typologies employed in Western countries fail to capture Chinese-specific aspects of parenting (Chao, 1994, 2001; Wu et al., 2002). For example, Wu and colleagues (2002) have examined similarities and differences between Chinese-specific parenting and authoritative and authoritarian parenting¹ among Chinese and US parents. They identified 5 distinct Chinese-specific parenting dimensions, which were not overlapping with the authoritative and authoritarian constructs described and studied in North America.

Encouragement of modest behaviour emphasizes behaving in a moderate, humble, and socially conforming way, when interacting with others, in order to maintain the social and interpersonal harmony which is of primary concern in traditional Chinese society (Chen et al., 1998). **Parental protection** reflects a desire to ensure a safe environment and to foster children's dependency on adults, especially on the part of parents with young children (Wu et al. 2002), because young children are considered incapable of understanding. **Shaming** is a widespread Chinese socialization practice designed to help children be sensitive to the perceptions, feelings, evaluations and judgments of others and to teach them to avoid behaviour that might shame or embarrass their families (*e.g.*, Fung, 1999; Lieber, Fung & Leung, 2006). **Directiveness** involves parents taking a major responsibility for regulating children's behaviour and academic performance and may reflect Chinese cultural beliefs that young children are incapable of understand-

1 Permissiveness was not included in the study because it has been shown to be an unreliable construct in Chinese samples and thus may not be appropriate when studying Chinese parents (Chen, Dong, & Zhou, 1997).

ing and making decisions that are in their own best interests. Finally, **maternal involvement** describes Chinese mothers' intense involvement and devotion, nurturance, constant physical availability, and prompt attention to children's needs, especially during the children's early years (Chao, 1994; Wu et al, 2002).

Although there has been increased research on parenting in Chinese societies, relatively little is known about the child-rearing styles and practices of Chinese immigrants (Chen, Chen, & Zheng, 2012), and even less is known regarding immigrant Chinese families in the United Kingdom (UK) compared to immigrant Chinese families in North America (USA and Canada). Thus, one of the aims of the current study was to advance understanding of the parenting practices of Chinese immigrants in the UK.

Current Study

The aim of the current study is to further our understanding of cultural differences in parenting beyond self-report measures and the associations between reported and observed parenting across these different cultural groups. We aspired to address the following questions: (1) Are parenting beliefs different in these three groups? And if so, how do they differ? (2) Are observed parental physical control different in these three groups? And if so, how do they differ?

Method

Participants

The current study targeted the mothers of 5- to 7-year-old (mean 6.08 years, $SD=0.82$) Taiwanese, Chinese immigrant, and non-immigrant white English children from two-parent heterosexual families. The 30 mothers in each group were matched with respect to their educational level and their children's age and gender. Unfortunately, there were only 29 families in the English group due to digital file damage of observational data. The mothers came from well-educated middle class backgrounds; all of them had finished at least 13 years of formal education. The English and Chinese immigrant families were recruited mainly in and around Cambridge, while the Taiwanese families were recruited in and around Taichung and Taipei city in Taiwan. The Chinese immigrant parents who participated in the current study were all first-generation immigrants to the UK. They came from various provinces in the Peoples' Republic of China (24, 80%), Hong Kong (2, 6.7%), Taiwan (2, 6.7%), Vietnam (1, 3.3%) and Malaysia (1, 3.3%).

Procedure

The participants were recruited through the children's kindergarten. The head teachers distributed the recruitment letters, and the parents willing to participate in the study left their contact information for the researcher to schedule a home visit. During the home visit, the researcher explained the study and the procedure to both the parent and the child. Verbal consent was obtained from the child, and written consent was obtained from the mother, both for herself and on behalf of her child. Thereafter, the mother was

given the questionnaires and prepaid envelopes in which they could be returned. The questionnaires included a demographic questionnaire and the Parenting Style and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ, Wu *et al.*, 2002). The observation procedure was then described and the camcorder was set up. The behavioural observations were video-recorded for later coding and analyses. The researcher provided a variety of age-appropriate and gender-neutral toys for the observation. The observation procedure was adapted from the tasks used in Kochanska's (1999) laboratory studies. The toys and observation procedure used in all the groups were identical.

