

A big loophole in child development in Xian China

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Abstract

The researcher reports on a grounded theory study of 13 Chinese ages 12-14 high school students, based on the qualitative interviews with them in Xi'an China. The study investigated 1) parent expectations from their child, 2) parenting focus, and 3) the moral quality of gratitude in children in the dimensions of gratification and guilt towards parental sacrifice. The results from this investigation reveal a big loophole in child development in China, which could take a heavy toll on the character-building of a child as a person and the provision of family elder care.

Keywords: Parent expectations, parenting focus, gratitude, housework

Introduction

Moral quality in child development is thrown into question in the provision of care to older parents in both developing and developed worlds. In developing countries adult children are crucial for family elder care like in India and China, the rise of individualism in young generations has resulted in avoidant behaviour typified by a tendency of adult children to evade elder caregiving responsibility (Dhar, 2012; Li, 2016b, 2016c, 2017; Seth, 2010; Whyte, 2003; Xie & Zhu, 2009; Zeng, George, Sereny, Gu, & Vaupel, 2016). In the developed world, though filial piety is not legally required and culturally endorsed, the physical and emotional (if not financial) support of adult children is still needed in aged care, for instance over 90 per cent of elders in the USA rely on unpaid family assistance (Johnson & Wiener, 2006). This kind of need creates a real predicament for adult children in elder care for whom individualism is nourished in childhood but altruism and sacrifices are demanded in the caregiving of the dependent elderly a role reversal for which they have not been trained (Grigoryeva, 2017). Despite living independently, even abundantly, in the West, older parents are in desperate need of their child's warmth in the winter of their lives such as listening and communication to combat loneliness and of their child's assistance of attending to their medical conditions and looking after their finances in the event of suffering from dementia, possibly even of their personal care of cooking, feeding, cleaning, and helping with their toilet. Thus, the trend of indifference to, or neglect of elders in adult children sounds an alarm bell about moral quality in child development, alerting to the need to reconsider the principles per se by which how a child should be brought up.

It is natural to assume that a lack of gratitude in a child towards parental sacrifice lies underneath such indifference to, or neglect of elders. In this article, parental sacrifice does not refer to their legal obligations but extra effort in nurturing a child emotionally and intelligently. Neither child's reciprocity suggests taking up filial piety nor exonerates parents from living an independent life in later years. It has been noted that while excessive caregiving would take a heavy toll on an adult child in terms of mental health (Levesque, Cossette, & Laurin, 1995; McKinlay, Crawford, & Tennstedt, 1995), physical health and mortality (Folbre, 2012), quality of their marriage and other family relationships (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010), time and income (Bookman & Kimbrel, 2011), and finances (Colello, 2007), studies also identified a strong sense of gratification, an intrinsic emotional reward, in adult children in caring for their elderly parents (Folbre, 2012; Noonan, Tennstedt, & Rebelsky, 1996; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010) and a sense of guilt for their incapability in providing adequate care (Aronson, 2019; Brody, 1985; Ingersoll-Dayton, Neal, Ha, & Hammer, 2003; Losada, Márquez-González, Peñacoba, & Romero-Moreno, 2010). It is gratification and guilt, the mixed feelings of positivity and negativity, that

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form precisely the two dimensions of gratitude in an adult child who keenly requites parents for their love received. This lays the theoretical foundation of this investigation in examining the quality of gratitude in child participants towards parental sacrifice. It is the belief of this study that gratitude development in childhood holds the key to the issue of family elder care, in either collective or individualistic societies.

There is sparse evidence that gratitude development in childhood has been the focus of researchers. In light of the nature of gratitude, some tend to see it as merely an emotion, an episodic disposition in nature (e.g. Aristotle, trans. 1976; Williams, 1985), but this idea is opposed by others (e.g. Komter, 2004; Li, 2014; Robert, 2004; Watkins, 2004) stating that gratitude is a long-term disposition, an affective trait or a character trait, because “[o]ne can be prone to experiencing and certainly expressing gratitude on appropriate occasions without necessarily being a grateful person” (Emmons, 2004, p. 9). While endorsing gratitude as a character trait, this author (Li, 2015a, 2015b) holds that gratitude is not inborn but a quality that needs to be trained in consideration of the fact that parental sacrifice will not naturally lead to the reciprocity of children.

