An Evaluation of Authoritative Parenting Style Through Comparative Discussion of Autonomy Support and Psychological Control: Inspired by the Success of Eileen Gu

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Abstract. As the overnight sensation of Eileen Gu, a prominent youth Olympic freestyle skiing Champion, has won much attention over the globe, the discussion of western and eastern parenting styles and the question of how to raise an outstanding adolescent have become a trending topic in Chinese social media. This paper aims to justify the favorable role of authoritative parenting style under the comparison of psychological control on adolescents' academic functioning and psychological wellbeing, particularly exemplified by the success of Eileen Gu. By examining prior research conducted on western and eastern adolescents, mainly Chinese adolescents from eastern society, the distinctive cultural values and Chinese educational system contributed to the prevailing adoption of psychological control by Chinese parents compared to their western counterparts. Autonomy support was shown to have consistent positive effects on adolescents' wellbeing in multiple dimensions across different cultures, whereas psychological control was shown to have destructive effects on western adolescents and nuanced effects but mainly negative on Chinese adolescents. This paper reassures that parents should adopt authoritative parenting style given its universal benefits to adolescents 'development in any cultural context.

Keywords: Eileen Gu; Authoritative parenting style; Autonomy support; Psychological Control.

1. Introduction

Autonomy support and psychological control are perceived to be two opposite parenting practices that lead to contrasting outcomes on adolescents' development [1] and serve as two distinct manifestations of western and eastern values in educational aspects. As a result, the current paper is built upon the comparative analysis of these two practices to illustrate their role in adolescents' development.

Unlike authoritarian, indulgent, and indifferent parenting style, authoritative parenting style demonstrates a preferred balance between restrictiveness and self- determination [2]. Authoritative parents practice modest guidance and discipline while rendering sufficient autonomy to adolescents [2]. Autonomy support is described as encouraging children to make decisions and solve problems independently to foster children's self-reliance and confidence [3]. According to self-determination theory, feeling autonomous is a basic psychological need for emerging adults to embark on healthy development [3]. Some favourable outcomes generated includes building better family relationship and having better performance in school. Prior studies have also indicated the positive relationship between autonomy support and adolescents' psychological, physical and academic outcomes in various ethnic contexts [2, 3, 4].

In contrast, psychological control is perceived to be a negative parenting practice as it tends to undermine adolescents' functioning in many aspects. The specific practice of psychological control includes love withdrawal, social comparison shame, harsh psychological control, parental relationship-oriented guilt induction, and shared shame. Love withdrawal is defined as parental withholding affection and esteem towards children that is solely dependent on the favourability of children's behavior and gives little attention to children's self-worth, resulting in reduced self-esteem. Similarly, social comparison shame was also conveyed through contingent self-worth defined by parents as they tended to make negative comparisons between their children and others. Harsh psychological control indicates a relegation of children's feelings and values through practices like

personal attacks, which also leads to poor internal well-being. Parental relationship-oriented guilt induction and shared shame are practices that tailor more to eastern cultural values (e.g. Confucianism) and thus may have differentiated effects on adolescents situated in distinct ethnic group. Parental relationship-oriented guilt induction was manifested through parents' attempt to convey the message that children's lack of preferable behavior or achievement could diminish parents' well-being and stressed on the moral demand of appreciating parental sacrifice. Shared shame is built upon family honor, and a common embodiment may include "you made your mother lose face" [5]. Studies examining the undesirable effects of various forms of psychological control have indicated that adolescents from both western nations like the U.S. and eastern nations like China seem to experience negative effects from the aspects of psychological control that reflect criticism, rejection, and negative comparison. However, adolescents from China may not react as strongly to some practices including parental relationship-oriented guilt induction and shared shame as these practices are derived and fermented from Chinese culture[4].

This paper will examine the stated topic by firstly introducing Eileen Gu and her mother's parenting style, as a practical case of authoritative parenting and its favorable effects on adolescents. The following passage will further discuss the role of autonomy support and psychological control on adolescents' academic functioning and psychological well-being, through a comparative perspective of western versus eastern cases. Studies that assure the benefits of authoritative parenting and examine the ethnic heterogeneity in adopting this ideal parenting style can be crucial in promoting the right educational concept among parents and explaining the discrepancy in the choice of parenting style across western and eastern societies. Potential solutions to reduce the use of negative parenting practices may also be found through studies like this.

