Parents' Roles in Guiding Children's Educational, Religious, and Other Trajectories

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Abstract

Although socialization efforts by parents have long been studied, the specific influence techniques parents adopt in promoting positive developmental trajectories have gone largely neglected by researchers. To investigate parental influence in supporting children's development in different domains we sampled 15 developmental trajectories, ranging from education and religion to cooking and the environment. Two methods of parental influence were targeted: guidance and pressure. Mothers' and fathers' reported behaviors associated with promotion of two trajectories--educational and religious--were also assessed. We predicted that parental guidance in those two domains would have a greater association with their children's values than parental pressure. Three hundred undergraduates filled out an on-line survey. Domain-specific influence was found: parents reportedly provided most guidance in the educational and family trajectories and the least in the artistic and environmental trajectories. Mothers were reported to provide more guidance than fathers but there was no main effect for sex of student. Guidance and pressure were correlated with the frequency of particular parenting practices. In regression analyses, parental guidance, pressure, and practices were used as predictors of youth values. None of these variables predicted students' educational values. However, maternal guidance was a significant predictor of youth valuing religion. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: parents, trajectories, education, religion, internalization

1. Introduction

The book *Tiger Mom* (Chua, 2011) brought considerable public attention to the question of how parents should best promote positive outcomes in their children. Chua's controversial solution was to exert substantial pressure on her daughters so they would excel in academics and music. However, there was a considerable backlash from many parents who thought Chua's tactics were draconian and even abusive (e.g., Su, 2011).

How parents can best influence their children is not a new topic of debate. A central issue in developmental psychology is the relation between socialization methods and children's development. Indeed the ways that parents affect their children's development is at the heart of family socialization research with its focus on how children acquire values, motives, and behavior patterns (Grusec & Davidov, 2007).

Historically, much of the research in the area of parental socialization has focused on the parent-child attachment (Roisman & Groh, 2011) and the relation between disciplinary techniques and children's adjustment (Holden, Vittrup, & Rosen, 2011). More recent efforts have taken a domain-specific approach to parental influence. For example, researchers have investigated how parents affect their children's development in politics (Austin & Pinkleton, 2001), financial responsibility (Shim, Barber, Card, Xiao, & Serido, 2010), and healthy behavior (Pugliese & Tinsley, 2007).

Studies such as those underscore the fact that socialization occurs simultaneously in multiple domains along multiple trajectories. Developmental trajectories or pathways have been gaining increasing attention as a way of conceptualizing development over time (e.g., Phan, 2012). However, the roles parents play on those trajectories has gone largely unexamined. Holden (2010) proposed a conceptual model of four major roles that parents' play with regard to trajectories. These roles involve initiating trajectories, supporting development along trajectories, mediating children's understanding of experiences along the trajectories, and reacting to child-initiated

trajectories.

As Holden (2010) and others (e.g., Chao, 2000) recognized, parents seek to promote development on positive pathways. This instrumental process is best captured by Chinese mothers' concept of "training," which involves guidance and continuous monitoring of a child (Chao, 2000). However, what goes into that training, or the ways that parents promote development along pathways, has not been investigated. When parents or childrearing have been assessed with regard to trajectories, the focus has been on problematic trajectories (e.g., aggression) or on global parenting style variables like warmth, support, and control (Asakawa, 2001; Chien & East, 2012; Deutsch, Crockett, Wolff, & Russell, 2012).

Two general types of parental influence efforts have sometimes been contrasted as they relate to promoting development over time. Some parents take an authoritarian approach, such as the "tiger moms." This controlling style, where high achievement and perhaps perfectionism is required, is commonly referred to as "pressure." Luthar and Becker (2002) found that parental achievement pressure was linked to various types of distress in junior high school students. The alternative influence technique is guidance, characterized by a more gentle, child-centered approach. The hallmarks of this approach involve supporting, encouraging, and promoting a child's sense of autonomy, as well as being sensitive to children's reactions and needs (Grolnick, Price, Beiswenger, & Sauck, 2007). Despite that study, there have been few efforts to compare the two influence methods and, to our knowledge, no study has linked those influence efforts with child-rearing behavior.

