Research article

Intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline: The moderating role of parenting stress and parent gender

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Intergenerational transmission
Harsh discipline
Psychological aggression
Corporal punishment
Parenting stress

ABSTRACT

The present study examined the intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline (psychological aggression and corporal punishment) and the moderating effects of parenting stress and parent gender in Chinese societies. Utilizing a sample of 634 Chinese father–mother dyads with preschoolers, findings revealed that both mothers’ and fathers’ harsh discipline were transmitted across generations and the strength of transmission varied by the severity of harsh discipline and the parent gender. For both mothers and fathers, high parenting stress intensified the intergenerational transmission of psychological aggression and corporal punishment, whereas low parenting stress weakened the transmission of psychological aggression and even disrupted the transmission of corporal punishment. Moreover, the moderating effects of parenting stress on the transmission were stronger for mothers than for fathers. Findings from the present study highlight the importance of considering how the proximal environmental factors (such as parenting stress) may influence the intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline.

1. Introduction

The intergenerational transmission of parenting is defined as the process through which, purposively or unintentionally, the generation’s parenting attitudes and behavior are psychologically influenced by the earlier generation (Van Ijzendoorn, 1992). To date, many studies have demonstrated that the parents who experienced harsh discipline in childhood are prone to use similar disciplinary techniques with their own children. For instance, using longitudinal data from 499 mothers and their infants, Berlin, Appleyard, and Dodge (2011) found that mothers’ childhood physical abuse directly predicted offspring victimization. Similarly, Wang, Xing, and Zhao (2014) analyzed data from 635 father-mother dyads with preschool-aged children and also found that corporal punishment could be transmitted across generations.

As suggested by Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, and Runyan (1998), parents’ harsh discipline includes psychological aggression, corporal punishment, severe physical abuse, and very severe physical abuse. Nevertheless, previous research about the intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline has drawn particular attention to physical discipline (e.g., corporal punishment or physical abuse) (Multer, Hunter, & Stollak, 1995; Wang & Xing, 2014; Wang et al., 2014) or combined psychological aggression with physical discipline (e.g., combined verbal attack, physical attacks, angry coercion, and hostility into hostile parenting) (Capaldi, Pears, Patterson, & Owen, 2003; Neppl, Conger, Scaramella, & Ontai, 2009; Scaramella & Conger, 2003; Schofield, Conger, & Conger, 2016). Yet, few studies have actually explored the intergenerational transmission of psychological aggression. More importantly, the strength of the intergenerational transmission may be stronger for psychological aggression than for corporal punishment. Specifically, compared with corporal punishment, psychological aggression is a less aggressive and intrusive but more commonly used form...
of harsh discipline (Mckee et al., 2007; Straus & Field, 2003; Wang & Liu, 2014). In other words, psychological aggression may be relatively more acceptable and normative than corporal punishment (Straus & Field, 2003; Wang & Liu, 2017). Therefore, parents may be more likely to first make use of psychological aggression with children’s misbehaviors, and then turn to make use of corporal punishment after psychological aggression was ineffective to correct children’s misbehaviors (Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995). However, when psychological aggression seems to be effective to correct children’s misbehaviors, parents may no longer use corporal punishment toward children even though they experienced corporal punishment in childhood, which thus leads to the intergenerational discontinuity of corporal punishment. Given the above considerations, the present study would examine the first hypothesis that the strength of the intergenerational transmission would be stronger for psychological aggression than for corporal punishment.

Despite much evidence demonstrated that the parental harsh discipline can be transmitted across generations, however, not all parents who experienced harsh discipline during childhood repeat these parenting practices with their own children. Indeed, previous studies have confirmed that only a small to moderate proportion of parents’ current use of harsh discipline could be explained by parents’ harsh discipline experiences in their family of origin (Conger, Belsky, & Capaldi, 2009; Kerr, Capaldi, Pears, & Owen, 2009). Accordingly, there may be moderating factors in the intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline. One possibility is that parenting stress may condition the effects of parents’ harsh discipline experiences in childhood on their current use of harsh discipline.

