

Immigrant Chinese Mothers' Use of Discipline with Their 4-Year Olds: A Pilot Study¹

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Abstract

Objective: To investigate immigrant Chinese mothers' discipline with their children.

Methods: Sixteen immigrant Chinese mothers of 4-year olds were interviewed about their use of discipline with children. Discipline items were grouped into four categories – the use of corporal punishment, consistency in the use of discipline, and mothers' self-reported calmness and meanness. We investigated if discipline related categories vary by child gender or mothers' educational level. **Results:** No significant difference between mothers of boys and mothers of girls on the use of corporal punishment, consistency in discipline, and calmness and meanness. Maternal educational level has no significant effects on the use of corporal punishment, consistency in discipline, and calmness, but has a small effect on mothers' self-ratings of meanness. **Conclusion:** Currently, even if the trends concerning mothers' reports on the discipline related categories were in the expected directions, the small sample size is too small to have a definitive conclusion. Future research with a larger sample size will be helpful to explore immigrant mothers' discipline with their children.

Key words: acculturation, parental discipline, immigrant families

¹ The paper is based on the author's unpublished master's thesis submitted to Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University. The author currently works as postdoctoral fellow at the School of Occupational Therapy, College of Medicine, National Taiwan University.

華人移民母親對四歲孩童的教養：前驅性研究

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摘要

目的：探究華人移民母親對孩子的教養。**方法：**16 位四歲孩童的華人移民母親接受關於教養孩子的訪談。教養的問題分為四類，體罰的使用、教養的一致性、母親自我報告的冷靜度以及漠視度。我們探究這四類與教養相關的問題是否會因孩童性別或母親教育程度而有所差異。**結果：**母親體罰的使用、教養的一致性和教養時的冷靜度及漠視度，在男孩及女孩之間無顯著的差異。體罰的使用、教養的一致性以及冷靜度在不同教育程度的母親之間沒有顯著的差異，但教養時的漠視度卻呈現微小的差異。**結論：**雖然母親在教養相關問題的表現符合預期的方向，但小樣本使本研究未能有一明確的結論。未來具有較大樣本的研究將有助於更進一步地探討華人移民母親對孩童的教養。

關鍵詞：文化適應、父母教養、移民家庭

Introduction

Discipline, one of the domains of parenting, is described as a way to guide and limit a child's behavior in order to help the child learn self-control (Newman & Newman, 1991) and achieve goals in more desirable ways. The method of discipline is categorized into four groups - power assertion, love withdrawal, induction, and permissiveness (Henderson & Bergan, 1976). Power assertion, including physical punishment, verbal abuse, and deprivation of privileges, is involved in discouraging a child's unwanted or bad behavior by the use or threatened use of force. Love withdrawal such as social or physical isolation means that the love of parents is conditional on the child only when he behaves well. Induction is used to reasonably persuade the child to behave in a way rather than another. Permissiveness happens when parents allow the child to do in any way he likes without any attempt to guide him (Papps, Walker, Trimboli, & Trimboli, 1995).

Among discipline practices, corporal/physical punishment is widely studied as the use of corporal punishment is associated with child antisocial behavior and physical aggression (Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010; Thompson et al., 2016). For example, across six countries, Lansford et al. (2005) demonstrated that mothers' use of physical punishment was associated with children's behavioral problems, but the link was stronger in countries where physical punishment is not viewed as a common rearing strategy. Investigating associations between children's inhibitory control, harsh parental discipline and externalizing problems in preschoolers in the U.S., China, and Japan, Olson et al. (2011) found that children's externalization problems were pronouncedly associated with harsh maternal discipline and low levels of inhibitory control in all three countries. And harsh maternal discipline was negatively correlated with children's inhibitory control, but this was observed only in China and Japan, not in the U.S. (Olson et al., 2011). Further, parents' inappropriate use of corporal punishment may lead to child abuse, which profoundly harms a child's physical and psychological development (Witt et al., 2016; Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008). In addition to the use of corporal punishment, other factors such as parents' consistency in using discipline practices and parents' emotions are also related to externalizing problems observed in children (Denham et al., 2000).

