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The Effect of Gender Differences and Cognitive Empathy on the Encouragement of Social Competence for the Next Generation: Evidence from Chinese Parents

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the western cultural context, parents emphasize female children's social-behavioral development more heavily. Likewise, mothers are more supportive of children's social development compared to fathers. However, whether the same behavior can be observed in eastern culture remains unclear. Besides the unchangeable factors (e.g., gender), it is also worth investigating whether the parents' improvable factors influence the emphasis on a child's socialization.

Methods: This study aimed to investigate the effects of a child's gender, parent's gender, and parent's cognitive empathy on parental encouragement of a child's social competence in Chinese culture.

Conclusions: Contrary to the western findings, this research suggested that in China, parents emphasize more social competence of the male child. Analogically, compared to mother, father underscores a child's social competence more heavily. Additionally, a parent's cognitive empathy explained the variance in parents' encouragement of a child's social competence even after controlling for the gender variables of parents and children.

Keywords: *Parent-Child; Gender Differences; Cognitive Empathy; Social Competence*

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Introduction

The development of social competence in children is especially important. Many researchers have noted that for children, adequate social skills are related to well-being (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Ladd, 2019; Luoma et al., 2001; Mavroveli et al., 2007) and other capabilities, such as leadership (Mavroveli et al., 2007), emotional regulation (Spinrad et al., 2006), active learning engagement and self-motivation management (Wentzel, 2017), that benefit their careers. Thus, for parents, it is essential to emphasize not only the current cognitive development of children but also children's socialization process. However, it is worth noticing that, in the western cultural context, parenting behaviors differ by child's gender. Compared to male children, parents emphasize the development of social competence in female offspring more heavily. In detail, generally, the parent expects the female kid to be more social or active in the interpersonal relationship. For example, according to clinical psychologists' view, parents usually have higher expectation for girls that their behaviors conform to those of parents while they rarely have the same expectations for their male children (Lai et al., 2015, 2017; Ratto et al., 2018).

Moreover, some researchers found that parents are more likely to have an extended communication with their daughters in term of child's social activities, for instance, child's potential sexual relationship (Nolin & Petersen, 1992) and negative emotional events in daily life (Fivush et al., 2000). Nonetheless, whether parents pay more attention to the social competence of girls instead of boys in Chinese culture, which is a typical eastern culture with a traditional family philosophy of "men dominating the outside while women dominating the inside of households" (Jia & Ma, 2015), remains unclear. This philosophy sets stricter requirements for men that they shall have good interpersonal relationships in society.

Besides parents being more willing to engage in female children's social development, mothers, compared to fathers, are more active in and supportive of children's socialization of emotion (Brown et al., 2015; Fivush et al., 2000). Based on the existing studies, it is reasonable that mothers are more likely to encourage children to participate in social communication with peers to develop social skills. Again, there is little evidence to show that the same conclusion is true for China.

As China has long eastern Asian cultural history, which is unique from the west, the parenting behaviors of Chinese parents are quite different from those of western parents. Chinese culture manifests the strong characteristic of collectivism based on Confucius's philosophy in which "(1) a person is defined by his or her relationships with others; (2) relationships are structured hierarchically, and; (3) social order and harmony are maintained by each party honoring the requirements and responsibilities of the role relationships" (Van Ziegert, 2013). In the Chinese

family system's hierarchy, parents play the role of "rulers" who are responsible for controlling children's behaviors to meet certain expectations. They usually use both warm and hush methods to train their children, a special parenting style known as "jiaoxun" (Chao, 1994), while in the west, parents rarely use two kinds of parenting styles at the same time (Chao, 1994; Dornbusch et al., 1987).

Although the awareness of a child's social competence is critically important for a parent, on the other hand, the caregiver's perspective-taking ability significantly affects the parent-child interactive style and child's socialization. Perspective-taking refers to cognitive empathy (Davis, 1980; Schaffer et al., 2009), which describes the ability to understand and think of a concept or situation from the perspectives of others. Previous research has indicated parents' perspective-taking predicts the parents' warmth towards and understanding of children, which promotes children's social development (Strayer & Roberts, 2004). In the child's socialization process, the correlation between parents' perspective-taking and the forming of children's antisocial personalities is negative (Schaffer et al., 2009) while the association between parents' cognitive empathy and child's development of prosocial behaviors is positive (Farrant et al., 2012). Thus, the plausible hypothesis would be that parents with higher perspective-taking are more likely to encourage children to develop their social competence.

