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Developing Gratitude and Filial Piety: The Role of Chores

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Abstract

Whilst decades of research in the global north has identified authoritative parenting as producing the better child outcomes, and there is a growing amount of literature from countries such as China, suggesting the contrary: that authoritarian parenting produces desirable outcomes. However, the links between authoritarian parenting and the development of filial piety in China appear to have been disrupted by the incursion of values from the global north, and the actions of Chinese parents themselves responding to the Chinese one-child policy. This has created a situation in China where there are now major concerns about children's lack of filial piety: an issue which has major implications in a nation that depends on familial care rather than state provided welfare. In this paper, we examine issues around parenting and the development of gratitude and filial piety. We suggest that it is important for children to learn how to behave in ways that demonstrate gratitude and filial piety and that competence in performing appropriate behaviours is the pre-requisite to internalizing the associated values. We suggest that engaging in family chores from an early age is one strategy parents can use that will help their children develop the appropriate behavioural repertoire.

Key Words: Authoritative Parenting, Authoritarian Parenting, Chores, Moral Development, Filial Piety

1. Introduction

The authoritative parenting style, as defined by Baumrind (1966, 1968, 1971, 1978), posits that parents are high in both demandingness (control) and responsiveness (warmth). This parenting style is characterised by setting high and age-appropriate standards for children, encouraging autonomy and but at the same time settling clear limits in a manner that is warm and supports children's ability to negotiate. Building on this, the parenting style model proposes three other parenting styles—authoritarian, indulgent and neglectful (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Authoritarian parenting has high demandingness but low responsiveness. This is where parents express little, or no warmth and affection set strict rules, and punish disobedient behaviour. Indulgent parents have low demandingness but high responsiveness, nurturing their children with little or no expectations from them and rarely discipline them. Neglectful parenting is low in both demandingness and responsiveness, as its name suggests, where parents are indifferent to or do not demonstrate care for the wellbeing and development of their children. It has been consistently found in empirical studies undertaken in the global north (the global north as identified by Connell, 2007) that authoritative parenting is associated with positive developmental outcomes such as independent, socially well-behaved and academically successful children, and thus this parenting style is regarded as the optimal parenting model (Baumrind, 1966, 1968, 1978; Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Laurence Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992; L. Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991).

2. Discipline in authoritative parenting in the global north

The term discipline, when used in an authoritative parenting model, is "characterised by the use of firm control contingently applied and justified by a rational explanation of consistently enforced rules" (Baumrind, 1996, p. 412). Authoritative parenting and discipline are linked with democracy, whereby children are supported to learn the reasoning behind rules, where they are encouraged to participate in determining how they can function appropriately within set limits, and where they are engaged collaboratively with parents and/or other adults in determining appropriate limits (Marion, 2011).

Along with the concept of democratic or authoritative parenting comes the growing opposition to the use of physical punishment (Clément & Chamberland, 2014; Fraser, 2010; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Saunders & Goddard, 2010). Research in countries that have banned physical punishment of children demonstrates that this has ultimately resulted in a decrease in societal violence (Bussmann, Erthal, & Schroth, 2009; Österman, Björkqvist, & Wahlbeck, 2014), particularly when associated with appropriate education programmes providing parents with alternative strategies (Holden, Brown, Baldwin, & Croft Caderao, 2014; Robinson, Funk, Beth, & Bush, 2005; Zolotor, 2014).

3. Discipline in Chinese families

In contrast, Chinese cultural values position ideal discipline in a different way than in the global north. Kang and Moore (2011) argue that Chinese culture values children's obedience to parents, and in that context, parents who use more authoritarian (rather than authoritative) discipline strategies are perceived as being more involved with their children and perhaps more caring of their children. Leung, Lau, and Lam (1998) suggest that there are strong cultural expectations that Chinese mothers train their children "so that they will behave well and obtain good school results" (p158) and this seems to result in children's improved academic performance. However, Xu et al. (2005) suggest that Chinese mothers who used a blend of authoritarian and authoritative parenting demonstrated behaviours that were a closer reflection of Chinese values. They note that parental levels of stress impacted on parenting style and that more highly stressed mothers were more likely to use authoritarian parenting styles. Unfortunately, their study did not examine the impact of parenting style on children's outcomes. Traditional Chinese society placed a strong emphasis on filial piety. Yeh, Yi, Tsao, and Wan (2013, p. 278) argued:

A positive relationship with parents fosters RFP, [reciprocal filial piety] which entails gratitude and willingness to repay one's parents' care and sacrifice. From a historical perspective, RFP corresponds with 'the natural inner disposition of filial ethics' emphasized during the pre-Chin era and with the Confucian principle of favoring the intimate (qin qin).

