

DOES DEMOCRACY IN THE FAMILY AND SCHOOL PROMOTE ADOLESCENTS'  
PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING?: FINDINGS FROM URBAN AND RURAL  
CHINA

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**Abstract:** Our study included 395 Chinese adolescents from two research sites in urban and rural China, who are either in their Junior High (12-16 year-olds) and Senior High (15-19 year-olds). The results show that autonomy support was highly positively associated with all measures of psychological well-being. With respect to democratic climate, we also found that democratic climate was just as strongly related to psychological well-being. And as with autonomy support and responsiveness, democratic family climate was especially strongly related to psychological well-being. A developmental pattern was found, in which adolescents are more likely to endorse both nurturance rights and self-determination rights.

**Keywords:** Nurturance right, self-determination right, psychological well-being.

### **The present study**

The present study examined both urban and rural Chinese adolescents' attitudes towards children's rights, and their perceptions of parental and teacher autonomy support and responsiveness, democratic school and family climate, and psychological well-being. Our study incorporated samples from both urban and rural China, in order to extend investigation

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of these issues into understudied and more traditional rural populations. The rural/urban distinction is particularly relevant in China, given the vast differences in modernization, economic standard of living, parenting practices, and traditional values uncovered in prior investigations comparing urban and rural Chinese settings (e.g., Helwig et al., 2014; Zhang & Fuligni, 2006; Zhang, Zheng, & Wang, 2003). Thus, exploring children's attitudes toward their own rights and their hypothesized correlates in more traditional, rural settings like that found in China may provide a stronger test of their universality than prior work using samples drawn from Western societies or modern, urban environments, where children's rights and autonomy is given more emphasis (Naftali, 2009).

## **Method**

### ***Participants and Research Sites***

The total sample consisted of 395 Chinese adolescents from two age groups drawn from two research sites representing urban and rural China. Among them, 195 participants were from the city of Guangzhou (13- to 15-year-olds,  $n = 92$ , 45 males,  $M = 13.90$ ,  $SD = .78$ ; 16- to 19-year-olds,  $n = 103$ , 37 males,  $M = 16.99$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) and 200 participants were from a rural village in Northern Guangdong Province (13- to 15-year-olds,  $n = 96$ , 52 males,  $M = 14.51$ ,  $SD = .82$ ; 16- to 19-year-olds,  $n = 104$ , 53 males,  $M = 16.81$ ,  $SD = .81$ ). These research sites were selected to provide a contrast between adolescents who were from a modern, economically-developed city and those who were from a much more traditional, agriculturally-based, rural community with far less exposure to Western influences.

The urban Chinese subsample was drawn from schools serving a largely working to middle-class population located in the city of Guangzhou, the capital and largest city of Guangdong province. Guangzhou is a modern city and one of the key commercial and trading centers of China. Residents of Guangzhou, like those in other modern cities in China, overall have a much higher standard of living, level of education, and exposure to foreign cultures than people living in rural areas. Average per capita wage for residents of Guangzhou is 30,658 yuan, or US\$4,977 (*Guangdong Statistical Yearbook*, 2010). In terms of occupation and education level, 19% of Chinese urban participants' parents were employed in professional, sales, managerial, or other technical occupations, 28% were employed in service occupations, trades, or manufacturing, 26% were employed in family-run businesses, and 22% (mostly mothers) were homemakers or unemployed, with 5% of unknown occupation. Nine percent had completed university or had some post-secondary education, 75% had completed high school only, and 14% had completed grade school only, with 2% of unknown

education level.

The rural Chinese subsample was drawn from schools located in a more remote area of Renhua County in Northern Guangdong Province. The region from which the sample was drawn was chosen to be representative of a typical rural and agricultural region in China, and thus substantially less developed economically and more traditional in character than the larger urban centers. Average family household income for the district from which the sample was drawn was 6,317 yuan, or approximately US\$1,025 (*Guangdong Statistical Yearbook*, 2010). The majority (55%) of parents of Chinese rural participants were farmers by occupation, with the remainder working in local industry (12%) or running small businesses in the area (13%) or of unknown occupation (20%). Two percent of parents had completed university or had some post-secondary education, 14% had completed senior high school, and most had only completed junior high school (49%) or grade school (28%). One percent of parents had never received any education and six percent did not report their parental education level.

