The influence of psychological control in parenting on children

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Abstract. A large amount of literature suggests that all aspects of children's live will be impacted by excessive parental psychological control, and this paper finds that excessive parental psychological control has an impact on children's peer relationships, family relationships, and adolescent maladjustment. In particular, when parents do not exert psychological control over their adolescents, the adolescents may become involved in drugs and substance abuse as a result of low-quality peer relationships. In addition, this paper focuses on the fact that Chinese families have stronger psychological control than Western families, and that there are bidirectional effects of psychological control in the Chinese family samples. The results discussed in this paper may provide direction for future research, as psychological control is stronger in the Chinese sample and has bidirectional effects.

Keywords: Psychological Control; Adolescent Mental Health; Bidirectional Effects.

1. Introduction

Psychological control refers to parental control over a child's psychological and emotional development (Barber et al., 2005). In recent years, as interest in parenting styles has increased, parental psychological control over adolescents has been the subject of much research. Parenting styles play an important role in the development of children and adolescents, according to Baumrind (1967). Maccoby et al. (1983) conceptualized parenting styles and categorized them into four different parenting subtypes according to two broad dimensions, which are responsiveness and demandingness. By crossing the two different dimensions, four subtypes of parenting styles are generated: authoritative, authoritarian, average-level undifferentiated, and strict-affectionate. Responsiveness in parenting styles is judged to represent a parent's intention to develop the adolescent's individuality, self-regulation and autonomy, and generally supports the child's specific needs and demands. Demandingness refers to the parents respond to the children's disobedience through demands, supervision, disciplinary efforts and willingness and different rules to make on children to become integrated into the family.

In recent years there have also been many studies showed that parental psychological control over adolescents is detrimental to the development of the adolescent. Laursen et al., (2009) point out that developing a positive sense of self and becoming an autonomous and independent individual are important tasks for adolescents. When adolescents develop a sense of autonomy, parental support (encouraging adolescents to express themselves, allowing them to make their own choices, etc.) can contribute to the development of social adjustment and autonomy in various areas such as peer relationships and academic achievements (Brenning et al., 2011). Conversely, parental control can also undermine adolescents' development of autonomy, including social maladjustment and social functioning such as emotions. Parental psychological control can foster guilt in adolescents or parents will withdraw their love from adolescents in order to make their children comply with their wishes (Arim et al., 2008). It has also been suggested that the degree of parental psychological control over adolescents varies across cultures (Barber et al. 2005). Chinese parents are generally less supportive of their children's autonomy than parents in Western countries, and they tend to help their children make decisions more often, so they have more psychological control over their children (Barber et al. 2005).

However, most of the existing studies refer to the effects of parental psychological control on children, but few of them address the issue of psychological control in samples, thus, the current research shows certain defects exist. In addition to the extensive literature on the effects of parental psychological control on children, this paper also addresses the question of whether the effects of
psychological control exist in Chinese samples and whether there is a two-way relationship between psychological control in Chinese samples.

2. **The effect of parental psychological control on adolescent**

2.1 **The impact of parental psychological control on a children's peer relationship**