The values of housework have been identified by numerous researchers. Kohlberg (1984) and Piaget (1965) state that household chores can act as a vital means for the development of moral character in a child, and some specifically found that engaging a child in routine housework can enhance concern for others, especially in older children (Grusec, Goodnow, & Cohen, 1996), develop reciprocal obligation (e.g. Rogoff, 2003; White & Brinkerhoff, 1981; Whiting, Whiting, & Longabaugh, 1975; Wingard, 2006), or specifically family responsibility (Hill, 2009; Li, 2016b, 2017; Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009; Warton & Goodnow, 1991; Zeng et al., 2016). Others even spotted a positive correlation between a certain amount of housework and academic performance of a child (e.g. Smith, 1969; Wilcox, 2011). As we can see, the most focused benefit of children’s engagement in domestic tasks relates to a sense of family responsibility. This is no coincidence from a psychological perspective. First, given that human beings are inherently predisposed to self-interest (e.g. Hume, 1960; Kohlberg, 1964; Maslow, 1943), Kohlberg’s moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1984) holds that one’s moral development is neither inborn nor a function of aging; and moral thinking does not naturally lead to moral behaviour. Second, Hoffman’s internalisation theory (1975; 1994) identified the means to overcome the obstacle of self-interest disposition—the internalisation of moral norms through affect and induction into countless disciplining acts over time during childhood. The process of internalisation will ultimately be leading to an emotionally charged moral knowledge structure that will generate the empathic and guilty feelings in a child in the event of failing to comply with moral norms. Hoffman’s internalisation is a theoretical version of Curzer’s thought that ‘teaching is futile before good habits are already in place’ (2002, p. 145). With these theories in mind, regular housework routine, characterised by relentless daily tedium and even hardship, can act exactly as a great vehicle of disciplining through parental warmth and reasoning to help subjugate a child’s selfish and hedonistic inclinations and mould the habit of taking responsibility for the wellbeing of other family members. Blustein refers it as a ‘gradual shift from its position of outward authority (parental demandingness) to an inner position of self-control’ (1982, p. 127). Thus, from the standpoint of psychological development, sharing of housework is highly positively related to family responsibility. Yet, despite in proximity to the concept of family responsibility, gratitude in a child to parental sacrifice in the two dimensions of gratification and guilt has never been properly examined and need to be scholarly explored in its correlation with sharing of housework in empirical studies.

Purpose of Study

This study investigated 13 aged 12 to 14 high school students in Xi’an China with a focus on exploring expectations that parents held from their child for family wellbeing, the extent to which parents stressed academic success, and the moral quality of gratitude there existed in them towards parental sacrifice. The study aims to identify good practices and issues in Chinese parenting.

In what follows, the researcher first describes the research method in terms of methodology, interview, participants, and procedures of data analysis. Then the results of data analysis are presented by running coding query, matrix query and crosstab; next, discussion and findings are followed on the results; finally, the conclusion is drawn with its limitations stated.

Method

Methodology

Grounded theory is adopted in this study for the purpose of allowing the data to speak for themselves (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and unearths real thoughts from student participants about their study, life, and their relationship with parents. Data start to be examined after the first interview, then initial questions are refined, and a follow-up question is added to facilitate deeper exploration of key ideas the study is seeking. This process iterates until the ideas have been fully explored. Through seeking and collecting pertinent data, categories are emerged and refined, and theoretical sampling is completed (Charmaz, 2014). Effort is made to minimise the involvement of a researcher in co-constructing the grounded theory with study participants (Charmaz, 2006) such as not eliciting preconceived answers and registering approval and disapproval of participant's responses to ensure that the study's findings are based on the experiences of participants rather than on my own opinions and ideas as a researcher.

Interview

In-depth interviewing with semi-structured and open-ended questions is employed for data collection. Interview questions are primarily structured on the aspects of parental support and requirements, and a child's reactions in terms of attitude and act. Open-ended questions were created to draw out the feelings and thoughts from student participants in a way to avoid socially desirable responses. For instance, 'who is looking after your daily life and study, and how', 'who often talks to you and how', 'what do they require you of', 'how did they discipline you if you did a wrong thing', 'how did you feel about it and react'. Parent expectations from a child were probed in questions like, 'what do you think your parents would expect from you', 'how do you feel about it', 'do you think you need to do something for them now, what if yes; and why if not'. Interview was conducted in Mandarin Chinese with each lasting approximately 60 minutes.