### ***Measures***

Several self-report questionnaires were used in this study. Chinese translations of questionnaires were pilot tested with urban and rural Chinese adolescents in focus groups and wordings were modified as necessary to improve readability and comprehension. Any question items that were deemed culturally inappropriate were replaced (see below) with more suitable items. All final translated Chinese questionnaires were then back translated into English by a different native Chinese bilingual translator to ensure the accuracy of the translations.

**Children's rights attitudes.** An adaptation of the Children's Rights Attitude (CRA) questionnaire (Peterson-Badali et al., 2003, originally derived from Rogers & Wrightsman, 1978) was used to measure Chinese adolescents' attitudes toward children's rights issues.

**Autonomy support and responsiveness.** Participants were given the Perception of Parents (POPS) scales (originally derived from Robbins, 1995) and a corresponding measure for teachers (see Chirkov & Ryan, 2001) to assess their perceived autonomy support and responsiveness (warmth and involvement) in family and school settings. In accordance with calls to examine the unique role of mothers and fathers in socialization (e.g., Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000), the dimensions of autonomy support and responsiveness were assessed separately for mothers and fathers in this study. The internal consistency for the parent and teacher autonomy support and responsiveness subscales for the present sample was

acceptable (Cronbach's alpha for autonomy support = .68 (mother), .73 (father), .70 (teacher); and for responsiveness = .83 (mother), .87 (father), .84 (teacher)).

**Democratic climate.** In order to examine the unique role of democratic school and family environments, a new measure of democratic climate was devised based on prior research (e.g., Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh, 2009).

**Psychological well-being.** Finally, participants completed two measures of psychological well-being. Given the hypothesized relations between parental and teacher control of autonomy and internalizing symptomology (e.g., Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Hasebe et al., 2004), participants were given the 10-item version of the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI short; Kovas, 1980).

## Results

### *Preliminary Exploratory Analysis of Reactive Patterns*

Given that prior research on rights concepts (e.g., Day et al., 2006) has sometimes yielded findings suggesting the existence of reactive patterns, in which adolescents displayed a heightened level of self-determination rights endorsement when perceived autonomy support and responsiveness were low, as a first step in the analysis, we explored our data for such patterns. Cases meeting *both* of the following observations were identified as potential reactive cases for exploratory analyses: (i) those falling one standard deviation below sample mean for at least two of the family and school predictor variables (i.e., maternal, paternal, or teacher autonomy support; maternal, paternal, or teacher responsiveness; and home or school democratic climate), in combination with (ii) endorsement of self-determination rights that is at least one standard deviation above sample mean. Eighteen cases met these criteria: Twelve from the urban sample and six from the rural sample. Table 1a displays the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for the full sample. With the reactive cases included in the analyses, we found several such reactive patterns indicating negative relationships between support for self-determination rights and mother responsiveness ( $r = -.14, p < .01$ ), father responsiveness ( $r = -.13, p < .05$ ), and home democratic climate ( $r = -.15, p < .01$ ). Moreover, support for self-determination rights was significantly positively correlated with the level of depression ( $r = .14, p < .01$ ). When these reactive cases were examined separately, significant negative associations between support for self-determination rights and teacher responsiveness ( $r = -.70, p < .01$ ) and teacher autonomy support ( $r = -.64, p < .01$ ) were found, along with negative (but not significant) associations for all of the other home and school predictor variables. However, in subsequent analyses when the reactive cases were

removed from the analysis, all of these unexpected significant pairwise correlations found in the full sample (i.e., the significant negative relations between endorsement of self-determination rights and mother responsiveness, father responsiveness, home democratic climate, and depression) were no longer significant (see Table 1b). Thus, all subsequent analyses were conducted with the eighteen reactive cases removed.

