

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED PARENTING STYLES AND STRESS LEVELS AMONG MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate the relationship between parenting styles and stress level among Malaysian adolescents. A final sample of 140 participants with equal number of males and females, with ages ranging from 13 to 16 years old were recruited. Data collection was conducted in two public secondary schools in Pahang. This survey included three instruments: Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ), Adolescent Stress Questionnaire (ASQ) and a Demographic Questionnaire. The results showed mothers prefer authoritative parenting compared to fathers and that parenting styles are not related to adolescents' stress level. There was also no gender difference in adolescents' stress level in home-life, peer pressure and school performance. Recommendations for future studies and implications of study are discussed.

Keywords: parenting style; stress; adolescent

INTRODUCTION

Jane has been seeing the school counselor for the past two weeks. She is in fact feeling stressed over the strict parenting she has at home. Her parents have arranged a series of tuition classes, piano lessons and dance lessons for her that she no longer can handle them well with the approaching school examination. However, she does not dare voice these concerns to her parents as they do not usually allow their children to negotiate with them. In addition, Jane is only allowed to socialize with friends once a month. After a few counselling sessions, Jane is relieved and grateful that there is someone that she can turn to when she is facing enormous stress at home and at school.

The above case study illustrates how parenting may sometimes heighten the stress level amongst local adolescents which may then negatively impact on the students' development and subsequently the country's development. Factors such as a heavy school work load, concerns over examination grades, peer pressure or family conflicts may all have been continuous stressors to students and to worsen this condition, inappropriate parenting behaviours can elevate the stress level among children.

Optimum stress can act as a motivational force to work towards goals. However, when the stress level increases, negative consequences such as truancy, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, fatigue or social delinquency may start to kick in (Melati Sumari & Mariani Md. Nor, 1998). Therefore, a stress coping capability plays an important role in maintaining the optimal stress level (Valiente, Fabes, Eisenberg, & Spinrad, 2004). A person can acquire coping skills from the surroundings and daily life events and this is why parents, being the role model to their children, have the strongest influence in shaping and moulding the characteristics and coping capability of children (Beyers & Goossens, 2008). Beyers and Goossens also pointed out that adolescence is the most crucial identity formation period and parents play an important role during this period. In addition, coping strategies that adolescents have adopted tend to prolong into adulthood.

Parenting behaviours tend to have an impact on children's stress level and may further affect children's psychosocial development. Baumrind (1971) further stated that different parenting styles – the authoritative, authoritarian and permissive styles - have proven to shape children differently. Authoritarian parenting usually causes aggression and delinquency in children in the western context because when the children cannot bear the stress of being strictly controlled by parents, they tend to go against parents and behave delinquently (Baumrind, 1971). Nevertheless, some children may turn out well under authoritarian parenting. It was also found that authoritarian parenting may lead to a positive psychosocial competence and academic achievement in Asian children (Ang, 2006).

On the whole, since parenting styles may have different impacts on children's development, the current study seeks to explore the relationship between parenting styles and stress level in the Malaysian context.

Definitions

Baumrind (1971) conceptualised parenting into three main types: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Authoritative parenting reflects parenting with a balance in discipline and affection, reasoning with children and being responsive to the children's demands. On the other hand, authoritarian parenting values obedience and favours power assertion. It constitutes the traditional parenting structure whereby children are given no autonomy but instead have to accept the discipline without questions. In contrast, permissive parenting gives children a high level of freedom and does not restrain their behaviours unless physical harm is involved (Rossman & Rea, 2005). The present study focuses on exploring authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles specifically in the Malaysian context.

