Perceived parental control processes, parent-child relational qualities and psychological well-being of Chinese adolescents in intact and non-intact families in Hong Kong

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Abstract: This paper examines whether Chinese adolescents' perceptions (N=3,017) of parental behavioral control (parental knowledge, expectation, monitoring, discipline, and demandingness as well as parental control based on indigenous Chinese concepts), parental psychological control, parent-child relational qualities (perceived parental trust, child's trust of the parents, child's readiness to communicate with the parents, and child's satisfaction with parental control), and adolescent psychological well-being (hopelessness, mastery, life satisfaction and self-esteem) differed in intact and non-intact families. Results showed that relative to non-intact families, parental behavioral control processes were higher and parent-child relational qualities were better in intact families. In contrast, parental psychological control was higher in non-intact families than in intact families. Finally, the psychological well-being of adolescents in non-intact families was poorer than that of adolescents in intact families.

Keywords: parents, parental control, education, well-being, Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

According to family ecological theories, parental divorce or separation will seriously affect the ecology of the family, including parenting roles performed by the parents. First, marital disruption is a stressor that affects parental psychological well-being, which in turn undermines their roles as parents. Secondly, paternal absence usually occurs in single-parent families and this pattern would lessen the involvement of fathers in the parenting process. Third, because of tangible and intangible family problems and related stress (e.g., economic strain and division of household responsibilities), parent-child relations in non-intact families are expected to be less favorable as compared to those in intact families. Unfortunately, a survey of the literature shows that family and parenting processes in non-intact families are far from clear. As commented by Walker and Hennig (1), “the growing number of single-parent families has not been matched by an increase in our understanding of their family functioning” (P. 63).

There are empirical research findings showing that family processes in single-
parent families are less favorable than that of intact families (2). First, there are findings suggesting that global family functioning in intact families is better than that of non-intact families. In contrast to two-parent families, children and parents in single-parent families were ambivalent in their relationship and displayed more conflict (3). Cohen (4) also reported that single parent families were less cohesive than two-parent families and Sack, Mason and Higgins (5) showed that abusive punishment in single-parent families was two times of that of two-parent families.

Second, research findings showed that parental control and parental warmth have been found to be lower in non-intact families relative to intact families. Barber and Eccles (6) suggested that marital status was a marker variable where children in divorcing families displayed higher levels of externalizing behavior and experienced lower parental supervision disciplinary practices as well as warmth. van Schaick and Stolberg (7) reported that parental involvement diminished after parental divorce and it had negative impact on young adults’ intimate relationship. Furstenburg et al (8) similarly reported that parental involvement decreased after parental divorce and Florsheim et al (9) showed that parental monitoring was weaker in single-parent families.

Finally, there are research studies showing that parent-child relations in intact families were more favorable than those in non-intact families. For example, Love and Murdock (10) suggested problematic parental attachment could be used as an explanation for the observation that individuals from stepfamilies had negative developmental outcomes compared to those from intact families. Barber (11) also suggested that impaired paternal support and advice in non-intact families was conducive to adolescent depression.

There are several limitations pertinent to the study of parenting processes, parent-child relational qualities and psychological well-being in intact versus non-intact families. First, the existing findings are equivocal (2). For example, based on 28 children from divorce families and children from intact families, Krakauer (12) showed a general absence of differences between the two types of children in terms of their perceptions of parenting (acceptance vs. rejection; psychological control vs. psychological autonomy; firm control vs. lax control) and locus of control. Lopez, Melendez and Rice (13) also remarked that “quantitative studies of the effects of parental divorce on young adults’ perceptions of their family and peer relationships have generally yielded inconsistent findings” (P. 178).

Second, related studies are under-researched with reference to the different dimensions of behavioral control and psychological control. According to Shek (14), five dimensions of parental behavioral control should be differentiated, including parental knowledge, parental expectations, parental monitoring, parental discipline and parental demandingness. In addition, Shek (14) argued that it would be desirable to use indigenous cultural concepts to assess parental control.

Third, as pointed out by Shek (14), few researchers have used multiple measures of parental control and parent-child relational qualities in a single study. With reference to parent-child relational qualities, it was argued that several aspects, including the child’s satisfaction with parenting, the child’s readiness to communicate with the parents, and mutual trust between the child and the parent, should be examined. Obviously, the inclusion of multiple measures of parental control and parent-
child relational qualities can broaden our understanding of the related issues and increase the reliability of the measurement for the related constructs.