### ***Analysis Plan for Main Sample***

In the following analyses, t-tests and MANOVAs were performed to test for mean differences of the outcome variables (i.e., adolescents' attitudes toward children's rights and their psychological well-being) by gender, setting, and age group. Zero-order correlations among all study variables are reported next, followed by four hierarchical regression analyses, for nurturance rights attitudes, self-determination rights attitudes, and self-reported life satisfaction and depression, respectively, to test if and how the various parental and teacher factors predicted the outcome variables. In the regression analyses for children's rights attitudes, support for nurturance rights and self-determination rights were regressed on five blocks of independent variables separately. All non-dichotomous variables were centered around their means by subtracting each mean from each variable prior to analyses to reduce problems with multicollinearity (Aitken & West, 1991). Dummy variables were created for gender (1 = male), age group (1 = 13- to 15-year-olds), and setting (1 = urban) and were entered at the first step in the model to control for immediate effects of demographic variables on children's rights attitudes. To assess the effects of features of socialization environment on children's rights attitudes, adolescents' perceived maternal, paternal, and teacher support for autonomy and responsiveness were entered at the second step, followed by measures of democratic home and school climate at the third step, and tolerance of dissent at home and school at the fourth step. We entered a block of eight interaction terms that crossed setting with each of the home and school environment variables at the fifth step to test for any moderating effects of setting. Variables in blocks that do not contribute significantly to the regression model (at the .05 level) were eliminated from the final regression model.

### ***Descriptive and Correlational Analysis***

Means and standard deviations of all study variables are presented in Table 1, for (b) the full sample without reactive cases, (c) the urban subsample, and (d) the rural subsample. As indicated by the means, rural adolescents perceived less tolerance of dissent at home compared to their urban counterparts,  $t(374) = 3.40, p < .005, d = .35$ . Participants' support for

children's rights and their reports of psychological well-being were analyzed with 2 (gender) X 2 (age group) X 2 (setting) ANOVAs. Analyses for children's rights attitudes revealed several significant age group and setting main effects. As expected, both older ( $F(1, 335) = 4.32, p = <.05, \eta^2 = .01$ ) and urban ( $F(1, 335) = 14.09, p = <.001, \eta^2 = .04$ ) adolescents endorsed higher levels of self-determination rights. Somewhat unexpectedly, older ( $F(1, 335) = 6.88, p = <.01, \eta^2 = .02$ ) and urban ( $F(1, 335) = 27.25, p = <.001, \eta^2 = .08$ ) adolescents also endorsed higher levels of nurturance rights. Regarding measures of psychological well-being, adolescents from the urban setting reported a higher level of life satisfaction compared to their counterparts in the rural area,  $F(1, 326) = 31.67, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ .

Table 1b displays bivariate correlations among study variables for our sample. As expected, all of the home and school environment variables were generally correlated with one another. Specifically, adolescents' perceived parental and teacher autonomy support were correlated with reports of their responsiveness ( $r = .66$  to  $.74, p < .001$ ). Moreover, parental support for autonomy and responsiveness were both correlated with reports of democratic climate at home ( $r = .51$  to  $.55, p < .001$ ), and teacher support for autonomy and responsiveness were both correlated with democratic climate at school ( $r = .64, p < .001$ ). Tolerance of dissent at home and school, however, was only correlated with parental and teacher autonomy support, respectively ( $r = .11$  to  $.17, p < .05$ ), as well as democratic home and school climate ( $r = .13$  to  $.19, p < .01$ ), but not with any of the corresponding responsiveness measures. Also as expected from prior research in Western cultural settings, adolescents' attitudes towards nurturance rights were positively related to their attitudes towards self-determination rights ( $r = .34, p < .001$ ).

In the present study, we hypothesized that support for nurturance rights would be associated with parent and teacher autonomy support and responsiveness and democratic home and school climate. These hypothesized relations were generally supported. Specifically, support for nurturance rights was positively associated with parental and teacher autonomy support, maternal responsiveness, and democratic home and school climate (Table 1b). It was further expected that support for self-determination rights would be associated mainly with home and school autonomy support, democratic home and school climate, and tolerance of dissent. As Table 1b indicates, support for self-determination rights was positively associated with tolerance of dissent at home and at school, but did not correlate with any other family and school environment variables. Lastly, our expectations regarding relations between home and school variables and psychological well-being were generally supported. Both life satisfaction and depression (reversed) were positively related to all of the home and school

environment variables except for tolerance of dissent at home and at school.

### **Hierarchical Regression Analyses: Predictors of Children's Rights Attitudes and Adolescents' Psychological Well-being**

To further assess how home and school variables contribute to adolescents' attitudes towards children rights, we performed two hierarchical multiple regression analyses on nurturance and self-determination rights attitudes, respectively. A multiple step model was employed to examine the unique contribution of different family and school environmental variables while controlling for background factors. Whereas some of the predictor variables were not significantly related to outcome variables at the bivariate level, to accurately assess the contribution of each independent variable to the outcome, all theoretically relevant independent variables were retained and included in the model (Pandey & Elliott, 2010).

