

## Parenting style and students' happiness in China

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the dynamic between perceived authoritarian parenting style (PAPS), and subjective wellbeing (SWB) among purposively recruited 423 college students in China. Expectancy value beliefs (EVB), fear of failure (FOF), and competitiveness were taken as mediators. The data were analyzed using Bootstrap method of 5000 sample and 95% confidence interval. The results revealed a significant negative total effect of PAPS on SWB. Additionally, two indirect paths were found to be significant: the mediation of FOF (Path 2) and the serial mediation of FOF and competitiveness (Path 6). These findings suggest that the perception of authoritarian parenting style is a negative predictor of students' happiness, and that FOF and competitiveness played important mediating roles in this relationship. These findings have important implications for educators, parents, and policymakers who aim to promote positive academic and personal outcomes for college students. The results suggest the need for interventions that address the negative impact of PAPS on students' wellbeing, and the importance of fostering positive beliefs about the value of education and academic achievement, as well as reducing FOF and promoting healthy competition.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study aims to examine the relationship between perceived authoritarian parenting style (PAPS) and subjective wellbeing (SWB) among college students in China. Specifically, we seek to explore the mediating roles of expectancy value beliefs (EVB), fear of failure (FOF), and competitiveness in this relationship. China has a unique cultural and educational context that has been characterized by a strong emphasis on academic achievement and a belief that education is the key to social and economic mobility [1]–[3]. As a result, parents and educators often adopt a strict and demanding parenting style that emphasizes discipline, obedience, and achievement. This parenting style, known as authoritarian parenting, has been found to be prevalent in China [4], [5], and has been associated with negative outcomes such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression in Chinese youth [6], [7].

Recent studies in China suggested that authoritarian parenting may have a negative impact on students' academic motivation and achievement [8]. However, little is known about the relationship between parenting styles and the child in Chinese youth, and the underlying mechanisms that may explain this relationship. Moreover, existing studies on parenting styles and academic motivation in China has focused

primarily on the direct effects of parenting styles, with limited attention given to the potential mediating roles of cognitive and motivational factors. Parenting styles have been reported to play a crucial role in shaping children's development, including their academic achievement, social skills, and emotional wellbeing [9], [10]. In the context of China, authoritarian parenting style often characterized by strict discipline, high demands, and low warmth, has been found to be prevalent among parents and educators although it has been suggested that authoritarian styles negatively affects children's social and emotional wellbeing, including lower self-esteem, increased anxiety, and depression [11], [12]. Despite that, it has been suggested that this parenting style may also have positive effects on academic achievement and motivation in Chinese students [13]. However, little is known about the association between parenting styles and the SWB or happiness of Chinese college students. Recent studies have suggested that the relationship between parenting styles and SWB may be mediated by cognitive and motivational factors. One cognitive factor that might mediate the association is called EVB.

First of all, it is imperative that we include the PAPS as the main predictor in the present study rather than the actual parenting styles themselves. The rationale behind this decision is that a child's perception of parenting style may diverge from the perception of the parents or the society. For example, a mother may believe that she provides her child with sufficient autonomy, leading her to perceive her parenting style as highly flexible. She may consistently encourage her child to select activities that are beneficial to their growth and development. In contrast, the child may interpret this behavior as authoritarian parenting as they feel that they are consistently being directed by their mother. Furthermore, it is not the parents' style of parenting that develops the child's attitude and personality, it is how they perception of their parents' parenting style. One of the traits that is predicted by students' PAPS is EVB. It refers to students' beliefs about the value and importance of a particular task or academic domain, and their expectation of success in that domain [14]. The social cognitive theory [15] explained it by stating that unlike self-efficacy, that merely refers to one's beliefs that they can perform a task well, EVB refers to one's beliefs about the value of a task, which then motivate them to engage with the task with a belief that they must and can do it well. Contextually, studies have suggested that parenting style may play a role in shaping students' EVB. For example, seminal work on parenting styles suggested that authoritative parenting, which emphasizes warmth, responsiveness, and reasonable demands, is associated with higher levels of academic motivation and achievement in children [9]. In contrast, authoritarian parenting, which emphasizes strict discipline, obedience, and achievement, is associated with lower levels of academic motivation and achievement in children. Other studies have also suggested that authoritarian parenting may have a negative impact on students' EVB. For example, it was stated that authoritarian parenting was negatively associated with college students' EVB about certain subjects [16], which in turn predicted their academic achievement. Similarly, it was also reported that authoritarian parenting was negatively associated with their children EVB about Chinese language, which in turn predicted their academic achievement in the subjects. In addition to the direct effects of parenting style on EVB, several studies have suggested that EVB mediates the relationship between parenting style and academic outcomes. For example, it was reported that parental warmth was positively associated with Chinese college students' expectancy beliefs about math, which in turn predicted their academic achievement in math [17], [18]. Moreover, the self-determination theory (SDT) [19], also supported the premise that parental autonomy support in the form of being flexible or authoritative was positively associated with Chinese college students' academic achievement in English language, mediated by their EVB in the subject.

