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A NEW LOOK AT THE OLD "LITTLE EMPEROR": DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES IN THE PERSONALITY OF ONLY CHILDREN IN CHINA

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In order to study the perception of Chinese parents of their children, audio-taped free descriptions of children's personality characteristics were obtained from 401 Chinese parents living in Beijing and Fuzhou. The free descriptions by parents showed that, as children's age increased, different categories of descriptors were typically used. Only for children at ages 3-5 did negative descriptors associated with the so-called "little emperor" stereotype prevail in parents' free descriptions. On the other hand, the proportion of negative descriptors in the Conscientiousness category increased with children's age. This was an indication of the persisting importance given by Chinese parents to characteristics associated with school performance, effort, and diligence. The results showed that there were no signs of a spoiling attitude in Chinese parents. The high proportions of negative descriptions given by Chinese parents should be interpreted as an expression of great concern for the future of their children, rather than as a sign of hostility towards their children.

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In order to reduce the rate of population growth, the People's Republic of China has – since 1979 – put into effect the one-child policy, which prescribes that each new family should have only one child. Since the enforcement of this policy, problems concerning only children have become hit topics in the field of child development in China. An only child in China is frequently regarded as “a little emperor” or “a little sun”, namely, a spoiled child. In the West, some researchers believe that an only child often grows up to be a self-centered individual (see Hall, 1987). Neal (1927) even declared that being an only child was a disease in itself.

Some studies in the early 1980s showed that Chinese only children were self-ish, unsociable, maladjusted, conceited, fragile and cowardly (see Wang, 1984), and that they made demands for immediate gratification of their wishes, displayed disrespect for elders, and had outbursts of temper (see Tao & Chiu, 1985). Although most of the studies were based on crude subjective observations or simple tests in kindergartens as mentioned by Wu (1996), these descriptions of characteristics (little emperor stereotype) in all kinds of media had a great influence on people's perceptions of Chinese only children. In research (Jiao, Ji & Jing, 1986) with 4-to-10 year old children from the urban and rural areas of Beijing, psychologists of the Chinese Academy of Science's Institute of Psychology discovered that only children obtained low scores in cooperation and peer prestige, and that they were perceived by their peers as highly egoistic. Only children were more likely than were children with siblings to refuse another child's request for assistance, were less modest, less helpful in group activities, tended to do whatever they liked and did not voluntarily share their toys with others.

However, some other studies reported very positive characteristics of Chinese only children. For example, the study by Poston and Yu (1986) of teachers' evaluations of 1069 Chinese children ranging in age from 3 to 9 years old indicated that, as compared with children with siblings, only children scored higher in both mathematics and verbal achievement, and were rated as more cooperative and less hostile. Also, in Falbo's research (Falbo et al., 1989), only children in China obtained highly positive evaluations.

In view of these contradictory results, it is misleading to state that only children in mainland China have been spoiled by their parents because the latter have treated the former as “little emperors”. The authors attempted to resolve the contradiction by employing, in the present study, a finer grouping of children with a wider range in age. Based on parents' free descriptions of their children, they examined to what extent the characteristics of the “little emperor” stereotype would emerge from different age groups of children.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 401 Chinese parents (215 mothers and 186 fathers) in Beijing and Fuzhou participated in this study and provided free descriptions of the personality characteristics of 231 children (55.6% boys and 44.4% girls). The majority (93%) of these children were only children. The children's ages ranged from 3 to 14 years. There were four age groups, namely, 3-5 years, 6-8 years, 9-11 years and 12-14 years, and the number of children in each of these four groups were 40, 117, 112 and 132 respectively. The age groups were constructed based on the unified classification method in a cross-cultural study of seven countries (see Kohnstamm, Halverson, Mervielde, & Havill, 1998). The SES of the families in this study was estimated on the basis of the occupation and education of the parents, and the proportions of the low, the medium and the high SES families were 12%, 45%, and 43% respectively.

PROCEDURE

Twelve second-year students of the Education Department of Fujian Normal University and six third-year students and four graduate students of the Education Department of Beijing Normal University conducted the interviews with parents. First of all, they acquired the names of the families and the addresses (and phone numbers) of the children from the kindergartens and primary schools near the campuses of Fujian Normal University and Beijing Normal University. Then they contacted these parents by telephone to ask for consent to interview them. After receiving a short training by the first author of this article, they went to interview the parents in the children's homes. In the interview, the main question to parents was: "Can you tell me what you think the typical characteristics of your child are?"

After the parents' descriptions were transcribed from audio-tapes, the original protocols were coded by employing a Chinese coding manual with fourteen coding categories. The coding manual was developed as a categorization system in a cross-cultural study (Kohnstamm et al. 1998). The descriptors were classified as "positive" or "negative" according to their directions in the fourteen coding categories. If a child were described as "diligent", then the descriptor "diligent" should be coded into the Conscientiousness category and its direction was 'positive'. On the other hand, the descriptor "lazy" belonged to the same Conscientiousness category, but its direction was "negative".