Finally, most of the existing studies have been conducted in Western societies and research findings in the Chinese culture are almost non-existent. Shek (2) pointed out that there was a predominance of Western studies in the study of differences between intact and non-intact families in family processes. As such, more studies in the Chinese context should be conducted.

Assuming that non-intact families would have less family strengths but more problems and that the presence of both parents in the family may serve as a symbol of family solidarity, three expectations with reference to the differences between intact and non-intact families can be put forward: 1) perceived parental behavioral and psychological control processes would be poorer in non-intact families than in intact families; 2) perceived parent-child relational qualities would be poorer in non-intact families than in intact families; and 3) adolescent psychological well-being would be better in intact families than in non-intact families. Based on the observation that fathers are more detached in non-intact families, it would be further expected that the differences between paternal and maternal control as well as parent-child relational processes would be greater in non-intact families than in intact families. There are several unique features of this study. First, in contrast to the available studies in which small sample sizes are commonly employed, a large sample size was used in this study. Second, multiple indicators of parental control and parent-child relational processes were used in this study. Third, to add a Chinese perspective in this study, an indigenous measure of parental control was employed in this study.

METHODS

Instruments

The following measures have been shown to possess acceptable psychometric properties in the previous studies (14-17).

Assessment of parental behavioral and psychological control

1. Paternal Knowledge Scale (PKNO: α=.83) and Maternal Knowledge Scale (MKNO: α=.86) were used to examine the level of parental knowledge of the child's behavior.

2. Paternal Expectation Scale (PEXP: α=.72) and Maternal Expectation Scale (MEXP: α=.71) were used to assess the level of parental expectation of the child's behavior.

3. Paternal Monitoring Scale (PMON: α=.82) and Maternal Monitoring Scale (MMON: α=.79) were used to assess the level of parental monitoring of the child's behavior.

4. Paternal Discipline Scale (PDIS: α=.68) and Maternal Discipline Scale (MDIS: α=.70) were used to assess the level of reasonable parental discipline.

5. Paternal Parenting Style Scale and Maternal Parenting Style Scale were used to assess the global parenting attributes of the parents. There are two dimensions in each scale, including the Paternal Responsiveness Scale (PRES: α=.85) and Paternal Demandingness Scale (PDEM: α=.76) for fathers and Maternal Responsiveness Scale (MRES: α=.84) and Maternal Demandingness Scale (MDEM: α=.73) for mothers.

6. Paternal Psychological Control Scale (PPSY: α=.89) and Maternal Psychological Control Scale (MPSY: α=.90) were employed to assess the level of parental psychological control.

7. Chinese Paternal Psychological Control Scale (CPPCS: α=.86) and Chinese
Maternal Psychological Control Scale (CMPCS: $a=.85$) were used to assess parental control based on indigenous Chinese concepts of parental control.

**Assessment of parent-child relational qualities**

1. Satisfaction with Paternal Control Scale (SATF: $a=.78$) and Satisfaction with Maternal Control Scale (SATM: $a=.78$) were used to assess the respondent’s satisfaction with parental control.

2. Readiness to Communicate with the Father Scale (RCF: $a=.89$) and Readiness to Communicate with the Mother Scale (RCM: $a=.89$) were used to assess the respondents’ readiness to communicate with the parents.

3. Paternal Trust of Children Scale (FTRU: $a=.80$) and Maternal Trust of Children Scale (MTRU: $a=.80$) were used to assess the respondents’ perceptions of their fathers’ trust about themselves.

4. Children’s Trust of Father Scale (TRUF: $a=.77$) and Children’s Trust of Mother Scale (TRUM: $a=.72$) were used to assess the respondents’ trust about their parents.

**Assessment of psychological well-being**

1. The Chinese Hopelessness Scale (HOPEL: $a=.91$) based on the previous work (18) was used to measure the sense of hope in a person.

2. The Mastery Scale (MAS: $a=.76$) based on the previous work (19) was used to measure a person’s sense of control of his or her life.

3. The Life Satisfaction Scale (LIFE: $a=.80$) based on the previous work (20) was used to assess one’s own global judgment of one’s quality of life.

4. The Chinese Self-Esteem Scale (ESTEEM: $a=.76$) based on the previous work (15, 16, 17, 21) was used to assess self-esteem in the participants.