Stress can be defined as the judgement of a situation or event as challenging, demanding and threatening (Hardie, 2005). Byrne, Davenport, and Mazanov (2007) stated that adolescent stress arises when they are unable to cope with the high intensity and magnitude of changes faced during the transition period to adulthood. It was stated earlier that adolescent stress often leads to negative outcomes such as drugs and alcohol abuse or

even to the more severe outcomes such as depression and suicidal attempts (Byrne & Mazanov, 2002). Byrne et al. (2007) identified ten aspects in adolescents' life that possibly act as stressors. The ten aspects are home life, school performance, school attendance, interaction with teachers, peer pressure, school-leisure time conflict, romantic relationships, future uncertainty, financial pressure and the emerging of adult responsibility. This present study measures the relationships between parenting styles and adolescents' stress level in the possible stressors as mentioned in Byrne et al. using the self-report method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parenting and Impacts on Adolescents

Different parenting styles lead to different development in children in terms of their general well-being, psychosocial competency and ability to respond to the demands in the environment (Chen, Dong, & Zhou, 1997; Rossman & Rea, 2005). However, it is too early to predict children's development solely based on core parenting styles without considering the effects of cultural differences. In a study within the western culture, Rossman and Rea recruited 104 mothers and children from both violent and nonviolent community. They discovered that authoritative parenting leads to better child adaptation and less externalising problems such as being less aggressive. In contrast, strong authoritarian parenting leads to higher learning and conduct problems in children while permissive parenting leads to a higher anxiety level and higher internalising problems in children such as depression and social withdrawal. Another study conducted by Kaufmann et al. (2000) with 1,230 mothers found both authoritarian and authoritative parenting to have positive associations with healthy adjustments in children.

In the Asian context, Chen et al. (1997) conducted a research on second-grade Chinese students and parents to examine the association between parenting styles and students' adjustment. It was found that authoritarian parenting correlated with higher aggressive behaviours and lower social competency and academic achievement. Years later, Ang (2006) conducted a study on Asian adolescents to investigate the effects of perceived parenting style on psychosocial competence and attitudes towards school. An investigation on 548 adolescents was carried out and it was found that authoritative fathers encourage adolescents' self-reliance in coping, solving problems and perseverance in academic challenges. However, within the same sample, Malay respondents with perceived authoritarian mothers had better attitudes towards school. The above studies demonstrated that the relationship between parenting style and its outcomes are rather inconsistent in different cultures. Further to this, authoritarianism is not universally correlated with negative outcomes in children and adolescents.

Inconsistencies in parenting styles and their outcomes in the Asian culture can be attributed to parental warmth and the concept of "guan" in the Chinese context. Chao (1994) discussed how Asians, especially the Chinese, emphasise on the ideas of "guan" and "chiao sun" which indicate parental control and training respectively and are similar to the characteristics of authoritarian parenting. In the Asian culture, "guan" means to govern and to care for (Chao, 1993). Strictness may be seen as parental concern in Asian parenting despite it being equated with parental hostility and aggression in American parenting. Bond

et al. (1998) examined the construct of “guan” and concluded that it correlated highly with parental warmth but not significantly correlated with control factor. The items of “guan” are in fact quite consistent with the construct of authoritative but not authoritarian according to Bond et al. (1998). The above researchers have illustrated how Asian parenting behaviours fall between the continuum of authoritative and authoritarian parenting. Furthermore, adolescents claimed that authoritarianism is desirable and necessary for harmony in a collectivistic society (Sorkhabi, 2005). Keshavarz and Rozumah Baharudin (2009) stated that Malaysian parents endorse authoritarian parenting and it is well accepted in this country. Malaysia is one of the collectivist countries where children are taught to conform to the group’s rules, behave in socially acceptable manner, inhibit their own needs and be considerate of others within the group; in this context it is to obey parents in all aspects (Keshavarz & Rozumah Baharudin, 2009). Therefore, authoritarian parenting receives positive perceptions among Asians who largely favour collectivism. Thus, this current study is interested in examining the association between Malaysian parents’ favoured parenting styles and adolescents’ stress level, if any.

Previous studies have suggested that fathers and mothers adopt different parenting styles. A study by McKinney and Renk (2008) with 475 youth suggested that adolescents perceived mothers to favour authoritative and permissive parenting while fathers favour more of the authoritarian parenting. Shek (1998) also discovered significant differences in both parents’ parenting styles within the Chinese community. Students perceived fathers as less demanding, less responsive, less concerned but harsher to them whereas mothers were perceived as the opposite. These differences in parenting styles especially among Asians can be attributed to the cultural values. Fathers are usually seen as the figure of authority at home, executing punishment and hence they are perceived as less concerned and harsh. In contrast, mothers are perceived as responsive and concerned because women are more expressive in their emotions, are more protective and affectionate (Shek, 1998).