Participants

The participants are 13 students aged from 12 to 14 from an average high school in Xi'an, capital of Shanxi Province, China. The finding on the thematic saturation of 12–16 participants for an interview-based research by Guest et al (2006) and others (Francis et al., 2010) could justify the number of 13 participants for this qualitative study. The selection of age range is determined by a turning point of age by which the moulding of a habit in a child has been completed and their capacity of reflecting on their own thoughts and feelings has been developed. A large-scaled study (Pressman, Owens, Evans, & Nemon, 2014) on 50,000 American families identified that a turning point of age is 9 after which breaking a habit can be really hard. And it is after the age of 11 from the perspective of cognitive development that children enter the last phase of formal operational thinking in which they exhibit the ability to reason in a hypothetico-deductive fashion (B. Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), i.e., contemplating abstract constructs such as independence, respect, and freedom, and no longer believing all the world to think like themselves (J. Piaget, 1926/1929, p. 167). In addition, their real names were substituted with pseudonyms consisting of the initials of their surname and first name in Chinese pinyin, such as SYN, SZH.

Procedure of Data Collection and Data Analysis

With the ethics approval by the University of New England, Australia, I contacted the Bureau of Education of Xi'an, capital city of Shaanxi province, China in late 2019. Soon after, one average middle school was arranged by the Bureau with one Year 7 class and one Year 8 class randomly selected. After explanation by the teachers in class about the aims and other basic information of the study, students were provided with the Information Sheet, Consent Form for Parents and Assent Form for Minors for voluntary participation. The following day 13 students handed back their filled-up forms. In the week after, interviews were underway during the lunch break at the school meeting room.

When data came in from the first interview, I immediately transcribed, translated, generated codes, wrote analytic memos, then initial questions were refined and used for subsequent interviews to better capture important concepts. Such process iterated until interview questions were tuned into

their optimal shape. The analysis evolved as data were collected in five steps with the assistance of NVivo, including: 1) open coding and continually revising the codes, identifying meaningful segments of text, naming quotations to describe what was happening in these passages using gerunds as recommended by Charmaz (2006). Open coding generated over 500 codes; 2) developing and continually refining categories concerning these topics that were to explore in further interviews. 3) writing memos on the codes. 4) Drawing on the open codes, the properties and their dimensions were identified, then categories established to each other using network views in NVivo. This resulted in seven axial codes. 5) through selective coding the process of gratitude development emerged as the central concept to which all other categories were related. See Table 1

Table 1.

Open codes	Properties/Dimensions	Axial codes	Selective code
<p>Examples:</p> <p>Really enjoy talking to my parents about what happened in school.</p> <p>My dad coaches me maths and my mum does English</p> <p>Once I hurt my leg and had stitches, my dad held me in his arms for one entire night. Very moved.</p> <p>Always 'have you done your homework'</p> <p>I once knocked over a glass of water and spilt it on my assignment book, my dad was very angry and asked to copy an English text five times.</p>	<p>Closeness with parents</p> <p>Study support</p> <p>Parental warmth</p> <p>Gratitude to parents</p> <p>Being concerned about study</p> <p>Punishment</p>	<p>Parental warmth</p> <p>Parental reasoning</p> <p>Parental discipline</p> <p>Parenting focus</p> <p>Parent expectations from their child</p> <p>Gratitude</p> <p>Sharing of housework</p>	<p>Gratitude development</p>

Findings and Results

The interesting results of the three themes, parent expectations, parenting focus and gratitude in children emerged by running coding query, matrix query and crosstab with NVIVO. First, on parent expectations from their child, coding query was run to gather content that has been coded at *parent expectations* and at cases with all the participants. The result came up with only one speaking of sharing of housework for the current expectation. In response to my question 'are you expected to share housework and how is it going', 12 participants said 'No'. Despite claiming that they were set responsible for their own bedroom such as making the bed, cleaning up their desk or mopping the floor, they were not expected of or required of sharing housework on a regularly basis except for occasionally giving a helping hand when asked like cleaning the dining table or in a weekend cleaning. It was found that such expectation or requirement happened at one time to 11 participants but ceased when their parents found that they would have to take out more time and energy to urge them and then clean up the mess they created. One participant also revealed that his mother taught him how to cook only as a survival skill.

