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Unpacking the rich tapestry of Chinese culture: the interplay between parental socialization and children's social functioning

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Citation

Gao, D. (2024, March 12). *Unpacking the rich tapestry of Chinese culture: the interplay between parental socialization and children's social functioning*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3721689>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 6

General Discussion

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DISCUSSION

The aim of my dissertation was to advance the understanding of parental socialization and children's social functioning within the Chinese cultural context. In the general discussion, I will: 1) summarize findings and connect previous chapters to cultural-ecological theories; 2) present limitations and future directions; 3) deliver general conclusions and implications.

Summary of Findings and Theoretical Reflection

In this section, I will draw connections between the theories presented in the general introduction and my findings in each chapter. By applying these theories to my research, I aim to provide a deeper understanding of Chinese children's social functioning and parental socialization in the Chinese context and contribute to the development of theories including cultural-ecological theory and colorblindness theory within the field of family studies. According to the domain-specific approach, parenting effort can be effective in one domain of child development but may not necessarily function well in another domain (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). That is, certain parenting behaviors may result in different effects on children's different domains of social functioning. For example, parental behavior control, including setting rules, enforcing discipline, and monitoring children's activities, can serve as a protective factor for child conduct problems (Watson et al., 2013), but may have negative effects on child anxiety (van der Bruggen et al., 2008). Therefore, it is crucial to identify which specific parenting behaviors are related to what specific child outcomes. Accordingly, in this dissertation, I focused on three specific development domains: emotion regulation, social anxiety, and intergroup attitudes.

Emotion Regulation

In Chapter 2, my focus was on the children's emotion regulation development. I aimed to examine whether differential aspects of maternal psychological control were related to children's emotional regulation, and whether these relations were bidirectional. The three aspects of psychological control are love withdrawal, guilt induction, and shaming, which have distinct meanings within the Chinese cultural context (Yu et al., 2019). Specifically, guilt induction and shaming are used by Chinese parents to evoke their children's feelings of humiliation and loss of face for the family. Due to the Chinese cultural emphasis on interdependence and obligations to others, these two forms of psychological control, in contrast to love withdrawal, might be less detrimental to children's development of emotion regulation. Previous studies examining psychological control in various cultural contexts did not take into account these three distinct forms with culturally specific meanings. Therefore, my study separated these forms and examined their effects in Chinese culture, drawing from the cultural-ecological perspective.

Based on the cross-lagged model analysis, I found that none of the three forms of psychological control predicted later children's emotion regulation. This partly supports the cultural-ecological perspective that parenting effects might be different in different cultural contexts. Specifically, Western-based research has found that psychological control is harmful to children's development (e.g., Loeb et al., 2021), while my research with the Chinese sample revealed inconsistent findings that maternal psychological control did not predict children's emotion regulation. Another possible explanation is that children's development of emotion regulation is predicted by other types of parenting behaviors rather than psychological control alone. According to the domain-specific approach, parenting behaviors are most effective when they are appropriately matched to the specific domain of interaction in which the child is situated (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). In addition, the effects of parental

socialization might be overshadowed by other socialization process, such as peers and teachers socialization. According to the model of multiple socialization agents (Vandell, 2000), different sources of socialization are associated with distinct outcomes in children. For instance, the teacher-child relationship has been linked to children's academic engagement (Verschuere, 2015) and social support from friends has been found to mitigate conduct problems in children who experience peer victimization (Cooley et al., 2015). By integrating the domain-specific approach with the model of multiple socialization agents, it is important to understand the complex system of social relationships in children's lives, as these relationships may interact with one another to influence their social functioning. Indeed, in the Bronfenbrenner model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the dynamic mesosystem emphasizes encompassing interconnectedness of parents, peers, and teachers, and these socializing agents collectively contribute to children's social development. Despite theoretical models and frameworks drawing attention to the interplay between different sources of socialization, little research has truly examined the simultaneous influence of multiple socialization agents on children's specific developmental domains.

My findings also revealed that children's emotion regulation negatively predicted later maternal psychological control, with greater levels of emotion regulation predicted less psychological control one year later. The findings support the transactional model that children's performance can evoke parenting behaviors (Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003). However, my findings did not show distinct paths among different types of psychological control. That is, children's greater emotion regulation predicted lower levels of *all* types of psychological control. This could be explained by the idea that children who have higher levels of emotion regulation can foster a more positive parent-child relationship, reducing the need for controlling behaviors from parents, regardless of forms (Kiel & Kalomiris, 2015). Overall, my study seems to support the cultural-specific perspective, suggesting that Western-

based results cannot be generalized to the Chinese context in terms of the effects of psychological control on children's emotion regulation development. My findings also underscore the importance of children's emotion regulation not only in enhancing their own mental well-being but also in benefiting the entire family system.