Parenting stress generally refers to specific difficulties in adjusting to the parenting role, reflecting parents’ conscious perceptions of their child, their relationship with their child and themselves as parents (Abidin, 1995). Previous research has repeatedly linked parenting stress with harsh discipline. For example, Anthony et al. (2005) found that parents who rated high parenting stress tended to use more harsh discipline, such as corporal punishment. Analogously, using a sample of 639 Chinese father–mother dyads with preschoolers, Liu and Wang (2015) also found that both mothers’ and fathers’ parenting stress were directly associated with their harsh discipline, including psychological aggression and corporal punishment. Considering that both parenting stress and parents’ harsh discipline experiences in childhood (Bailey, Hill, Oesterle, & Hawkins, 2009; Wang & Xing, 2014; Wang et al., 2014) can increase the likelihood of using harsh discipline against their children, we speculated that high parenting stress may intensify the intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline. Specifically, high parenting stress may easily place parents in anxious and distressed emotional states. Parents may be more irritable and hostile in these negative emotional states (Belsky, 1993). Additionally, parents with high parenting stress may be also more likely to engage in rapid and automatic information processing (Milner, 2000). In this regard, during disciplinary attempts, parents with high parenting stress may quickly and automatically react to child misbehavior with the most impressed parenting practices in childhood towards their own children. As pointed by Scaramella and Conger (2003), for parents who experienced harsh discipline in childhood, the harsh discipline may represent the most impressed parenting practice learned from interactions in their family of origin. Hence, we speculated that compared to parents with low parenting stress, parents who experienced harsh discipline as children would be more likely to continue to use harsh discipline with their own children when their parenting stress was high. Despite its theoretical plausibility, presently there is no study that has actually examined the moderating effect of parenting stress on the intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline. Accordingly, it is necessary to investigate whether parenting stress could moderate the intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline.

In addition, the patterns of moderating effect of parenting stress may also vary by the severity of harsh discipline. We speculated that the moderating effect of parenting stress may be stronger for the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment than for the intergenerational transmission of psychological aggression. To be specific, the moderating effect of parenting stress on the intergenerational transmission of psychological aggression might be limited by a ceiling effect. Since psychological aggression is a less aggressive and intrusive form of harsh discipline (Mckee et al., 2007; Straus & Field, 2003), parents may easily ignore its potentially harmful effects, which may lead to parents with low parenting stress at relatively higher risk of repeating psychological aggression close to the ceiling. Thus, high parenting stress may only mildly intensify the transmission of psychological aggression which is already at the upper limits. In other words, despite high parenting stress may intensify the transmission of psychological aggression, the strength of the transmission of psychological aggression may only mildly stronger when parenting stress was high than when parenting stress was low. In contrast to psychological aggression, corporal punishment is more aggressive and intrusive but less commonly used than psychological aggression (Mckee et al., 2007; Straus & Field, 2003; Wang & Liu, 2014). And parents’ use of corporal punishment may be relatively less acceptable and normative than psychological aggression (Straus & Field, 2003; Wang & Liu, 2017). Within this context, parents who were exposed to corporal punishment in childhood may repeat these patterns with their own children only when they felt high parenting stress during interacting with their children. Conversely, when parents felt low parenting stress, they may be more likely to adopt the democratic and child-centered disciplinary tactics rather than the parent-centered tactics such as corporal punishment which they experienced in their family of origin (Deater-Deckard, 1998; Dietz, 2000). That is, such intensity effect of high parenting stress may be relatively strong on the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment. Based on the above analyses, the present study hypothesized that the moderating effect of parenting stress was stronger for the intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment than for the intergenerational transmission of psychological aggression.

Previous research on the potential mechanism of the intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline revealed the moderating effects of the transmission may differ by parent gender. For example, Lunkenheimer, Kittler, Olson, and Kleinberg (2006) found marital satisfaction moderated the intergenerational transmission of physical punishment for fathers, but not mothers. Within this context, we speculated that the moderating effects of parenting stress on the intergenerational transmission of harsh discipline may also differ by parent gender. To be specific, previous research revealed that women were more affected by the stress, as they tend to be more emotionally involved than men (Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Turner, Wheaton, & Lloyd, 1995). In this case, high parenting stress may be more easily place mothers in anxious and distressed emotional states than fathers, which in turn may lead to highly
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