We posit an association between parenting style and the development of filial piety as defined by Yeh et al. (2013) above. We argue that traditional Chinese child rearing practices focusing on authoritarian parenting were linked with the hegemony of filial piety. The existence of high levels of filial piety has created a context where state-based welfare systems were not developed because they were not perceived as necessary.

However, in more recent years countries such as China have come under the influence of the global north (Litke, 2013) and different cultural influences are now impacting on parents. Coupled with these influences from the global north is the Chinese one-child policy which has resulted in Chinese parents investing all their human capital into one child (J. Zhang, 2017). In this context, parenting styles have become more indulgent, and each child has become the exclusive focus of both parents. A strong body of research (e.g. Chen & Yang, 2011; M. Li & Peng, 2011; author1, 2014; author 1, 2015, 2016; Lu, 2009; Ma, 2011; C. Zhang, 2013) suggests that the unintended consequence of this is what is now positioned as an egoistic young generation, who are identified as selfish, un-empathetic, who consistently take other people's help for granted, and who lack gratitude: all characteristics contrary to the cultural expectation of filial piety.

In an attempt to address this situation the Chinese government has implemented special education programmes focusing on key elements of filial piety including gratitude towards one's parents and towards society in general,

and moral reasoning. (Gao, 2015; Qing, 2015). The assumption underpinning this education programme was that learning to think morally would lead children to behave in ways that demonstrated filial piety. Unfortunately, Li's investigation (2016b) with 589 high school students in China found that discipline (parenting style) played a much more important role than moral reasoning in shaping moral behaviour across both genders. At this point in our argument, it is useful to summarise the key points we have made. We have argued that authoritarian parenting in a Chinese context contributes towards the development of filial piety. The development of this in Chinese children makes it possible for the State to rely on familial care rather than state-provided welfare for family members. The extant research identifying authoritative parenting as producing more desirable outcomes in children in the global north is thus not relevant in the Chinese context. However, changes in Chinese society and the Chinese one-child policy have modified the way in which Chinese parents fulfil their role. Whilst their parenting may maintain elements of authoritarianism, it is also more indulgent (author1, 2015, 2016) and this is linked with growing concerns that modern Chinese youth do not develop the levels of filial piety expected of them. The Chinese government has attempted to address this through moral education of young people, but there is evidence that this approach has not had the positive impact desired. In the next section of this paper, we propose an alternative approach.

4. An alternative

Whilst self-interest is one of the fundamental motives of human behaviour, we acknowledge doing the right thing is often very difficult and thus moral behaviour is not necessarily easy to teach (Curzer, 2002; Kohlberg, 1964, 1976; Piaget, 1965). In the global north, teaching children empathy begins at birth. It is argued that children learn to respect the feelings of others when they, themselves, have received respect for their own feelings (Marion, 2011; author2 et al., 2011). Parental strategies involve acknowledging and naming children's feelings, modelling in their own behaviour how these feelings are taken into account and providing children with scaffolding they can use to work through recognition to action in response to the feelings of others. These strategies are associated with authoritative parenting as they are delivered warmly and respectfully with clear messages about limits. The assumption in these strategies is that a clear understanding of feelings and a script that provides ideas for action are both necessary ingredients for the development of empathy.

In the Chinese context, we posit, empathy is positioned as filial piety where children are expected to feel gratitude to their parents and reflect that gratitude in their behaviour, specifically in caring for their parents in their old age. We are not suggesting that, in order to achieve these outcomes, Chinese parents need to learn authoritative parenting strategies. Such a suggestion would not recognize the complexities of Chinese culture and all the intersecting factors that contribute to the Chinese world view and experience. Rather, we are suggesting that the two elements of filial piety (feelings of gratitude, and actions that demonstrate that gratitude) can be developed through a two-pronged approach: namely beginning with actions and moving from actions to the abstract ideas of feelings (including the abstract concept of social justice). We will explain this idea in the following paragraphs.

Firstly we suggest that doing family chores is a key action that will trigger opportunities to learn feelings of gratitude and understandings of social justice. Doing family chores is a way for children to share family burdens and contribute toward family goals. When children do family chores, they are working for the well-being of other family members, not just themselves. Chores can be hard work, boring and repetitive. However, in doing these tasks children are sharing the family burden and can be given feedback indicating how important their contribution is for the welfare of the family. In doing chores, children experience what it is like to put aside their own immediate wants in order to perform in ways that support others. These learning opportunities create a context where children begin to understand how their actions impact on others.

