Cultural values, parenting, and adolescent adjustment in immigrant Chinese families

Catherine Costigan, Daphne Dokis, Ai-Lan Chia, & Jing Ee Tan

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Abstract

The current study examines variation in parental values, parenting practices, and children’s adjustment among immigrant Chinese families. Participants were fathers, mothers and children (average age of 12) in 62 families from Chinese-speaking countries. Mothers reported more warmth, inductive reasoning, and monitoring than fathers. Children’s reports of mother-father differences were quite similar. Contrary to expectations, parents’ cultural values were largely unrelated to their parenting practices. Greater differences between children and their fathers in reports of parenting were associated with children’s reports of lower self-worth and lower satisfaction with parent-child relationships. In contrast, differences between children and mothers in reports of parenting showed few relationships with child well-being. The results suggest the need for more attention to the ways in which cultural values influence daily family life and to the role of fathers in immigrant Chinese families.
Introduction

The current study examines variation in parenting practices among immigrant Chinese families living in Canada. Most research on Chinese families is comparative. However, within-group studies can demonstrate how culture influences development by identifying sources of within-group heterogeneity (e.g., Cauce et al, 1998).

The first issue we explore is whether mothers and fathers report differences in their parenting. Specifically, we assess whether the parenting styles of immigrant Chinese parents conform to the Chinese adage “kind mother, strict father” (Shek, 1998).

Next, we examine the extent to which parents’ cultural values predict their parenting practices. Values that exist in the broader culture influence individual-level beliefs about effective childrearing techniques. Key Chinese cultural values include collective identities and children’s obligation to parents (Ho, 1996; Kim et al., 1999).
These values are assumed to underlie cross-cultural differences in childrearing practices. For example, comparative studies find that Chinese parents exert greater control, use more high-power discipline, and express less affection than Western parents (e.g., Chiu, 1987; Gorman, 1998). However, the cultural values assumed to shape these differences are rarely measured directly. Here, we directly evaluate the influence of cultural values on parenting practices. If previous speculations are correct, greater endorsement of traditional cultural values should be associated with reports of more restrictive control and less affective expression.

Finally, we examine the consequence of parenting practices for children’s well being. Specifically, we assess whether discrepancies between parents’ and adolescents’ perceptions of parenting practices influence adolescents’ satisfaction with their relationships with their parents and their sense of self-worth. We expect positive adjustment will be related to greater congruence in perceptions of parenting, and that poorer adjustment will be related to greater incongruence.
Participants

- **N=62** immigrant families with Chinese origins in Canada
- All parents foreign-born
- Child generational status:
  - 50% of the children immigrated after age 6
  - 50% of the children were born in Canada or arrived before the age of 6

Country of Origin

- China: 50%
- Taiwan: 13%
- Hong Kong: 13%
- Mixed: 24%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fathers</th>
<th>Mothers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Age <em>a</em></td>
<td>44.40 (4.39)</td>
<td>41.28 (4.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Arrival in Canada</td>
<td>34.09 (10.36)</td>
<td>32.84 (7.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Time in Canada <em>a</em></td>
<td>10.83 (10.88)</td>
<td>8.66 (7.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (% &gt; High school) <em>a</em></td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of Marriage</td>
<td>17.63 (5.27)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age</td>
<td>11.92 (1.80)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Gender</td>
<td>35% male, 65% female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* Significant mother-fathers difference
Measures

- **Parenting** assessed parents’ use of **inductive reasoning** (e.g. Do you give you reasons to your child for decisions?), **monitoring** (Do you know who your child is with when he or she is away from home?), and **harsh discipline** (e.g., Do you spank or slap your child when he or she does something wrong?) (Kim & Ge, 2000). Additional items assessed parental **warmth** (e.g., Do you show affection to your child?). Both parents and youth completed this measure.

- **Cultural Values** were assessed with measures of **traditional Asian values** (e.g., one should be humble and modest) (Kim et al., 1999), **ethnic identity** (Phinney, 1992), and the **family obligations** parents expect of their children (**Current**: e.g., expectation to spend time with family on weekends; **Respect for Family**: e.g., expectation to follow parents’ advice about choosing friends) (Fuligni et al., 1999).