Parenting and Adolescents’ Stress

Yamamoto and Davis (1982) conducted a study to compare the perception of stressful life events among Japanese and American children. In their study involving 248 fourth-sixth graders, ratings of perceived stress and the frequencies of stressful events experienced by children from both countries seemed to be similar. This study also identified common stressors in children, which can be classified into three main domains: home-life, school related issues and social events. In Malaysia, Melati Sumari and Mariani Md. Nor (1998) concluded that apart from adolescence-adulthood transition pressure, school-related issues, peer pressure, family and parenting are among the common stressors. LaRue and Herrman (2008) conducted a qualitative study on 120 adolescents and identified common stressors faced by these youth to be school-related factors concerning passing grades, money-related issues, conflicts with parents and relationship with friends and significant others. These findings provided strong support to acknowledge family, school and social circles as the three main dimensions of adolescents’ stressors and they are relevant across cultures.

The next focus is on the relationships between parenting styles and stress. Hildebrand (2000) claimed that stress occurs when children feel too much pressure and rigidity from their parents, in addition to the high expectations imposed on them to excel in their studies. Children tend to feel challenged and in response to meeting high parental

expectations, stress surfaces within them. Rigidity and pressure from parents are associated with authoritarianism as well. Likewise, in Melati Sumari and Mariani Md. Nor's (1998) review, one of the factors that causes stress in adolescents is being treated like young children but at the same time expected to behave like adults. Additionally, parents who are impatient with their teenagers, rigid in their interaction and controlling with minimal give-and-take contribute to the rising stress level in youths (Melati Sumari & Mariani Md. Nor, 1998). The above triggers conflicts between children and parents and causes adolescents to experience stress.

Tajularipin, Aminuddin, Vizata and Saifuddin (2009) conducted a study on 155 teenagers in Malaysia to explore the stress level among urban and rural youths. They made a general conclusion that home-stability, parenting styles and parent-child relationships contributed to youth's stress level. Another study conducted by Dwairy and Menshar (2006) on 351 Egyptians adolescents concluded that authoritarian parenting in a collectivistic culture is not as destructive to adolescents' mental health as compared to the West. These studies show that there is an association between parenting styles and adolescents' stress and that authoritarianism possibly yields a positive outcome in a collectivist culture.

Gender Differences

Previous studies discovered that stress levels of adolescents differ in gender. Tajularipin et al. (2009) discovered that females have a significantly higher level of stress than males though the differences were small. In Singapore, Yeo, Ang, Chong and Huan (2007) conducted a study on 1,042 high school students to measure their concerns over emotional well-being. The findings showed that girls had higher emotional distress and anxiety over personal concerns such as worries and feelings of hopelessness. In contrast, Kristel, Young and Chambliss (1997) carried out a survey with 798 high school students but discovered no significant gender difference in the stress level despite more females reporting problems concerning family and friends. Despite the mixed findings, they do reflect that in general females have higher stress than males. The present study is also interested in exploring the gender difference in adolescents' stress level in Malaysia, if any.

PURPOSE OF STUDY AND HYPOTHESIS

The purpose of this study is to examine parenting styles adopted by both fathers and mothers separately, before exploring the relationships between perceived parenting styles with stress level among Malaysian adolescents. Gender differences in terms of stress level will be examined. A total of five (5) hypotheses have been proposed for this study:

- 1) Adolescents perceive their father as being authoritarian relative to their mother.
- 2) Adolescents perceive their mother as being authoritative relative to their father.
- 3) Adolescents with perceived authoritarian paternal parenting will display lower stress level especially in the aspects of home life, peer pressure and school performance in comparison with authoritative and permissive parenting styles.
- 4) Adolescents with perceived authoritative maternal parenting will display lower stress level especially in the aspects of home life, peer pressure and school performance in comparison with authoritarian and permissive parenting styles.

- 5) Adolescent females will have a higher level of stress in the aspects of home life, peer pressure and school performance as compared to adolescent males.