2. Eileen Gu

Eileen Gu (Chinese name: Gu Ailing) is an Olympic freestyle skier, who was born in San Francisco, California, the United States to a Chinese mother and an American father on September 3rd, 2003. She has competed for China in the 2022 Winter Olympic game, winning two gold medals in big air and half pipe and a silver medal in slopestyle. During her athletic career, she excelled with eight gold medals in FIS Freestyle Ski World Cup from 2019 to 2022, two gold medals in the 2021 FIS Freestyle World Ski Championships, two gold medals in the 2020 Lausanne Winter Youth Olympics, and other championships in minor events [6].

In light of her numerous achievements as a young athlete, "prodigy" and "genius" became her labels along with her eminent accomplishments in academic and other fields [7]. Not only did she finish her high school study in just one year, but she also received early admission to Stanford University with a SAT score of 1580 out of 1600 [8]. Moreover, she was able to balance her athletic and academic life with her extensive hobbies, including cross-country races, rock climbing, ballet dancing, horse riding, surfing, etc[7].

Triggered by her overnight sensation as an American-born Chinese Olympic Champion, Eileen's name associated with the title "the pride of China" immediately occupied seven out of ten trending topics on Weibo, one of the biggest Chinese social media [9]. Content related to her growing-up trajectory, family background, and educational articles on how to raise another "Eileen Gu" further perpetuated her popularity as a role model for millions of Chinese parents and adolescents. Ensuing her Olympic Championship, Eileen was also bestowed with lucrative marketing values, particularly in sports and fashion field[6].

3. Yan Gu and Her Authoritative Parenting Style

Yan Gu, Eileen's mother, first graduated from Peking university with both undergraduate and master's degrees in chemical engineering. She then emigrated to the U.S. in her twenties while pursuing her MBA at Stanford University. Yan was also experienced with skiing as a ski coach being

her early occupation. She later had a mature career devoted to venture investment and worked as a venture capitalist between China and the U.S. Yan raised Eileen as a single mother after her divorce with her American husband [6].

The following section will introduce Yan's description of her parenting practices from an interview video and analyze its similarities with positive parenting practices perceived by existing literature. Despite the hardship of being a single mother, Yan has raised Eileen in a supportive, loving, autonomy-granted way that substantially aligned with various practices of authoritative parenting style:

Practice 1: The Mirage of Perfection

As Yan has disclosed in her interview, there is no need to pursue perfection on the results as perfection does not exist [11]. She values the learning process and adolescent's command of knowledge and skills rather than the outcomes represented by rigid measures in scores[10]. This has thus granted Eileen little outcome-oriented psychological burden when confronting challenges or exploring self-potential. Setting feasible expectations within adolescents' capacity, instead of being over-demanding on adolescents' performance, is classified as one of the characteristics of authoritative parents[2] .

Practice 2: Enjoy your own game

Yan granted sufficient autonomy to her daughter in making decisions while being responsive by providing enough support and resources that could promote adolescent outcomes. According to Eileen, skiing has been her passion since the age of three[7]. In response, Yan has become Eileen's personal driver for her eight hours round trip to the ski park on weekends [12] and offered her professional training resources throughout her skiing experience[6]. Yan's autonomy support was further manifested during Eileen's last jump in the Winter Olympics as she respected Eileen's choice in deciding the moves by telling her to enjoy her own game after Eileen rejected Yan's advice of not taking risks [13].

Given the consciousness of authoritative parents in allowing autonomy and fostering adolescents' self-direction, adolescents are likely to develop self-reliance and a sense of initiative[2]. In light of Yan's autonomy-granted while responsive parenting practices, Eileen's success was attributed to her strong intrinsic motivation and self-assurance in being a professional ski racer [14]. She perceived skiing as a reward that could generate contentment[13], which explained her years of perseverance and high self-discipline in realizing her goals. According to the self-determination theory, one's autonomy is a crucial generator of internal motivation[13]. If people believe that they have control over their decisions and the ability to change their surroundings, they tend to put in constant effort[13].