Factors Associated with the Use of Discipline

Discipline practices may vary with characteristics of child or parents such as child gender or mother's educational level. Dion (1972) found that child gender appears to be a determinant of parental discipline practices. For instance, parents tend to have more punishments toward boys than girls in the same behavior. Moreover, child gender difference was revealed in students' self-reports. Relative to boys, girls significantly reported being treated in a less authoritarian way (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987). Previous research has shown that Chinese parents treat boys more strictly than girls. More induction, less power assertion, and less love withdrawal are used for girls than for boys. Additionally, Dornbusch et al. (1987) found that after controlling for child gender, compared to parents with higher educational level, parents with lower educational level were more authoritarian and permissive and less authoritative. One study conducted by Li et al. (2000) in Yunnan, China, demonstrated that mothers with lower educational level were associated with using more physical punishment toward their children.

Immigrant Families

The change of the environment tends to influence the way in which parents educate their children (Keller, 2007). Such an issue is worthy of investigation in immigrant families because researchers can explore how immigrant parents adjust to the new environment at large to educate their children while maintaining their cultures of origin. A study conducted by Wu (1985) showed that in terms of child rearing practices, overseas Chinese mothers may make some changes or adjustments with cultural values and environmental factors they are surrounded by, which are in contrast to those of their elders. Concerning parental control, immigrant Chinese parents seemed to show a gradual change between Chinese parents and parents of American culture (Lin & Fu, 1990). This result may indicate that immigrant parents change their parenting practices due to acculturation, which is a process of adjusting and accommodating to the values in the U.S. (Lin & Fu, 1990).

Current Study

As the immigrant population is growing in New York City, it is important to understand how immigrant parents teach their next generations in a context that differs from their origin

countries . In New York City, the Chinese population is the largest Asian immigrant group, and the number of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. continues to rise. Here, the focus is on immigrant Chinese mothers' disciplinary strategies with their 4-year olds.

Specifically, for the issue of research interest, the current research questions are:

1) Do Chinese parents living in New York City use different amounts of corporal punishment with their 4-year old boys versus girls? Do they differ in their emotional responses to boys versus girls (i.e., in their self ratings of “meanness” and their self ratings of “calmness”)? Are they differentially consistent in their discipline of boys versus girls?

2) Do mothers with different levels of education vary on these measures of corporal punishment, emotional meanness, calmness and consistency?

Based on these research questions, it was hypothesized that mothers of boys as well as mothers with lower levels of education would engage in greater amounts of corporal punishment. No specific expectations were made with respect to consistency, meanness, and calmness. These analyses were more exploratory.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this pilot study were 16 self-identified Chinese mothers, who were recruited in summer 2008. Mothers and their children were recruited when their children were around 51-53 months in age at the time of conducted interview. They were recruited from one health center located in China town in New York City as part of a larger study entitled “Metrobaby Project” at the Center of Research on Development, Culture, and Education (CRCDE).

At time of recruitment mothers were informed that this was a longitudinal study and visits would be conducted at certain developmental stages of their focal child. In order to be eligible to participate, mothers must fit the criteria on a screener. Initially, recruitment was conducted in the health center and participants were deemed eligible by CRCDE research volunteers in person

through asking the questions on a screener. Maternal age ranged from 27-40 years ($M = 35.5$) at the time of 52-month visit. Of them, 52.25% ($n = 9$) were Cantonese-speaking; 43.75% ($n = 7$) were Mandarin-speaking. All mothers (100%) were first-generation immigrants, not born in the U.S. Reported yearly household income ranged from \$10, 000 dollars to \$140, 000 dollars ($M = 48, 600$). In regards to their focal child, seven participants were mothers of boys and nine were mothers of girls.

Procedures

Recruitment. Questions were asked in mothers' native languages. Meanwhile, mothers were informed that it was a study of learning "how families, schools, peers, parent's work, and the media affect children's learning and performance in school," and visits would be conducted at child's ages of 4, 5, and 6, respectively. Details of this study were explained by recruiters. Later, participant recruitment was assisted by the health center. Through the contact lists provided by the health center, more prospective mothers were contacted and screened by phone to confirm their eligibility. They were also introduced the project to understand it more at the same time.