The Current Study

Research on the gender-differentiated effects of parenting on social competence encouragement in the Chinese context is lacking. The relationship between a parent's perspective-taking and the encouragement of a child's social competence has not been verified. This study aimed to explore whether Chinese parents, like western parents, place a stronger emphasis on the social competence of girls, whether Chinese mothers encourage child's social competence more than fathers, and whether parents' perspective-taking can affect the encouragement of children's social competence after controlling for child's gender and parent's gender among Chinese parents.

Methods

Participants

Four hundred seventy-two parents were invited to participate in this research through the Chinese online survey website named "wenjuanxing". Every parent had a child in middle school during the survey time. The reason for the selection of these participants is that most children in middle school are in their early adolescent period when they start to demonstrate more interest in peer relationships compared to their younger peers (Forbes & Dahl, 2010). Moreover, parents' attitude

towards children's social activities is influential from children's early adolescent stage to the early adult time (Petersen et al., 1995).

Measurements

Parent's Encouragement of Social Competence - We adopted the Encouragement of Children's Social Communication subscale from the Chinese version of the Children Rearing Practice Report (Zhang et al., 2019) to evaluate parents' encouraging attitude towards children's social competence. The subscale was developed by Roberts et al. (1984) to assess parents' attitudes towards children's social activities. Specifically, it measures whether parents encourage their children's social communication with peers on a 5-point Likert scale (1 refers to "it doesn't describe me at all" and 5 refers to "it describes me very well").

Cognitive Empathy - This study included the items on perspective-taking extracted from the first edition of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980) to measure parent's cognitive empathy. The first edition contains nine items on perspective-taking while in the second edition, two items were removed. We chose the first edition because the adaption of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index is unclear for Chinese subjects, and the 2 excluded items may be applicable in Chinese context. From Davis' (1980) point of view, cognitive empathy is the ability to understand others' point of view, named as perspective taking (1980). The scale items are assessed on a scale from 1 ("does not describe me well") to 5 ("describes me very well").

Statistical Analysis Procedures

All the statistical work was conducted in SPSS 25.0 and the "lavaan" package in R (Rosseel, 2012). First, we conducted a descriptive analysis to evaluate the demographic information, including parents' and children's gender and age. Second, the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was run to test whether the items in each scale estimate the latent variable (parent's encouragement of social competence or parent's cognitive empathy) well. The third step involved revising the scales based on CFA models and running the descriptive statistics for the parent's encouragement of social competence or parent's cognitive empathy. Subsequently, the t-test was used to compare the differences in parent's encouragement of social competence by parents' and children's gender. Finally, the hierarchical regression was proposed to predict parent's encouragement of social competence by parent's gender, child's gender, and parent's cognitive empathy based on the revised scales.

Results

Four hundred fifty-two parents (151 fathers and 301 mothers) completed the questionnaire. The mean age was higher for fathers ($M=42.13$, $SD=4.10$) compared to mothers ($M=39.95$, $SD=4.34$) ($t=5.13$, $p<0.01$). Furthermore, 287 parents answered the questionnaire describing parenting attitudes towards male children. The remaining parents ($N=165$) answered all items according to the female children's situation. The age difference between boys ($M=13.53$, $SD=0.87$) and girls ($M=13.58$, $SD=0.94$) was non-significant ($t=1.76$, $p=0.08$).

Based on the theoretical framework from previous studies, both Encouragement of Children's Social Communication Scale (Zhang et al., 2019) and the Perspective Taking Scale (Davis, 1980) should contain only one factor in the CFA model. Because structural equation model (SEM) can be seen as the combination of CFA and multiple regression (Schreiber et al., 2006), and because it is necessary to examine the correlation between parents' encouragement of social competence and parent's cognitive empathy in this study, the SEM was constructed directly by combining CFA models for Encouragement of Children's Social Communication Scale and Perspective Taking Scale. The SEM indicated that for the Encouragement of Children's Social Communication Scale, all items loaded on the latent variable with the factor loadings greater than 0.4, which means all the items measure the underlying factor well based on the factor loading criteria (Nugent et al., 2017). However, four items of the Perspective Taking Scale were removed due to the small factor loadings (below 0.4) (the four excluded items were: "It's rare that some issue is ever black and white -- usually the truth is somewhere in between," "I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guys" point of view," "If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments," and "It's often harmful to spend lots of time trying to get everyone's point of view -- some decisions have to be made quickly"). After deleting the rejected four items from the Perspective Taking Scale, the new SEM attained a good fit ($CFI=0.92$, $RMSEA=0.08$, $SRMR=0.06$, $\chi^2/df<5$), which means the Encouragement of Children's Social Communication Scale and the Perspective Taking Scale have good constructive validity after excluding the four items with small loadings. Additionally, the SEM revealed a positive association between parents' encouragement of social competence and parent's cognitive empathy ($r=0.41$, $p<0.01$).

