



Bidirectional longitudinal relations between father–child relationships and Chinese children’s social competence during early childhood

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ABSTRACT

Using a two-year and three-wave cross-lagged design with a sample of 118 Chinese preschoolers, the present study examined bidirectional longitudinal relations between father–child relationships and children’s social competence. The results of structural equation modeling showed bidirectional effects between father–child conflict and social competence. Higher conflict in father–child relationships at three months after preschool entry predicted lower levels of children’s social competence at the end of the first preschool year over and above continuity in competence. Lower levels of social competence at three months after preschool entry also predicted higher father–child conflict at the end of the first preschool year over and above continuity in conflict. These bidirectional relations did not vary across child gender and proved robust to the inclusion of potential common factors.

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1. Introduction

Historically, father ideals have evolved through nearly the same stages in China (Chuang, Moreno, & Su, *in press*) as in the United States (Pleck & Pleck, 1997): from the ‘moral overseer’ and disciplinarian, through the economic provider and breadwinner, and the modern involved dad and ‘buddy,’ to the father as a nurturing co-parent. Over the past three decades, increasing interest has been shown in the nature, antecedents, and consequences of father–child relationships (e.g., Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Cabrera, Hofferth, & Chae, 2011; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). There is a growing consensus among researchers that the involvement of fathers, or positive father–child relationships, is important for children’s development and welfare (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). However, most of these studies have been carried out in Euro-American settings, with only limited research on father–child relationships in Chinese societies. Moreover, there is a growing awareness in the field that more studies need to be conducted on the transactional process between fathers and children (Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Coley, Votruba-Drzal, & Schindler, 2008; Ream & Savin-Williams,

2005). The purpose of the present study is to examine bidirectional longitudinal relations between father–child relationships (i.e., closeness and conflict) and Chinese children’s social competence during early childhood. Specifically, we assess whether the quality of father–child relationships is predictive of later social competence among Chinese young children, and whether the children’s social competence is predictive of their later relationships with their fathers. To avoid awkward and cumbersome terminology, causal terms (e.g., effect, impact, and influence) are used in a noncausal sense to refer to predictive relations in this article.

1.1. The effect of father–child relationships on social competence

Positive growth in social competence is typical during early childhood. A variety of perspectives share the view that children’s social competence is at least partly grounded in their relationships with their fathers. First, from an attachment perspective, father–child relationships reflect the quality of emotional bonds between fathers and children (Lamb, 2002). Bowlby’s (1982) attachment theory posits that the internal working models derived from early attachment guide children’s expectations, feelings, and competencies in later social interactions, especially when the circumstances and the peer’s intent are ambiguous (Cassidy, Kirsh, Scolton, & Parke, 1996). Children with positive father–child relationships may develop models of caregivers as trustworthy and supportive, and later approach others with positive attitudes and expectations. Consequently, they are likely to be socially

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competent. In contrast, children with negative relationships may develop models of the social world as untrustworthy and are less likely to be competent. Second, social-cognitive theorists argue that fathers can influence their children's social competence skills through modeling (Parke & Buriel, 1998). Fathers who are warm and directive in their interactions may provide children with adaptive models of how to resolve conflicts and solve problems. Within such positive interactions, children can learn about and practice new social skills in a systematic and meaningful context, which helps them develop social competence. By contrast, hostile and aggressive fathers may provide children with maladaptive models. Children who engage in such negative interactions may view hostility and aggression as effective ways to settle disputes, which in turn is likely to undermine their development of social competence. Last but not least, the social capital perspective also suggests that father-child relationships are one of the contexts in which children's social competence can be developed (Parke, 2004). On this view, fathers may create opportunities for children to interact with peers and provide advice about peer choices and appropriate play strategies, which is particularly important for the development of social competence in early childhood when children have limited opportunities to seek out peers on their own.

A growing body of research supports the notion that close father-child relationships contribute to the prediction of children's social competence skills. For example, closeness (e.g., secure attachment, warmth, and positive affect) in father-child relationships has been found to predict children's self-regulatory abilities, competence behavior with peers, and peer acceptance and popularity during early childhood (e.g., Main & Weston, 1981; Verschueren & Marcoen, 1999). Moreover, the literature has further revealed the substantial impact of father-child closeness on children's social competence independent of that of mother-child closeness (Verschueren & Marcoen, 1999; Youngblade, Park, & Belsky, 1993). Within the body of research on Chinese father-child relationships, evidence has also emerged in support of the role that close father-child relationships play in children's social competence and peer liking (Zhang, 2011). For example, in a longitudinal study of Chinese toddlers, Chen, Wang, Chen, and Liu (2002) demonstrated that paternal warmth negatively predicted children's aggressive behavior two years later, independent of maternal parenting practices.

