

Parental Authority, Parent-child Relationship and Gender Differences: A Study of College Students in the Malaysian Context

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Abstract: The study aims to investigate the relationship between parental authority and parent-child relationship and also to explore the differences between males and females in terms of their relationship with their parents. The study was conducted among 160 participants between the age of 17 to 25 in Klang Valley, Selangor, Malaysia. The instruments used in the present study were Parent-Child Relationship Survey (PCRS) and Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ). The results revealed that there is a significant parent-child relationship when the mother or father was authoritative in their parenting style. Furthermore, male participants rated both parents as significantly more authoritarian as compared to female participants. Male participants also rated both parents as significantly more permissive as compared to the ratings of their counterparts. Lastly, there was no significant difference between gender and parent-child relationship.

Key words: *Parent Child Relationship, Parental Authority, Parenting Styles*

INTRODUCTION

Parent-child relationship has been studied extensively as it is closely related to many social issues (Bernado, 2010). Academic studies generally found that parenting styles affect the quality of relationship between parent and child. For example, the results of Bernado (2010) indicate that children's decision making skill is still very much influenced by parental believes, despite the degree of influence may vary across cultures. Hence, this implies that the renegotiation of legitimate areas of parental control is an important element of the developmental transitions from childhood to adolescence (Bernado, 2010).

Researcher in this area, for example, Fletcher, Walls, Cook, Madison, and Bridges (2008) argued that children demonstrated the most problematic development when parents scored low on both dimensions of responsiveness and demandingness (authoritative parenting). On the other hand, Boutelle, Eisenberg, Gregory and Neumark-Sztainer (2009) remarked that deficits in parental relationships are likely to be associated with future depression, self-esteem, and body image issues. They also claimed that these same symptoms could contribute to changes in parent relationships over time.

It is commonly known that the social relationships of children rely heavily on the strength of relationship between children and their parents, especially from a young age. On the other hand, the nature of parenting styles has been known to affect relationships between parents and their children (Johnson, Kent & Leather, 2004). It is therefore important for parents to know which parenting style is best to be employed to strengthen the relationship between parents and their children.

Based on the converging perspectives of attachment and social learning theories, Seiffge-Krenke, Overbeek and Vermulst (2010) argued that parental support, closeness and overall negativity in parent-child relationships experienced during adolescence affects the ability of a child to form close, supportive and intimate romantic relationships. Likewise, Fletcher *et.al* (2008) found that authoritarian families brought about negative effects of yielding to coercion in terms of internalizing, externalizing, and social problems. Fletcher *et.al* further explained that greater use of punitive discipline caused more externalizing problems within the indulgent and authoritarian parenting style groups. However, authoritative parents would engage in less yielding to coercion than the indulgent parents. Although authoritarian styles of parenting have often been criticized, it is still believed to be widely practiced among Asian parents. For example, many Asian families believe that there is a closer parent-child tie although the parents may be authoritarian in their parenting style. The present study aims to provide insight towards this claim.

Parenting programs can be important adjuncts to address child problems and enhance parent-child relationship. Glasser (1998) highlights that parents, teachers and the society as a whole need to be aware that the availability of choice and responsibility are essential in promoting optimal development. More effort should be focused in providing preventive programs to encourage parents to foster effective parenting styles and better

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inter personal relations. Present findings serve as reference that the topic of parenting styles and parent-child relationship should be treated as a cross-disciplinary problem. This issue should be addressed by researchers and intervention teams which comprise of counselors, social workers, professionals, educators and parents. With the collaboration of different disciplines, more comprehensible strategies of fostering parent-child relationships can be obtained.

In sum, understanding the cultural context of the society may help to predict as well as to provide possible reasons of the differences in parenting styles that are predominated in a society (Somayah & Rozumah, 2009). In particular, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between parental authority and parent-child relationship and also to explore the differences between males and females in terms of their relationship with their parents. It is hoped that the results of the study will contribute knowledge towards in the literature in this area as there is limited study conducted in such area in the Asian context even though many studies have been conducted in the Western cultures.