Social Anxiety

In Chapter 3, I focused on children's social anxiety as the developmental outcome, and its relations to maternal and paternal psychological control and autonomy support. Fathers' parenting behaviors have received less attention compared to mothers' parenting. Explanations for fathers' absence from research studies often focus on factors such as their perceived lack of time and interest in research (Mitchell et al. 2007). However, a recent interview study exploring fathers' perspectives on their underrepresentation in child research revealed that more than 80% fathers reported fathers are underrepresented because they have not been asked to participate (Davison et al., 2017). This finding challenges the traditional belief that fathers' underrepresentation is due to their attributes (e.g., lack of time and interest). Researchers may have unconsciously perpetuated traditional beliefs about parental roles, leading to the marginalization of fathers in child research. It is crucial to raise awareness among researchers about the critical roles that fathers play in children's development (see also Cabrera et al., 2018). In addition, I used child-report and parent-report measures of parenting behaviors to establish separate longitudinal models. Reporter discrepancies are often overlooked in the field of parenting and social anxiety, although children and parents perceive family interactions differently and provide distinct reports (De Los Reyes & Ohannessian, 2016). Furthermore, despite universalist perspectives suggesting that parental psychological control can harm children's social-emotional development, culture-specific perspectives indicate that in cultures that emphasize interdependence, the effects of parental psychological control and autonomy support on children may not be as

pronounced as in independent-oriented cultures (Soenens et al., 2015). Although parental psychological control and autonomy support may have unique cultural meanings and functions, there is limited research on the relations between these parenting behaviors and the development of children's social anxiety in the Chinese cultural context.

My findings showed that maternal reports of psychological control and autonomy support did not significantly predict children's social anxiety one year later. However, children's social anxiety significantly predicted maternal reports of psychological control one year later. The findings indicate that children play an active role in shaping parenting behaviors. Additionally, there was no significant bidirectional relation between paternal reports of psychological control and autonomy support and children's social anxiety. One possible explanation is that fathers' parenting behaviors might be less influential than mothers' when children have low levels of social anxiety (Bögels & Perotti, 2011).

Researchers proposed that children with low social anxiety may need to learn social wariness to adapt to group norms and avoid social mishaps (Bögels et al., 2011). Mothers have been found to be more influential than fathers in teaching social wariness to their low socially anxious children. In contrast, highly socially anxious children need to learn social confidence, and fathers tend to encourage risk-taking and competition and thus have stronger impacts on fostering children's confidence (Paquette et al., 2020). Indeed, in the sample of my study, children reported relatively low social anxiety, such that the influence of fathers may not be significant. Furthermore, the effect of psychological control on social anxiety was only present in the perceived maternal parenting behavior model for girls, and the effect size was relatively small. This suggests that parents' psychological control has a relatively small impact on social anxiety in Chinese children. The reason might be that in the Chinese cultural context, parents regulate children's misbehavior by evoking guilt and emphasizing the social consequences of inappropriate behavior. This internal control strategy is part of Chinese

parenting beliefs, meaning that the intention behind psychological control is parental care rather than hostility or rejection (Wu, 2012). Research has found that Chinese children critically evaluate love withdrawal but preferred guilt induction, indicating that certain forms of psychological control are relatively acceptable to Chinese children (Helwig et al., 2014). Overall, my findings emphasize the importance of cultural context in exploring the impact of different parenting behaviors on child development.