Practice 3: Rejection Towards Parental Relationship-Oriented Guilt Induction

Regardless of Yan's significant investment devoted to Eileen in making her a prominent youth distinguished in sport, academic, and commercial fields, Yan recognized Eileen's effort rather than accentuating the conclusiveness of her parenting role and seeking reciprocal gratitude from adolescent[10]. "You don't have to be grateful when you grow up, you owe me nothing", stated by Yan during her interview[10]. Yan's practice of not increasing children's sense of indebtedness to parents forms a contrast with the practice of parental relationship-oriented guilt induction that is likely to be adopted by Chinese parents, attributing to the distinctive cultural values and socialization processes like interdependence, familial cohesion, and children's resonance with parental sacrifice[5].

To summarize, Yan has demonstrated characteristics of authoritative parents through her tolerance towards flaws and rejection of pursuing perfectionism, sufficient autonomous support, and the awareness of not imposing additional moral burden on adolescent for their appreciation towards parents. As a result, Eileen developed a strong personality filled with courage and openness towards unknown, self-determination, and high self-discipline. Given the personal case of successful authoritative parenting outcomes, the following passage will examine authoritative parenting style and its counter parenting practices from a broader and comparative context between the western and eastern society to reinforce the favorable role of authoritative parenting style on adolescents' development.

4. Ethnic Difference in Parenting Practice and the Variance in the Effect on Adolescents

Despite the racial identify of Eilleen's mother being an Asian, her educational methodology is westernized in which adolescent is treated with respect, support and individual freedom, relative to the conventional eastern educational concept in which, obedience and moral values are stressed. This cross-cultural practice thus seems particular and worth examining since authoritative parenting style is less adopted outside of Caucasian families[2], and eastern parents tend to implement more controlling practices on adolescents[4]. A similar conclusion can be seen in Jung et al.[3], which found that American adolescents reported more autonomy support from mothers than Korean adolescents and in return provoked a positive reaction chain that manifested in the enhanced mother-child relationship, better physical condition, and higher life satisfaction. Moreover, Chen et al.[4] also disclosed that American parents were inclined to use less psychological control than Chinese parents. Hence, there is a noticeable difference in the likelihood of parents adopting healthy parenting style between western and eastern societies.

The disparity in parenting practices between western and eastern families owes to different cultural values and parenting beliefs. The favorable characteristics of authoritative parenting like autonomy support are conceptually aligned with western cultural values that accentuate independence and individualism[3,4]. In contrast, Eastern culture values collectivism, interpersonal connection within families as well in social life, and the fulfillment of traditional values and societal standards, especially in China[3,4,5]. Consequently, these cultural-oriented differences are reflected in specific parenting practices and concepts. Chinese parents are likely to use more psychological control because they tend to sacrifice youth's feelings to achieve their expectations of youth on academic and social aspects[4]. They prioritize adolescents' academic achievement and effort over adolescents' self-development and self-worth; this focus has been, attributed to the excessively competitive educational environment in Chinese society[4]. The design of Chinese education is largely exam-oriented as adolescents' performance on standard exams serves as a major determinant for getting into prestigious schools and increasing their chance in having a bright career prospect[5]. Specifically, the negative relationship between parents using aggravated psychological control and Chinese adolescents' performance at school was manifested by the finding that poorer academic performance was associated with more parental psychological control one year later[4]. Other than academic consideration, the traditional Chinese values also made raising an academically competent child with traditional merits such as filial piety, familial reciprocity, and modesty into criteria in judging parents' success in parenting[4]. As a result, Chinese parenting is associated with relatively complex responsibilities such that parents are expected to ensure that children meet certain societal standards like the aforementioned[4]. Likewise, the similar social burden on youth is conveyed in the different perceptions of adolescence between western and eastern cultures. Western parents regard adolescence as a phase for children to develop independence, thus they tend to be less involved and offer more autonomy[4]. However, Chinese parents regard adolescence as a time to fulfill responsibility to family, given the importance of merits like filial piety[4]. Hence, more intervention is likely to occur in Chinese families if children are not behaving in a way that conform with these cultural values.