The mother and child were first told to play together in their usual way for 10 minutes using the toys provided by the researcher. This session was not coded, allowing the parent and child to get used to the researcher's presence and the video recording. After the free-play session, the researcher instructed the parent to ask the child to put the toys away in appropriate boxes, which took 10 minutes on average. The first author conducted the observation and data collection; the observation was coded by the first author and by trained graduate students at the University of Cambridge. Each participating child received a small snack as a token of thanks, and each participating mother received a copy of the observation video as a souvenir.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to obtain background information about the family, including the child's age, gender, ethnicity and parental educational levels. The information was used to match the participants in the 3 groups.

Parenting Style and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ). The Parenting Styles and Dimension Questionnaire (PSDQ, Wu *et al.*, 2002) contains 44 parenting questions (using 5-point Likert scales) measuring 11 parenting dimensions: (1) connection, (2) regulation, (3) autonomy granting, (4) physical coercion, (5) verbal hostility, (6) punitive, (7) encouragement of modesty, (8) shaming, (9) protection, (10) directiveness, and (11) maternal involvement. Mean score on items in each dimension were computed for analyses. Dimensions 1-3 assess aspects of authoritative parenting, dimensions 4-6 assess aspects of authoritarian parenting, and dimensions 7-11 assess Chinese-specific. The reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) for the authoritative, authoritarian and Chinese parenting scales were .88, .78 and .66, respectively for the current sample.

Behavioural Coding. Maternal physical discipline in the clean-up task were coded using coding scheme developed by Kochanska (1999) to assess parent-child interaction in children aged 15 to 78 months. The coding adopted a time-interval approach (30-second segments), and the percentages of each targeted behaviour were computed. Five codes were used for maternal physical discipline: (0) No physical control: The parent did not use physical interventions or distal controlling gestures. (1) Distal physical signals: The parent signalled/instructed the child or got the child's attention without direct physical contact. (2) Gentle physical control: Gentle direct physical contact or gentle

contact mediated through an object, without a clash of will between parent and child. (3) Assertive physical control: The parent had firm contact with the child to intervene with child's action. The code implied a definite clash of will or coercion between the parent and child, without presence of anger. If anger was present, it was coded 4. (4) Forceful, negative physical control: Code 4 applied to high-power interventions (*e.g.* slapping the child), lower-power interventions accompanied by parental anger, or when there were threatening bodily gestures that clearly signalled the parent's intent to hurt or frighten. However, no negative physical control was present in the data. Two trained coders fluent in both Mandarin and English coded the videos. Inter-rater reliabilities were computed using Cohen's Kappa for 25% of the data. The Kappas for maternal physical control was .88. Because the scores were not well distributed, they were transformed into scores on a 7-point scale (see Table 1 and Table 2) to reduce the skewness to yield scores that could be used in subsequent MANOVA.

Table 1
Metric for transforming scores

| Original Scores (percentage, 0-1) | Transformed Scores (0-6) |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 0% | 0 |
| 1-20% | 1 |
| 21-40% | 2 |
| 41-60% | 3 |
| 61-80% | 4 |
| 81-99% | 5 |
| 100% | 6 |

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for original and transformed scores

| Observed Maternal Physical control | Range | Mean | Std. Dev. | Skewness |
|--|---------|------|-----------|----------|
| Distal physical control | .00-1.0 | .38 | .21 | .44 |
| Transformed distal physical control | 0-6 | 2.36 | 1.13 | .46 |
| Gentle physical guidance | .00-.38 | .07 | .09 | 1.60 |
| Transformed gentle physical guidance | 0-2 | .67 | .62 | .34 |
| Assertive physical control | .00-.40 | .01 | .05 | 6.68 |
| Transformed assertive physical control | 0-2 | .15 | .39 | 2.63 |

Results

Effects of child age and gender

Correlational analyses and independent t-tests were conducted to examine the effects of child age and gender on reported parenting and maternal physical control. No significant effect of child gender emerged, and only one correlation between child age and reported verbal hostility ($\rho(90) = .217, p = .041$) was significant. Therefore, on the whole, child age and gender had no significant association with the dependent variables, thus excluded from subsequent MANOVA analyses.