Intergroup Attitudes

In Chapters 4 and 5, my research focused on examining Chinese children's intergroup attitudes. Intergroup attitudes structure the social functioning of children's development and is related to other domains of social functioning such as children's emotion regulation and social anxiety (Bobba & Crocetti, 2022; Tran et al., 2017). Due to globalization resulting in increased indirect and direct exposure of Chinese children to other racial groups, as well as deep-rooted cultural notions of colorism in Asia (Bettache, 2020), I examined Chinese children's intergroup attitudes towards three groups based on race and skin tone: light-skinned East Asians, tan-skinned East Asians, and Whites. Additionally, I investigated the color-evasive practices adopted by Chinese mothers and children. In the study, I specifically used the term "color evasion" instead of "colorblindness" as the measures only tested whether Chinese mothers and children mentioned racial characteristics such as skin tone and eye color during picture reading tasks and categorization tasks, while not specifically exploring how they discuss racism. It is important to differentiate between discussing race and discussing racism, as these represent distinct aspects of socialization (Mekawi et al., 2020). In line with colorblindness theory, the former relates to color evasion (ignoring race), while the latter pertains to power evasion (denying racism; Neville et al., 2013). Indeed, research has found that these two concepts have differential associations with race-related attitudes (Mekawi et al., 2020). Specifically, power evasion was found to have strong associations with modern

racism and social dominance orientation, indicating a devaluation of diversity. In contrast, color evasion had a weak association with modern racism and no association with social dominance beliefs. It appears that power evasion has a more detrimental impact on racial attitudes compared to color evasion (Yi et al., 2023). However, color evasion also had no association with openness to diversity, suggesting that color evasion endorsement is more likely driven by a “strategic” motive to appear nonprejudiced rather than genuine prosocial motives to support racial and ethnic minorities. It is important to note that my study only focused on Chinese mothers and their children's color-evasive practices rather than power-evasive practices. This is because issues of racism are not openly discussed in the Chinese context, partly due to political issues (Lan, 2016).

My findings revealed that Chinese children's openness to talking about racial characteristics of White people was associated with more *positive* attitudes towards this group, while mothers discussing the appearance of tan-skinned East Asians predicted children's more *negative* attitudes towards this group. These seem to be inconsistent findings regarding the effects of color evasion on children's racial attitudes. One possible explanation is that due to the high prevalence of colorism in the Chinese context, light skin tone is preferred over tan skin tone (Bettache, 2020), the attention to light skin tone may trigger positive attitudes and the same for tan skin tone which can evoke negative attitudes. Previous research on color evasion has focused on whether individuals mentioned racial characteristics or not, but did not specifically examine the target of their discussions. The absence of examination may obscure the relations between color evasion and racial attitudes towards specific racial groups.

Importantly, I found that mothers' discussion about tan-skinned East Asians' cultural background predicted children's preference for this group. This indicates that emphasizing shared cultures can evoke positive attitudes, even in the presence of less preferred physical

appearance features. Therefore, it seems that focusing on individuals' cultural background could help foster positive attitudes. Future intervention research can further test whether strategies that emphasize shared cultures with children can facilitate shaping children's positive attitudes towards people with a tan skin tone. It is worth noting that my dissertation did not include Black people as targets in the measures; therefore, the suggestions regarding shared cultures to mitigate colorism may not be generalizable to Chinese children's attitudes towards Black people. However, research has shown that cultural humility, referring to the ability to have a humble and other-oriented mindset towards others' cultures, can foster successful and unbiased interactions with other racial groups (Rullo et al., 2022). Therefore, it appears promising that culture-related interventions can help facilitate positive intergroup racial attitudes.

Taken together, the four chapters in my thesis fall well within the Bronfenbrenner model and support the cultural-specific lens. Parenting, including psychological control and autonomy support, does not have the same effects on Chinese children's social functioning as in Western-based studies, which supports a relativistic perspective that culture and other factors can buffer the effects of parenting. However, consistent with Western findings, Chinese children play an active role in shaping parenting behaviors. Overall, the results from my studies showed that parenting effects fit well with the cultural-specific lens, while child-driven effects seems to align less well. This pattern requires further research to delve into the underlying mechanisms that can explain such findings. Additionally, my studies partly support Western-based colorblindness theory that talking about race to can foster positive attitudes towards other groups. However, it is worth noting that the ideology behind talking about race might be different from the one found in Western parents. Chinese parents' engagement in discussing race with their children may indicate a preference for a White appearance and an emphasis on their own culture heritage. This contrasts with some Western

parents' color-conscious talk showcasing mindsets of openness to cultural diversity and eliminating bias and prejudice (Vittrup, 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