METHOD

Study design

This was a survey study designed to explore the relationships between parenting styles and adolescents' stress level in Malaysia. This study relied on self-report measures to obtain adolescents' perceived parenting styles and stress level. Independent variables included the gender of students and parenting styles while the dependent variable was the adolescents' stress level.

Participants

A total of 161 students were recruited from two public secondary schools in Malaysia. Participants with single parents were excluded. After data clearing, a final sample of 140 participants with equal gender was randomly selected using SPSS software. The participants' age ranged from 13 to 16 years old with a mean of 14.48 years ($SD = 1.15$).

Measurements

The two instruments used were the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) and the Adolescent Stress Questionnaire (ASQ). There were two versions of PAQ, each with modifications for appropriate references to gender - "mother" was changed to "father" while "she" was changed to "he".

The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ)

A 30-item instrument was designed to measure a child's perceived parenting styles in terms of authority and disciplinary practices (Buri, 1991). All items are rated on a 5-points Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The 30 items are divided into three subscales: Permissive (1, 6, 10, 13, 14, 17, 19, 21, 24, 28); Authoritarian (2, 3, 7, 9, 12, 16, 18, 25, 26, 29); Authoritative (4, 5, 8, 11, 15, 20, 22, 23, 27, 30). Ten items in each subscale are summed up to obtain scores ranging from 10-50. A subscale with the highest score indicates the type of parenting adopted. The PAQ has good internal consistency with alphas ranging from .74 to .87 and stable test-retest reliabilities over two-week period ranging from .77 to .92. Lastly, the PAQ also has good construct validity with the authoritative level correlating positively to the respondents' self-esteem and the authoritarian level correlating negatively to self-esteem (Buri, 1991).

The Adolescent Stress Questionnaire (ASQ)

The ASQ is a revised version of the one by Byrne et al. (2007). The revised version consists of 58 items whereas the original ASQ consists of 31 items. The revised version was

designed to measure the dimensions of stressor amongst adolescents and was useful in both the clinical and research contexts. This revised ASQ was completed by modifying the original ASQ, using adolescent focus groups to confirm original items, including stressors not covered by the original ASQ and reviewing the structure and wording of items. These 58 items reflect a total of ten stressor dimensions: Stress of home life (1, 2, 4, 13, 21, 29, 31, 35, 37, 44, 46, 48, 49); Stress of school performance (5, 6, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 43); Stress of school attendance (3, 33, 39); Stress of romantic relationships (17, 27, 40, 52, 58); Stress of peer pressure (8, 28, 30, 32, 36, 54, 56); Stress of teacher interaction (18, 25, 41, 42, 45, 55, 57); Stress of future uncertainty (7, 20, 34); Stress of school/leisure conflicts (19, 23, 24, 26, 53); Stress of financial pressure (22, 38, 47, 51); and Stress of emerging adult responsibility (10, 11, 50). All items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all stressful or is irrelevant to me*) to 5 (*very stressful*). Scoring is done by summing responses for all items under each component and higher scores indicate higher stress experienced for that stressor dimension. Some dimensions were modestly correlated hence the total score was not computed to avoid the chances of Type I error (Byrne et al., 2007).

The ASQ has modest but significant concurrent validity with three other criterion measures in the predicted directions: correlated positively with anxiety ($r = .26$ to $.43$) and depression ($r = .35$ to $.56$) and correlated negatively with self-esteem ($r = -.19$ to $-.40$). Besides, the ASQ has strong internal reliabilities with Cronbach's alpha ranging from $.62$ – $.92$. Test-retest reliabilities over one-week period showed reliable temporal stability for all ten components ranging from $.68$ – $.88$. The ASQ was developed through adolescents' perspective suggesting the practicality of ASQ across the adolescence period (Byrne et al., 2007).

Procedure

Students from three secondary schools were approached, one for a pilot study while another two for the main data collection. Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the relevant government agencies. The survey was conducted only during the students' free period to prevent disruption to their lessons. Classes were selected randomly based on availability with the exclusion of Form 3 and Form 5 classes due to the government examinations they were sitting for. Counselors assisted in distributing parent's consent letters to students one to two days before the survey was conducted. On the data collection day, parents' consent letters were collected and students' consent letters were distributed and collected on the spot. Only students with parental consent and willingness to participate were given the questionnaires. The average time needed to complete the questionnaires was approximately 30 minutes.