Given the aforementioned evidence, it is plausible to suggest that EVB may mediate the relationship between PAPS and SWB in Chinese college students. Specifically, it is possible that students who perceive their parents as being authoritarian may anxiety develop negative EVB about most academic tasks, which in turn may have a negative impact on their overall SWB (or also known as happiness) and even mental health. Accordingly, it was suggested that negative expectancy beliefs can lead to feelings of helplessness and anxiety, which may in turn undermine not only the students' SWB, but also their mental health [20]. Moreover, given the strong emphasis on academic achievement in the culture in China, students who hold negative expectancy about their academic abilities may experience heightened stress and pressure, which can lead them to more sinister problems, both academically and psychologically [20], [21]. PAPS is characterized by high levels of control, punishment, and strict rules with little room for negotiation, and is often associated with negative outcomes for children, including lower levels of happiness under the influence of various other factors, including the child's EVB, self-efficacy, and FOF, as suggested by the self-efficacy theory [15].

EVB refers to the extent to which an individual believes that their actions can lead to desired outcomes, such as success or failure [22]. In the context of parenting, children with higher levels of EVB may be more likely to view their actions as having a direct impact on their outcomes, leading them to be more motivated and less anxious in their endeavors [23]. Conversely, low EVB may lead to feelings of helplessness and lack of motivation, which can in turn lead to lower levels of SWB.

FOF, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which an individual is afraid of failing and the potential negative consequences that may result from failure [14]. In the context of PAPS, children may develop a heightened sense of FOF as a result of the high levels of control and punishment they experience from their parents. This fear can lead to avoidance of challenges and a lack of motivation, which can negatively impact SWB. It was suggested that EVB may act as a mediator between PAPS and FOF [24]. In other words, PAPS may lead to lower levels of EVB, which in turn can lead to higher levels of FOF [25], [26]. Furthermore, FOF may mediate the link between PAPS and SWB. It was reported that children who experience high levels of FOF are more likely to report lower levels of SWB [27], [28]. Similar results were reported in the studies examining the impact of PAPS on children's SWB, where the negative effect of PAPS on SWB was found to be partially mediated by FOF [29]. It can be concluded that the more students perceive their parents to be authoritarian, the less happy they would be, as they would subjectively believe they are unwell. Nevertheless, this association is considered complex as other factors are needed to explain it. Some evidence supported the hypotheses that EVB may act as a mediator between PAPS and FOF, while FOF may mediate the link between PAPS and SWB.

Another common trait that can be found in most of the students and educational stakeholders in China is competitiveness [30]. It is a prevalent trait among students and parents of the students in China, with the pursuit of academic excellence being a top priority for many families. The culture of competitiveness in China can be attributed to several factors, including the traditional emphasis on education, the one-child policy, and the competitive nature of the Chinese education system [31]. The social comparison theory provides a useful framework for understanding the prevalence of competitiveness in Chinese culture. This theory posits that people evaluate themselves based on social comparisons with others, and this process can lead to feelings of competitiveness and the desire to outperform others [32]. Additionally, cultural factors such as Confucianism, which values hard work, discipline, and achievement, may contribute to the emphasis on competition and academic excellence in China. The prevalence of competitiveness among students and parents in China has both positive and negative effects, including increased academic achievement and motivation, but also high levels of stress and pressure to perform [33]. Competitiveness may mediate the contribution of PAPS, EVB, and FOF on students' SWB. The social comparison theory [30], [31] suggests that individuals evaluate their own abilities and worth based on comparisons with others, and this process can lead to feelings of competitiveness and the desire to outperform others. Contextually, students who perceive that their parents employ authoritarian or excessively controlling styles would feel the pressure to compete and excel to meet their parents' expectations [34]. This pressure to perform may contribute to the development of FOF, which in turn, have negative effects on students' SWB.