Cultural Norms and Values

In my dissertation, I explored parental socialization and children's social functioning within the specific cultural context of China. However, the actual cultural norms and values perceived and evaluated by Chinese parents and children have not been investigated. Specifically, I speculate that one of the reasons Chinese parents' psychologically controlling parenting did not have pronounced effects on children's social functioning is that Chinese children might interpret these parenting behaviors as more benign and acceptable compared to Western children. Because interdependence is emphasized in Chinese culture (Lan et al., 2019), Chinese parents and children are considered to be more accepting of psychological control. However, given that interdependent and independent values can coexist within a cultural context, it is possible that Chinese parents and children endorse both of these values to varying degrees (Killen & Wainryb, 2000). Indeed, it has been argued that interdependence can be maintained despite the increasing emphasis on independence, particularly in cultures with a traditional emphasis on interdependence (Kagitcibasi, 2013). Research has found that Chinese mothers who reported being influenced by social changes felt the need to exert control over their children while also fostering their independence (Fung et al., 2017). This suggests that social change can lead to the promotion of independence values while also upholding traditional interdependent values. Unfortunately, most of the studies investigating the effects of parental socialization only consider cultural values and norms as a hypothetical background, but fail in examining the extent to which parents and children endorse certain cultural values and the reasons behind their endorsement. There is a study that examined

Chinese children's judgments and reasoning about parents' psychological control, revealing that while Chinese children perceive psychological control as common, they negatively evaluate such behaviors and believe they are detrimental to psychological well-being (Helwig et al., 2014). Further studies are needed to examine how children's perception and evaluation of cultural values to the effects of parenting behaviors on children's social development. Additionally, while rapid social change can lead to cultural values shift, it may vary across life domains. For example, research has shown that social changes in South Korea led to Korean children displaying greater individualism in the school domain while maintaining collectivistic values in the home (Park et al., 2015). Future studies should investigate perceptions and evaluations of cultural values by parents and children across different life domains. This can help advance understanding of the relations between parental socialization and children's social functioning within the broader cultural context.

Sample Composition

The samples used in my dissertation could be more representative. Participants in the research were from urban areas of China. However, rural population in China accounts for 40% of the total population (Worldometer, 2020), which means that the samples of my research fail to include nearly half of the representative population in China. This is problematic for several reasons. First, since the implementation of opening-up policies in the 1980s, some Chinese cities have undergone significant transformations. Furthermore, globalization has exacerbated the imbalanced development between urban and rural areas, with rural areas bearing most of the globalization costs such as labor outflows and ageing population, while experiencing limited increases in social welfare (Wei, 2018; Ma & Chen, 2020). Rural areas in China have relatively remained traditional, relying mainly on agriculture-based economies. Modernization theory suggests that urbanization and modernization is associated with increasing emphasis on autonomy and independence

(Inglehart & Welzel, 2010). Based on Greenfield's (2009) theory of social change and human development, changes in sociodemographic ecologies can alter cultural values. Specifically, urbanization can lead to changes in value systems, with urban ecology being associated with greater independence and autonomy, while rural ecology is associated with more valuing interdependence and obedience to authority. Indeed, research has found that rural parents and children embrace more traditional values than urban parents and children (Naftali, 2016). A recent study revealed that the association between Chinese parental guilt induction and children's life satisfaction was moderated by urban/rural setting, with guilt induction being associated with greater life satisfaction for rural children, but less life satisfaction for urban children (Fang et al., 2022). Therefore, the degree to which values emphasize independence as well as the effect of certain parenting behaviors depend on the urban or rural settings. Considering that the sociocultural context of urban and rural settings can vary in terms of traditionalism and modernity, future studies should include samples from both urban and rural families.

Another reason why excluding rural samples can be problematic is that rural people in China have less direct and indirect contact with other racial groups. This is because rural areas in China are mostly in remote places resulting in less exposure to globalization, such as rural areas being less attractive to foreign trade compared to urban cities (Ma & Chen, 2020). Based on intergroup contact theory that having more contact with outgroup members can reduce prejudice (Pettigrew et al., 2011), Chinese children living in rural areas may have different attitudes towards other racial groups compared to children in urban areas, and Chinese rural parents may socialize their children in terms of race differently compared to urban parents. Indeed, rural China is considered as a society characterized by local acquaintances, where the fundamental way to build trust among people is through close acquaintanceship (Xu et al., 2022). Therefore, people in rural areas of China might be more

conservative regarding diversity, resulting in more prejudice against outgroup racial members regardless of skin tone and being less likely to openly talk about diversity. Regarding attitudes towards tan- vs light-skinned East Asians, Chinese people in rural areas often engage in outdoor labor, leading to more exposure to sunshine which results in a relatively tanned skin tone compared to people living in urban areas. Chinese rural children with a tanned skin tone may perceive other tan-skinned East Asian people as ingroup and those with light skin tone as outgroup, which may lead to more positive attitudes towards tan-skinned East Asian people. Therefore, Chinese rural children with a tan-skinned tone may have different attitudes towards tan- vs light-skinned East Asians compared to those urban children with a lighter skin tone. Overall, future studies should include both urban and rural families to ensure the generalizability of findings to the Chinese population.