To date, the specific parental behaviors that promote positive development have not been linked to child-rearing guidance or pressure. For example, are particular parental behavior practices associated with children's perceptions of parental guidance? Presumably, parents who seek to promote their children's educational success engage in various child-rearing behaviors that support children's academic development, such as reading to them, helping with homework, and taking trips to the library. Similarly, do parents who seek to promote their children's faith development frequently engage their children in religious-related activities, such as reading sacred books, discussing religious issues, or going to places of worship?

Those types of questions lead us to three goals for this investigation. First, we sought to collect information about mothers' and fathers' influence efforts, as manifested in guidance and pressure, across a number of developmental trajectories. Second, we collected reports about parental behavioral practices with regard to promoting two positive outcomes--education achievement and religious faith--to determine how parenting behaviors are related to parental influence efforts. We selected these two domains because they both are salient domains but promoting development along those pathways requires different behaviors. Third, we sought to answer the question "Is guidance or pressure more strongly linked with individuals' values?" Along the lines of self-determination theory, we hypothesized that parental guidance would be a more effective technique than pressuring children (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997).

2. Method

2.1 Participants

We collected data from college students, who are in ideal position to report on parental influence attempts. For almost fifteen years, they have observed, first hand, their parents' efforts in this area. In addition, only youth would be able to reveal the extent to which they had internalized particular values. Consequently, we recruited a total of 339 students; most were in their second year of college. Due to missing responses, complete data were available for 300. The students had a mean age of 19.94 years (SD = 1.88, range = 18 to 35). The most of the students were female (82%) and sophomores (90%). All participants reported they had a mother (or mother figure) and a father (or father figure) while growing up. In terms of education attained, a majority of the mothers (55%) held BA degrees, and another 26% received advanced degrees. Seventeen percent of the mothers had high school degrees and the remaining 2% held no degree. Fathers also had a range of educational experiences. Forty-two percent of the fathers had college degrees and another 40% held advanced degrees but 14% had high school degrees and the final 3% held no educational degree. Mothers' and fathers' religious affiliation was predominantly Christian (84% & 76.7%, respectively), followed by no religion (5.7% mothers, 11.3% fathers), Muslim (4.7% mothers, 6 % fathers), Jewish (2 % mothers, 2.3 % fathers), Hindu (2% mothers, 2% fathers), and Buddhist or other (1.4% mothers, 1.6% fathers).

2.2 Measures

A survey was developed for this study (available from the authors on request). The first part of the survey included several demographic/background questions. Part Two consisted of rating 15 trajectories (e.g., *education*--"studying and doing well in school"; *religion*-- "spiritual or religious matters"; *music*--"playing an

instrument"). Each trajectory was responded to four times: first with regard to maternal guidance ("to what extent did your mother guide you when you were a child…"), second with regard to paternal guidance, third concerning maternal pressure ("Did your mother pressure you… If so, to what extent"), and fourth concerning paternal pressure. Responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 5 = a great deal). Part Three concerned parenting practices. For the questions related to education, participants rated both mothers and fathers on 11 items each concerning the frequency of engaging in various educational activities (e.g., "How frequently did your mother and father… … discuss the importance of education with you;" "… take you to the library"). These questions were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never; 7 = every day or almost every day) and were internally consistent (Cronbach's α = .88 for both mothers and fathers). For religious practices, both parents were rated on 10 questions assessing parental behaviors (e.g., How frequently did your mother [father]… "read religious children's books or stories to you;" "discuss issues about or related to religion") using the same Likert-type scale as above. These frequency-based items had Cronbach's αs of .92 for ratings of mothers and fathers. Part Four of the survey included two global value questions ("To what extent is education/religion important in your life"), rated on a 5-point Likert-type importance scale (1 = not at all important; 5 = very important).

2.3 Procedure

Students taking introductory level psychology classes were invited, via email, to participate in the on-line study. The questionnaire was uploaded into the Qualtrics online survey platform. It took approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. Students received extra credit for their participation.