The result shows by running coding query that six mentioned of 'provision of aged care' for the long-term expectation. For instance, 'when you grow up and make big money, buy us a big house for our elder care' albeit seemingly tongue-in-cheek, said one participant. Filial piety, one core value of

Chinese traditional culture, has apparently fallen off the radar for most young parents. By running crosstab query, the distribution of the coding 'provision of aged care' among the six cases identified with the attributes of academic performance, gender, family income, parent education and occupation, and family structure shows that four students were from the upper-middle academic performance group, two from the average; all six students were from low-middle-income families (10-20 thousand Australian Dollars annually); both parents of five students only finished high school and worked as factory workers, truck drivers or street vendors, only one student's parent attained university education and worked as an accountant; only one boy was spotted among the six participants in comparison of five girls in terms of gender; three participants had one more sibling (despite the one-child policy (1979—2015), four out of thirteen families managed to have two children). The distribution indicates that the combination of academic advantage and economic disadvantage may be the greatest contributor to the expectation of filial piety, girls are also expected to provide aged care and having one more child is more likely for the purposes of seeking filial piety.

Second, by running coding query on what extent parents focused on academic performance, it was found that out of 13 participants, all received their parents' urging, monitoring, and even coaching across all levels of academic performances except for one top level student. That 'have you finished your dinner?! Go write your homework' was said by parents daily in most families. These parents spared no effort in supporting their kids' study, with some sending them to various extra-curriculum classes, with others coaching some subjects in person, for instance in the cases of LBX that dad tutored his maths and mum did his Chinese language and of ZMY with dad on English and mum on Chinese language. Most of the weekends and after school time were taken up by homework, extra-curriculum classes, parent tutorials and even extra homework assigned by parents, with only around 2 hours a week granted for indoor screen time (watching TV and/or using cell phones) over the weekend. Outdoor activities such as fairground fun and holiday trips were only adopted as a prize by parents for a child obtaining a satisfying academic result. The only exception, DCW, occurred to one family in which both parents (surprisingly mum was a middle school teacher and dad was a manager working out of town) were too busy to take care of the participant and she could not care less now. She felt very independent in the interview, she said that she had been studying on her own as far as she could remember. Overall, parental focus on academic performance was perceived across the board regardless of gender, family income, parental education, and occupation.

Third, the most striking result to emerge from the data is on the moral quality of gratitude in a child towards parental sacrifice on the aspects of feelings, thoughts, and acts. 10 categories surfaced from the interviews, including 'feeling bad when thinking the parents are getting old' (1 participant), 'doing chores regularly' (1 participant), 'doing little things to care for them such as pouring tea or massaging their backs' (1 participant), 'finding a good job to alleviate their burden when growing up' (2 participants), 'preparing and giving birthday cards' (8 participants), 'looking after them when they get sick' (3 participants), 'looking after them when they grow old' (4 participants), 'looking after myself' and 'doing nothing' (4 participants). A few participants reported more than one feeling, thought or act. Of these categories, the mostly mentioned was 'preparing and giving birthday cards' from 8 participants but 4 of whom stopped doing so now because they found that their parents uninterested in it. The two second most mentioned items that 'looking after them when they grow old' with 4 participants that reflects their intention of practising filial piety, and 'doing nothing' from another 4 participants' because they perceived gratitude unnecessary or irrelevant for now. It is interesting to note that, as we know from above, the parents of six students expected the provision of elder care from their child but only four students intended to meet their expectation. Only one participant spoke of doing chores regularly. This student did dishwashing every workday, washing parents' socks, and mopping the floor every day. To the question of how he felt about it, he responded 'is it what I should be doing, I felt good when I shared chores for my parents and would feel bad if I did not.

The results of data analysis reveal astonishing findings on parenting practices in these families. From parent expectations from a kid, to parenting focus on academic results, to the moral quality of gratitude in a kid to parental sacrifice, new findings observed in this study might put family elder care in jeopardy.

The major finding emerged in the mindset shift of young Chinese parents about filial piety. Most of these parents did not expect the provision of elder care from their child and those who did in families

with one son and one daughter also broke the tradition of son preference. Disregard for the Chinese tradition of filial piety and son preference came to existence for good reason. On one hand, the economic boom, fierce competition in the job market, and the fast pace of life in China have made adult children impossible to practise filial piety in a traditional sense such as living together and looking after them personally. On the other hand, the one-child policy (1979-2015) over the last thirty years has left Chinese parents no choice but to treat boys and girls equally in urban areas where the policy had been rigidly carried out. Looking through the prism of their demographic information into the situations of those parents unwillingly to part from filial piety, it was found that all of them received education only up to high school and were low-income workers. This may reveal a truth that it is not traditional Chinese culture or Confucianism but education and socio-economic status that dictate parental expectation of filial piety from their child or the practice of filial piety in China.