Adolescence is a period when adolescents become more autonomous and independent from their parents. However, the family remains the closest and most influential environment for adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). There has been much literature on the influence between parental influence on children's peer relationship, with some researchers suggesting a link between parenting styles and adolescent peer relationship. Parke & Ladd (1992) indicated that adolescents, who will have increased sensitivity to peer influence, will have an increased interest in more general peer relationships. There is some research that suggests that parents’ control or limit adolescent access to friends through monitoring, and thus monitoring is considered a parenting practice to manage peer relationships (Parke et al., 1992). Bronfenbrenner et al. (2006) suggest that parental supervision of children's peer relationships can have both positive and negative effects. The relationship between parental monitoring and adolescent relationships with antisocial peers is even strongly supported in some literature, as some studies have reported a significant relationship between low levels of parental monitoring and child delinquency. Steinberg (1986) found that compared to adolescents who were asked to determine if the child arrived home after school by remote monitoring by parents’ adolescents who were not remotely monitored by their parents were more likely to receive the negative effects of peer pressure. In another study of adolescent peer relationship and related parenting practices, parents were found to use a number of strategies to influence their adolescents' peer relationships, including guidance, neutrality, prohibition, and support (Mounts, 2002). Guidance is when parents discuss with their adolescents what consequences will occur if they become friends with a specific person, while neutrality is when parents do not interfere with their child's choice of peers or peer relationships, which is generally seen with open parents who believe that who they befriend is their child's own personal choice. Whereas prohibition is when parents allow their adolescents to instruct them that they do not want their adolescents to socialize with specific people, support is indicated when parents do things that facilitate their children's socialization, such as keeping their adolescents' friends as guests in their homes (Mounts, 2002). In the findings, Mounts (2002) also indicated that adolescents with authoritarian parenting styles reported that drug use among their friends was rare, according to Mounts (2002), any neutrality of parents in terms of adolescent peer relationships may be challenging because authoritarian style parents exist to exert a high degree of control over their adolescents. That is, adolescents from authoritarian families may be so aware of their parents' expectations that even if they do not have explicit guidance about peer relationships, they will still choose friends who they believe will receive approval by their parents (Mounts, 2002). Conversely, some adolescents who report a permissive or uninvolved parenting style have a high proportion of drug users among their peers, and from their perspective the overall tone of the parent-child relationship is very loose and permissive because their parents have not explicitly communicated with them about what kind of peer relationships are unacceptable (Mounts, 2002).

2.2 **The impact of parental psychological control on Family relationship**

Families are considered important for child and adolescent development (Murray et al., 2013), and the dynamic and interactive effects of different family processes in different systems, such as parenting and parent-child relationships, have a profound impact on adolescent development (Shek et al., 2021). Parental psychological control over the child also has an impact on the parent-child relationship, and family relationship represents, to some extent, parent child relationship, with the quality of the parent-child relationship representing the degree of emotional connection between parent and child (Murray et al., 2013). High-quality parent-child relationships help shape the way children look at the world around them, providing them with care, enhanced values, and reliable help.
(Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Because numerous emotional and instrumental elements are thought to be provided by parent-child relationships, the quality of parent-child relationships has been identified as playing an important role in psychological adjustment and maladjustment during adolescence (Espinoza et al., 2014). Researchers have examined the association between parent-child relationship quality and parenting behaviors by exploring moderation effects, and numerous studies have shown that adolescents are influenced by parenting behaviors such as parent-child relationship quality and psychological control. Espinoza et al. (2014) found that authoritative parenting by fathers altered the strength of the association between parent-child relationship quality and the strength of the association between risky behaviors. In other words, there was a significant reduction in adolescents' involvement in delinquency and substance use in the context of authoritarian parenting by fathers, depending in part on a positive father-child relationship. Also, researchers have found that maternal knowledge of adolescent whereabouts in the context of higher quality mother-son relationships can prevent drug and alcohol use (Padilla-Walker et al., 2008). Murray et al. (2013) also indicated in his study that paternal psychological control was associated with high quality of mother-son relationships, with mothers with sons with low quality mother-son relationships had higher levels of aggression, while sons with good quality mother-son relationships had lower levels of aggression. These findings suggest that low-quality relationships with mothers in adolescent males, combined with paternal psychological control, increase the risk of adolescent aggression (Murray et al., 2013).