Cultural differences in reported parenting

A 3-way (cultural group) MANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of cultural group on reported parenting, revealing significant effects for cultural group ($F(2, 86) = 2.618$, Pillai-Bartlett trace = .544, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .272$, achieved statistical power = .999). Follow-up univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with Bonferroni corrections revealed significant effects of cultural groups on autonomy granting ($F(2, 86) = 3.167, p < .05$), physical coercion ($F(2, 86) = 5.887, p < .01$), and shaming ($F(2, 86) = 5.199, p < .01$). Subsequent post-hoc pairwise comparisons revealed that the Chinese immigrant mothers reported higher scores in autonomy granting than English mothers ($MD = .456, p < .05$), and that the Taiwanese mothers reported more physical coercion than the English mothers ($MD = .440, p < .01$) and than the Chinese immigrant mothers ($MD = .327, p < .05$). The Taiwanese mothers also reported using more shaming ($MD = .515, p < .01$) than the English mothers. The data on reported parenting by cultural group are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3*Cultural differences in mothers' reported parenting*

| | EN | | CI | | TW | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------|--------------------|------|---------------------|------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| Connection | 4.41 | 0.43 | 4.34 | 0.62 | 4.24 | 0.50 |
| Regulation | 4.18 | 0.50 | 4.11 | 0.80 | 4.29 | 0.55 |
| Autonomy granting | 3.32* | 0.63 | 3.78* | 0.81 | 3.58 | 0.63 |
| Composite authoritative | 4.06 | 0.41 | 4.13 | 0.63 | 4.08 | 0.46 |
| Physical coercion | 1.61* ¹ | 0.47 | 1.73* ² | 0.53 | 2.05* ¹² | 0.53 |
| Verbal hostility | 2.24 | 0.60 | 2.12 | 0.51 | 2.11 | 0.58 |
| Punitive | 1.62 | 0.44 | 1.66 | 0.54 | 1.78 | 0.54 |
| Composite authoritarian | 1.78 | 0.42 | 1.81 | 0.42 | 1.99 | 0.45 |
| Encourage modesty | 1.83 | 0.61 | 1.75 | 0.70 | 1.88 | 0.77 |
| Shaming | 1.80* | 0.52 | 1.97 | 0.58 | 2.32* | 0.75 |
| Protection | 2.93 | 0.81 | 3.30 | 0.84 | 3.36 | 0.82 |
| Directiveness | 2.99 | 0.69 | 3.12 | 0.68 | 3.22 | 0.56 |
| Maternal involvement | 2.62 | 0.80 | 3.05 | 0.81 | 3.06 | 0.67 |
| Composite Chinese | 2.34 | 0.34 | 2.58 | 0.44 | 2.71 | 0.46 |

EN= English, CI= Chinese Immigrant, TW= Taiwanese

*between group difference, pairwise comparisons, $p < .05$ **Cultural difference in observed maternal physical control**

A 3 (cultural group) way MANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of cultural group on transformed observed maternal physical control scores. The MANOVA revealed significant effects for cultural group ($F(2, 86) = 2.941$, Pillai-Bartlett trace = .301, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .150$, achieved statistical power = .974). Follow-up ANOVAs with Bonferroni corrections revealed significant effects for cultural groups on no physical control ($F(2, 86) = 3.859$, $p < .05$), gentle physical guidance ($F(2, 86) = 12.091$, $p < .001$), and assertive physical control ($F(2, 86) = 3.522$, $p < .05$). Subsequent post-hoc pairwise comparisons revealed that the Chinese immigrant mothers used less physical control than the Taiwanese mothers ($MD = .800$, $p < .05$), and that the Taiwanese mothers used more gentle physical guidance than both the English mothers ($MD = .617$, $p < .001$) and the Chinese immigrant mothers ($MD = .667$, $p < .001$). Also, the Taiwanese mothers used more assertive physical control than the English mothers ($MD = .299$, $p < .01$) and than the Chinese immigrant mothers ($MD = .267$, $p < .05$). The data on observed ma-

ternal physical control by cultural group are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Cultural differences in observed maternal physical control (transformed scores)

| | EN | | CI | | TW | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|------|--------------------|------|----------------------|------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| No physical control | 3.34 | 1.40 | 3.57 | 1.01 | 2.77 | 1.33 |
| Distal physical control | 2.45 | 1.30 | 2.13 | .90 | 2.50 | 1.17 |
| Gentle physical control | .48** ¹ | .57 | .43** ² | .60 | 1.10** ₁₂ | .55 |
| Assertive physical control | .04* ¹ | .19 | .07* ² | .25 | .33* ¹² | .55 |

*between group difference, pairwise comparisons, $p < .05$

**between group difference, pairwise comparisons, $p < .01$

Discussion

Cross-cultural differences in parenting between Chinese and Western parents have been well documented in past research (*e.g.*, Cheah, Leung, Tahseen, & Schultz, 2009; Su & Hynie, 2011) and we expected to find significant cultural differences in reported as well observed parental behaviour in the current study. Indeed, we found that, the Taiwanese mothers not only reported higher physical coercion scores, but they were also observed to be using more physical means of control, including gentle and assertive physical control than did the English and the Chinese immigrant mothers.