To estimate the inter-rater reliability in coding, use was made of the protocols of 50 interviews which were randomly selected from the total 401 interviews. The inter-rater reliability in coding was found to be 87.2%.

RESULTS

PROPORTIONS OF DESCRIPTORS IN MAIN CATEGORIES

A total of 4458 descriptors (words or phrases) were obtained from the descriptions of 401 parents about their children, and were coded according to the 14 categories of the coding scheme. Over 85% of the Chinese children's personality characteristics could be rationally coded in five main categories that resembled the Big Five in adult personality psychology. For the total sample, the proportions of descriptors in Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness were 26.9%, 18.1%, 19.1%, 7.7%, and 13.8%, respectively. The nine other categories had very few descriptors.

TABLE 1
PROPORTIONS OF DESCRIPTORS AND *F* TEST FOR ARCSINE, TRANSFORMED PROPORTION SCORES

	Age 3-5 (<i>n</i> =40) %	Age 6-8 (<i>n</i> =117) %	Age 9-11 (<i>n</i> =112) %	Age 12-14 (<i>n</i> =132) %	<i>F</i>
I. Extraversion	30.9	27.5	25.8	25.7	1.33
a: Sociability	18.8	15.3	12.4	12.4	3.76*
b: Dominance	3.4	1.5	2.2	2.5	2.37
c: Activity	8.7	10.6	11.2	10.7	0.90
II Agreeableness	21.4	18.8	17.3	16.8	2.17
a: Helpfulness	6.7	8.3	8.6	7.7	0.41
b: Manageability	14.1	9.2	7.3	7.0	9.14***
c: Honesty	0.6	1.4	1.5	2.1	0.82
III. Conscientiousness	6.9	18.3	22.2	21.8	19.07***
a: Carefulness	2.4	6.7	8.7	7.8	6.59**
b: Faithfulness	0.0	0.1	0.4	0.2	1.09
c: Diligence	4.4	11.4	13.1	13.8	9.52 ***
IV. Emotional Stability	8.9	7.3	7.8	7.4	0.52
a: Emotional Reactivity	4.2	2.3	3.1	4.4	2.21
b: Self-confidence	2.2	4.6	3.7	2.5	3.18*
c: Anxiety	2.4	0.4	1.1	0.5	5.84**
V. Openness to Experience	16.3	13.9	13.0	13.4	1.78
a: Openness.	6.3	5.7	4.7	6.2	0.11
b: Interests	6.1	4.2	4.6	3.6	3.20*
c: Intelligence	4.0	4.0	3.7	3.6	0.34

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

AGE DIFFERENCES IN THE PROPORTIONS OF DESCRIPTORS FOR FIVE MAIN CATEGORIES

The proportions of descriptors in the four age groups for the five main categories and their subcategories are shown in Table 1. These proportions were calculated on the basis of each age group. To test the significance of the proportion scores and to stabilize sample variances, arcsine transformed proportion scores

were used. ANOVA analyses were performed with the proportion scores as the dependent variables and age group as the independent variable.

In the category level, there were significant age differences in the proportions of descriptors only for the category Conscientiousness ($F(3,397)=19.07$, $p<.001$). The proportion of descriptors of the 3-5 years group was significantly lower than that of the other groups. The age differences in Conscientiousness were due to Carefulness ($F(3,397)=6.59$, $p<.01$) and Diligence ($F(3,397)=9.52$, $p<.001$). Significant age differences were also found in some subcategories of other categories: Sociability ($F(3,397)=3.76$, $p<.05$), Manageability ($F(3,397)=9.14$, $p<.001$), Self-confidence ($F(3,397)=3.18$, $p<.05$), Anxiety ($F(3,397)=5.84$, $p<.01$), and Interests ($F(3,397)=3.20$, $p<.05$).

The negative and positive subdivision of categories provided useful information. For Agreeableness, the proportions of positive descriptors in the 3-5, 6-8, 9-11, and 12-14 years groups were 9.3%, 9.9%, 11.9%, and 11.6%, respectively; whereas the proportions of negative descriptors in the same age groups were 12.1%, 8.9%, 5.4%, and 5.2%, respectively. For Conscientiousness, the proportions of positive descriptors in the 3-5, 6-8, 9-11, and 12-14 years groups were 6.1%, 6.7%, 7.2%, and 8.1%, respectively; whereas the proportions of negative descriptors in the same age groups were 0.8%, 11.7%, 15.4%, and 13.7%, respectively. Thus, the line of positive descriptors crossed the line of negative descriptors for both Agreeableness and Conscientiousness in moving from the 3-5 years group to the 6-8 years group (see Figures 1 and 2).

