Cultural Models of the Self and New Parenting Patterns in Shanghai
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Abstract. It is well known that parents exert a profound impact on children's development. Their specific cultural parenting beliefs and practices usually lead to certain culturally desirable behaviors from the children and thus deserve more attention from researchers. To explore the current parenting patterns in Shanghai, qualitative research was designed and carried out. Analysis of the young parents’ responses to interview questions suggested that, compared with the previous generations, this younger generation of parents grew up mostly during the era of reform, known as the post-80s and display relatively higher rates of the construal of the independent self in their parenting. The article concludes that the cultural models of the self in parenting pattern are changing in response to today’s increased globalization, rapid modernization in Chinese society, development of technologies, and China’s one-child policy, etc.

Introduction

The significant role of parenting beliefs and practices in children’s development and socializing process has long captivated the interest of researchers. It has been argued that parents, as the regulators of children’s physical and social settings, act as the mediator between the culture and the children’s development [1]. Parenting is regarded as a cultural activity as culture affects parents’ beliefs and regulates certain parenting practices. These culturally specific parenting practices, which promote children’s culturally desirable behaviors and thus contribute to the great culture diversity, must be examined in different contexts.

Previous studies in China have suggested that, compared with Western parents, Chinese parents are less authoritative or independence encouraging, but more authoritarian or restrictive [2, 3]. However, with the rapid modernization and globalization in Chinese society, Chinese parenting is undergoing dramatic changes. Moreover, China’s one-child policy (1979) has changed the family structure, which in turn has exerted a profound impact on the new parents, the first generation of single children. Therefore, it remains a problem whether the previous descriptions of Chinese parenting patterns are still valid today. There is a dire need for researchers to update our understanding on this issue. Accordingly, with a qualitative research design, this paper focuses on examining the current parenting patterns in Shanghai by identifying the parenting goals and beliefs of today’s young parents.

Literature Review

The concept of “self”, an important psychological construct, can be defined as “the idea or images that one has about oneself and how and why one behaves as one does [4]”. Its construction is under the influence of one’s cultural worldview since one always thinks about oneself in association with the outside world.

Markus and Kitayama illustrate the interaction between culture and construal of the self and put forward two contrasting models—the models of "a construal of the independent self" (Western
culture) and "a construal of the interdependent self" (East-Asian cultures) [5]. With the construal of independent self, westerners see themselves as an entity existing apart from a social context whereas easterners focus on interdependent relationship with others under the interdependent construal of self.

These strikingly different construals of "self" between the Western (Euro-American) and Eastern-Asian cultural models can be seen in the parental goals, beliefs and practices of caregivers. In contrast to the Euro-American parenting approach, which is assumed to be rooted in "individualism, the love of enterprise, and the pride in personal freedom" [6], the Chinese parenting strategy is assumed to be rooted in Confucian ethics, emphasizing social hierarchy and discipline [7]. Accordingly, Chinese parents place a high value on obedience, respect and filial piety while Euro-American parents prize highly individuality and self-esteem. Chinese children thereby grow up in a "highly involved" and prearranged social world while the European American children enjoy individual choice and take responsibility for their own choices [8].

In order to explore the current parenting patterns in Shanghai, the present study focuses on the following research questions: 1) What is the parenting pattern displayed by today’s young parents in Shanghai? 2) To what extent can a construal of the interdependent self be seen in the current Parenting Patterns in Shanghai?

**Methods**

A qualitative research methodology—the collective case study—was employed to gain a better understanding of the current parenting patterns in Shanghai. More than one case was studied in order to "investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition" [9]. The target population was young parents in Shanghai. Since the population of the study is extremely large, homogeneous sampling strategy was employed in recruiting participants. The researcher chose participants purposefully based on membership in subgroup that has defining characteristics [10].

At the outset, one of the kindergartens in Shanghai—the SH Kindergarten (this pseudonym has been adopted to protect the identity of the institution) located in Baoshan district was chosen as the site for study. The sample was then selected from the parents aged below 37 years old. To put it simply, the following criteria were used in the selection: (1) parents who have children enrolled in SH Kindergarten, and (2) parents who were born in 1980s. Those who filled the above requirements were thus invited to participate in the study.

Twelve open-ended interview questions were developed by the researcher and adopted as the instrument in this study. Ten young parents, seven females and three males, were thus interviewed on their parenting. (Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent name (anonymous)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Region of Rearing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>34</td>
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<td>Shanghai</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
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Face to face interviews occurred in their homes or the kindergarten and ranged in length from 25 to 35 minutes. To facilitate following data analysis, each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.
Findings

After an in-depth analysis of the data gained from the interview, several themes emerge:

(1) Child-centered parenting goals: emphasizing the child as an individual

All of the young parents interviewed mentioned that personal satisfaction or self-realization of the children is their foremost goal. To achieve it, they believe parents should be “child-centered” and give children freedom in their choices throughout their development. They value the notion of “be[ing] himself/herself” in the child instead of “obedience” and perceive themselves more as a “facilitator”, focusing on children’s needs and helping them develop themselves at different stages in terms of their own interests, rather than a “dominator” who plans and determines children’s life. As one mother said:

“I have no plan for his future. I think it (his future) depends mainly on his own interests. I do not require him to be the top one in class as it might be rather exhausting. Instead, I want him to be healthy and happy everyday. So I try to respect his opinions and needs, and help him make decisions by himself.”

