

Father-child and mother-child attachment in contemporary urban China

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Chinese Fathers: Past and Present



Traditional Confucian fathers

- Low emphasis on father-child emotional attachment
- A strict yet benevolent educator, disciplinarian, moral role model who is distant from day-to-day care
- Withhold expression of warmth, especially in father-son dyads



Western parenting /
gender ideals

Family
revolution



Demographi
c shift

Neoliberal
economy

Contemporary Chinese fathers

- Strong motivation for parent-child intimacy and emotional bond
- Urban fathers readily praise their preschoolers/ grade schoolers for good behavior during play and everyday life (Li & Li, 2019; Y. Xu, 2010)
- Urban and rural fathers of older children display affection in diverse ways (Li, 2020b)

Extant literature on father-child attachment in China

General pattern

- Consistencies with “western” literature: Secure/higher-quality attachment and positive developmental outcomes ([Song, Thompson, & Ferrer, 2009](#); Yin, Li, & Su, 2013); father-child attachment as buffering resource against father-child conflict (Yin, Li, & Su, 2013) and discrimination ([Song et al., 2020](#))
- Culturally specific findings: The salience of father-child attachment
 - Stronger father-child attachment than mother-child attachment ([Li et al., 2014](#))
 - Father-child attachment having greater influence than mother-child attachment ([Pan et al., 2016](#); [Pan et al., 2020](#); [Q. Wu & Wang, 2014](#))

Extant literature on father-child attachment in China

Literature gap

- Limited empirical and theoretical research on father-child attachment
- Lack of examination of the relation between paternal and maternal attachment (e.g., assumed similarity of father-child and mother-child attachment: [Bao et al., 2015](#); [Zhang et al., 2020](#); [Wang, Wu, & Wang, 2019](#) as exception)
- Child-report measures (typically Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment) among adolescents

Research questions

- Do father-child and mother-child attachment fall under the same factor in contemporary urban Chinese families?
- Association between parent-child attachment and child development in middle/late childhood
- (Attachment Script Assessment in Chinese population)

Method

Sample



- Part of a mixed-method longitudinal study on social change, parenting, and child development in China
- Middle-class families from Nanjing, southeast China
- 268 10-year-old children ($Mean_{Age}=9.72$, $SD=0.23$; 52.99% boys)

Method

Measures

- Father-child/Mother-child Attachment: Attachment Script Assessment (Waters and Rodrigues-Doolabh, 2001); 2 stories for mother/father each
- Parent-child relationship: Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985)
- Prosociality: Prosocial Behavior subscale, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1977)
- Depression (Kovacs, 1980, Shortened Version)
- Self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965)

Method

Measures

- ASA prompt for parent-child attachment; 2 mother and 2 father stories
- Scored from 1-7 (3 being neutral)

At home	I am worried	Raised my head	Time for bed
Prepare for exam	Dad	Help	Smile
Difficult	Read	Speak/Say	Sleep
Mom and I	Crowded	Mother looks for	Hold
Mall	Lost (separated)	Toys	Reunite
Strolling/walking	Afraid	Speak/Say	Go home

ASA example - Mother (scored 3)

One day Mum and I were in the shopping mall. Because of the crowd, Mum and I got separated. Mum was really afraid in her heart, she looked here and there but still couldn't find me. Finally she found me in the toy store holding a teddy bear and I said to her "I want this teddy bear." Then mum went to the cashier, bought the teddy bear, and went home happily.

ASA example - Father (scored 6)

Today, I was preparing for the upcoming exam at home. The exam information distributed by the teacher this time became more and more difficult. There was always something that I could not understand. There were a few more papers left. I was really worried that I could not work well next time. For some unknown reason, it was very late after I pondered over the things. Dad came by at this time. After reading the problems, he looked up and said: “Although it is not an easy exam, you have to work hard. Don’t worry about doing bad. I believe you are the best. So just do your best!” After that, he helped me sort out the knowledge. I asked him a few things I did not understand and he helped me a lot. He solved a lot of difficult questions in the exam. When it was time for bed, I smiled at him and said thank you and I felt I would definitely do well in this exam to him. Then I went to bed and had a nice and sound sleep.



ASA example - Father (scored 2)

One day at home, because it was almost the final exam, Dad gave me a test, saying it's almost exam time. I thought to myself, Oh my gosh, another exam, I saw the test, oh god, a test again. Also the test was so difficult, I was worried I would get a bad grade. Dad said, the test time was one hour. I immediately started reading the question. I found that I didn't know how to solve this question, I raised my head, asked dad for help. Dad said, during exams you can't ask for help from parents. Finally when I finished the test, I was confused on this question. It's time for sleep, dad says, in future exams you can't ask, the same goes for exams in the exam room, I was happy, I said, I know. I nodded and finally went to sleep.

Findings

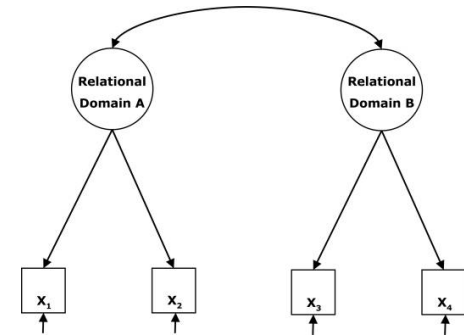
Convergent validity of father-child and mother-child attachment

Latent Structure of ASA:

- CFA confirms that secure base script knowledge (ASA) is generalized across fathers and mothers

Final ASA score is the composite score of 4 stories

- ICCs between 2 coders = .86 -.93
- *Mean* = 3.34, *SD* = .83
- Cronbach's alpha = .77



([Waters et al., 2015](#))

Findings

Association between parent-child attachment security and prosociality

Controlling for child gender and parental education

- ASA is associated with close relationships with fathers and mothers
 - Mother: $b=.11$, $SE=.05$, $p=.034$; Father: $b=.15$, $SE=.06$, $p=.021$.
- ASA not significantly associated with child's depression or self-esteem
- ASA is associated with child's prosocial behaviors differently for boys and girls
 - Moderation: $b=.18$, $SE=.06$, $p=.005$
 - Girl: $b=-.10$, $SE=.04$, $p=.023$; Boy: $b=.08$, $SE=.05$, $p=.089$

Discussion

Convergence of paternal/maternal attachment representation

- Infancy: Attachment style is grounded in individual relationship with individual caregivers (as seen in often unrelated Strange Situation security with mother and father among infants)
- Middle/late childhood: Attachment script abstracted from prior experiences with various caregivers and becomes child's individual quality

Discussion

Secure attachment and gender atypicality?

- Girls: Secure attachment may give them confidence to be more assertive (so less prosocial)
- Boys: Secure attachment may gives them confidence to be less assertive/aggressive (so more prosocial)

(cf. [Menon et al., 2017](#))

Thank You! Questions?



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