

Parental Control in the West and East Asia

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The Role of Parental Control in Children's Development in Western and East Asian Countries

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**ABSTRACT**—Decades of research in Western countries such as the United States have supported the idea that parental control undermines children’s psychological development. In recent years, investigators have asked whether this is also true in East Asian countries such as China, given that several aspects of East Asian culture have the potential to make children more accepting of parental control. We review research indicating that the effects of parental control on children’s psychological functioning are similarly negative in the United States and China, the two countries where most research on this subject has been conducted. However, we also highlight specific contexts in which the effects may be stronger in the West.

There is a wealth of evidence from Western countries, such as the United States, that when parents exert control over children by intruding, pressuring, or dominating them in terms of their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, children suffer psychologically (for a review, see Pomerantz & Thompson, 2008). In contrast, when parents support children's autonomy by allowing them freedom of choice, supporting their initiative, and adopting their perspective, children in the West benefit. Initially, the assumption was that such effects are universal. However, beginning in the 1990s, it was suggested that several aspects of the culture in East Asian countries, such as China, make children more accepting of parental control so that the negative effects are not as strong as they are in Western countries (e.g., Chao, 1994; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Because control is considered one of the most influential dimensions of parenting (Maccoby & Martin, 1983), there has been much debate over the effects of parental control in East Asian (versus Western) countries. As a consequence, there is now a sizeable body of research, conducted mainly in the United States and China, from which it is possible to gain significant insights about similarities and differences in the effects of parental control in Western and East Asian countries.

### **PARENTAL CONTROL**

In theory and research on parenting, the term "control" is often used to refer to parental intrusiveness, pressure, or domination, with the inverse being parental support of autonomy (Grolnick & Pomerantz, in press). The focus of much research has been psychological control, or parents' regulation of children's feelings and thoughts (e.g., Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005); psychological control is frequently contrasted with behavioral control, defined as parents' regulation of what children do. Behavioral control commonly includes parental guidance, monitoring, and rule setting. As such, it does not necessarily entail intrusiveness, pressure, or

domination; indeed, behavioral control has positive, rather than negative, consequences for children's psychological development (Grolnick & Pomerantz, in press). The debate about the effects of parental control in the West and East Asia has centered on control in the intrusive sense, with little attention to distinguishing between its targets—that is, whether parents are attempting to regulate children's psychology or behavior (Wang, Pomerantz, & Chen, 2007). We follow suit here, by focusing on parental control that is intruding, pressuring, or dominating, regardless of whether parents are attempting to regulate children's psychology or behavior.

### **UNIVERSALIST PERSPECTIVES**

Much of the research so far has been guided by the idea that parental control undermines children's sense of autonomy, thereby interfering with their psychological development (e.g., Barber et al., 2005). In the context of self-determination theory, Deci and Ryan (1985) argue that there is a universal need for autonomy and that satisfaction of this need is essential to optimal psychological functioning. These investigators make the case that controlling environments detract from feelings of autonomy, regardless of culture. Thus, when parents exert control over children, for instance by making decisions for them about personal issues (e.g., who to be friends with), children suffer, as they feel they do not have control over their lives. Such a universalist perspective is also evident in parental acceptance–rejection theory, which holds that parental control may negatively influence children by conveying rejection—for example, when parents withdraw love because children have not met their expectations, children may feel that parents no longer care about them. Parental acceptance–rejection theory postulates that children's feelings of being rejected (vs. accepted) by parents play a role in their development regardless of culture, because relatedness is universally important (e.g., Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2004).

## **CULTURE-SPECIFIC PERSPECTIVES**

The major principle behind culture-specific perspectives is that Western and East Asian countries have distinct cultures that shape the effects of parental control on children's development leading the effects to be less negative in East Asian contexts. Iyengar and Lepper (1999), for instance, contend that when East Asian parents exert control over children by making decisions for them about personal issues, it does not have detrimental effects; taking on their parents' decisions as their own provides children with an opportunity to harmonize with parents, something that in East Asia is prioritized over autonomy, given the heightened cultural orientation toward interdependence. In a somewhat different vein, because East Asian notions about parents' role in children's development—such as the Chinese concept of *guan*, which means to govern as well as care for—involve parental control with the ultimate aim of supporting children, parental control may not be experienced as rejecting by children (Chao, 1994). As parental control is more common in East Asia than in the West (e.g., Wang et al., 2007), it has also been suggested that East Asian parents may exert control more deliberately and calmly, with less negative affect, because control does not violate, and is even part of, “good parenting” (e.g., Grusec, Rudy, & Martini, 1997).