Measures

First, the studies strongly relied on questionnaire methods, which can lead to the issue of social desirability bias (van de Mortel, 2008). Specifically, parents and children might have responded in a way that presents them in a favorable light, conforming to societal norms or expectations, instead of expressing their true thoughts and behaviors. Indeed, a cross-cultural study has found that Chinese parents had higher levels of socially desirable responding than the cross-country grand mean level (Bornstein et al., 2015). The social desirability bias can impact the validity and reliability of my results. Future studies can use observations, such as observing parenting behaviors during a given task, to mitigate the effects of social desirability bias (Herbers et al., 2017).

Second, my studies only used quantitative methods, which might cause issues of oversimplification and limit the exploration of individual experiences and interpretations. For example, to test Chinese mothers' color evasion, I only captured how many times they

engaged or did not engage in talking about race as well as its relations to their levels of social dominance orientation, but did not delve into the specific motivations behind their (non-) color evasion. Future studies can employ a mixed-method approach (Bergen & Labonté, 2020; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007), combining quantitative and qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and observations in addition to questionnaires, to capture the nuances and complexities in interpreting findings of parental socialization.

Finally, the data collection was conducted through virtual meetings rather than traditional home visits due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although virtual visits have been found to be effective and viewed as a promising method for boosting family participation in research programs (Roben & Costello, 2022), results from virtual visits might be different from home visits. For example, parents typically engage in reading physical books to their children in daily life rather than using a screen device. Indeed, a study revealed that parents perceived print books as being more educational and entertaining compared to digital media, and they were motivated to use print books for their children's learning and entertainment (Strouse et al., 2019). Researchers who conducted online visits in this project indeed noted that during picture book reading, some participating parents appeared to read the book to themselves rather than to their children, without much parent-child bonding. This raises concerns about ecological validity. However, this phenomenon was only derived from our researchers' observations and subjective impressions. A comparative study between virtual and home visits is recommended to further establish the validity of virtual visit format.

Conclusions

The four chapters of my dissertation focused on various aspects of children's social development, including emotion regulation, social anxiety, and intergroup attitudes, and how they were related to parental socialization. I explored these areas within a specific family and

cultural context. Previous research has demonstrated both similarities and differences in child social development across cultures, highlighting the importance of exploration variations within and between cultures. Therefore, my goal was to provide evidence for both commonality and specificity of social development within Chinese culture. The findings in my dissertation shed light on both specific and common features in children's social development. Chinese children play an active role in family dynamics and display prejudice towards outgroups, which align with the common and universal processes in children's social development. Moreover, my findings support the perspective of within-culture specificity in certain domains of social development, such as the relatively small detrimental effects of psychological control on Chinese children's social functioning, and Chinese children and mothers' active engagement in talking about racial differences. These findings emphasize the importance of further investigating within-culture conceptualizations, such as how cultural constructs are conceptualized and how different cultural groups prioritize these values.

Overall, the findings in my dissertation acknowledge the uniqueness in each child's social development within their family and culture context, while also integrating previous knowledge on common processes in social development. Importantly, my dissertation addresses the research gap in Chinese parental socialization on children's intergroup racial attitudes, suggesting that the effects of parental ethnic-racial socialization are similar from Western-based findings, while highlighting potential differences in the underlying motivations behind such socialization practices due to cultural norms and values. Indeed, scholars have advocated for moving beyond the notion of sameness and embracing complementarity principle in studying children's social development (Malti & Cheah, 2021). This involves creatively combining new information on specific and common patterns to gain a more comprehensive understanding of each child's social development.

Looking ahead, it is important to explore cultural constructs in specific domains, and to embrace diversity in its entirety. Adopting an open-minded approach and focusing on both specific and common features of social development can inform the development of tailored interventions that are contextually appropriate. I hope that my dissertation contributes to a deeper understanding of parental socialization and children's social functioning in the Chinese cultural context and to promote a greater appreciation and respect for cultural diversity worldwide among both researchers and practitioners.