(2) Maternal involvement: quantity and quality time with children

Traditionally speaking, Chinese mothers will be expected to pay great attention to their children and dedicate their time to the child nurturing. This is consistent with traditional Chinese cultural notions of the ideal mother figure, being kind and loving (Ci Ai). Differently, the mothers interviewed depicted their dominating role in parenting more as a leader. They value quantity as well as quality time, and care for their children in a rational and exquisite way.

These working mothers have to rely on some other caregivers, mostly their parents, to take care of their children. Meanwhile, being aware of the importance of maternal involvement, they try their best to involve themselves in the child rearing, rather than leaving the parenting responsibilities to other caregivers completely.

They are less reliant on their parents for parenting information. Actually, they tend to get more parenting information from professionals, media, and peers. It is notable that they reflect and judge critically in order to ameliorate their own parenting practices as well as other caregivers’.

In addition, they highly stress the significance of harmonious family environment in which conflicts or inconsistency between generations on parenting practices should be avoided.

(3) Redefining parental love: independence and support

The different ways to express love strongly differentiate the young parents from the old. As previous research has indicated, in the traditional Chinese parenting, love involves parents’ sacrifice and devotion for a close parent-child relationship [11, 12]. With this belief in mind, the traditional parents are always prepared to do everything for the kids, much more than they should. While stressing the significance of letting the child feel loved, the young parents interviewed conveyed their different interpretation of love.

From their perspective, love means to respect the child as an individual and provide support for his/her needs. Realizing that too much help from parents may lead to over-reliance, which may even spoil the child, they prize higher the child’s independence and self-esteem, rather than the continuity of a close parent-child relationship. As one mother stated:

“I think mother-child relationship is different from any other relationships in the world. It implies the separation between mother and child from its very beginning. I know as my boy grows up, he will be less and less reliant on me and ultimately become self-reliant. We used to do everything for kids to show our love for them. However, this may not be what them expect and stop them from depending on themselves.”

(4) Emphasizing children’s growth in morals and ethics

In contrast to the common stereotype that Chinese parents always give top priority to children’s academic achievement in their parenting, young parents interviewed put great emphasis on children’s growth in some important aspects other than academic development, like morals and ethics. All the parents interviewed mentioned the significance of teaching their children “to know right from wrong”, to be “sociable”, and “autonomous”. Some mentioned specific characteristics such as “being honest”, or “keeping promises”.
In the following quotes, the parents note the qualities that they wish to instill in their children:

Mother #1: “We [her father and I] come to realize that she is really selfish. For example, she always refuses to share her food or toys with any others. Our short-term goal is to change this—otherwise she may not be able to get along well with other people in the future.”

Mother #2: “I always tell him that it is important to be dependable and honest. And I try to be a positive role model for him in our daily life. I wish for him to be an honest and decent man when he grows up. In addition, since he will grow up to be a ‘man’, it is also important for him to be independent and sensible. This may decide whether he can succeed in his future career and life.”

Discussion

Cultural models are not static entities separate from psychological phenomena but are standing in dynamic and dialogical relationship to the persons living in a specific cultural context [13].

It is revealed from this study that some of the today’s young parents in Shanghai display relatively higher rates of the construal of the independent self in parenting. Generally speaking, the increased globalization, rapid modernization in Chinese society, developed technology, and the one-child policy all contribute to this transition of the Construal of Self in current parenting pattern. Being exposed to more and more Western ideologies and parenting practices in unprecedented ways, these parents appear to be more confident and open-minded. They are active constructors who shape their own parenting beliefs with more available information obtained from not only their parents but also professionals, peers, and media.

As the first generation of “single children”, their parenting goals and beliefs are also influenced by their own childhood, in which their parents predetermined or dominated every single aspect of their life. It is from their own experience they learn that freedom is the essence of love. It is assumed that with the expectation of having only one child, parents are very likely to display a permissive parenting style [14]. However, witnessing some peers spoiled by parents or grandparents, they become cognizant of the significance of fostering self-reliance in parenting.

Conclusion

Nowadays, compared with the previous generations who are considered restrictive, controlling and authoritarian in their parenting, some young parents (the post-80s generation) in Shanghai possess more child-centered parenting goals and prize more highly the child’s independence and self-esteem. They are more likely to respect their children as independent individuals.

These young parents grew up mostly during the era of reform, known as the post-80s, appear to be more pragmatic, open-minded and individualized in their parenting goals and beliefs. They are less reliant on their parents for parenting information. Actually, they tend to get more parenting information from professionals, media, and peers.

Undoubtedly, the change which leads to a weakening of power of cultural transmission through families may exert complex impacts on the new generation of single children whose parents are also single children.

It should be noted that the data in the study were based on parents’ self-report, which thus leads to limited generalizability. Limitations of this study also includes the fact that only ten parents from just one kindergarten in Shanghai were involved. Therefore, further study should be undertaken using a more comprehensive sample with more robust observation data.

References