## **EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE**

The culture-specific perspectives arose in part in response to a series of findings from the 1990s showing that authoritarian (vs. authoritative) parenting has a greater negative effect on American children of European heritage than it does on American children of Asian heritage in terms of academic functioning (e.g., grades) but not necessarily in terms of emotional functioning (e.g., depressive symptoms; e.g., Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994). Unfortunately, conclusions about the dissimilarity of the effects of parental

control in Western and East Asian countries cannot be made from such data, because authoritarian parenting is an amalgamation of multiple dimensions of parenting including control, structure, and acceptance. Thus, it is unclear if it is parental control that drives the difference (or absence of difference) in the effects of authoritarian parenting; it could be one of the other dimensions or the interaction between two or more of the dimensions.

The research on the effects of authoritarian parenting on children of European and Asian heritage in the United States was followed by research on the effects specifically of parental control in Western and East Asian countries. Hasebe, Nucci, and Nucci (2004) found that parents making decisions for children about personal issues was associated with dampened emotional functioning among American and Japanese high-school children. Similarly, Barber et al. (2005) documented positive associations between parental psychological control and adolescents' depression and delinquency in a variety of countries including the United States, Germany, China, and India. Because these studies used concurrent designs in which parental control and children's psychological functioning were examined at a single point in time, the findings cannot provide insight into whether parental control precedes dampened psychological functioning among children similarly in Western and East Asian contexts; determining whether it does is critical in drawing conclusions about the role of parental control in children's psychological development in the two regions.

Research following children over time in the United States and China sheds light on this issue. The more parents make decisions for children about personal issues as children enter adolescence, the more children's emotional functioning suffers 2 years later, adjusting for their earlier functioning; notably, the size of the effects in the United States and China do not differ (Qin, Pomerantz, & Wang, in press). A comparable pattern is evident for psychological control

(Wang et al., 2007): During early adolescence, such control predicts children's dampened emotional functioning 6 months later, taking into account children's earlier emotional functioning, similarly in the United States and China. Conversely, parental support of children's autonomy (e.g., encouraging them to express their opinions) predicts better subsequent emotional functioning among children in both countries, albeit with a stronger effect for positive, but not negative, emotional functioning in the United States. Parental support of children's autonomy also predicts children's enhanced grades over time similarly in the two countries, but its effect on children's motivation (e.g., investment in school) is stronger in the United States.

### **MODERATING CONTEXTS**

Although parental control appears to interfere with children's psychological functioning similarly in the West and East Asia, there may be some contexts in which it may do so to a greater extent in Western countries. Because the identification of such contexts represents a second step in elucidating whether the effects of parental control differ in the two regions, there is limited evidence on this issue. However, what evidence does exist is suggestive of several circumstances under which the effects of parental control are stronger in the West. First, almost all of the research has been conducted in areas that are in or near urban centers. Given that such areas in East Asia have been increasingly exposed to Western values in the past few decades, it is unclear to what extent the findings are generalizable to rural areas. Indeed, parental control may play a stronger undermining role in urban areas than in rural areas, given that children, particularly boys, in urban China feel less of a sense of obligation to parents (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004) and are also more averse to conflict with parents than are their counterparts in rural areas (Zhang & Fuligni, 2006). Stronger effects of parental control in urban (versus rural) areas may

also exist in the West, however, given cultural variability by geographical area in the West (e.g., Plaut, Markus, & Lachman, 2002).

Second, differences in the strength of the effects of parental control in Western and East Asian countries may exist, as reflected in the extent to which parents decrease their control as children mature. Perhaps because of the West's heightened orientation toward independence and its less hierarchical structure (Triandis, 1994), American parents decrease their control (i.e., refraining from making decisions for their children about personal issues) more than do Chinese parents as children progress through the early adolescent years (Qin et al., in press). As Western children expect this decrease in parental control more than East Asian children do (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991), their psychological functioning may be influenced more by the extent to which their parents "loosen the reins" during these years. As shown in Figure 1, when American parents relinquish control by making fewer decisions for children about personal issues as children enter adolescence, children have better emotional functioning; although such a trend is also evident in China, it is substantially weaker (Qin et al., in press). It is possible that Chinese children benefit more from a decline in parental control in later adolescence, when it may be more normative. Unfortunately, similarities and differences in how Western and East Asian children move through development have not been comprehensively documented.