These findings were generally consistent with previous evidence that Chinese and Chinese American parents are more authoritarian (Porter *et al.*, 2005; Wang & Phinney, 1998; Wu *et al.*, 2002) and more controlling (for reviews, see Chao & Tseng, 2002; Pomerantz, Ng, & Wang, 2008) than their European-American counterparts. These differences could reflect Confucian socialisation goals that emphasize children's responsibility to be obedient to their parents (Ho, 1986), which may promote strict control, intolerance of misbehaviour and physical discipline in Chinese parents (Ima & Hohm, 1991; Tang, 2006). Physical discipline is still a common and socially accepted parenting practice in Taiwan, as well as in many Chinese and East Asian societies. However, the positive correlations between parents' acceptance of physical punishment and the occurrence of child physical abuse (*e.g.*, Maker, Shah, & Agha, 2005; Park, 2001) may place children of Chinese cultural background at higher risk of physical abuse (*e.g.*, Tang,

1998; Zhai & Gao, 2008). Moreover, parental harsh physical discipline is a consistent predictor of maladjustment and problematic behaviour in children (*e.g.*, Hart, Newell & Olsen, 2003; Nelson et al., 2006), suggesting that this feature of Chinese culture might have unanticipated negative consequences.

One major difference between the current findings and past research findings is that the Chinese immigrant parents in the current study reported and were observed to be using significantly less physical discipline than their Taiwanese counterparts, with levels comparable to those of their English counterparts. In previous studies (*e.g.*, Kelley & Tseng, 1992), Chinese and Chinese immigrant parents have reported comparably high levels of physical discipline. Other research indicates that the use of physical discipline by Chinese parents is waning (Chang, Lansford, Schwartz, & Farver, 2004), with physical punishment now less common in China than in other European, Asian and African nations (Lansford *et al.*, 2005). This may be attributable to rapid social, economic and political changes, the one-child policy and a resultant child-centred, indulgent parenting orientation known popularly as the ‘Little Emperor’ effect in mainland China (Xu, Farver, & Zhang, 2009), from where most (80%) of the Chinese immigrant participants came. The Chinese parents we studied lived in Taiwan, where similar changes have not taken place. In addition, the Chinese immigrants’ attitudes and behaviour may have changed in the course of acculturation (Buki, Ma, Strom & Strom, 2003; Costigan & Su, 2008), which might explain the difference between the immigrant Chinese mothers’ parenting and the Taiwanese mothers’ parenting.

Contrary to prediction, the Chinese immigrant mothers reported granting their children the most autonomy whereas the English mothers reported the least. By contrast, Wu and colleagues (2002) found that (non-immigrant) Chinese parents reported less autonomy-granting than their European-American counterparts. Perhaps, as immigrants moving from a collective culture to an individualistic culture, immigrant Chinese parents feel that they must encourage their children to be independent and autonomous in order to fit in. Similarly, Lin and Fu (1990) and Wang and Phinney (1998) both found that immigrant Chinese mothers of preschoolers sought to promote their children’s self-reliance and independence more than Anglo-American mothers did.

Strength, limitations and conclusions

The current study examined parenting with both self-report and observational data, with matched groups of Chinese (Taiwanese), immigrant Chinese and English families, and the measures were taken to reduce the effects of the observer on mother–child interaction. However, some limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the current sample was fairly small with well-educated parents. Second, the current study only investigated mother–child interaction, although fathers, too, affect child development both directly and indirectly (Lamb, 2010). In Chinese culture, the traditional paternal role is associated with authority and strict discipline (Li & Lamb, 2013), whereas mothers are portrayed as nurturing and supportive (Wilson, 1974). Third, the mother-child dyads were

only observed once in the current study, making generalisation to other situations questionable. Therefore, future study should examine both mothering and fathering in larger, more demographically diverse samples with multiple observations.

The current study demonstrated significant cultural differences in both reported and observed parenting and their associations. Although limited by the moderate sample size, the current study still provides valuable insight into parenting in cultural contexts, highlighting importance of multiple methodologies in cross-cultural research.

Author note

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