- **Child well being** was assessed in terms of feelings of **self-worth** (Harter, 1982) and **satisfaction with relationships** with parents.
Question 1: Mother-Father Differences in Parenting

• First, we looked at differences in parenting practices reported by parents and youth

• Reports of parenting were unrelated to
  – parents’ length of time in Canada
  – children’s generational status

• Child gender differences
  – parents reported more harsh discipline with boys than girls
  – girls reported more inductive reasoning, warmth, and monitoring than boys
Differences in Reports of Parenting

- Harsh Discipline
- Inductive Reasoning
- Warmth
- Monitoring

Dad, Mom, Child on Dad, Child on Mom
• **Mother vs. Father Reports**
  – Mothers reported higher levels of inductive reasoning, warmth, and monitoring than fathers. There were no differences in harsh discipline.

• **Child Reports of Mothers vs. Fathers**
  – Similarly, children reported that mothers were warmer and engaged in more monitoring than fathers. Unlike parents, they also reported that mothers used more harsh discipline, and they did not report differences in inductive reasoning.

• **Father Reports vs. Child Reports of Father**
  – Fathers reported more monitoring than children. This was the only significant father-child difference.

• **Mother Reports vs. Child Reports of Mother**
  – Mothers reported more monitoring and inductive reasoning than children.
Question 2: Relationship between Cultural Values and Parenting

Parents reported their values in four areas:

- Traditional Asian values
- Ethnic identity
- Family Obligations - Current
- Family Obligations - Respect for Family

Mothers reported higher ethnic identity and higher expectations for child’s current obligations to family than fathers.

Parents’ values were not related to their length of time in Canada or to child gender. Child generational status was not related to Asian values or ethnic identity.
Differences in Parents’ Values related to Child Generational Status

- Child generational status was related to parents’ family obligation expectations.
- Parents of children born in Canada or arriving before age 6 reported more Family Obligations (both current and regarding family respect) than parents of children who immigrated after age 6.
Partial correlations between cultural values and parenting: Fathers
Controlling for child gender, generational status, and parent length of time in Canada

- Few relationships were evident.
- The more fathers emphasized children’s current obligations, the more harsh discipline they reported.
- Alternatively, higher ethnic identity was associated with more warmth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Harsh Disc.</th>
<th>Induct. Reason.</th>
<th>Warmth</th>
<th>Monitor -ing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian Values</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Oblig.</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Respect</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Partial correlations between cultural values and parenting: Mothers

Controlling for child gender, generational status, and parent length of time in Canada

- Only one significant relationships emerged.
- The more mothers emphasized children’s showing respect for the family, the more inductive reasoning they used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Warmth</th>
<th>Monitor -ing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian Values</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current Oblig.</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Respect</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.15</td>
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</table>
Question 3: Predicting Child Well-Being

• Two indicators of well-being were assessed
  – self-worth
  – satisfaction with parent-child relationships

• First, we correlated both parent and child reports of parenting with the two indicators of well-being, controlling for the following background variables:
  – **Child Gender:** Neither indicator of well-being was related to gender.
  – **Generational Status:** Children born in Canada or immigrating before age 6 reported higher self-worth (trend)
  – **Child Age:** Older children reported less self-worth
Partial Correlations between Parenting and Child Well-Being

- Children’s reports of parenting were more predictive of their self-worth and relationship satisfaction than parents’ reports of parenting.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-Worth</th>
<th></th>
<th>Satisfaction with Relationship</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Report</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Inductive Reasoning</td>
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<td>Monitoring</td>
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<td>Harsh Discipline</td>
<td>-.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warmth</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.35**</td>
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<td>Child Report</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.34**</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harsh Discipline</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
<td>-.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.59***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Calculating the discrepancy between child and parent reports of parenting

• Next, we classified children into one of two groups based on the differences between their reports and their parents’ reports of parenting:

• **Group 1: Child less positive than parent**
  – child reported less warmth, monitoring, and inductive reasoning, and more harsh discipline than parent reported

• **Group 2: Child similar to or more positive than parent**
  – child reported similar levels as parents, or they reported more warmth, monitoring, and inductive reasoning, and less harsh discipline than parent reported

• We then compared the reports of well-being for the children in these two groups, controlling for child age.
Self-Worth and Discrepancy in reports of Parenting

Fathers
- Children reported less self-worth when their perceptions of their fathers’ parenting (in all domains) were less positive than their fathers’ reports.
- These differences are shown in the graph to the right.