RESULTS

Parenting Styles

To test the favoured parenting styles, a 'between subjects t ' test was used with an alpha level of $.05$. As opposed to what was being hypothesised, fathers were not significantly perceived as authoritarian over mothers, $t(139) = 1.33$, $p > .05$ (see Table 1). Fathers scored

33.97 (SD = 6.22) for authoritarian parenting while mothers scored 34.38 (SD = 6.00). Fathers and mothers in this sample simply displayed similar levels of authoritarian parenting.

As hypothesised, there were significant differences in terms of authoritative parenting styles, $t(139) = 3.06$, $p < .01$ (see Table 1). The mean score for paternal authoritative parenting was 34.90 (SD = 6.44) while the mean for maternal authoritative parenting was 36.11 (SD = 5.84). This indicated that Malaysian mothers were perceived to have adopted more authoritative parenting compared to the fathers.

Table 1. Paired Sample T-test for Parenting Styles between Parents

Variable	Father	Mother	t (139)
Authoritarian Parenting	33.97 (SD = 6.22)	34.38 (SD = 6.00)	1.33
Authoritative Parenting	34.90 (SD = 6.44)	36.11 (SD = 5.84)	3.06**

** $p < .01$.

Parenting Styles Correlation with Adolescents' Stress Level

A bivariate correlation test was used to examine the relationship between parenting styles and adolescents' stress level. For the PAQ, subscales with higher scores indicated the parenting style adopted by a parent. A higher score in the ASQ subcomponents indicated a higher stress level in that particular dimension. It was hypothesised that adolescents with perceived authoritarian paternal parenting will eventually display lower levels of stress especially in the aspects of home life, peer pressure and school performance. However a bivariate correlation analysis showed authoritarian paternal parenting did not have a significant correlation with the stress of home-life with $r = .11$, $p > .05$, the stress of peer pressure with $r = -.06$, $p > .05$ and the stress of school performance with $r = .02$, $p > .05$. In fact, no significant correlation was observed between any of the stress subcomponents with authoritarian paternal parenting (see Table 2). This indicated that authoritarian paternal parenting did not have any correlation in one's stress level thus the third hypothesis was not supported.

Next, it was also hypothesised that adolescents with perceived authoritative maternal parenting will display lower stress especially in the aspects of home life, peer pressure and school performance. The findings, however, did not support this hypothesis. A bivariate correlation analysis showed a slight variation in the results. Authoritative maternal parenting did not correlate significantly with the three subcomponents as mentioned, with $r = .03$, $p > .05$ for the stress of home-life, $r = -.01$, $p > .05$ for the stress of peer pressure and $r = -.08$, $p > .05$ for the stress of school performance. However, it did correlate positively with the stress of emerging adult responsibility with $r = .23$, $p < .01$ (see Table 2). Hence this analysis showed authoritative maternal parenting did not have a significant relationship with the three stress subcomponents but correlated with higher stress of the emerging adult responsibility among adolescents.

Table 2. Correlation between Parenting Styles (PAQ) and Adolescents' Stress Level (ASQ)

Adolescent Stress Questionnaire (ASQ)	Authoritarian Paternal Parenting	Authoritarian Maternal Parenting
Home-Life	.11	.03
Peer Pressure	-.06	-.01
School Performance	.02	-.08
School Attendance	-.09	.00
Romantic Relationship	-.05	.08
Teacher Interaction	-.01	.07
Future Uncertainty	-.11	-.06
School-Leisure Conflict	-.08	-.02
Financial Pressure	-.02	.02
Adult Responsibility	.09	.23**