Various studies have explored the relationships among different variables in different contexts and over time. For example, research has shown that individuals who perceive their parents to be authoritarian are more likely to experience a FOF, as their parents' expectations of success are often set at an unattainable level compared to their peers [27]. Consequently, such individuals may develop unachievable goals, which can exacerbate their FOF [25], [26]. Another study found that FOF mediates the link between EVB and competitiveness; individuals with a high fear of making mistakes are likely to lose their sense of competitiveness, and this lack of competition can negatively impact their sense of well-being [34]. Furthermore, in a highly competitive culture, individuals who are less competitive may experience a further decrease in their well-being. Based on the above evidence and claims from previous studies, we propose that the negative impact of perceiving parents as authoritarian on students' SWB is mediated by their EVB, FOF, and competitiveness, in a serial manner. Specifically, we hypothesize that students who perceive their parents as authoritarian may devalue their academic achievements due to their parents' tendency to undermine them. Consequently, they may develop a FOF, driven by the need to avoid their parents' disapproval. Paradoxically, the highly competitive educational culture in which they are immersed may exacerbate this FOF. Ultimately, this competitiveness may have detrimental effects on their subjective well-being, as the constant pressure to perform may undermine their happiness. Figure 1 illustrates these hypotheses. Association among the aforementioned variables have been studied in different settings and timelines, for instance, it was established that when individuals believe that their parents were authoritarian, they would likely to fear failures [27], as their parents' standard of success was heightened to a higher level than their peers, and therefore they develop unattainable goals that amplified their FOF [25]. Another example is the report that FOF mediates the link between EVB and competitiveness; it was evident that individuals with higher fear of making mistakes would likely to have their expectancy of the task value does not affect their competitiveness anymore as they have no longer believe that they are up for the competition [33]; furthermore being less competitive in the highly competitive culture might bring them down to further negative sense of well-being [35]. The aforementioned evidences and claims of the previous studies provide us with ideas that the negative contribution of PAPS on the SWB among the students is mediated by their EVB, FOF, and competitiveness in a serial manner. In other words, we hypothesize that students who perceive their parents as authoritarian may devalue their academic achievements due to their parents' tendency to undermine them. Consequently,

they may develop a FOF, driven by the need to avoid their parents' disapproval. Paradoxically, the highly competitive educational culture in which they are immersed may exacerbate this FOF. Ultimately, this competitiveness may have detrimental effects on their SWB, as the constant pressure to perform may undermine their happiness. These hypotheses are illustrated in Figure 1, in the form of the serial mediation model.

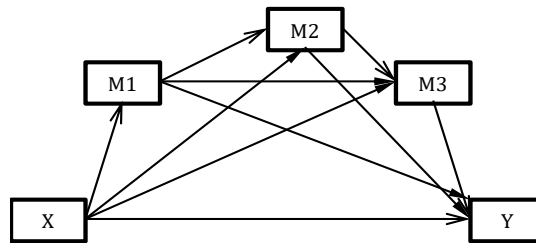


Figure 1. The serial mediation hypothesis model

Where X is PAPS, M1 is EVB, M2 is FOF, M3 is competitiveness, and Y is SWB.

As illustrated in Figure 1, we hypothesized that the direct path between PAPS and SWB is mediated by EVB, FOF, and Competitiveness. These mediators' function in a serial fashion, with each mediator mediating the association between the previous and subsequent mediators, as well as the outcome variable. We anticipated that the empirical evaluation of this hypothetical model would provide supportive evidence for previous research findings on the significance of these variables in the enhancement of students' SWB in the context of China.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Respondents

We utilized G\*power sample size calculator by setting a medium effect size ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ), a power of 0.80, at a significance level of 0.05, with 1 predictor, and 3 mediators.), and the sample size of 216 participants was suggested. To improve the precision and accuracy of our analyses, a sample of 423 college students (260 or 61.5% female, 163 or 38.5% male) from three provinces, namely Fujian, Yunnan, and Sichuan, was purposefully recruited using the following inclusion criteria: aged between 16 and 25 ( $M = 18.33$ ,  $SE = 0.043$ ), Chinese nationality, raised in China, and currently living and studying in Chinese universities in China during the data collection period.