Mothers
- In contrast to the results for fathers, children’s sense of self-worth was unrelated to the match between their reports and their mothers’ reports of parenting (in any domain of parenting).
Relationship Satisfaction and Discrepancy in reports of Parenting

Fathers

- Children reported less satisfaction when their perceptions of their fathers’ parenting were less positive than fathers’ reports. Significant differences existed in reports of Inductive Reasoning, Harsh Discipline, and Warmth.
- These differences are shown in the graph to the right.

Mothers

- Children reported less satisfaction only when their perceptions of their mothers’ warmth were less positive than their mothers’ self-reports.
Discussion

Mother-Father Differences in Parenting

Mothers were more likely than fathers to show warmth and affection, to explain their reasons for their rules, and to keep track of their children’s activities. Both parents reported low levels of harsh discipline. Children’s reports of mother-father differences largely paralleled these findings, except that children saw mothers as using more harsh discipline than fathers, and perceived no differences in parents’ use of inductive reasoning. Differences were similar in families where mothers were primary caregivers and in families where this responsibility was shared. This pattern of mother-father differences conforms to the traditional characterization of Chinese mothers as more nurturing. However, contrary to dichotomies such as “kind mother, strict father,” the results do not suggest that discipline is primarily the province of fathers (e.g., we did not find that fathers used more harsh discipline).

Cultural Values and Parenting

We found little support for the hypothesis that parents’ cultural values influence their parenting practices. The may be due to the limited variability in reports of parenting (parents were generally quite positive). Furthermore, the relationships that did emerge were not all in the predicted direction. Consistent with previous research, more traditional values for fathers (current obligations) were related to more harsh discipline. However, we also found that more traditional values (for both
parents) were related to more expressive or democratic parenting in a few instances. Thus, contrary to previous speculations that more traditional cultural values are associated with more control and less warmth, our results suggest that traditional cultural values can promote positive involvement with children.

More research is needed to identify the ways in which cultural-level values guide or shape the behavior of individuals. Perhaps the missing link is parents’ childrearing beliefs. That is, broad cultural values may relate more directly to the beliefs parents hold about what qualities are desirable in children and how best to achieve these goals. These more specific beliefs related to parenting may show more direct relationships with actual parenting behaviors.

**Discrepancies in Perceptions of Parenting and Child Well-Being**

Finally, we found that father-child discrepancies in reports of parenting were most predictive of children’s well-being. Specifically, children who were less positive than their fathers in their characterization of his parenting reported lower self-worth and less satisfaction in their relationship with their fathers. In contrast, mother-child discrepancies in reports of parenting were largely unrelated to children’s well-being. For mothers, it was the mean level harsh discipline and warmth, rather than discrepancies with children, which were related to lower levels of self-worth for children.
A mismatch between parents’ and children’s perceptions, with children feeling less positive, signals differences in interpretations of parenting. These differences may lead children to feel unsupported and less accepted by their parents and may contribute to greater intergenerational conflict within the family (e.g., Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993), all of which may undermine positive adaptation. Our results suggest that a mismatch in perceptions with fathers is particularly important.

Why were father-child differences, but not mother-child differences, related to lower adjustment? Father-child differences were not greater in magnitude than mother-child differences. Recall, however, that mothers on average were warmer and engaged in more monitoring and inductive reasoning than fathers. Perhaps this means that mothers are above an “acceptable” threshold (from children’s point of view) in these desirable parenting behaviors, whereas fathers’ are not. Consequently, although the differences are of the same magnitude, discrepancies with fathers may indicate dissatisfaction, whereas differences with mothers, although indicating a preference for more of these behaviors, do not.

In addition, our measure of parenting tells us more about how parents interact with their children, than about which parent is most involved in discipline or decision-making. At least traditionally, fathers in Chinese families have primary authority and are most involved in issues regarding conduct and achievement (Ho, 1987). If fathers’ interactions with their children are predominantly in these domains, and if fathers’ are more likely to make the rules and decisions that affect children, then discrepancies with fathers may have more consequences for how children feel about themselves and their relationships.