**Nurturance rights.** The regression results are presented in Table 2. Consistent with the results of the ANOVA, significant main effects were found for age and setting, which accounted for 12% of the variance in support for nurturance rights. Adolescents from the urban setting and those from the older age group endorsed a higher level of nurturance rights. Predictor variables in block 2, consisting of main effects of parental and teacher support for autonomy and responsiveness, accounted for an additional 6% of the variance in the regression analysis. Maternal responsiveness and teacher autonomy support significantly predicted higher levels of endorsement of nurturance rights. Unexpectedly, teacher responsiveness predicted lower support for nurturance rights. Upon further inspection, a suppression effect with teacher responsiveness serving as the suppressor variable was found (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2013). While teacher responsiveness was uncorrelated with support for nurturance rights,  $r(359) = .06, p = .30$ , it contributed significantly to the model by suppressing irrelevant variance in the measure of teacher autonomy support. The negative regression weight of teacher responsiveness is a result of the suppressor's low correlation with the outcome variable (support for nurturance rights) and high correlation with the other predictor variable (teacher autonomy support) at the bivariate level. Analyses revealed that this suppressor effect was not the result of high levels of multicollinearity between teacher responsiveness and any other predictors. The third, fourth, and fifth block of regression, which consisted of the home and school democratic climate, tolerance of dissent, and interaction effects respectively, did not account for additional variance and hence were eliminated from the model. Together, the regression model accounted for 18% of the variance in support for nurturance rights.

**Self-determination rights.** Within the first block of control variables, significant main effects were found only for setting, explaining 8% of the variance in support for self-determination rights. After controlling for the demographic variables in the second block, maternal autonomy support was found to be the only significant predictor in this step, accounting for an additional 4% of the variance. The introduction of democratic climate variables in the third block did not contribute significantly to the regression model and hence the variables within the block were not further investigated. In the fourth step of the regression analyses, tolerance of dissent at home was found to be a significant predictor in the positive direction, predicting attitudes of self-determination rights above and beyond what was predicted by more general measures of parental and teacher autonomy support and responsiveness, as well as democratic home and school climate. Lastly, the results showed that the inclusion of interaction terms did not significantly explain any additional variance in support for self-determination rights and hence were dropped from the model. Together, the regression model accounted for 17% of the variance in self-determination rights attitudes.

**Adolescents' psychological well-being.** To assess whether various features of family and school environment predicted adolescents' psychological well-being, two hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed with life satisfaction and depression (reversed), respectively (see Table 3). When demographic variables were entered in the first block, urban setting was associated with higher life satisfaction. Controlling for demographic variables, teacher responsiveness significantly predicted adolescents' level of depression in the second block. Adolescents who perceived higher levels of teacher responsiveness reported lower levels of depressive symptoms. Home democratic climate was a significant predictor of both life satisfaction and depression level in block 3, with adolescents who reported more democratic family climates reporting higher life-satisfaction and fewer depressive symptoms. Thus, democratic climate appears to make a unique contribution to adolescents' psychological well-being, above and beyond what was predicted by the general measures of autonomy support and responsiveness. Neither the addition of tolerance of dissent nor interaction parameters in the fourth and fifth step improved the predictive power of the model and hence were removed from the final model. Together, the predictor variables accounted for 30% of the variance in adolescents' life satisfaction scores and 21% of their depression scores.

## **Discussion**

This study examined urban and rural Chinese adolescents' attitudes toward children's rights, and how these attitudes relate to several dimensions of socialization in their family and

school environments, including perceptions of parental and teacher autonomy support and responsiveness and family and school democratic climate. Relations between these dimensions of socialization and adolescents' psychological health and well-being also were examined. This study is the first to systematically investigate these correlates of children's rights attitudes and psychological well-being in a non-Western culture and in a traditional, rural setting. The findings provide support for several theoretical propositions derived from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2013) and democratic socialization research (e.g., Vieno et al., 2005) regarding relations between psychological well-being and patterns of socialization in family and school contexts.