** $p < .01$.

Table 3. Matrix Correlations among the 10 Stress Subcomponents

	HL	SP	SA	RR	PP	TI	FU	SL	FP	AR
HL	1	.59(**)	.20(*)	.44(**)	.67(**)	.73(**)	.57(**)	.53(**)	.55(**)	.39(**)
SP		1	.41(**)	.17(*)	.57(**)	.52(**)	.70(**)	.58(**)	.53(**)	.45(**)
SA			1	.27(**)	.19(*)	.35(**)	.30(**)	.43(**)	.36(**)	.09
RR				1	.39(**)	.48(**)	.32(**)	.43(**)	.32(**)	.11
PP					1	.67(**)	.65(**)	.47(**)	.58(**)	.41(**)
TI						1	.52(**)	.59(**)	.62(**)	.35(**)
FU							1	.48(**)	.51(**)	.42(**)
SL								1	.54(**)	.25(**)
FP									1	.54(**)
AR										1

Note. HL = Stress of Home Life; SP = Stress of School Performance; SA = Stress of School Attendance; RR = Stress of Romantic Relationship; PP = Stress of Peer Pressure; TI = Stress of Teacher Interaction; FU = Stress of Future Uncertainty; SL = Stress of School/ Leisure Conflict; FP = Stress of Financial Pressure; AR = Stress of Emerging Adult Responsibility.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Despite the correlation between perceived authoritative maternal parenting with the stress of emerging adult responsibility not predicted earlier, this correlation made sense and was supported by the matrix correlation (see Table 3). The stress of emerging adult responsibility correlated strongly with the other three stress subcomponents, with $r = .39$, $p < .01$ for the stress of home life, $r = .41$, $p < .01$ for the stress of peer pressure and $r = .45$, $p < .01$ for the stress of school performance. This indicated that these stress subcomponents were somehow inter-correlated.

Gender Differences

It was also hypothesised that females will display a higher stress level especially in the aspects of home life, peer pressure and school performance as compared to males. Using the independent-group *t* test, results analysis showed no significant differences between gender and the three stress subcomponents mentioned. As shown in Table 4, $t(138) = -.43$, $p > .05$ for stress of home-life, $t(138) = -.02$, $p > .05$ for stress of peer pressure and $t(138) = -.98$, $p > .05$ for stress of school performance. Females and males experience a similar level of stress in these three subcomponents thus the fifth hypothesis was not supported.

However, there were gender differences for the stress of school attendance and the stress of romantic relationships instead. Males scored 6.94 (SD = 2.89) while females scored 5.99 (SD = 2.78) for stress of school attendance with $t(138) = 1.99$, $p < .05$ (see Table 4). As for the stress of romantic relationship, males scored 11.40 (SD = 4.03) while females scored 9.16 (SD = 4.51) with $t(138) = 3.10$, $p < .01$ (see Table 4). In fact, this analysis showed males have a higher stress level than females in the subcomponents of the stress of school attendance and the stress of romantic relationship.

Table 4. Independent Sample T-test for Stress Level between Genders

Variable	Male	Female	<i>t</i> (138)
Stress of Home-Life	34.77 (SD = 8.95)	35.47 (SD = 10.34)	-.43
Stress of Peer Pressure	19.11 (SD = 4.99)	19.13 (SD = 5.82)	-.02
Stress of School Performance	23.79 (SD = 6.72)	24.86 (SD = 6.29)	-.98
Stress of School Attendance	6.94 (SD = 2.89)	5.99 (SD = 2.78)	1.99*
Stress of Romantic Relationship	11.40 (SD = 4.03)	9.16 (SD = 4.51)	3.10**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

Parenting Styles

This study hypothesised that adolescents perceive fathers as authoritarian relative to mothers. The results refute this hypothesis and thus do not support previous studies that concluded fathers to be more authoritarian (McKinney & Renk, 2008; Shek, 1998). However, the present analysis is congruent with Ong's (2000) study on Singapore adolescents which discovered that fathers were perceived as being less strict and harsh as expected whereas mothers were relatively more strict and controlling. Habibah and Tan (2009) also performed a study on youths in Malaysia and found that both fathers and mothers were perceived as authoritative instead. They speculated parents' higher education level might have contributed to their findings and this possibly explains the current finding too. It is speculated in this study that fathers might have been exposed to the negative outcomes of authoritarianism through education or the media and hence decreased the practice. Moreover, Xu's et al. (2005) study claimed Chinese parenting does not have clear distinctions between being authoritarian and being authoritative. Asian mothers emphasise traditional values like strictness, responsiveness and parental acceptance which are the

attributes of both authoritarian and authoritative parenting. This also explains why mothers are perceived to have similar authoritarian level as fathers in this study. The present analysis thus indicates that Malaysian fathers are not more authoritarian relative to mothers as perceived by adolescents.

