

Psychologist finds that controlling parents have the same negative impacts in the U.S. and China

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

It doesn't matter if you're an American "tiger mom," or a Chinese one, evidence shows that parents' attempts to control children through psychological means (e.g., shaming children) are associated with

academic and emotional distress in children. This is according to a new study by Cecilia Cheung, assistant professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside. Cheung's study, "Controlling and Autonomy-Supportive Parenting in the United States and China: Beyond Children's Reports," was published in the journal *Child Development*.

"There is a sizable amount of research indicating that a parent's controlling practices leads to a child's dampened academic and emotional functioning," explained Cheung. "And what's most surprising is that contrary to the suspicion and belief that countries would vary greatly in the outcome controlling parenting behavior has on children (because controlling parenting is more common in countries like China than the U.S.) – in actuality it is very similar."

Cheung and her team of researchers studied nearly 350 mother/child pairs in China and the United States. Researchers observed the pairs as they worked on a problem-solving task in a laboratory. The team recorded controlling and autonomy-supportive practices while the mother-and-child pairs interacted with one another. Before the visit to the laboratory, both mother and child reported on the mother's [parenting style](#), and the children responded to questions about their own emotional adjustment before and after the study.

When Chinese and American parents exhibited heightened controlling [parenting practices](#) with attempts to intrude on children's thoughts, feelings and behaviors, their children often developed academic and emotional problems. In contrast, when parents were supportive, but hands-off, children felt encouraged to make their own decisions and flourished.

"We found that both in the U.S. and China, children's reports of parenting were more commonly associated with the mother's reports than with the observer's," said Cheung. This could be because the

mothers and children are "insiders" in that they are able to observe parenting in a variety of contexts compared to the observer who is an "outsider."

Results were similar in both countries, despite controlling parenting being more common in China. Moreover, a mother's control predicted a child's dampened adjustment regardless of the informant. Findings across informants indicate that American and Chinese mothers' controlling behavior have similar undermining effects on [children](#).

More information: Cecilia S. Cheung et al. Controlling and Autonomy-Supportive Parenting in the United States and China: Beyond Children's Reports, *Child Development* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12567](#)

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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