Literature Review:

Parental Authority:

The common way of defining parental authority is through the concept of Baumrind's Parenting Style (Baumrind, 1971). Through experiments, Baumrind (1971) found that there were four dominant types of parenting styles, which include: Authoritarian, authoritative, neglectful, and indulgent parenting. As she introduced these concepts, she emphasized the level of dominance and control of parents, and the responsiveness and acceptance of parents.

Besides defining parental authority using the concept of Baumrind, it is also essential to understand parental authority through the different perspectives. For example, in the studies of Darling, Cumsille and Peña-Alampay (2005) and Smetana, Crean and Campione-Barr (2005), the concept of parental authority has been defined in the different domains. This includes moral, conventional, prudential, friendship, multifaceted, personal issues and the amount of authority that parents exert. Such domains would enable the researcher to understand the type of parenting styles and the general patterns of parenting styles in each of the domain.

Parent-child Relationship:

According to Johnson, *et al.*, (2004), there are many areas which could be taken into consideration when discussing parent-child relationships. Topics such as conflict between parents and children, amount of communication involved, and attachment between parents and their children are the issues commonly raised. In parallel, Fine and Schwebel (1983) defined parent-child relationship as the psychological closeness, trust and communication between parents and children. They further explain that children's understanding of their parent's role, their perceptions, feelings and respect towards their parents are equally important in influencing the child's life.

In this present study the parent-child relationship is defined as not only the biological relationship between parents and children but also the psychological and social relationship between them.

Parental Authority and Parent-child Relationship:

The relationship between parental authority and family relationship has been the subject of several studies. Furthermore, the relationship between parental authority and family relationship in accordance with cultural or gender difference has also been investigated in a number of studies (e.g. Zhang & Fuligni, 2006; Smetana, 2000; Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997).

Among all parenting styles, authoritative parenting is revealed to be the optimal style (Castrucci & Gerlach, 2006). It is said to be competence-inducing as it identifies the individuality and need for control of the child without jeopardizing the duties of the parents. Meanwhile, authoritative parenting is also sensitive to children's capabilities (Belsky, Lerner, & Spanier, 1984). Bednar and Fisher (2003) further supports that adolescents tend to turn to their parents instead of their peers in times of need to make decisions when parents adopt the authoritative parenting style. Furthermore, authoritative parents tend to encourage their children more through verbal and non-verbal measures as well as engage themselves in their children's activities such as doing homework and playing games. This would naturally increase the amount of quality time spent with the child; finally enhance the emotional bond and strengthens the relationship between parents and their children (Howard, *et al.*, 2006).

Conversely, Somayah and Rozumah (2009) argue that the parenting style practiced is very much dependant on the cultural context of the society. They claim that Asian societies are more collectivist as compared to western societies. Therefore, the outcome valued in collectivist groups may form the basis for authoritarian parenting, and is reflected as more appropriate as compared with other parenting styles. Another study conducted on Malaysian students by Habibah and Tan (2009) revealed that perception of students towards their paternal and maternal parenting style was similar. They found that majority of the students have a perception that their father and mother are authoritative, followed by authoritarian, and permissive.

Gender Differences on Parent-child Relationship:

With regards to gender differences in parent-child relationships, females tend to establish a better relationship with their mothers and fathers as compared to their male counterparts (Rozumah & Nor Sheereen, 2009). This is consistent with previous research that indicates females perceive a more positive quality relationship with their parents as compared to males (Tam & Yeoh, 2008).

On the other hand, a study by Lloyd and Devine (2006) reveals that gender differences of the children have affected how parents select parenting styles and the strength of the parent-child relationship. Parents tend to practice more positive parenting on females than males. In addition, females are being praised and cuddled more than males; females are also being hit and shouted at less. Lloyd and Devine (2006) further explain that parents tend to have better communication and are more supportive towards their daughters. Likewise, Weiss and Schwarz (1996) showed that parents tend to be less demanding towards the well-being of their daughters compared to their sons.

Zhang and Fuligni (2006) conducted a study in China on 700 rural and urban 10th and 12th standard children. They found that urban males were less close with their mothers as compared to rural males. On the other hand, both females from the rural area and urban area were close to their mothers. Zhang and Fuligni (2006) also found that urban females tend to disagree with their fathers more than urban boys or rural males and females.