### 2.2. Measures

The predictor, perceived PAPS was measured by English-Chinese parent authority questionnaire (PAQ) [9] which was designed to measure Baumrind's three dimensions: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive styles applied by the parents of the participants, and it consisted of two parts, mothers' APS and fathers' APS. It consists of 30 items, and each dimension consists of 10 items. Scores of each subscale range from 10 to 50. Each item is scored by a quantitative scale like strongly disagree = (1), disagree = (2), agree = (3), strongly agree = (4). Responses to each of these items were made on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). EVB was assessed using the Bilingual English-Chinese version of the subscale of motivated strategy for learning questionnaire (MSLQ) [36]. The subscale of MSLQ was selected because it shared the basis EVT construct with expectancy-value beliefs. It contains 14 items (e.g., I'm certain I can master the skills being taught in this class) which were answered using a 7-point rating scale (1 = not at all true of me; 7 = very true of me). For practical reasons, the phrase "this course" has been changed into "most courses", and "this class" into "most classes" (e.g., I'm certain I can master the skills being taught in most classes). FOF was measured using the Bilingual English-Chinese version of the performance failure appraisal inventory (PFAI) [37]. The PFAI contains 25 items (e.g., When I am failing, I worry that others may think I am not trying) which were answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (do not believe at all) to 5 (believe 100% of the time). A higher score indicates a higher level of FOF. The third mediator, competitiveness, was measured by the personal development competitive attitude scale (PDCAS) [38] a scale consists of 25 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and divided into two subscales: the competitive attitude subscale and the personal development subscale. The competitive attitude subscale includes 13 items and assesses an

individual's attitudes toward competition, such as the importance of winning and the belief that competition brings out the best in people. The personal development subscale includes 12 items and assesses an individual's attitudes toward personal growth and development, such as the belief that personal development is important and the willingness to learn from mistakes. The outcome variable, SWB is measured by the scale of subjective well-being [39]. It measures individuals' overall life satisfaction and the frequency of positive and negative emotions experienced in their daily lives. This scale consists of three components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. SWB refers to individuals' overall assessment of their lives and how satisfied they are with it. Positive affect measures the frequency of positive emotions such as joy, happiness, and contentment. Negative affect measures the frequency of negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and anger. Two sample items from the scale are "In general, how satisfied are you with your life?" and "Over the past week, how often did you feel happy?" The responses to the items are usually rated on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest level of SWB.

All the scales were back-translated to Mandarin and delivered in bilingual mode in order to enhance the understanding of the participants and the researchers. The informed consent form, demographic questionnaires, and the scales were compiled in google form for easy online distribution to our respondents. They were allowed as much time as they needed to complete the inventories, and they typically required about 20 to 30 minutes. Their participation was voluntary and they were allowed to quit their study anytime. All data were saved anonymously and kept confidential. The reliability of each scale was tested and reported in Table 1. As seen in Table 1, all of the scales are reliable to be utilized in this current study.

Table 1. Reliability of scales

Scale	Variable	Cronbach's alpha
PAQ	PAPS	0.654
MSLQ	EVB	0.924
PFAI	FOF	0.939
PDCAS	Com	0.958
Scale of SWB	SWB	0.897

### 3. RESULTS

Bootstrap method was used to estimate the indirect effects of the mediator variables on the outcome variable as the traditional approaches to estimating indirect effects such as the Sobel test or the Baron and Kenny approach are known to be biased and lack statistical power [40]. Bootstrap method can help to overcome these limitations by providing more accurate and reliable estimates of the indirect effects, even when the sample size is small or the distribution of the data is non-normal. Moreover, it can also provide confidence intervals for the indirect effects, which can be used to assess the statistical significance of the mediation effects. Bootstrap analysis with 5000 samples in 95% confidence interval was employed to analyze the data. Process Macro 4 (model 6) for SPSS 26 was used to analyze the entire model as the model offers the ability to analyze multiple serial mediation. The following tables depicts the results of the analyses of the total, direct, and indirect effects of the mediation model.

Table 2 depicts the direct effect of PAPS on SWB, which indicates the immediate contribution of the students' current perception that the parents were authoritarian on their current happiness. It is shown that the PAPS significantly predicts the SWB in a negative manner. Which means that without factoring any mediator variables, the more the students perceive that their parents were authoritarian, they would be significantly less happy. Table 3 depicts the results of the analysis involving all the three mediators in this current study.