3. Results

3.1 Parental Influence on Trajectories

Students showed considerable discernment when reporting on their parents' influence across the 15 trajectories (Figure 1).
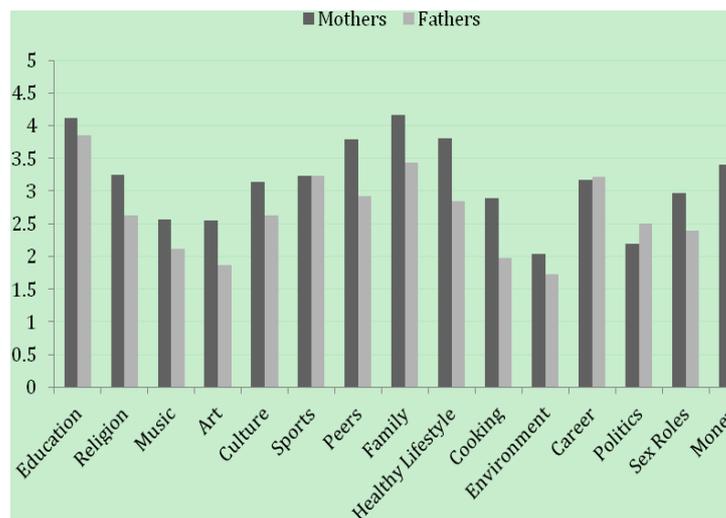

Figure 1. Mothers' and fathers' level of guidance across domains

Parental guidance was uniformly higher than pressure across the trajectories. When examining the mean parental guidance scores, the highest level of guidance came in the *educational* trajectory (*M* = 3.99, "quite a lot"). The next highest means involved the *family, money, peers,* and *healthy living* trajectories. At the bottom of the list was the *environmental* trajectory (*M* = 1.89, "a little"). *Religion* occupied the median parental guidance score with an average of 2.95 ("some"). The means for each domain are listed by sex of parent and student in Table 1. Although the mean rating varied by domain, parents' guidance and pressure ratings were internally consistent across domains as assessed by Cronbach's alphas (guidance was .84 for mothers & .87 for fathers; pressure was .91 for both mothers & fathers).

Table 1. Students' perceptions (means) of mothers' and fathers' type of influence by domain

Domains:	Maternal Guidance		Maternal Pressure		Paternal Guidance		Paternal Pressure		Parental Means	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	G	P
Education	4.13	4.02	3.38	3.55	3.87	3.84	3.43	3.55	3.99	3.43
Family	4.18	4.11	3.13	3.18	3.46	3.35	2.74	2.82	3.80	2.95
Money	3.34	3.65	2.52	3.04	3.45	3.76	2.70	2.93	3.45	2.67
Peers	3.82	3.71	2.65	2.80	2.90	2.07	2.18	2.41	3.37	2.45
Healthy Living	3.83	3.89	2.76	2.96	2.90	2.71	2.26	1.41	3.35	2.55
Sports	3.26	3.36	2.22	2.56	3.15	3.62	2.47	2.67	3.26	2.39
Career	3.21	3.02	2.38	2.60	3.16	3.55	2.58	2.84	3.20	2.52
Religion	3.27	3.09	2.54	2.62	2.63	2.82	2.13	2.31	2.95	2.36
Culture	3.17	3.13	2.06	2.48	2.64	2.62	1.98	2.04	2.90	2.07
Sex Roles	2.92	3.16	2.19	2.56	2.25	3.00	1.91	2.47	2.68	2.13
Cooking	2.93	2.62	1.96	2.02	1.93	2.15	1.56	1.62	2.43	1.77
Politics	2.20	2.31	1.61	1.87	2.45	2.94	1.93	2.22	2.37	1.82
Music	2.58	2.51	2.08	2.29	2.16	2.07	1.78	1.89	2.35	1.95
Art	2.60	2.51	1.75	1.85	1.89	1.84	1.55	1.65	2.20	1.67
Environment	2.05	2.07	1.50	1.64	1.69	1.91	1.49	1.56	1.89	1.51

F = Female. M = Male. G = Guidance. P = Pressure.