During the toddler and preschool years, children are able to assert their own will, and parents begin to assert control over their behavior (Laible, Panfile, & Makariev, 2008). Conflict is thus considered a large part of parent-child relationships beyond infancy (Klimes-Dougan & Kopp, 1999). Although the common perception is that close relationships involve less conflict, recent research has suggested the need to systematically differentiate conflict from closeness in parent-child relationships (Klimes-Dougan & Kopp, 1999; Laible et al., 2008). For example, conflict was found to correlate only at low to moderate levels with closeness in early childhood (Laible et al., 2008; Pianta, 1992). Moreover, a recent study of Chinese young children showed that conflict and closeness in parent-child relationships contributed independently to the prediction of children's behavior problems (Zhang, Chen, Zhang, Zhou, & Wu, 2008b). These findings suggest that closeness and conflict may not be simply two end points on the same continuum. In the literature, however, little attention has been paid to conflict in young children's father-child relationships. Consequently, the present study focused on conflict as well as closeness.

Most researchers consider extreme and frequent conflict the marker of dysfunctional relationships across childhood and adolescence (e.g., Rubin, Burgess, Dwyer, & Hastings, 2003). The extant research has also converged in suggesting that parent-child conflict has a negative impact on child and adolescent social adjustment (e.g., Rubin et al., 2003; Waschbusch, 2002). In this rich literature,

however, "parent-child conflict" is nearly always operationalized using measures focused solely on mothers or on the parents as a unit, failing to assess father-child conflict independently. Thus, little is known about the role that father-child conflict plays in children's socio-emotional development.

Conflict in Chinese father-child dyads may be manifested when fathers use authoritarian parenting styles such as physical coercion, verbal hostility, and non-reasoning/punitive behavior (Lau, Lew, Hau, Cheung, & Berndt, 1990). A recent study found that Chinese fathers were more authoritarian than their US counterparts (Porter et al., 2005). Moreover, a growing number of studies have documented that Chinese fathers' use of authoritarian parenting styles is associated with externalizing behavior on the part of their children, such as aggression across early and middle childhood (Chen et al., 2002; Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006; Xu, Farver, & Zhang, 2009; Yang et al., 2004). Hence, there are good reasons to assume that father-child conflict in the Chinese context may have an impact on young children's social competence.

1.2. Influences of children's social behavior on father-child relationships

Given the importance of father-child relationships for children's social development, further examination of the factors associated with these relationships is warranted. Relationships between fathers and children develop as the two parties interact with each other within families. It is not surprising that the attributes of each party contribute to the quality of these relationships. In the literature, much attention has been paid to the role of fathers' attributes (e.g., education, income, job satisfaction) in father-child relationships (Cabrera et al., 2011; Marsiglio, 1991; Pleck, 1997). The few studies that have examined the role of child attributes in father-child relationships have focused mainly on gender, age, temperament, and health status (e.g., Belsky, 1996; Marsiglio, 1991; Porter et al., 2005). Only three studies were located which investigated how children's social behavior influenced their father-child relationships (Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Coley et al., 2008; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005); however, all these studies focused solely on adolescents.

Notably, the studies of young children have documented the role of child behavior in both closeness and conflict in mother-child relationships (Crockenberg, 1981; Laible et al., 2008). Because fathers' behavior may be influenced more by contextual factors than mothers' (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1996), father-child closeness and conflict may be also influenced by children's social behavior. In addition, historical views of fathers as disciplinarians suggest that fathers tend to engage in disciplinary practices if children show problems or difficulties in adapting to the social world (Coley & Medeiros, 2007). Such practices often involve fathers' control over their children's behavior, which in turn may lead to conflict in their interactions (Laible et al., 2008). It is thus possible that socially difficult children engage more in conflictual and less in close relationships with fathers than their socially competent peers.

The studies of linkages between child temperament and fathering in the Chinese context also suggest that Chinese children's social competence may have an impact on their father-child relationships. For example, it has been documented in Chinese preschoolers that negative emotionality tends to elicit authoritarian parenting approaches from their fathers (Porter et al., 2005; Yang et al., 2004). In Chinese girls, sociability has been found to correlate positively with fathers' authoritative parenting, as manifested in warmth and autonomy granting (Porter et al., 2005). Such findings suggest that social ineptness is very likely to induce conflict in Chinese father-child relationships. Taken together, there are good reasons to believe that Chinese children's social competence skills may

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