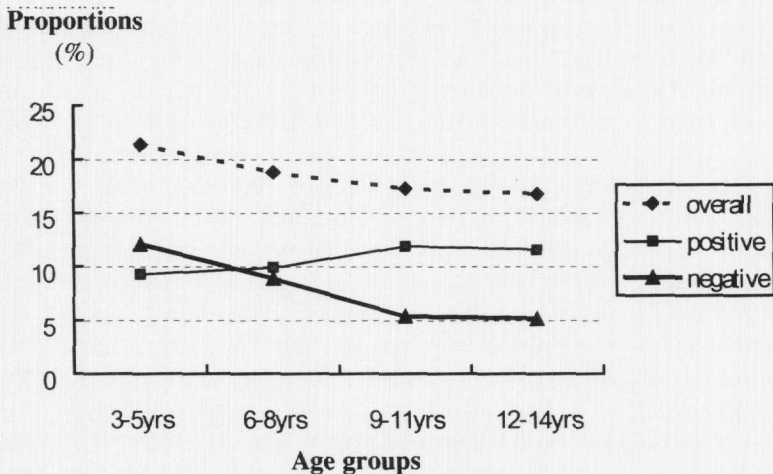


Figure 1. Proportions of positive, negative, and overall descriptors coded as Agreeableness in different age groups

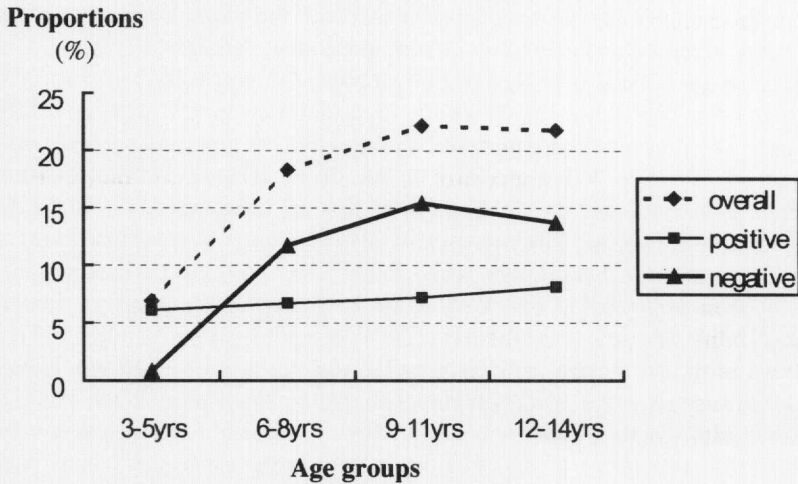


Figure 2. Proportions of positive, negative, and overall descriptors coded as Conscientiousness in different age groups.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study help clarify previous mixed results in relation to the so-called "little emperor" stereotype of Chinese only children. The negative descriptors in the category of Agreeableness include words or phrases like "to be more self-willed", "easily loses his/her temper", "sometimes talks back to parents", "stubborn", "very naughty", "pigheaded", "strong rebellious mind", "cries and yells when unhappy" etc.. These are characteristics of the "little emperor" stereotype. The negative descriptors predominate for the 3-5 year group. However, when a child is old enough to belong to the 6-8 year group, the proportions of negative descriptors drop and that of positive descriptors rise. Henceforth, the positive descriptors predominate. In other words, the "little emperor" stereotype can apply to preschool children only. As the only children advance in age and go to school, the "little emperor" characteristics subside.

For the category of Conscientiousness, the proportions of negative descriptors increase sharply from almost zero in 3-5 year old children to 12 percent in 6-8 year old children. Examples of negative descriptors in Conscientiousness are "lacks spirit of digging into the difficulties of school work", "quite lazy", "careless and negligent", "is fond of playing", "does homework slowly", "school grades cannot meet the expectations of parents", etc.. The high proportions of negative descriptors in this study correspond well with the findings of Stevenson, Chen and Lee (1993) that Chinese parents express the highest degrees of dissatisfaction with their children's academic performance even

though these children obtain much higher scores than children from other countries. Thus, the high proportions of negative descriptors by Chinese parents should be interpreted as a strong concern with the academic performance of their children, rather than as a sign of hostility towards their children.

The results of this study are understandable in light of the Confucian tradition in Chinese parenting. Impulse control and academic achievement may be identified as two of the most important goals of socialization in the Confucian heritage, and the former is more fundamental than the latter (see Ho, 1994). For young children aged less than 6 years, impulse control could be emphasized more by their parents. This is evidenced by the particularly high proportions of Manageability descriptors for the 3-5 years group in the present study. The rising trend of the proportions of Conscientiousness descriptors in the age groups also lends support to the belief that parental emphasis on academic achievement increases with age.

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