2.3 Adolescent maladjustment under psychological control

Internalising symptoms, aggression and deviant peer relationships are the three main aspects of adolescent maladjustment, with internalising symptoms being the most threatening to adolescents, which include anxiety and depression (Padilla-Walker et al., 2020). Aggression, on the other hand, is defined as the presence of violent attitudes or behaviours towards others, often hostile, in order to intimidate or cause harm or injury to others (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). The association with aberrant peer relationships refers to the presence of peers among the adolescent's peers who engage in undesirable behaviours, such as substance abuse and drug problems as mentioned above (Weaver & Prelow, 2005). Some scholars argue that early adolescents are more able to receive the effects of parental psychological control because in early adolescence, adolescents begin to struggle for their independence, and it is at this time that adolescents become sensitive to the imbalance of power in the parent-child relationship (Shek et al., 2021). Thus, early adolescents may be more vulnerable when parents use psychological control styles because they are adjusting to adolescence and are experiencing changes in physical, intellectual, and social development (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2012). Parents may interfere with adolescents' feelings and ways of thinking, thereby disrupting their search for autonomy (Chen et al., 2019). When parents are not satisfied with their adolescents' performance or when adolescents do not perform up to their parents' expectations, harsh criticism from parents may reduce their sense of competence thus their willingness to increase their efforts in activities (Costa et al., 2016). In addition, disappointed psychologically controlling parents may undermine the relevance of parent-child interactions, as such parents are more inclined to keep their children at a distance (Oudekerk et al., 2015). Adolescents may increase their aggression when they experience frustration with their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs, and the frustration-aggression hypothesis holds that a certain level of aggression is displayed when one's efforts to meet one's needs are blocked or thwarted (Bandura, 1978). Another study suggests that adolescents who are psychologically controlled by their parents in order to compensate for the need to interact under their parents' psychological control are more likely to interact with dysfunctional peers (Espinoza et al., 2014). Parental psychological control hinders adolescents' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness and therefore may induce internalizing symptoms in adolescents, such as anxiety and depression (Soenens et al., 2010). It has also been suggested that parental psychological control is also associated with depression as well as anxiety levels in adolescents (Chyung et al., 2021). Results integrating the effects of parental psychological control in relation to depression and anxiety in adolescents showed that although parental psychological control had significant effects on both
depression and anxiety in children, the difference between the two was not significant, i.e., the effect size was moderate in relation to depression and less than moderate in relation to anxiety (Chyung et al., 2021). Psychological control is one of the parenting strategies used by parents to shape adolescents' behaviour and speech in line with parental expectations by limiting their expression, withdrawing love as punishment or even physically attacking them (Barber, 1996). Adolescents gradually lose confidence in their own judgements or actions because parental psychological control often leads to feelings of guilt and self-criticism (Soenens et al., 2009). Parental control also interferes with adolescents' development of emotional efficacy and deprives adolescents of the opportunity to practice emotional control on their own, believing that they can cope effectively with emotionally conflicting situations. Thus, under parental psychological control, adolescents are more likely to exhibit a number of internalizing symptoms including depression, anxiety, and aggression, and may be less able to interact with normal peers and thus be at higher risk for delinquency.

Certain level of psychological control has also been found to be associated with suicidal behavior in adolescents, with Johnson et al. (2002) finding that negative parenting may lead to interpersonal difficulties in adolescents, which may lead to suicidal behavior. Several studies have shown that there is a link between adolescent well-being and parental psychological control. According to research findings, parental psychological control is one of the key factors contributing to adolescents' self-harm and depression (Duriez & Goossens, 2005). Adolescents need to develop self-determination and independent thinking skills during adolescence, and before they can develop these skills, they need to experience psychological separation from their parents. Parental psychological control may limit adolescents' ability to develop better self-determination skills, so adolescents who are psychologically controlled by their parents may have difficulty making appropriate decisions, as in result, these adolescents may have higher levels of internalising problems and anxiety (Bowen, 1991). A longitudinal study has shown that father-child relationships are more likely to have a significant impact on adolescents' intentional self-harm than mother-child relationships (Lloyd-Richardson & Prinstein, 2008). In short, the current findings suggest that the effects of fathers and mothers on adolescent development are more complex than we might expect. Some researchers have found that fathers have a greater impact on adolescent development compared to mothers. However, the relative influence of fathers and mothers varies depending on the child's different developmental outcomes. Thus, based on the current literature, it appears that the differential influence of fathers and mothers on adolescents' internalizing and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, association with antisocial peers, or delinquency) may involve different pathways (Shek et al., 2014).