A disquieting finding arising from the interviews is that parenting focus were completely around academic performance (except for one top-level student), while fun family activities and holiday trips only served as a means of reinforcement for good grades or of punishment for unsatisfying grades by withholding it. A lack of family quality time together indicates that a happy and carefree childhood be largely removed from the lives of these children, which could make a considerably negative impact on their personal and social life. Studies found that (Batcho, 2012; Layard, 2005) a happy childhood is highly associated with one's sense of self, healthy behaviours, and social connectedness later in their lives. The happiness in childhood plays a bigger role in determining life satisfaction than anything else. Obviously, there were reasons for such parenting focus like concerns about their kid's prospect in life and work, and/or expectation for filial piety, but the deficiency of fun family activities would eventually take a heavy toll on the kid's success and happiness in life and negatively impair their gratitude for parental sacrifice. Therefore, to raise awareness for the importance of family quality time for the mental wellbeing of a child is necessary and imperative in family education.

The finding on the moral quality of gratitude in these children towards parental sacrifice is quite depressing that the dimensions of gratification and guilt were only perceived in the habitual behaviours of one participant. Most students were in the state of having a feeling of appreciation or engaging in sporadic acts of reciprocity towards their parental sacrifice, i.e., sharing of housework. Yet, love is an action, not a feeling (Willis, 2018) and 'love is not effortless. To the contrary, love is effortful' (Peck, 2008, p. 71). In other words, love can only be authenticated by sacrifices in time, money, energy, comfort, personal and social life etc. Though the sacrifice of money is too early for a student, the sacrifices in many other aspects were not identified in the recounts of participants except for one, ZMY.

To investigate causes behind the successful development of gratitude in ZMY, it was not hard to discover the 3-factor mechanism of gratitude: parental warmth, reasoning, and discipline especially through regular engagement of housework (Li, 2015a, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017). The coaching and supervision of his study, communication in a good-humoured way, reasoning, disciplining him for inappropriate behaviours such as procrastination in doing homework and cleaning his desk, most importantly, the requirement of sharing housework that played a major role of subjugating one's self-interest and hedonistic inclinations. The first two factors were discerned as common in other student participants, but regularly sharing of housework as a means of disciplining only occurred in this family. He was the sole participant who felt satisfied doing things for parents and guilty if not. It is worth noting that ZMY was one of the four top-level students among the participants, resonating the research findings that the sharing of an appropriate amount of housework would plant a seed of intrinsic motivation and make students thrive academically (e.g. Smith, 1969; Wilcox, 2011).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This qualitative study was designed to investigate parent expectations from their kids, parenting focus and the moral quality of gratitude in them towards parental sacrifice. By the employment of coding query, matrix query and crosstab with NVivo, the results of data analysis show that 1) filial piety was not entertained by most parents and sharing of housework was least expected either. 2) academic success is almost the sole purpose of parenting in these families. 3) a widespread lack of gratitude in

all these children towards parental sacrifice in their habitual behaviours was perceived with one exception who engaged himself regularly in daily chores.

The most significant finding of this study that came to surface is a prevailing lack of gratitude in these children towards parental sacrifice. This was predominately caused by parents not requiring the child of sharing housework. As discussed above, the quality of ingrained gratitude is highly associated with family responsibility and empathy, i.e., the core concepts of humanity. Without humanity, people should not be defined as mankind. Thus, it is legitimate to conclude that engaging children in sharing of housework in conjunction with parental warmth and reasoning holds the key to the foundation of a child's healthy character, and at the core of the development of the parent-child intergeneration bond that is the bedrock of a family aged care.

While the present study makes empirical contributions to the literature on gratitude development and aged care, it has two limitations. First, it is important to note that the validity of this study in Xi'an may be limited to urban areas and only Han ethnical group in China. Qualitative research in different areas and countries may provide a differently nuanced outcome. Second, these data are cross-sectional, and no causal inferences can be drawn. Future longitudinal studies should follow the educational, life and career journeys of these students from the present to five, ten, twenty and thirty years, which may provide an in-depth look into the mechanism of gratitude development.

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