Subsequently, the t-test indicated that parents place more emphasis on the social competence of boys rather than girls ($t=3.03$, $p<0.01$), and analogously, fathers encouraged their children to a greater extent compared to mothers ($t=2.66$, $p<0.01$). (see Table 1).

	N	M	SD	t
Fathers	151	25.58	3.42	2.66**
Mothers	301	24.61	4.08	
Male children	287	25.36	3.96	3.03**
Female children	165	24.21	3.28	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 1. T-test comparing the different levels of parents' encouragement of social competence by parent's gender and child's gender

Ultimately, the hierarchical regression suggested that both parents' and child's age can only explain only 1% of the variance in a parent's encouragement of a child's social competence. The gender of parents and children accounted for an additional 4%. After controlling for demographic information, parents' perspective-taking can predict his/her encouragement of social competence in a positive linear way (see Table 2).

Step	Variables	Standardized beta	R²	ΔR²
Step 1	Parent's age	0.01	--	--
	Child's age	-0.09	0.01	--
Step 2	Parent's gender	-0.13**	--	--
	Child's gender	-0.15**	0.05	0.04
Step 3	Parent's cognitive empathy	0.33**	0.15	0.10

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis predicting parent's encouragement of social competence by demographic variables (age and gender) and parents' cognitive empathy

Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, we found that in China, parents emphasize the social competence of male children more heavily compared to female children. Likewise, compared to mothers, Chinese fathers are more engaged in inspiring children's social relationships and social competence. Besides, this research noted that a parent's cognitive empathy could affect the encouragement of the social competence of a child after controlling for parents' and children's gender and age.

As opposed to the Western findings, which have argued that parents usually put more attention and

effort into girl's social development, in China, boys get more encouragement from parents to develop competence in peer relationships. These different findings may be caused by cultural disparities. Nowadays, the traditional idea of "men dominating the outside while women are dominating the inside of households" is still popular in China (Jia & Ma, 2015; Xu, 2016), even though in some urban areas, the influence of such conventional thinking declined slightly (Xu, 2016). This idea agrees that men shall be responsible for families' income and social-economic status however participating in work for income is not necessary for Chinese females. Meanwhile, in China, the cooperative and collectivistic culture is the mainstream in the working environment (Shah & Chen, 2010). The culture is founded on Confucius's theory, which "emphasizes humans exist in interactive relationships with others" (Xiaohong & Qingyuan, 2013). Therefore, in this context, family members raise stricter requirements or expectations of male's interpersonal skills and social relationships.

Compared to mothers, fathers emphasized children's social competence more in China. Although the researches about modern Chinese father-mother differences of parental involvement are scant, especially, there are very few explorations about father's role in China since the 20th century (Li, 2018), the traditional family education based on Confucianism may still elucidate some of it. Traditional father plays the role of disciplinarian in the family, who is strict and with high expectations on the offspring (Ho, 1987). In the Chinese cultural context, fathers with a stronger awareness of the importance of social competence underlie the kind of vital ability of the child more than the mother does. However, further investigation is needed to support this reasoning.

In line with the hypothesis, parent's cognitive empathy predicted the encouraging attitude towards a child's social competence, implying that the parent with higher perspective-taking ability cares about children's social competence more. This result helps explain why the higher perspective-taking of parents leads to fewer antisocial behaviors (Schaffer et al., 2009) and more prosocial behaviors (Farrant et al., 2012) in their offspring because these parents encourage the children to build positive peer and interpersonal relationship.

Some limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, this study used only self-reports and quantitative research methods. Thus, the perspective of the child was not considered, and mental processes underlying gender differences in parenting attitudes of encouragement of a child's social competence are unknown. Further studies should consider and address these limitations. A qualitative study could also be conducted to expand upon this study. In addition, the ratio of fathers to mothers participants was not balanced in that significantly more mothers were included. Thus, the sample size of fathers should be increased to examine the invariance of the conclusion.

This research clarifies the cultural and gender differences in parenting behaviors towards children's

social development. Additionally, it highlights the importance of parents' cognitive empathy. In the future, the related intervention program shall be done to promote parents' cognitive empathy. It would be worth investigating whether the intervention's effect is the same mothers and fathers. Meanwhile, this research has significant implications for Chinese clinical psychology. As in the West, psychologists developed different parent-report instruments for female and male children respectively due to parents' different social expectation towards boys and girls (Ratto et al., 2018), such as Social Responsiveness Scale (Constantino & Gruber, 2012) and the Second Edition of Survey Interview (Sparrow et al., 1984), to diagnose young children's autism spectrum disorder. Chinese psychologists may consider the validity of western psychological tools in the Chinese context carefully and modify the related instruments properly.

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