In addition, there is also heterogeneity in the magnitude of both positive and negative effects of different parenting practices on adolescents' internal well-being and academic functioning due to cultural-oriented differences. For instance, the adverse effect of psychological control on self-esteem was more explicit in the U.S. as individualism was highly appreciated, whereas the negative association was smaller in Chinese cases, given that adolescents were less sensitive to changes in self-esteem under an interdependence-directed culture[4]. In fact, having high self-esteem may be regarded as an obstruction to performing traditional values like modesty in China[4]. The insensitivity of Chinese adolescents was also demonstrated in their outcomes in response to positive parenting practice. According to Wang et al.[1], the favorable effects of autonomy support on adolescents' internal wellbeing were stronger among American adolescents compared to Chinese adolescents. Therefore, the essential difference in cultural background not only causes divergence in parenting

styles across western and eastern society but also contributes to the varying degree of effects on adolescents.

5. The Effect of Autonomy Support on Adolescents' General Well-being

Autonomy support is believed to be an advantageous parenting practice across existing research since it tends to result in fewer mental issues and higher self-esteem, especially during adolescence when establishing autonomy and confidence are essential for children to have a healthy development[3]. The case of Eillen Gu has certainly exemplified how autonomy support from parent can render children with confidence and self-reliance when making decisions and confronting challenges. Sufficient parental autonomy support was examined to generate positive adolescents' outcome across various ethnic groups[3]. Jung et al.[3] has explored the association between autonomy support and adolescents' general well-being, mediated by mother-child relationship, across countries from both western and eastern cultures. Their hypotheses of the positive relationship between autonomy support and adolescents' well-being, autonomy support and mother-child relationship, mother-child relationship and adolescents' well being assessed by life satisfaction and physical health, are all accounted by the correlational findings[3]. In both the U.S and Korea, autonomy support had a positive and significant association with adolescents' physical health and life satisfaction[3]. Furthermore, Wang et al.[1] also indicated that cultural similarity in terms of the positive effect of autonomy support also applied to Chinese adolescents in raising their emotional and academic functioning. Hence, parental autonomy support is no doubt beneficial for adolescents' development both physically, psychologically, and academically, apparently regardless of culture.

6. The Effect of Psychological Control on Adolescents' Academic Functioning

By comparing the studies examining the relationship between parental psychological control and adolescents' academic functioning conducted in European and Chinese contexts, a negative association was generally found in western adolescents, whereas there were inconsistent findings on the correlation between the variables in Chinese cases. Specifically, only cross-sectional data showed a compelling negative association between psychological control and academic motive and performance, but not in longitudinal studies. The disparity between western and eastern cases might be attributed to the following considerations: firstly, the factors adopted to measure adolescents' academic functioning might be limited to those mainly reflect on adolescents' academic goal, learning obligation and strategies, excluding the examination of their internal and external motivation beyond these superficial indicators. Besides, academic functioning and motivation of Chinese adolescents might be detached from each other, implying that psychological control might fail to exert significant effects on the mediating variable — learning motivation. The third reasoning, which further clarifies the former one, is that Chinese adolescents were more likely to be externally motivated due to the extreme competition induced by Chinese educational system. Students were passively engaged in pursuing higher scores on standardized entrance exams from Junior High school on, as these could determine their chance of enrolling in prestigious secondary schools and universities, which in turn might impose an effect on their prospects when entering society. Consequently, Chinese adolescents' academic performance that was largely extrinsically oriented tended to be decoupled from psychological control that affected their intrinsic development[5].

While the inconsistent relationship between psychological control and Chinese adolescents' academic functioning may has explained by the above considerations, Fang et al. has also testified the discrepant outcomes between specific practices of psychological control on Chinese adolescents situated in two nuanced social settings, with rural area implying a stronger inclination towards traditional values and urban area implying a relatively modern or westernized hold of values. The findings regarding the effect of psychological control on academic functioning measured by adolescents' relative autonomy index that implied their level of intrinsic motivation, showed variance

across different types of psychological control. In the concurrent analyses, social comparison shame was negatively related to relative autonomy for both rural and urban adolescents. Shared shame was negatively associated with relative autonomy for rural adolescents only. An increase in parental relationship-oriented guilt induction was correlated with a decrease in the relative autonomy index for urban and rural adolescents. Neither change in love withdrawal nor harsh psychological control had a significant relationship with adolescents' level of relative autonomy. Despite the differential effect of each psychological control on adolescents' academic autonomy, Fang et al. further verified the universal negative outcome of social comparison shame on adolescents from any culture or even nuanced sub-culture, which corresponds to other prior research, in undermining adolescents' intrinsic motivation as it conveyed relegation of one's self-worth and imposed excessive external expectations on adolescents. Moreover, although rural adolescents were expected to be less sensitive to practices of parental relationship-oriented guilt induction and shared shame that are well-adapted to traditional Chinese values, they still responded with significant decline in relative autonomy, suggesting the underlying negativity of such practices beyond cultural consideration[5].