In sum, research evidences concluded that female college students generally had better relationships with both of their parents. However, such findings could also be contradicted with the western culture. For example, the beliefs that degree of relationship between parents and child may decrease and is outweighed by the peer relationship during adolescence. It is believed that research from the Malaysian context could help to generate better understanding of parent child relationship and gender differences.

Gender Differences on Parental Authority:

In relation to parental styles and children's gender, researchers (e.g. Lei, David, Kenneth & Chang, 2002) found harsh parenting of Chinese fathers affect sons more than daughters; whereas mothers' harsh parenting cause a similar effect on children of both sexes. The study of Lei *et. al* (2002) also revealed that the stronger effect of fathers' gender differential treatment seems especially obvious in negative parenting. Studies conducted in Malaysia by Somayeh and Rozumah (2009) revealed that children, particularly females, are inhibited in showing assertive behavior and autonomy. This may direct or indirectly influence parental authority on the child.

According to Smetana, *et al.*, (2005), parents and adolescents have various beliefs about parental authority. Parental authority is said to be dependant on various factors which include social context, social classes and cultures. Smetana *et al* also explains that parents should adjust control over their children as they grow. Some parents may tend to over control their children in certain domains and this may affect the relationship between parents and children.

Effective maternal authority is important in order to have a well-run family and also in maintaining parent-child relationships. Many cultural beliefs and mass media images portray parenting styles of fathers and mothers as distinct (Lamb, 1987). Proving that, studies have typically indicated that mothers are more likely to utilize an authoritative style of parenting (Smetana, 1995). Besides, Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Roberts and Fraleigh (1987) found that mothers were more likely to employ authoritarian style with males rather than with females.

On the other hand, parent-child relationship may be affected by the degree of mother control over the children. For example, authoritative parenting provides explanation, guidance, and communication of affect. This parenting style has a higher tendency to be associated with the child's feeling of confidence and security and positive parent-child relationships (Chen, Hastings, Rubin, Chen, Cen & Stewart, 1998). It can be further explained in similar terms as to how parental sensitivity and responsiveness contribute to secure attachment in infancy. It is argued that the caregiver's affection and sensitivity may help to develop a positive and secure relationship with the child (Ainsworth, *et al.*, 1978). Findings of Karavasilis, Doyle and Markiewicz (2003) also indicate that parental warmth or involvement, authority, and behavioral monitoring are associated with the attachment with the mother and thus affect their relationship. Besides, low warmth and low control are particularly associated with dismissing/avoidant attachment.

Thus, how parents demonstrate authority towards children could affect the attachment and relationship between them. It is essential to note that maternal authority are often portrayed as spending more time with the children, caring oriented and provide a sense of nurturance (Aunola, Nurmi, Onatsu-Arviolommi & Pulkkinen, 1999).

Objective and Hypotheses of Study:

This present study aims to investigate the relationship between parental authority and parent-child relationship, the differences between male and female in terms of parental authority and parent-child relationships. The hypotheses of the study are formulated as below:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between parent-child cohesion and authoritative parenting, the better the parent-child cohesion, the higher the level of authoritative parenting style.

Hypothesis 2: Male adolescents would perceive their father and mother as more authoritarian as compared with their females counterparts.

Hypothesis 3: Male adolescents would perceive their father and mother as more permissive as compared with their females counterparts.

Hypothesis 4: Male adolescents would perceive higher level of parental cohesion as compared with their females counterparts.

Method:

Participants:

The survey consists of 160 participants from several University Colleges located in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. There were 80 males and 80 females in the sample. Their age ranges from 17 to 25 years, while their mean age was 20.2 years.

Procedure:

Participants were given a brief explanation on the purpose of the survey and informed consent was obtained. Participants were approached at different locations such as the cafeteria, foyer and library within the university colleges. The survey consisted of three parts. The first part was made up of six demographic questions. The following two parts of the survey consists of the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) and the Parent-child Relationship Survey (PCRS).