**Participants and Procedures**

The study was based upon the responses of 3,017 secondary school students (1331 males and 1670 females). They were all Secondary 1 students (mean age=12.65 years) recruited from 16 schools randomly selected from secondary schools in Hong Kong. The sampling frame of the study was all Government and aided schools in Hong Kong. As the questionnaire was in Chinese, international schools and non-Chinese speaking schools were not included in the present study. For all recruited schools, all Secondary 1 students were invited to participate in the study. The purpose of the study was mentioned and the confidentiality of the data collected was repeatedly emphasized to all of the students in attendance on the day of testing. All participants responded en masse to all the instrument scales in the questionnaire in a self-administration format. Adequate time was provided for the subjects to complete the questionnaire.

**RESULTS**

Concerning the marital status of the parents of the participants, most of them were from intact families: parents divorced (5.5%), parents separated (1.5%), parents were legal spouses (90.8%), and parents with other forms of marital status, such as cohabitation with boy friend or girl friend (2.2%). To understand the differences between intact and non-intact families on perceived parental control processes, parents separated, divorced or having other forms of marital status were combined to form the Non-Intact Families Group. Adolescents whose parents were legally married couples formed the Intact Families Group.

Analyses showed that the two groups
differed in age, but not in the gender ratio. As such, analyses of covariance with parents (fathers vs. mothers) and family types (intact vs. non-intact families) as the main factors and age as the covariate were performed. With reference to Table 1, two observations could be highlighted. First, perceived parental control processes and parent-child relational qualities were relatively less favorable in the Non-Intact Families Group than in the Intact Families Group. Second, the significant interaction effects in most of the analyses showed that parental differences were greater in the Non-Intact Families Group than in the Intact Families Group. Regarding psychological well-being, the findings showed that the psychological well-being of adolescents from the Non-Intact Families Group was poorer than that of the Intact Families Group after the effect of age was removed (see Table 2).

DISCUSSION

Regarding the relationship between family types and dyadic family processes, the present findings showed that perceived parental control and parent-child relational qualities indexed by different measures was relatively poorer in non-intact families. From the family systems perspective (22), non-intact families may suffer from systems defects (e.g., lack of spousal support in parenting) that may eventually affect parenting functioning. In the Chinese culture, the parenting and parent-child relationship processes of non-intact families may further be negatively affected in two areas. First, because the economic conditions of non-intact families are relatively more disadvantaged, such families might experience additional stress, which would eventually lead to dysfunctional parenting and parent-child interaction. Second, because non-intact families are not widely accepted in the Chinese culture, family members may subject to stigmatization that would adversely affect their parent-child relationships. It can also be reasoned that impaired parental control and parent-child relationship processes will adversely affect adolescent psychological well-being. The present findings can be regarded as pioneering as no systematic attempt has been conducted to examine this issue in the Chinese culture.

There are three reasons why it is important to examine differences between intact and non-intact families in parental control processes, parent-child relational qualities and adolescent psychological well-being. First, the related knowledge would help to understand the complexity of perceived parenting processes, parent-child relational qualities and psychological well-being in adolescence. According to Walsh (23), it is important to understand family processes in diverse groups with different demographic and socio-economic background. Demo (24) also argued that the consequences of divorce and single-parent structure may have been exaggerated and suggested that we should examine the related family processes. Second, knowledge on the family correlate of parental control, parent-child relational qualities and adolescent psychological well-being would have implications on family intervention. For example, the knowledge that adolescents in non-intact families might have more negative perceptions of their parents would help practitioners formulate appropriate intervention strategies. Finally, from an epidemiological point of view, the related knowledge would help to identify those adolescents whose families that may be more dysfunctional at an earlier stage. Brassington (25) recommended that counselors should be aware of the changing family constellation in single-parent
Table 1. Effects of parents (fathers vs. mothers) and family types (intact vs. non-intact families) on the different indicators of parental control and parent-child relational qualities