To test for statistically significant differences in ratings of parental guidance and pressure across the domains, a 2 (Sex of Parent) x 2 (Influence Type: Guidance/Pressure) x 2 (Sex of Student) x 15 (Domain) Mixed MANOVA was computed. Given the large number of tests involved, we will only interpret multivariate results at the .001 level. There were main effects for three out of the four variables. Mothers provided significantly more guidance and pressure than fathers, $F(1, 273) = 41.47$, $p < .001$, Wilks' Lambda = .87, partial-η^2 = .13, and parents provided higher levels of guidance than pressure, $F(1, 273) = 163.41$, $p < .001$, Wilks' Lambda = .63, partial-η^2 = .38. There was also a main effect for domain, $F(1, 273) = 71.99$, $p < .001$, Wilks' Lambda = .21, partial-η^2 = .80. Only sex of student was not significant.

There were also three 2-way interactions (Sex of Parent x Domain; Sex of Parent x Influence Type; Influence Type x Domain) as well as one three way (Sex of Parent x Influence Type x Domain) at the .001 level. Table 2 lists the results of the 2 (Sex of Parent) X 2 (Influence Type) X 2 (Sex of Student) x 15 (Domain) mixed model MANOVA.

Mothers' and fathers' influence efforts were moderately associated. For example, in the education domain, the correlation between guidance levels of the two parents was $r = .36$, $p < .01$ and $r = .47$, $p < .001$ for pressure. In the religious domain, parents' guidance was also associated, $r = .46$, $p < .001$, as was pressure, $r = .45$, $p < .001$ (Table 3).

Table 2. Results of the mixed model MANOVA

	F	Wilk's Λ	Partial-η^2
Main Effects:			
Parent	*41.68****	.89	.13
Domain	*71.99****	.21	.80
Influence Type	*163.41****	.63	.37
Student Sex[a]	*2.86*	--	.01
Two-way Interactions:			
Parent x Domain	*13.68****	.58	.42
Parent x Influence Type	*18.75****	.94	.06
Parent x Student Sex[a]	*1.75*	.99	.06
Domain x Influence Type	*7.55****	.71	.29
Domain x Student Sex[a]	*1.99**	.90	.10
Influence Type x Student Sex[a]	*2.11*	.99	.01
Three-way Interactions:			
Parent x Domain x Influence Type	*4.69****	.80	.20
Parent x Influence Type x Student Sex[a]	*9.30***	.97	.03
Parent x Domain x Student Sex[a]	*1.51*	.93	.08
Domain x Influence Type x Student Sex[a]	*1.29*	.94	.07
Four-way Interaction:			
Parent x Domain x Influence Type x Student Sex[a]	*1.88**	.91	.09

[a] between-subjects effect. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

3.2 Parental Influence Type and Behaviors

We next examine how perceptions of parental guidance and pressure were associated with parent behaviors. The 11 educational acts were aggregated into one scale. This subscale was internally consistent (Cronbach's α = .87 for mothers, .88 for fathers). The mean scores on the scale were 38.76 (SD = 12.87, range 0 to 66) for mothers and 31.38 (SD = 13.89, range 0 to 66) for fathers. This difference was statistically significant, $F(1, 299) = 133.1$, $p < .001$, partial-$\eta^2 = .31$.

The ten religious acts were also aggregated and demonstrated strong internal coherence (Cronbach's α = .92 for mothers, .91 for fathers). The mean mothers' score on this subscale was 20.97 (SD = 14.15, range 0 to 58); fathers' was 13.99 (SD = 13.38, range 0 to 52). This difference was also statistically significant ($F[1, 299] = 151.6$, $p < .001$, partial-$\eta^2 = .34$).