Instruments:

Parent-child Relationship Survey (PCRS):

The Parent-Child Relationship Survey (PCRS) by Fine and Schwebel (1983) was designed to measure young adults' perceptions of their relationships with their mothers and fathers. Father and child relationship is measured in terms of positive effect, father involvement, communication and anger. Mother and child relationship is measured in terms of positive effect, resentment/role confusion, identification and communication. The PCRS has excellent internal consistency, with overall alphas for the father subscales at .96 and overall alphas for the mother subscales at .94. In each subscale, a high score indicates the level of close relationship or cohesiveness between the parent and child.

Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ):

The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) by Buri (1991) was designed to determine the parents' disciplinary practices perceived by their adult children. The PAQ has three subscales which are permissive, authoritarian and authoritative. The PAQ has good construct validity and an internal consistency of .74 to .87 for the subscales. Test-retest reliabilities of the PAQ range from .77 to .92. A high score on the respective subscale indicates the parent's disposition towards that particular style of parenting. For example, a high score in authoritarian parenting indicates parents who use harsh disciplining towards their children.

Results:

A bivariate correlation was carried out which involved the mean scores of parent-child relationship and types of parental authority. Analyses revealed that there was a significant negative correlation between mother-child cohesion with the father permissive parenting style. This shows that adult children who were close to their mother were less likely to perceive their father as warm, nondemanding and noncontrolling or vice versa ($r = -.170, p < .05$). In addition, authoritative mothers ($r = .222, p < .01$) and authoritative fathers ($r = .518, p < .01$) have significant positive correlation with father-child cohesion mean scores. This was similar for the significant positive correlation between mother-child cohesion scores with authoritative mother ($r = .400, p < .01$) and authoritative father ($r = .331, p < .01$). The results revealed that both parents who were perceived to be clear, firm but flexible and rational in their parenting were more likely to be perceived as cohesive in parent-child relationship. See Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix Depicting Relationships between Father and Mother Cohesion Mean Scores with Types of Parental Authority

Father Cohesion	.044	-.038	-.142	.040	.518**	.222**
Mother Cohesion	-.170*	-.105	-.090	-.110	.331**	.400**
	PermF	PermM	ARianF	ARianM	ATiveF	ATiveM

Key

- Father Cohesion = Father-child cohesion mean scores
- Mother Cohesion = Mother-child cohesion mean scores
- PermF = Permissive father
- PermM = Permissive mother
- ARianF = Authoritarian father
- ARianM = Authoritarian mother
- ATiveF = Authoritative father
- ATiveM = Authoritative mother

Note

- * $p < .05$
- ** $p < .01$

An independent sample t-test was used to compare the mean scores of the different types of parental authority between male and female children. Analyses indicated that there were significant mean differences for the four types of parental authority which include permissive father, permissive mother, authoritarian father and authoritarian mother. For permissive father, there were significant mean differences between male and female. Males perceived their father to be warmer, non-controlling and non-demanding as compared to females [t (158) = 2.36, $p < .05$]. For permissive mother, there were significant mean differences. Males also perceived their mother to be warmer, non-controlling and non-demanding as compared to females [t (158) = 2.89, $p < .01$].

For authoritarian father, there were significant differences between the genders. Males perceived their father to be harsher in disciplining as compared to females [t (158) = 2.93, $p < .01$]. Lastly, for authoritarian mother, there were significant differences between males and females. Males perceived their mother to be harsher in disciplining as compared to females [t (158) = 2.19, $p < .05$]. See Table 2.

Table 2: Independent Sample t-test Comparison of Parental Authority Types by Gender

Variable	Mean Scores		
	Males	Females	t (158)
Permissive Father	30.04	27.93	2.36*
Permissive Mother	30.41	27.89	2.89**
Authoritarian Father	32.30	29.63	2.93**
Authoritarian Mother	31.56	29.60	2.19*
Note.	* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$		

An independent sample t-test was used to determine the mean score differences in parental cohesion for mother and father in the perspective of their male and female children. The analyses indicated that there were no significant differences between male and female children in terms of perceived cohesiveness in relations with mother [t (158) = -1.54, $p > .05$] and father [t (158) = -.836, $p > .05$]. See Table 3.

