

Cultural Differences in Parental Responsibility Assignment for Misbehavior: China and the U.S.

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1. Aim

Asian Americans outperform students of other races academically (Tao 2013; Kao 1995), which is a phenomenon discussed extensively by both lay media (e.g. USA Today 2013; Huffington Post 2013; New York Times 2011) and in academic scholarship. Although studies delineate reasons why success motivates Asian American parents and children, however, they miss differences in the way that Asians assign responsibility for individual performance. Cross-cultural attribution studies show that East Asian cultures tend to attribute negative behaviors and events to a collective or its proxies (Menon et al. 1999, Lu et al. 2014, Zemba et al. 2012; Zemba et al. 2006). This tendency raises the question of how Asians attribute children's performance and whether that attribution motivates children to achieve and avoid misbehaving. This paper examines first, are Chinese perceivers more likely to assign responsibility to parents for the misbehavior of their children than American perceivers? And second, will the misbehavior of children entail a greater loss of status for Chinese parents? Additionally, the study explores how age of misbehaving child may affect patterns distinguished by culture. This study draws on both cultural psychology research and attribution studies to answer the above questions.

2. Data & Methods

For this purpose, this study draws on original data gathered from American and Chinese respondents using an Internet-based survey experiment to empirically test the hypotheses. A convenient Chinese sample was gathered from Internet posts on an online bulletin board of a college in Beijing and two other social-networking sites. The American sample was drawn from Amazon Mechanical Turk. The duration of fielding was about one month starting November of 2013. The experiment was a 4 (age conditions) \times 2 (culture) between-subjects design. Chinese and American participants entered the survey experiment by clicking on a generated link, and each was randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Within each age condition, where the target actor is described as 12, 22, 32, or 42 years old, the respondent read three vignettes each. The first and the last vignettes are the critical stimuli conditions, describing a misbehaving male ("shoplifting" and "fighting"). Immediately after reading each vignette, participants rated responsibility assignment, then answered two sets of questions measuring their perceptions or changes in status for parents and grandparents of the focal male. The following parts asked about individualism-collectivism tendency and analysis-holism score. The survey was in both Chinese and English. The online survey software (Qualtrics) can detect the browser's language that participants used and displayed the matching language. Participants are also able to adjust the language.

3. Results

I first tested whether Chinese and American participants would differentially assign responsibility to parents for the misbehavior of their children. Results showed a significant effect of culture for the first four items (the target individual, organizations individuals belong to, parents and parenting). Chinese participants, compared to Americans, assigned more responsibility to the organizations that individuals belong to (companies and schools), whereas Americans assigned greater responsibility to the individual actor.