Mothers' and fathers' reported educational practices were associated with their reported educational guidance (rs = .31, .35, ps < .01, respectively). The correlations for mothers' and fathers' reported religious actions and religious guidance was considerably stronger than the correlation in the educational domain (rs = .67, $p < .01$). Parental pressure was also associated with actions but the magnitude was not as strong. The correlations between the variables in the two focal domains are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlations between parental guidance, pressure, and behavior, with students' values in the education domain (above diagonal) and in the religious domain (below diagonal)

| | Mothers' | | | Fathers' | | | Students' |
	Guidance	Pressure	Behavior	Guidance	Pressure	Behavior	Value
M's Guidance	-	.38**	.31**	.36**	.20**	.24**	.12*
M's Pressure	.59**	-	.13*	.23**	.47**	.03	.07
M's Behavior	.67**	.44**	-	.13*	.11	.66**	.01
F's Guidance	.46**	.25**	.40**	-	.61**	.35**	.11
F's Pressure	.34**	.45**	.33**	.67**	-	.16**	.06
F's Behavior	.48**	.27**	.75**	.67**	.52**	-	.28
S's Value	.52**	.26**	.55**	.34**	.25**	.45**	-

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. M = Mother. F = Father. S = Student.

3.3 Parental Influence, Behaviors, and Youth Values

The final question concerned the extent to which parental guidance, pressure, and parental behavior were linked to the importance participants placed on education and religion in their own lives. This question was evaluated using a series of stepwise multiple-regressions. Predictors were z-scored to aid in interpretation of coefficients. The main effects of each parenting variable were evaluated in a base model, with a second and third model adding two-way interactions and the three-way interaction, respectively.

When predicting educational values of the students, regression models that included parents' guidance, pressure, and behavior were not significant, nor were individual predictors within those models. However, the results concerning the religious values were very different. A model including reports of mothers' religious guidance, pressure, and personal acts predicted 35% of the variance in the importance participants placed on religion in their lives ($F[3, 296] = 53.95$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .347$). Within this model, maternal guidance ($\beta = .338$, $t = 4.79$, $p < .001$) and maternal religious practices ($\beta = .369$, $t = 5.84$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors; maternal pressure was not.

Similarly, a model including reports of fathers' religious guidance, pressure, and behaviors predicted 20% of the variance in the dependent variable ($F[3, 296] = 25.41$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .197$), with paternal behavior being the lone significant individual predictor in the model ($\beta = .399$, $t = 5.68$, $p < .001$). Following the evaluation of maternal and paternal predictors independently, a final stepwise model was run, including maternal predictors in step 1, and paternal predictors in step 2. When paternal predictors were evaluated alongside maternal predictors in this fashion, they did not add significantly to the model ($R^2\Delta = .006$), while the maternal effects noted above remained significant.

4. Discussion

This investigation has provided four types of new information about parental influence on children's developmental trajectories. First, new information was revealed about mothers' and fathers' influence efforts, as perceived by their children, across 15 domains. Second we learned about students' perceptions of mothers' and fathers' guidance and pressure. Third, we collected novel information about parental behavior as it related to promoting *educational* and *religious* trajectories. Fourth, we investigated the degree to which reported parental influence methods predicted students' values in the two focal domains.

4.1 Parental Influence and Domains

This analysis of parental influence efforts on trajectories reveals just how complex and nuanced development is.

Students' ratings revealed significant distinctions across domains, across mothers' versus fathers' influence, and across ratings of guidance and pressure. Given we used a college student sample, it was not surprising that the greatest amount of parental influence came in the *education* trajectory. Overall, students reported "quite a lot" of parental guidance and between "some" and "quite a lot" of pressure as well. Close behind *education* was promotion of the *family*. Guidance in the *religious* domain fell directly in the middle of the 15 domains assessed. Guidance in *environmental* concerns was rated last, a finding that is sure to be concerning for environmentalists (e.g., Steg & Vlek, 2009).