The present study hypothesised that Malaysian mothers will be perceived as authoritative relative to the fathers. The results of the study supports the hypothesis and is in line with the findings by Ong (2000) whereby mothers are found to be not only nurturing, affectionate and supportive but also more reasonable with adolescents. The current result also supports the study by McKinney and Renk (2008) as older adolescents perceived mothers as more authoritative and permissive. Despite being relatively strict, Asian mothers are responsive, warm and supportive towards their children. In addition, it is possible that mothers in the current sample are perceived as more authoritative due to the level of these mothers' involvement in their children's lives. When there are more interactions, adolescents might perceive their mothers as less harsh, more responsive, more understanding and more approachable comparatively (Ong, 2000; Shek, 1998). Thus, Malaysian mothers are still perceived as authoritative despite their strictness.

Parenting Styles and Adolescents' Stress Level

Adolescents with perceived authoritarian paternal parenting or perceived authoritative maternal parenting were hypothesised to experience a lower stress level. Result analyses do not support both hypotheses which indicate that both parenting styles do not correlate with adolescents' stress level. These findings are incongruent with the review by Melati Sumari and Mariani Md. Nor (1998) and the study by Tajularipin et al. (2009) which claimed that parenting styles are associated with adolescents' stress. Nevertheless, a study by Yeo et al. (2007) did find that adolescents somehow do not show higher stress over matters related to school, family and peer relationships which support the current insignificant correlation between parenting styles and the three stressor dimensions.

In the present study, parenting styles may have an indirect relationship with adolescents' stress but not the main contributing factor. During adolescence, even positive parenting might not be effective in moderating the level of psychological distress (Ong, 2000). The intensity of academic pressure (Hui, 2001) and the adolescent's personality might possibly offset the influences of parenting (Huan, Yeo, Ang, & Chong, 2006). A study in Malaysia concluded that the majority of adolescents identified academic issues as a stressor followed by relationship issues at home and at school (Intan Hashimah, 2007). A study by Huan et al. (2006) on Singapore adolescents showed that optimistic individuals are reported to have lower stress as compared to those who are pessimistic. Hence, it is speculated that academic-related pressure or personality dispositions might have greater influence over parenting styles in relation to the adolescents' stress level in the present sample.

In addition, current analysis showed that perceived authoritative maternal parenting is correlated with the stress of emerging adult responsibility instead. The transition to adulthood, in the view of adolescents, includes being independent, having autonomy and full responsibility over their own lives (Hartmann & Swartz, 2006). Since authoritative parenting involves a sharing of autonomy and trust between parent and child, it is therefore

speculated that adolescents might be concerned over the failure to appreciate the autonomy and independence given which will then disappoint their parents further.

Gender Differences in Stress Level

Current findings also did not support the hypothesis which predicted female adolescents to experience higher stress especially in home life, peer pressure and school performance compared to males. This finding is incongruent with earlier studies (Byrne et al., 2007; Yeo et al., 2007). However, this finding is congruent with the study by Kristel et al. (1997) which did not find gender difference in stress level and concluded instead that this problem is general for adolescents. A possible explanation for this finding is the willingness of adolescents to report and express their emotional concerns. Girls are observed to be more willing in reporting their problems and emotional distress than boys (Yeo et al., 2007). Nevertheless, in the present sample, both females and males may have a similar level of willingness to report and share their personal concerns over issues related to peer pressure, parenting and school matters since these matters are rather common among adolescents. Besides, the level of perceived stress might have been influenced by stress moderators like adolescents' perceived self-worth (Robinson, Garber, & Hilsman, 1995) and perceived control and social support (Benson & Deeter, 1992). All these factors might have moderated the perceived stress level among adolescents.

