The University of Hong Kong
Department of Psychology

Departmental Seminar

“Unpacking Chinese Parenting Paradox: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry of Children’s Affective Feelings towards Maternal Involvement”

Date: April 16, 2015 (Thursday)
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Time: 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Venue: Room 1103, 11/F, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU

Speaker: Ms. Tong Ying, Nelly
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Psychology, The University of Hong Kong

The effects of parental control on Chinese children’s academic functioning have presented a paradox to the parenting literature (Chao, 1994). Chinese parents were empirically found to be controlling and restrictive, and yet their children often managed to perform well academically. Viewing the limit of Western parenting theories in explaining the findings on Chinese parenting, some researchers have turned to study the differences between the Eastern and Western cultures in perceiving parental control. However, the emphasis on what is different between cultures (i.e. the emic) might result in overlooking what is common across cultures (i.e. the etic). The present research put a parallel focus on the emic and the etic processes pertaining to the paradox. It compared how Chinese and American children felt affectively towards their mothers’ involvement in an academically related task. Mothers’ controlling behaviors could elicit different feelings among children across cultures, and thus result in varied motivational outcomes. This could be the key to resolve the paradox. The present research also examined the role of mother-child socio-emotional relatedness in affecting children’s affective feelings
towards mothers' involvement in the task session as well as task motivation among the two cultures.

A total of 142 mothers and their 5th graders were invited to participate in a laboratory activity which resembled everyday homework task. About half of the mother-child dyads \((n = 73)\) were Caucasian Americans recruited in Urbana-Champaign and the other half \((n = 69)\) were Chinese recruited in Hong Kong. The children were asked to work on three similar digit-search tasks. They were joined by their mothers for the second task, during which the mother-child interactions were videotaped. Mothers’ controlling behaviors were operationalized as mothers’ provision of unsolicited interventions during the second task session. Children’s affective feelings towards mothers' involvement in the task session (i.e. felt anger/hurt, felt loved/cared for), task motivation as well as their social-emotional relatedness with mothers were assessed by self-report measures.

Similar across cultures, children’s affective feelings instead of the actual unsolicited interventions from mothers were found to be the significant predictors for children’s task motivation. Nevertheless, Chinese and American children differed in how they felt affectively towards maternal control. Heightened unsolicited interventions from mothers were associated with elevated feelings of anger/hurt among the American children but not the Chinese children. Similar across cultures, children were more likely to report elevated feelings of being loved/cared as well as higher task motivation when they reported higher level of socio-emotional relatedness with their mothers. Nevertheless, the mechanisms underlying the effects of socio-emotional relatedness on motivation were different across cultures.

Overall, the findings revealed both the etic and the emic aspects in how maternal control is associated with children’s affective feelings, motivational outcomes, and mother-child socio-emotional relatedness. The present research provides a solution to the Chinese parenting paradox through adopting a globally applicable framework that can accommodate both the universality and the cultural specificity pertaining to the effects of parental control. It also makes contribution to the development of global psychology that integrates both emic and etic approaches.