4.2 Sex of Parent and Child Effects

Across the male and female respondents, mothers were rated as providing more influence than fathers across domains. For example, mothers received higher ratings than fathers in 80% of the domains, although the magnitude of the difference was not large. Paternal guidance was rated as higher than maternal guidance in the traditionally male-oriented domains of politics, career, and sports. Of course, we could not determine what was driving this finding. Perhaps, if the mothers did not work outside the home, then the difference could be due to the amount of time spent with children. However, we suspect the finding reflects the cultural roles of parents: mothers are generally the primary caregivers and assume more responsibility in guiding their children's development.

This finding does not mean that fathers do not influence their children (cf., Lamb, 2004). In fact the correlation between mothers' and fathers' influence efforts was in the moderate range. However, as the regression analyses in the domain of religion indicated, the students indicated that maternal guidance had a greater impact on their religious values than paternal guidance, a finding that replicates other investigations in the realm of religion (e.g., Laird, Marks, & Marrero, 2011).

In contrast to the three other variables tested in the MANOVA (sex of parent, guidance vs. pressure, domain), there was no main effect for sex of student. The significant interaction between Sex of Student X Domain was largely due to ratings on the sex roles domain (p < .001). In that domain, males reported receiving more guidance from both mothers and fathers than females. This finding may reflect the fact that parents regard their sons' behavior in this domain as potentially problematic and thus provide more guidance. Future work should investigate the nature of the parental guidance provided.

4.3 Parental Behavior and Guidance

The third novel finding afforded by these data concerned linking behavioral reports with parental influence efforts. In the area of education and religion, we inventoried reports of 10 and 11 parental actions, respectively. It is clear that parents were engaging in a variety of behaviors to promote the desired pathways. In the educational trajectory, these behaviors most often included reading books, discussing educational topics, and helping with homework. For the religious trajectory, the most commonly cited behaviors were reading religious books or stories, taking to religious institutions, singing religious songs, and discussing issues related to religion.

These data also provide information about associations between parental guidance, pressure, and behavior with youths' values in the educational and religious domain. Regression analyses indicated that neither parental guidance nor actions contributed to youth's value of education. However, this is likely because the lack of variance in this outcome variable (i.e., $M = 4.89$, $SD = .39$). Notably, the current sample consisted of college students, which can be presumed to value academic achievement to a greater degree than the population at large. However, when we regressed the parallel set of variables on students' religious values, we found that maternal guidance, rather than pressure had the strongest predictors. This finding fits well with other work in guidance vs. pressure (e.g., Grolnick et al., 2007). It indicates that, at least for this sample, being a tiger mom is not as effective influence strategy as providing guidance, at least in the domain of religious beliefs.

4.4 Limitations

There are three limitations concerning the sample that need to be acknowledged. First, we used a convenience sample of college students as our informants. Given less than one third of young adults attend college in the United States, this sample is not representative of the population. As mentioned above, the restricted range in the area of valuing education likely obscured parental influence effects. Indeed, collecting data on educational variables from an educationally-diverse sample of young adults would likely result in significant observed effects in this domain.

Another limitation of our sample was the unequal number of males and females. Only 18% of our sample consisted of males—a reflection of the gendered nature of today's psychology undergraduate education. Consequently the evidence from females provides a better estimate than that of males. A final sample-related

limitation was we collected data only from students. Future work should collect data from parents in order to determine the extent of agreement across informants.

Another limitation was that we only assessed a subset of all possible developmental trajectories. For example, we did not assess emotion socialization (Eisenberg et al., 1998) or encouraging physical activity (Pugliese & Tinsley, 2007). As the results of this study suggest, there are many more potential developmental pathways than the 15 ones we assessed. Future work should develop more comprehensive assessments of the developmental trajectories that parents seek to influence. The number of domains as well as how parents attempt to influence those domains offer new variables with which to examine parental behavior and how it is associated with children's outcomes. This approach may be especially fruitful for cross-cultural research, where parental guidance may be exerted on different trajectories than those reported here.

4.5 Conclusion

These data provide new insights into parents' roles in influencing developmental trajectories. More generally, this study provides some initial evidence in support of Holden's (2010) conceptual model. According to their children, parents--and especially mothers--are working hard to guide their children's development along positive pathways.

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