In contrast to the hypothesis, males had significantly higher stress than females in the subcomponents of school attendance and romantic relationship. This finding is incongruent with previous studies. In the study by Byrne et al. (2007), no significant gender difference was evident for the stress of school attendance dimension while females scored significantly higher than males in the stress of romantic relationship dimension. In another study, it was reported that females experienced a larger increase in stress level than males when they were involved in a romantic relationship (Joyner & Udry, 2000). Since the current study showed males experiencing higher stress than females in the stress of school attendance, it is speculated that issues like being absent from school or the internal conflict of conformity to peers in truancy versus the responsibility of a student may be more prominent among the male adolescents in the present sample. Moreover, females might also be less willing or more ashamed to report their concerns over romantic relationships or as the level of maturity increases, female adolescents do not easily get stressed over romantic issues.

Limitations and Strengths of Study

This study has a few limitations. Firstly, it relied solely on the adolescents' self-report measures which might not be able to yield accurate information with regards to parenting styles. Adolescents' perception of parenting behaviours could have been influenced by their beliefs and might not be consistent with parents' actual parenting behaviour (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). Another limitation was the use of a cross-sectional design to examine developmental research questions (Recklitis & Noam, 1999). One's stress level would not be the same across the years as these variables fluctuate in accordance to life experiences. However, findings from this cross-sectional study could still provide preliminary trends of the relationships between perceived parenting styles with adolescents'

perceived stress. A third limitation was the correlational design; a correlational design could only provide information with reference to the relationships between variables but was unable to determine the causes and effects among these variables to provide a more in-depth understanding of the issues (McKinney & Renk, 2008).

Despite the limitations, steps have been taken to ensure mothers' and fathers' parenting scores were not combined or averaged. In this study, it was uncertain as to what extent the father and mother displayed similar parenting styles. Averaging the parenting scores might over or under rate the parenting styles and also the possible influence on adolescents (Simons & Conger, 2007). Additionally, in Bronstein's study (1984), the father displayed different interactions towards son and daughter as well. Therefore, mothers and fathers' parenting styles were examined separately in this study to maximise the accuracy of the results. The instruments used have strong reliabilities (Buri, 1991; Byrne et al., 2007) while a pilot study was conducted to obtain the reliability of translated instruments used in the Malaysian context. In addition, the current sample is representative of Malaysian adolescents to a certain extent because recruitment of participants was carried out in two public secondary schools with the inclusion of the three main races. Finally, Form 3 and Form 5 students who were sitting for the major government examinations were excluded to rule out the possibility of overrated stress levels caused solely by the examinations.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Mothers and fathers might adopt different parenting styles while certain combinations of parenting might be more or less effective than others due to the buffering effects of different parenting styles. Having one authoritative parent could offset the less positive outcomes associated with the uninvolved parent (Simons & Conger, 2007). In this case, adolescents' development under consistent or inconsistent parenting can be further investigated. Secondly, since parental control has different indications in different cultures (Xu et al., 2005), future studies may examine how specific parenting dimensions such as warmth, democracy, reasoning or support can contribute to adolescents' development across various cultures (Habibah & Tan, 2009). Next, given that parenting behaviours and one's stress level may change over time, a longitudinal study can be conducted to further elaborate and support the findings from the present cross-sectional study. As for the methodology, instead of the reliance on adolescents' self reports on parenting styles, data collection through structured interviews from both adolescents and parents together with observations may yield more accurate and reliable results.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore perceived parenting styles among Malaysian parents and also the relationship between perceived parenting styles with adolescents' perceived stress levels. The general conclusion is that Malaysian fathers are not perceived to be authoritarian over mothers. However, mothers are perceived to be more authoritative than fathers. Parenting styles, specifically the authoritarian paternal and authoritative maternal parenting, do not correlate with adolescents' stress level as predicted. Furthermore, no gender difference is evident for the three stress dimensions of home life, school performance and peer pressure.

The findings from this study will alert practitioners and parents that Malaysian fathers in fact do not favour authoritarianism. This information offers insights for practitioners who work with Malaysian parents in promoting adolescents' well-being and psychosocial development and also to reassess their parenting strategies throughout the years. In contrast, since parenting behaviours and adolescents' stress level do not correlate, this study then redirects research focus to explore other factors which may have a direct influence on adolescents' stress level in Malaysia.

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