Besides the general adverse results on adolescents' academic intrinsic motivation induced by parental psychological control, Fang et al.[5] has found that there was a positive correlation between parental relationship-oriented guilt induction and Chinese urban adolescents' scores, exceptional from the partial negative effect of love withdrawal and harsh psychological control on adolescents' grade in either urban or rural settings. This contrasting result thus might have explained the prevalent adoption of parental relationship-oriented guilt induction among Chinese families, given its effectiveness in raising grades under an aggressive educational environment. Similarly, interview studies have also indicated that the extrinsic motivation of Chinese students can promote them in getting higher academic achievement in the short run [15], which justified Fang et al.[5]'s finding that social comparison shame and shared shame that were shown to diminish adolescents' autonomous motivation, had no direct relationship to lower adolescent academic achievement. However, psychological control that relied on imposing external burdens to fulfill certain expectations may eventually have a more substantial negative effect on Chinese adolescents' performance in the long run[5].

7. The Effect of Psychological Control on Adolescents' Internal well-being

According to Chen et al., substantial research has shown that individuals in the U.S. had higher self-esteem than their counterparts in East Asia. With this prior condition, Chen et al. has further studied why American adolescents tended to have higher self-esteem than Chinese adolescents, by specifically examining the longitudinal role of psychologically controlling parenting on youth's self-esteem during early adolescence. His comparative research found that first, American parents essentially adopted less psychological control compared to Chinese parents, given their lower intercept on using psychological control in the initial phase of the study. Secondly, American parents did not increase psychological control over time with a slope of -0.02, whereas Chinese parents increased their psychological control during the period with a slope of 0.06. In response, the magnitude of the decline in Chinese adolescents' self-esteem was larger than American adolescents over the study duration. The correlation between the examined variables thus showed that the disparity in adopting psychological control parenting significantly contributed to the difference in adolescents' self-esteem in the U.S. and China[4].

Promoting and maintaining adolescents' self-esteem is indispensable for adolescents to embark on a healthy growth trajectory. Having sufficient self-esteem implies one's ability in appreciating oneself more for positive outcomes rather than focusing on negative ones. Moreover, self-esteem serves as a protective mechanism against the negative influence of failure. Lastly, higher self-esteem is associated with lower depression and stronger self-adjustment, and it is shown to enhance emotional functioning in both the U.S. and China[4]. This may have explained that American adolescents are less prone to psychological issues than Chinese adolescents[4]. Considering the significance of self-

esteem on adolescents' development, the adverse impact of psychological control on self-esteem should evoke more attention when comes to parenting.

Other than weakening psychological functioning like self-esteem, the consistent conclusion that psychological control was associated with dampened emotional functioning and was likely to result in depression, applied to both American and Chinese adolescents without cultural dissimilarities[1]. Besides the consensus that general psychological control would lead to undesirable internal functioning, specific forms of psychological control were also shown to result in poor mental conditions but with nuanced effects on adolescents depending on their alignment with cultural and social values. In Fang et al.[5]'s study conducted on Chinese rural and urban adolescents, an increase in social comparison shame and harsh psychological control was correlated with an increase in depression and a decrease in life satisfaction for both settings. However, psychological controlling practices that were more culturally adaptive, like parental relationship-oriented guilt induction and shared shame, exerted little negative effect on Chinese adolescents' psychological well-being and life satisfaction[5]. This is due to that parental relationship-oriented guilt induction complied with the traditional value of children's gratitude and acknowledgment of parental sacrifice, and the adoption of shared shame reflected the emphasis on family honor as one of the Chinese cultural norms[5]. It's worth mentioning that contrasting with the prevalence adoption of such practices by Chinese families, Eileen's mother clearly conducted the opposite by telling her child to be guilty free, which not only prevented adolescent's feeling of indebtedness but also conveyed respect of viewing adolescent as an independent individual rather than parents' appendage. Therefore, regardless of the prevailing negative outcome of psychological control on adolescents' internal well-being, there was discrepancy between the effects of each type of psychological control on adolescents due to its conformity with the cultural norms.