Interviews. Eligible mothers and their children were brought into the Center. Extensive 3-4 hour visits at the center consisted of three main sessions: mother interview, child assessment and video recorded mother-child interaction. Informed consent was obtained upon their arrival. Then, mothers were administered two separate interviews by native language speakers while child assessment was conducted simultaneously. Mothers were paid \$ 125 dollars for their participation in the visit after the three sessions were completed. All information related to participants was kept to a highest level of confidentiality.

Coding

Items related to discipline were drawn from the 52-month interview survey created by the center. There were totally 11 items for analysis. Two items were related to corporal punishment, six were related to consistency in discipline, two items measured mothers' calmness, and one item measured mothers' meanness. Responses were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Child gender was coded dichotomously. Concerning mothers' educational level, mothers with less than high school level were considered lowly educated and coded as 1

(low), those with high school diploma but less than bachelor degree were coded as 2 (middle) and those with bachelor degree or higher were coded as 3 (high). All participating mothers ($N = 16$) completed their primary education in China.

Data Analysis

For all analyses, child gender (boy, girl) and maternal education (low, middle, high) were the independent variables. The use of corporal punishment, consistency in the use of discipline, and self-reported calmness and meanness were the dependent variables. Mann-Whitney U -test was used for the comparison of the four discipline related categories between mothers of boys and mothers of girls. Kruskal-Wallis test was used for the comparison of the four discipline related categories among mothers with different levels of education (low, middle, high). The significance level of all statistical analyses was set at 5%.

Results

Data presented in the following session were organized according to the two main research questions that framed the study.

1) Are there child gender differences in mothers' use of corporal punishment, consistency in discipline, and/or self ratings of meanness and calmness? When asked “Did you spank (child's name)?” and “Did you slap or pop (child's name)?” Immigrant Chinese mothers of boys tended to use corporal punishment more often than mothers of girls, but the difference was non-significant, $p = .271$ (Table 1). Mothers of boys relative to mothers of girls reported more consistency in discipline when children misbehaved (Table 1). However, the difference did not reach significance, $p = .215$. Regarding how mothers felt when disciplining their children, both mothers of boys and mothers of girls reported remaining calm, $p = .828$ (Table 1). As shown in Table 1, there was a tendency for mothers of girls to report more meanness when handling their child's misbehavior than mothers of boys, but the difference was not pronounced, $p = .651$.

Table 1

Mothers' Use of Discipline by Child Gender

Variable	Boys	Girls	Mann-Whitney test
Median (Q1-Q3)	(n = 7)	(n = 9)	<i>p</i> value
Corporal	2.0	1.50	.271
Punishment	(1.0-2.50)	(1.25-1.75)	
Consistency	3.83	3.17	.215
	(3.17-4.17)	(3.0-3.92)	
Emotion			
Calmness	3.50	3.50	.828
	(3.0-4.50)	(3.0-4.0)	
Meanness	1.0	1.0	.651
	(1.0-2.0)	(1.0-2.50)	

2) *Do mothers' use of corporal punishment, consistency in discipline, and/or self ratings of meanness and calmness vary with mothers' educational level?* When asked “Did you spank (child’s name)?” and “Did you slap or pop (child’s name)?” As shown in Table 2, although mothers with less than high school education tended to report greater use of corporal punishment than those with bachelor’s degrees or higher and mothers with high school education fell between the two groups, no significance was observed among the three groups, $p = .411$ (Table 2). Mothers without high school education tended to be more consistent in using the same discipline than the other two groups, but the difference among the three groups was not pronounced, $p = .173$. All three groups of mothers reported they were calm when disciplining their children, and there was little variation in this measure by education, $p = .942$. Concerning meanness, mothers with less than high school education tended to report more meanness when disciplining their children than the other two groups, namely, mothers with college degrees or

beyond and mothers with high school education. A small difference existed in mothers' self-reported meanness by education, $p = .054$.