As depicted in Table 3. The only significant paths are the total effect and the second indirect path, where FOF mediated the link between PAPS and SWB. The other indirect paths were not significant as the range between bootstrap upper limit of confidence interval (BootULCI) and the lower limit of confidence interval (BootLLCI) contained zero value.

Table 2. Direct effect of PAPS on SWB

Effect	Se	T	P	LLCI	ULCI
-0.23	0.069	-3.928	0.000	-0.409	-0.136

Table 3. Total and indirect effect of PAPS on SWB

Path	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	
Ind1 PAPS→EVB→SWB	0.038	0.025	-0.093	0.007	
Ind2 PAPS→FOF→SWB	0.174	0.042	-0.263	-0.0999	*
Ind3 PAPS→Com→SWB	0.007	0.020	-0.029	0.059	
Ind4 PAPS→EVB→FOF	0.006	0.005	-0.017	0.001	
Ind5 PAPS→EVB→Com→SWB	0.016	0.011	-0.039	0.003	
Ind6 PAPS→FOF→Com→SWB	0.016	0.009	-0.036	0.001	
Ind7PAPS→EVB→FOF→Com→SWB	0.001	0.001	-0.002	0.001	
Total	-0.243	0.062	-0.368	-0.125	*

#### 4. DISCUSSIONS

Our study provides support for previous research indicating a negative correlation between authoritarian parenting and the SWB of students [8]. While authoritarian parenting may have positive effects on certain domains such as physical health and financial stability [13], individuals who perceive such parenting practices are less likely to report a sense of well-being. It is worth noting that parental control can be viewed as a positive aspect of parenting, but its effects on SWB are contingent on how children interpret it. Ultimately, it is the interpretation of parents' parenting style by children, rather than the actual parenting practices themselves, that influences the SWB of children [13].

Furthermore, our findings suggest that FOF is the only significant mediator that can operate independently, without the involvement of other mediators. The significance of expectancy of task value (EVB) and competitiveness only emerges when they work together with FOF as a combined effect. These results are not entirely consistent with previous studies that reported the mediating role of EVB and competitiveness in the relationship between PAPS and SWB [14], [15]. The differences between our findings and previous studies may be due to the inclusion of mediator variables in the same equation. Additionally, socio-cultural factors such as the highly competitive culture in China may have contributed to these discrepancies. In other studies, the PAPS alone may have been sufficient to elevate EVB, which could subsequently predict lower FOF and higher SWB [20], [21]. However, in our study, the social pressure of competitiveness also influenced parents to be more authoritarian, resulting in increased FOF in children, and subsequently lower SWB.

##### - Practical implication

In practical terms, our findings highlight the importance of considering the impact of parental control on children's subjective well-being. Parents should be aware that their parenting style may not necessarily result in positive outcomes in terms of their children's well-being. Rather, it is the children's perception of their parents' behavior that influences their well-being. Therefore, parents should strive to be more responsive and empathetic to their children's needs and concerns. Additionally, our study underscores the role of FOF as a key mediator in the relationship between authoritarian parenting and SWB. Interventions aimed at reducing FOF may be beneficial in improving the well-being of individuals who perceive their upbringing as authoritarian. Finally, our findings also highlight the importance of considering socio-cultural factors in understanding the relationship between parenting styles and SWB, particularly in highly competitive cultures like China. Furthermore, teachers and educational stakeholders can benefit from understanding the potential negative effects of authoritarian parenting on students' SWB, and they can be mindful of these effects in their interactions with students. Educational stakeholders can also consider developing programs and interventions to help students manage their FOF and improve their SWB, particularly in highly competitive educational cultures. Additionally, the findings suggest that parental involvement and support should be emphasized in ways that do not undermine students' sense of autonomy and competence, as these factors have been shown to positively impact students' SWB.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

As conclusion, this study adds to the existing literature by confirming that authoritarian parenting is negatively associated with students' subjective well-being. However, it also highlights that parental control can be perceived positively by children, and its effects on well-being depend on how children interpret it. FOF was found to be a significant mediator, while EVB and competitiveness only had a combined effect with FOF. These findings suggest that cultural and socio-economic factors may play a role in the interpretation and effects of parenting styles on children's well-being.

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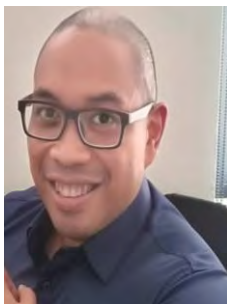
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