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<td>Parental Control Measures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>16.20</td>
<td>18.77</td>
<td>20.28</td>
<td>21.70</td>
<td>55.95***</td>
<td>65.74***</td>
<td>14.65***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expectation</td>
<td>17.22</td>
<td>19.49</td>
<td>19.97</td>
<td>20.66</td>
<td>10.37**</td>
<td>51.44***</td>
<td>41.78***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>14.84</td>
<td>16.10</td>
<td>18.48</td>
<td>19.38</td>
<td>41.51***</td>
<td>17.52***</td>
<td>1.44ns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>12.71</td>
<td>14.09</td>
<td>14.80</td>
<td>15.34</td>
<td>18.75***</td>
<td>30.13***</td>
<td>19.16***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demands</td>
<td>6.97</td>
<td>9.72</td>
<td>10.44</td>
<td>11.62</td>
<td>16.20***</td>
<td>62.03***</td>
<td>44.32***</td>
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<tr>
<td>P-Control</td>
<td>21.88</td>
<td>21.43</td>
<td>23.12</td>
<td>21.61</td>
<td>4.26*</td>
<td>5.52*</td>
<td>5.35*</td>
<td>N S S S N</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-Control</td>
<td>33.23</td>
<td>35.45</td>
<td>36.14</td>
<td>36.64</td>
<td>7.91**</td>
<td>11.53**</td>
<td>23.08***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent-Child Relational Qualities Measures</td>
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<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>10.67</td>
<td>11.89</td>
<td>12.17</td>
<td>12.45</td>
<td>0.15ns</td>
<td>22.81***</td>
<td>25.47***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child initiative</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>1.12ns</td>
<td>12.93***</td>
<td>7.50**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust of child</td>
<td>14.08</td>
<td>14.91</td>
<td>14.53</td>
<td>15.13</td>
<td>1.71ns</td>
<td>12.41***</td>
<td>1.54ns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child's trust</td>
<td>12.91</td>
<td>14.35</td>
<td>14.44</td>
<td>14.95</td>
<td>0.77ns</td>
<td>23.89***</td>
<td>15.75***</td>
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<td>Parental Responsiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>12.57</td>
<td>14.68</td>
<td>15.83</td>
<td>17.41***</td>
<td>54.12***</td>
<td>43.43***</td>
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</table>

Note: Knowledge = Paternal knowledge (PKNO) vs maternal knowledge (MKNO). Expectation = Paternal expectation (PEXP) vs. maternal expectation (MEXP). Monitoring = Paternal monitoring (PMON) vs. maternal monitoring (MMON). Discipline = Paternal discipline (PDIS) vs. maternal discipline (MDIS). Demands = Paternal demandingness (PDEM) vs. maternal demandingness (MDEM). P-Control = Paternal psychological control (PSY) vs. maternal psychological control (MPSY). C-Control: Paternal control based on Chinese concepts (CPPCS) vs. maternal control based on Chinese concepts (CMPCS). Satisfaction = Satisfaction with paternal control (SATF) vs. Satisfaction with maternal control (SATM). Child Initiative = Readiness to communicate with father (RCF)

Post-hoc Comparisons: A = Parental difference in Non-Intact Families Group. B = Parental difference in Intact Families Group. C = Family difference for paternal variables. D = Family difference for the maternal variables. S = significant at the 1% level. N = non-significant at the 5% level.

*** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05; ns non-significant

Table 2. Effects of marital status of the parents (non-intact families vs. intact families) on adolescent psychological well-being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Non-Intact Families (Mean Scores)</th>
<th>Intact Families (Mean Scores)</th>
<th>F Value</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HOPEL</td>
<td>28.25</td>
<td>25.08</td>
<td>19.58*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAS</td>
<td>27.70</td>
<td>29.34</td>
<td>14.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIFE</td>
<td>17.55</td>
<td>19.13</td>
<td>7.81*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESTEEM</td>
<td>13.56</td>
<td>14.27</td>
<td>11.78*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. HOPEL: Hopelessness Scale. MAS: Mastery Scale. LIFE: Life Satisfaction Scale. ESTEEM: Self-Esteem Scale. * p < .001
families and the related family processes.

There are several limitations of the present study. First, because the research findings reported in the present study are based on Hong Kong adolescents, there is a need to replicate the findings obtained and to assess the generalizability of the findings in adolescent samples in different Chinese communities. Second, because there are research findings suggesting parents and their adolescent children may have different perceptions of their families, assessment based on parents' perspective may give a clearer picture of the problem area. Third, because the present attempt is a cross-sectional study, it would be helpful if future studies will examine the long-term impacts of non-intact family structure on family processes and adolescent psychological well-being via longitudinal studies.

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