Table 2

Mothers' Use of Discipline by Maternal Education

Variable	Low	Middle	High	K-W test
Median (Q1-Q3)	(n = 2)	(n = 12)	(n = 2)	<i>p</i> value
Corporal	2.00	1.50	1.25	.411
punishment	(1.50-2.50)	(1.13-2.0)	(1.0-1.50)	
Consistency	4.25	3.42	3.42	.173
	(4.17-4.33)	(3.17-3.83)	(2.83-4.0)	
Emotion				
Calmness	3.75	3.50	3.50	.942
	(3.0-4.50)	(3.13-4.0)	(3.0-4.0)	
Meanness	3.0	1.0	1.0	.054
	(2.0-4.0)	(1.0-1.75)	(1.0-1.0)	

Discussion

Although the current study is based on analysis of only 16 families, trends were in the expected direction (even if not significant). It is anticipated that these trends would be significant when more families are included in analyses.

Specifically, mothers of boys tended to use more corporal punishment than mothers of girls, which was consistent with the previous findings on Chinese parenting (Dion, 1972; Dornbusch et al., 1987).

The trends of the preliminary findings supported the previous research by Li et al. (2000), which indicated higher rates of corporal punishment in mothers with lower level of education. Additionally, mothers with high or middle level of education reported lower level of meanness

than mothers with low level of education, and this difference was close to significance even in this small sample. Unexpectedly, mothers with the lowest level of education were most consistent in their discipline. This observation was in contrast to the previous study, in which mothers with more education were found to be more consistent in their discipline. High consistency in discipline tended to decrease or buffer children's later social problems (Wolchik, Wilcox, Jenn-Yun, & Sandler, 2000). However, the current finding of greater consistency in discipline in mothers with lower level of education might reflect mothers being "inflexible" in the ways they discipline their children. Mothers with higher level of education might be expected to be more flexible in the use of discipline, even when facing the same misbehavior by the child; this may be true if mothers are more likely to consider situational and other contextual factors when disciplining their children (e.g., if the child is very tired or sick). It will be important for future research to explore whether or not "consistency" and "flexibility" in discipline represent opposite ends of a bipolar continuum or separate, unipolar constructs. Finally, it is compelling to explore if child gender and mothers' educational level operate together in exploring mothers' discipline with their children.

Limitations and Directions of the Future Research

Although the current study advances the literature on the role of maternal education and child gender in the discipline practices of Chinese immigrant families, several limitations remain.

First, findings were based on mothers' self-reported discipline, and their responses could have been affected by the experience of living in the U.S. They also might have responded in ways they felt were appropriate in the U.S., perhaps minimizing the extent to which they truly used corporal punishment. Indeed, the average rates of corporal punishment were very low. What is more, since the role of acculturation needs to be taken into account, and it would be valuable to incorporate findings from another group of native Chinese mothers in China. This study design would help us understand whether and how disciplinary practices change for Chinese families who live in the U.S.

Second, although mothers of boys used corporal punishment more often than mothers of girls, the study did not gather information on other forms of discipline, such as inductive

reasoning and reprimand. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude that immigrant Chinese mothers use more corporal punishment than other methods when disciplining their children. Also, any statements that immigrant Chinese mothers are highly controlling when disciplining children would be premature, even if others have suggested that Chinese mothers are more controlling. Further, the positive or negative meaning of spanking, slapping and popping to mothers also needs to be probed and investigated, which will help us understand why mothers of girls use less corporal punishment but show more meanness than their counterparts.

Third, the study is based on quantitative responses to close-ended probes about discipline. More qualitative studies are needed to understand why parents use the forms of discipline that they do. Qualitative studies would also help explain what makes mothers with different educational levels engage in different discipline practices toward their children.

Finally, the current study may indicate that immigrant Chinese mothers in New York city educate/raise their children in ways different from those used in their origin countries due to acculturation. As there are more and more immigrant families in Taiwan, this study may draw researchers' attention on exploring how immigrant parents in Taiwan get adapted to a new environment and raise their next generations. Through the studies focusing on immigrant families, it may advance our understanding on the acculturation process and the associations between parental rearing and child development among immigrant families in Taiwan.

Conclusion

The present study provides a first step in examining the discipline practices of immigrant Chinese mothers with their 4-year-old children in New York city. Future studies with larger sample sizes, as well as cross-national investigations, will help advance a better understanding of the child rearing experiences of immigrant Chinese parents in the U.S.

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