In accordance with prior research revealing age-related increases in adolescents' striving for autonomy within different cultural contexts (Helwig, 2006; Smetana, 2011), we found that support for children's self-determination rights increased with age. As well, reasoning about both types of rights was influenced by urban versus rural setting, with urban Chinese adolescents endorsing children's rights more strongly. This finding probably reflects the increasing attention paid to children's rights in modern, urban Chinese settings, where higher standards of living and parental education levels mean that children's needs and autonomy often receive greater attention than in more traditional, rural settings (Naftali, 2009). Interestingly, and unexpectedly, we also found that support for nurturance rights increased with age across both urban and rural samples. This finding may reflect the relative underemphasis in China on children's rights of all types. For example, parental shaming and corporal punishment of children are more common in China than in Western cultural settings (Helwig et al., 2014; Naftali, 2009) and may lead to diminished expectations regarding children's claims to some nurturance rights. Thus, in addition to expansions in the scope of Chinese children's autonomy during adolescence, there may be further changes during this age period in their understandings of the obligations of authorities to provide for children's physical protection and psychological welfare.

Several predictions about the correlates of children's rights attitudes derived from prior work in Western or other cultural settings (e.g., Khouri-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh, 2009; Peterson-Badali et al., 2004) were supported. We found that children's nurturance rights followed a straightforward pattern in which positive attitudes toward these rights were facilitated by responsive, autonomy supportive, and democratic family and school environments. Maternal responsiveness and teacher autonomy support were especially important, as indicated by the finding that only these variables remained significant predictors

of children's nurturance rights attitudes after the other variables were controlled for in the regression.

We hypothesized that endorsements of children's self-determination rights would be facilitated by parental and teacher support for children's autonomy and by democratic home and school environments that encourage children's input into decisions and that respect their basic freedoms. Although we did not find that democratic climate was related to support for self-determination rights, maternal autonomy support did predict higher levels of endorsement of self-determination rights when other variables were controlled in the regression, as found in research in North American cultural settings (e.g., Peterson-Badali et al., 2004). These findings provide tentative support for the proposition that socialization agents who encourage and support children's autonomy may facilitate positive attitudes toward children's self-determination rights across diverse cultural settings. At the same time, we also explored the existence of an "oppositional" pathway that may enhance children's awareness of and support for self-determination when basic needs for autonomy are not perceived as being met (Lo et al., 2011; Vansteenkiste et al., 2014). In the present study, we found evidence of such an "oppositional" pathway in the form of significant negative associations between support for self-determination rights and socialization predictors such as maternal and father responsiveness and home democratic climate, as well as negative relations between support for self-determination rights and adolescent psychological well-being. These significant negative associations were entirely due to the contribution of a small number of participants who showed very high levels of support for self-determination rights and very low levels of perceived autonomy support, responsiveness, and democratic climate in the family and school. When these participants were removed from the analysis, these unexpected negative correlations became non-significant. This finding highlights the importance of accounting for reactive or oppositional pathways, as well as more straightforward or facilitative relations, in research on the socialization correlates of children's rights attitudes, and may help to explain some contradictory findings of prior research (e.g., Day et al., 2006; Peterson-Badali et al., 2004).

Also as predicted, support for self-determination rights was found to be positively correlated with tolerance of dissent in the home and school. The latter finding is consistent with prior research showing strong associations between tolerance of dissent and support for children's rights among Israeli and traditional Arab adolescents residing in Jerusalem (Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh, 2009). Evidence of this association across such diverse cultural settings (i.e., among different ethnicities in the Middle East and now in urban and

rural China) strongly suggests that universal processes may be at work. It is reasonable to suppose that family and school environments that encourage the expression of dissent and criticism may enhance adolescents' sense of their own autonomy, leading to greater support for children's self-determination rights. However, the opposite causal relationship also may account for these patterns, i.e., it may be that those adolescents who initially have a greater awareness of children's self-determination rights may be more empowered to assert their autonomy and thereby influence their family or school environments to become more tolerant of dissent. As argued by many current theorists (e.g., Kuczynski & Knafo, 2014; Smetana, 2011), socialization is a reciprocal process, and it may be reasonable to expect bidirectional influences here. Further research, preferably of a longitudinal nature, is needed to tease out the precise nature of these causal relationships.

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