We argue that chores reflect the principle of social justice, a key element of which upholds that social harmony is achieved through balancing different rights, obligations, and benefits—the golden rule of reciprocity (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Knowledge of social justice helps children be aware that their rights are earned through fulfilling their obligations, and that there are no rights in the world without obligations attached to them. Demanding children engage in routine chores can help children subjugate their hedonistic inclinations and

transform the principle of social justice into their behaviour in their daily life. This follows the pattern identified in Hoffman's internalisation theory (1960, 1975) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), where moral traits are developed through the internalization process or habitualisation before becoming self-motivated. In other words, we learn to desire to behave morally by learning first HOW to behave morally. We argue in the same way that chores offer an opportunity to learn behaviours that foreground the habitualisation of social justice, which in the Chinese context, leads to gratitude and filial piety. In making this argument, we are not alone. For example, Aristotle holds that "teaching is futile before good habits are already in place" (Curzer, 2002, p. 145). Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik said "Morality is embedded in and is an outcome of everyday family practices" (2007, p. 5), and Peters also pointed out "the palace of the reason is entered through the courtyard of habit" (1966, p. 314). One's character is essentially the sum of his habits, and chores provide an ideal vehicle for such habitualisation of social justice in children by "sobering children into the social fact that are growing up means that obligation precedes pleasure" (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007, p. 9). Childhood is a vital phase for the development of a habitus of justice (Aristotle, trans. 1976, p. 32).

The importance of shaping children's development whilst they are young is reinforced by the neurobiological research which emphasises the primacy of early childhood experiences in shaping adult behaviour (Donoghue & Horvath, 2016; Heckman, 2011; Nelson, Kendall, & Shields, 2014; Vandenberg et al., 2017). This research is used to justify the human capital investment motif that now underpins much of early childhood service delivery (Penn, 2017; Urban, 2015) and this idea can be applied to children's moral development. Engaging in routine chores throughout childhood provides a vehicle for parents to help children internalise understandings around social justice and habituate them into behaving in ways that demonstrate, in the Chinese context, gratitude and filial piety.

5. Advantages of chores over other disciplinary measures

For Chinese parents, our suggestion of using chores as a tool to support the development of gratitude and filial piety may be particularly useful in contexts of familial disadvantage. Studies (Fan 2001; Fantuzzo, Tighe, and Childs 2000) have demonstrated that parents with lower income and less education may sustain financial and social constraints that hinder their ability to engage actively in children's life, and we argue in these contexts chores can be a valuable means by which parents can work co-operatively with their children to support family wellbeing whilst, at the same time, working to develop positive emotions in children and enhance their academic performance.

Clearly, chores need to be developmentally and contextually appropriate so that they support children's development and do not overburden children nor put their wellbeing at risk. Children may need support in order to learn effective ways of carrying out their chores, and support to organize their time so that chores are performed in a timely manner. This support requires parental time and attention in the initial stages, but as children develop the necessary skills that support can be gradually withdrawn.

6. Conclusions

We argue in this article that the "Me Generation" or "Entitled Generation" in the global north and China (lack of empathy, unbounded narcissism) (author1, 2014; Rifkin, 2005; Salt, 2016; Stein, 2013; Twenge, 2006) observed to have developed since the 1980s is a major concern to society. We suggest that this sense of entitlement (rights without obligations) has partly arisen because children have not been offered opportunities to enact gratitude and filial piety (and ultimately social justice) in their early years. Because they do not know HOW to demonstrate gratitude and filial piety in their behaviour, they have not internalised these as values. We suggest that education campaigns aiming to teach moral values such as gratitude are likely to fail because learning how to behave must precede learning why one needs to behave in that manner and that the most effective strategy that can teach young children how to behave in a moral manner is the performance of family chores (e.g., Breheny, 2015; author1, 2016a; Rende, 2015; Weissbourd, 2009). We suggest that performing family chores offers another way of perceiving parental roles and responsibilities that can operate irrespective of parenting styles (and thus cultural context).

Children are like jewels that need to be fashioned with the hammer, chisel and buffing cloth of a supportive and positive discipline. Yet given the current trend of parental practices that focus on the happiness and success of children to the exclusion of appropriate limits, with some parents even frequently using “bribes” in the form of payment or points that could be “cashed in” for toys, games or outings in order to ask their child to do chores (Hill, 2009), it appears necessary to re-emphasise the importance of chores in the life of modern-day children.

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