Lastly, the destructive influence of psychological control on adolescents' internal well-being was not merely a one-time effect but rather tended to provoke a vicious cycle that perpetuated adolescents' psychological issues. Rote et al. indicated that youth with internalizing problems were more likely to report feelings of guilt and shame, parental guilt induction, and negative parenting, due to their negatively biased perception of maternal interaction. Intuitively speaking, youth who were already ensnared in mental struggles were inclined to generate more negative emotions and were more sensitive towards any negativity that occurred in mother-child relationships. As a result, adolescents' biased cognition towards parental practices due to their existing internal issues would further worsen their psychological state [16]. Therefore, parental psychological control not only exerted direct negative effects on adolescents' psychological functioning, such as lower self-esteem and greater risk of struggling with mental issues like depression, but it also eternalized the reciprocity between adolescents' psychological symptoms and the negative interaction between children and parents.

8. Limitations

Although my analysis has indicated the benefits of authoritative parenting style from various aspects and the devastating while complexed effects of psychological control on adolescents from different cultures. Some limitations of the current paper should be noted. Firstly, this paper focuses on how the cultural differences and the competitive educational environment contribute to the prevalent use of psychological control in China. Other indicators such as parents' educational level, income level, personal psychological well-being, and numbers of children may also potentially affect parents' parenting preference, which can be examined in further research. Furthermore, the paper examines the benefits of authoritative parenting style from the aspect of autonomy support, leaving space for the inclusion of other features of authoritative parenting style for future research to create a more comprehensive understanding of its advantages. In addition, considering the difference in adolescents' characteristics, authoritative parenting style may also not be the most ideal practice and have its shortcomings in some exceptional cases. For instance, authoritative parenting style may fail to generate positive outcome sufficiently for uncompromising adolescents with oppositional behavior

problems. Children that are more demanding with absolute autonomy may still interpret authoritative parents negatively as controlling [17]. Lastly, the prior studies mentioned in the paper mainly focused on adolescents from the U.S, Korea, and China, which may not be representative enough of adolescents worldwide. These aspects should be taken into consideration when conducting future research.

9. Conclusion

Through the case of Eileen Gu and her mother's authoritative parenting style, this paper theoretically highlights the favorable role of authoritative parenting style in benefiting adolescents' outcomes, particularly through parental autonomy support. Cultural values thus serve as a major factor in explaining the choice of parenting practices and the magnitude of effect on adolescents across the two cultures.

The positive correlation between autonomy support and adolescents' outcome in either physical, psychological, or academic aspects is universal across cultures, regardless of cultural dissimilarities. Reversely, psychological control exerts negative effects on adolescent development across cultures, differing in the degree of its negativity. A consistent negative correlation was generally found in European studies in terms of the effects of psychological control on adolescents' academic functioning, whereas there were nuanced effects of some particular forms of psychological control on Chinese adolescents due to cultural considerations. For instance, parental relationship-oriented guilt induction was examined to have a positive association with Chinese urban adolescents' grades in the short run but was possible to exert a negative effect on adolescents' performance in the long run. Lastly, psychological control was correlated with worsened internal well-being in both western and eastern settings, manifested by lower self-esteem and other mental issues like depression.

In conclusion, the above findings and the example of Eileen Gu have shown that authoritative parenting style, exemplified by autonomy support, is undoubtedly beneficial to the comprehensive development of children. In contrast, the undesirable parenting style exemplified by psychological control has a negative impact on children's academic and psychological performance generally, despite particular practices like parental relationship-oriented guilt induction and shared shame indicated less dramatic negative effect on adolescents' mental state in light of their compatibility with Chinese cultural values.

Hence, a practical solution that may alleviate the adoption of destructive parenting style in China could be reforming the current over-competitive educational scheme by adding more categories in examining one's capability, to disperse the tension and pressure of both adolescents and parents in achieving a single rigid standard. Teachers and administrators may also consider promoting the concept of authoritative parenting style and its benefit to parents, given that parents may not be conscious of their controlling practices under the innate influence of culture.

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