Third, the effects of parental control over children's academic learning may be stronger in the West than in East Asia. In Confucian teaching, which is central in East Asian culture, learning is viewed as a moral endeavor in which individuals take on the lifelong task of constantly improving themselves (Li, 2005). Access to education is also more limited, but has greater financial impact, in East Asia (Pomerantz, Ng, & Wang, 2008). Given the moral and practical importance of children's learning, East Asian children may be particularly accepting of

parental control when it comes to academics. Although the effects of parental control in the academic area have not been compared to the effects in other areas, there is some suggestive evidence. When European American children believe their mothers have made decisions for them about an academic task, they spend less time and perform more poorly on the task than they do when they make the decisions themselves; however, the reverse is true of Asian American children (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Research conducted in China, however, suggests this is the case only when children feel they have positive relationships with their mothers (Bao & Lam, 2008); it may be that children's sense of connectedness to their parents allows children to internalize parents' goals.

Fourth, parental control may take many forms, but the major focus of the comparative research has been on parents making decisions for children about personal issues and their exertion of psychological control over children. These forms of control may be at the extreme end of the continuum. It is possible that less extreme forms, such as providing assistance when children do not request it or hovering over children as they work on something, are more open to interpretation by children in terms of the extent to which they are seen to violate their autonomy or convey rejection. Consequently, culture may play a greater part in how such forms of control are interpreted, leading Western children to hold more negative views of less extreme forms of control than do East Asian children and thus to suffer more when their parents use them. For example, because the West is oriented more toward independence than is East Asia, Western children may see parents' hovering as children complete their homework as more of a violation of their autonomy than might their East Asian counterparts, who may instead interpret such behavior as an expression of parents' love.

#### **UNDERLYING MECHANISMS**

Fully elucidating the effects of parental control in Western and East Asian countries involves identifying not only the circumstances that may lead to differences in the strength of effects but also the mechanisms underlying the effects. It is necessary to consider the possibility that similar effects reflect different processes. Given different cultural orientations toward independence and interdependence, for example, dampened feelings of autonomy may account for the negative effects of parental control to a greater extent among children in the West, whereas heightened feelings of rejection may account for them to a greater extent among children in East Asia. Under circumstances when there are differences in the effects, the differences need to be unpacked: For example, do they reflect differences in children's interpretation of parental control? In this vein, Chao's (1994) suggestion that parental control has less negative effects among East Asian (vs. Western) children because they view parents' attempts to regulate them as an act of love should be examined. And if differences in how children interpret parental control underlie differences in its effects, is this due, at least in part, to differences in how parents exert control—for instance, in the extent to which parents accompany control with negative affect, as suggested by Grusec et al. (1997)?

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In line with universalist perspectives, when parents exert control over children by intruding, pressuring, or dominating them, children suffer, whether they live in the West or East Asia. This undermining role, however, may not be uniform; its strength may differ in the two regions in some contexts. The negative effects of parental control are stronger in the West than in East Asia when parents fail to decrease it as children enter adolescence; parental control may also have stronger effects in the West when it is exerted over academics than in other areas of children's lives. These potential contextual forces, as well as others such as the extremity of

control, need more direct investigation—something that can likely be accomplished as the focus moves away from asking *whether* the effects of parental control are stronger in the West than in East Asia to asking *when* they may be stronger, and *why*. Despite these lingering issues, the findings to date are consistent with self-determination theory's (Deci & Ryan, 1985) notion that there is a universal need for autonomy whose fulfillment may be undermined by controlling environments. Hence, recommendations that parents limit their intrusiveness in children's lives are likely to be useful both in the West and in East Asia.

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### **Recommended Reading**

Chao, R.K. (1994). (See References). One of the first papers to suggest why parental control may not have as negative effects in East Asia as it does in the West.

Greenfield, P.M., Keller, H., Fuligni, A.J., & Maynard, A. (2003). Cultural pathways through universal development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *54*, 461–490. This paper provides a full discussion of issues of culture in children's development, including that of the differential effects of parental control.

Grolnick, W.S. (2003). *The psychology of parental control: How well-meant parenting backfires*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. A clearly written, user-friendly, and relatively comprehensive review for readers who wish to expand their knowledge of the effects of parental control.

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Physical discipline and children's adjustment: Cultural normativeness as a moderator.

*Child Development*, 76, 1234–1246. An innovative study that illustrates original research about the differential effects of parents' physical discipline in multiple countries.

Wang, Q., Pomerantz, E.M., & Chen, H. (2007). (See References). A representative study that illustrates original research about the differential effects of parental control in the United States and China.

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**Fig. 1.** The effects of change over time in parental decision making on child emotional well-being during early adolescence in the United States and China (adapted from Qin, Pomerantz, & Wang, in press). In the United States, the larger the decline in parental (versus child) decision making about personal issues as children progressed through the seventh and eighth grades (adjusting for such decision making at the beginning of seventh grade), the better children's emotional well-being at the end of eighth grade (adjusting for such well-being at the beginning of seventh grade). In China, there was a similar pattern, but it was significantly smaller.