3. Psychological control exist in Chinese parenting

As mentioned above, psychological control is more likely to occur in Chinese parenting styles and may differ in Chinese samples compared to those in Western countries. According to the report, adolescents are subjected to psychological control by their parents at an early age in order to achieve better academic performance due to the Chinese social environment (Yu et al., 2021). China's large population and recent social changes, such as rapid economic growth and globalization trends, have led to increased competition in academic research and job search, and the perception among Chinese parents that only better academic achievement will lead to better opportunities for advancement as well as excellent jobs in their adolescents' future. It means that academic success is very important to adolescents and their parents (Quach et al., 2015). Therefore, academic achievement is another very important socialization goal for Chinese parents and Chinese adolescents, influenced by this social environment (Chao, 2000), are themselves aware of these risks early and show more external motivation to obtain higher academic achievement (Liu & Helwig, 2008). In contrast, in western countries, parental psychological control over adolescents is not as frequent and strict as that of Chinese parents, but it also occurs. An interesting finding is that adolescents in Western countries have the ability to make their own choices once they reach adulthood, which means that the degree of parental psychological control decreases substantially after adulthood, whereas in China, parental
psychological control over adolescents does not diminish after adulthood, which means that parents remain in charge of their children's lives after adulthood. Empirical evidence of positive interactions between fathers' and mothers' behavioural control was found by a recent study (Van Lissa et al., 2019). In the Chinese cultural context, interdependence is a highly valued feature of the family system (Liu & Wu, 2018), and this concept of the family system has led to some interaction between parenting behaviours (Zou et al., 2019). At the same time, in the Chinese social environment, academic achievement-oriented and collective socialisation goals are one of the criteria for judging one's success, and this is highly valued by Chinese parents (Rao et al., 2003), and adolescents' academic achievement and pro-social development largely determine parental attitudes and behaviours related to psychological control. Adolescents who demonstrate low levels of pro-social competence with family, friends or strangers may be perceived by their parents as having low social skills, and in order to prevent this, this may lead to greater parental involvement in the adolescent's social activities (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2015). Chao (2000) suggests that Chinese parents' competence can be judged by their children's success in education, therefore unlike the Western cultural environment, in the Chinese cultural environment, parental psychological control is not necessarily seen as negative parental manipulation of children, rather it is culturally acceptable and even one of the ways in which parents wish to make their children better (Shek & Zhu, 2019).

4. Bidirectional effects were noted in Chinese samples

It has been found that there is a bidirectional relationship between parental and adolescent psychological control, thus, not only parental psychological control over adolescents affects adolescents, but adolescent performance likewise affects parental psychological control (Yu et al., 2021). Most previous research has shown that parental psychological control can have a negative impact on adolescent development, including that it may lead to higher levels of depression and anxiety in adolescents (Aunola et al., 2015), increasing aggression (Campione-Barr et al., 2014) and a range of antisocial behaviours ( Özdemir, 2012). Adolescents' search for autonomy can be undermined by parental psychological control, which interferes with adolescents' feelings of autonomy and the way they think about their problems (Chen et al., 2019). When parental expectations are not met by adolescent performance, parents increase their psychological control to reduce the adolescent's sense of competence, thereby increasing the adolescent's willingness to strive (Costa et al., 2016). In order for their child to perform to their expectations, parents may exert psychological control to alter their child's emotions, perspectives, and behavioural patterns in thinking about problems, using intrusive and manipulative strategies to achieve their goals, such as isolating the child, inducing guilt in the adolescent, disciplining the adolescent's behaviour and withdrawing affection from the adolescent, among others (Barber, 1996). Therefore, most parental psychological control of adolescents involves over management of problems within the private sphere. Parents who over manage problems or behaviors in the private sphere will be perceived as intrusive, and therefore the child will resist or reject such regulation (Nucci, 1996). In contrast, how adolescents influence parental psychological control depends on whether adolescents can accomplish the goals set by their parents; if parents exert psychological control over adolescents in order for adolescents to achieve better academic success, and after adolescents' academic success adequately meets parents' expectations, parents will no longer exert psychological control (Fu & Zhang, 2020). In a Chinese sample, parental psychological control over adolescents was not only in the area of academic achievement, but also in social relationships and peer relationship (Fu et al., 2020). Researchers have found it interesting that one problem in China today is the low level of trust between strangers (Xin & Xin, 2017), as negative events often occur in this social context, such as strangers taking advantage of your kindness to cheat on donations, being blackmailed after helping an injured person, or even child abduction on the street (Wu & Wu, 2015). In addition, the media often uses exaggeration to gain attention when reporting such incidents. In this context, Chinese parents may believe that helping strangers not only takes time and energy away from learning but also increases the risk of deception.
Particularly in the female population, there is greater alertness and sensitivity to such risks, as females are usually more vulnerable to strangers than males (Duan et al., 2005).