Table 3: Independent Sample t-test Comparison of Parent-Child Cohesiveness by Gender

Variable	Mean Scores		
	Males	Females	t (158)
Father-Child Cohesion	18.30	18.83	-0.836
Mother-Child Cohesion	19.70	20.50	-1.54

Discussion:

The main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between parental authority and parent-child relationship, gender differences between parental authority and parent-child relationship. The results revealed that there was a significantly higher parent child relationship when the parents were more authoritative in their parenting style. There was higher cohesion to both father and mother when paternal parenting was rated as more authoritative. The same was found with higher ratings of authoritative maternal parenting. The first hypothesis was supported and was in parallel with research conducted by Karavasilis *et al.* who found that authoritative parenting would have a higher tendency to form more secure attachments between children and parents. The research of Karavasilis *et al.*, (2003) was conducted among participants of middle childhood and adolescence and such results could have similar implication to the young adult sample such as this present study. In another study among college students, authoritative and permissive parenting was related to more positive family relations, whereas uninvolved-neglecting and authoritarian parenting was related to more negative family

relations (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & De Lisi, 2007). Hence, authoritative parenting which is the more responsive and demanding parenting style is shown to be related to higher levels of parent-child cohesion.

The results revealed that male participants rated their mothers and fathers as significantly more authoritarian as compared to female participants. The present finding is supportive of the second proposed hypothesis that fathers engage in more authoritarian parenting with their male offspring as compared to female offspring. The more authoritarian approach by fathers towards their sons may be due to past parenting experience. Generally, parents tend to implement parenting styles that they are familiar with, or styles that have been applied by their parents before (Peretti & Statum, 1984). Fathers may be stricter and controlling towards their sons and this has inter-generational effects on the parenting attitudes of fathers towards sons. For example, as shown by Bronstein (1984), fathers may exhibit less dominance, restrictiveness, and punitive behaviours towards their daughters as compared to their sons.

In addition, it was found that male participants rated their mothers and fathers as significantly more permissive as compared to the female participants. Hence, the third hypothesis is supported. This could be due to the reason that parents often use a combination of parenting styles on their children. Parenting styles are often tailored to the situation and also used in accordance to its effectiveness. Hence, males may rate their parents as highly permissive and authoritarian at the same time. However, further analysis indicated that males' ratings of authoritarian paternal parenting styles are significantly higher than ratings of permissive paternal parenting styles.

There was no significant difference between gender and parent child cohesion with either father or mother. Females, as compared to males, were reported to have a slightly higher cohesion to their fathers. Thus, the fourth hypothesis is rejected. In terms of cohesion with mothers, females also reported a slightly higher value as compared to males. The non-significant difference in results could be due to the change of parenting styles in the current era. More exposure to parenting methods and their impact on children has resulted in changes in the way parents interact with their children. Hence, the disparity in cohesion with either parent is less obvious in parent-child relationships.

The study provides a closer look at parenting styles that is culturally appropriate. Parents would be more confident of applying authoritative skills on their children with the increased number of literature that sways towards the authoritative style of parenting. Additionally the positive relationship between parent-child relationship and authoritative parents implicated in this study can be extended to developing tailor made programs to counter specific social problems, especially when parenting styles have been identified to be the cause.

Since attachment has been related to many different types of pathology and psychological problems, clinicians would do well to look into perceived parent-child relationships as well as the care received by the individual during childhood as important predictors or determinants of current problems (Matsuoka *et al.*, 2006). Results from this study not only pave the way for future research but also allows researchers to develop interventions which could help families at risk.

Further studies can look at the relationship between culture and parenting styles for males and females. Since the present study found impact of permissive parenting style on parent-child relationship, it would be beneficial to further investigate this finding, as most studies focus on authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles. There are many other areas that should be explored in future studies, such as whether birth order plays a role in affecting parent child relationship and the children's perception of parental authority.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, results of the present study shows that there is a significant relationship between parental authority and parent-child relationship. Male adolescents perceive their father and mother to be more authoritarian and permissive as compared with their female counterparts. It is essential to note that the way in which individuals are raised by their parents impacts the development of their personality and could lead to potential onset of mental disorders in their adulthood (Uji, Tanaka, Shono, & Kitamura, 2006). It is essential for future studies to examine the reasons behind these findings as well as interventions to improve parental authority and parent-child relationships.

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