5. Conclusion and limitation

In summary, psychological control of adolescents is common, with parents wishing to achieve psychological control over their adolescents by interfering with the way they think and feel, or even withdrawing "love," which can cause adolescents to lose their sense of self in the developmental process, through manipulation and exploitation of parent-child relationships (e.g., love withdrawal and guilt response), negative, emotionally charged expressions and criticism (e.g., disappointment and shame) that may inhibit or interfere with psychological development, and excessive personal control (e.g., possessiveness, protectiveness).” Research further noted that this socialization pressure stifles independent expression and autonomy due to unresponsiveness to children's emotional and psychological needs, making it difficult to develop a healthy sense of self and self-perception for a variety of reasons (Baber, 2012), but in the Chinese cultural context, there is tremendous academic and employment pressure for adolescents, which makes psychological control in the Chinese adolescent population common and acceptable among the Chinese adolescent population (Shek & Zhu, 2019). Parents exert psychological control over their children so that they can be more competitive, and adolescents themselves are able to realize some of these threats and therefore show better motivation to learn (Liu & Helwig, 2008). Although receiving the influence of the social environment, psychological control also has many negative effects on adolescents, for example, parental psychological control is one of the causes of depression and anxiety in adolescents, and adolescents with psychologically controlling parents are more likely to associate with dysfunctional peers because this association may compensate their need for association to some extent, which may induce internalizing depression and anxiety in adolescents symptoms (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010), and that frustration with autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs increases the likelihood of adolescent aggression (Bandura, 1978). But it has also been shown that adolescents who lack control are likely to become drug user under the influence of their peers, while in families where parents establish authority, adolescents are able to clearly understand what their parents' expectations are, and so are biased towards meeting their parents' expectations while making friends and making friends they feel their parents will approve of (Mounts, 2002). In the Chinese social context, a large part of parental psychological control is due to the desire for their children to achieve better academic success, so the Chinese educational system may create a very different outcome from Western psychological control (Burkhoff, 2015). Under psychological control, adolescents are more likely to show more motivation to learn because Chinese parents' psychological control is more about eliminating and reducing distractions from adolescents' learning, e.g., driving their children and keeping them away from household chores, all just to be able to give them more time to study (Zhang, 2016). However, there is a two-way relationship between adolescent performance and parental psychological control, with parents reducing their psychological control over their adolescents whenever they are able to meet their parents' expectations, and increasing their psychological control over their children when their children's academic achievement falls short of their expectations to achieve better performance (Wang, 2012).

Of course, all studies at this stage still have limitations, first of all, the current study relies on a single item through which adolescents report their grade level in the class to determine academic performance. It may lead to biased estimates, so caution is needed in interpreting the associated effects. Also, all reported components, including adolescents' internalizing symptoms (depression as well as anxiety, etc.) and parental perceptions of the presence of psychological control in adolescents are measured by self-report and some scales may have cultural limitations. Despite limitations, many of the findings add new theoretical knowledge to the existing literature by identifying longitudinal interactions between parental psychological control and adolescent behavioral outcomes, which
provides empirical evidence for the development of transactional models (Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003), providing some reference and evidence.

References


