

Parents' Psychological Control over Learning Autonomy of High School Students

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Abstract. This study focuses on how parental psychological control would affect the learning autonomy of high school students. An online questionnaire survey lasting from August 20, 2025, to August 31, 2025, was carried out among public high schools and private international high schools in Shenzhen, China. Participants are 182 students from grades 9 to 12 (89 boys; 93 girls; mean age=16.5; SD=1.08). The credible Parental Psychological Control Scale and Learning Autonomy Scale were employed. Results predicted a positive correlation between parental psychological control and learning autonomy of high school students ($r=0.234$, $p<0.01$). The regression analysis showed that the independent variable of parental psychological control does have a slight effect on high school students' learning autonomy as the dependent variable ($B=0.107$, $t=3.229$, $p=0.001<0.01$, $r^2=0.055$). Despite the fact that parental psychological control is perceived or proven to be an intrusive parenting style that might impair children's autonomy, this study provided a new insight, which, to some extent, could be possibly attributed to Chinese family culture that emphasizes relatedness rather than individualism, the educational background of participants' parents, and the special characteristics of high school students.

1 Introduction

The importance of parenting in children's development and growth is never overstated. Family functioning shapes children's personalities and nurtures their abilities [1]. Long years of research done by scholars have raised theories regarding which parenting methods facilitate children's growth effectively and which do not. Some parents, in the name of helping children, force their children to behave according to their own requirements, which is typical parental control. Parental control is most frequently classified into parental psychological control and parental behavioral control, and these two forms of control seem to have opposite effects on children's functioning [2]. Parental behavioral control refers to parents' behaviors aiming to positively regulate and manage children's behaviors by setting rules, while parental psychological control is a manipulation and invalidation of children's psychological and emotional expression [2]. Besides, parental psychological control, which consists of attempts that intrude on children's psychological development, is often contrasted

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with parental psychological autonomy support, which fosters individuality and a sense of self-determination [3]. Numerous studies, after differentiating among parental psychological control, parental behavioral control, and parental psychological autonomy support, center on the exploration of the effect of parental psychological control on children's functioning.

The manipulative practices of parental psychological control include guilt induction in children, love withdrawal from children, and authority assertion to children [3]. By verbally emphasizing the effort, hard work, or even sacrifice made, parents induce guilt in children to make them behave as parents expect [2]. Love withdrawal means parents threaten children that unless they meet parents' requirements, they will lose parents' love and support [4]. When asserting parents' authority, they constrain children's self-expression, deny children's independent voices, and label children's talking back as an act of disobedience [3]. Empirical evidence proves that among children from Western countries, parental psychological control exerts negative effects on children: it stifles children's self-autonomy as parents make most of the decisions for their children; children habitually feel helpless and weak due to parents' assertion of power over children; children develop fear towards close relationships as they believe love is conditional [5]. There are also Chinese scholars who predicted children's lower self-efficacy, school aversion, and internalized problems, all caused by intense parental psychological control, that might put children at high risk of anxiety and depression [6]. However, in Asia, especially in China, where interpersonal connectedness is highlighted, parents' practices of psychological control might be interpreted by children as "Guan" in Chinese, which means parental monitoring or guidance mixed with parents' care. Under these circumstances, children may not feel a violation of their sense of self and may not be affected adversely [7].

According to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, only when people's fundamental psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met can they be highly motivated [8]. Hence, students with high learning autonomy might hold an inner belief that they take full charge of their learning activities, that they can decide what to study and how to study instead of always following teachers' or parents' instruction, and that they do not study for others but for their own pursuit of knowledge [9]. Such a belief, or high learning autonomy, enables students to choose appropriate methods, time, and environment to carry out self-regulated study [10]. In the face of crucial decisions as to which university to apply for or what field to delve into, high school students especially need to be autonomous learners to outcompete their peers and find out their true interests to have a promising academic and career development. Chinese parents of high school students seem to be more anxious about these decision-making and their children's choices than ever, especially after the implementation of the government's Double Reduction policy in July 2021, whose core aim is to reduce students' burden by calling off excessive homework and off-campus tutoring. Many parents worry that without enough devotion of time to study, children's academic performance would drop, and parents themselves, unintentionally or intentionally, conduct psychological control practices to intervene in children's study and push them to study harder.

Previous Korean scholars have done research to explore the influence of maternal psychological control upon self-directed learning ability in elementary school students, indicating a negative correlation between these two variables [11]. In addition, some Chinese researchers have tested that parental psychological control would impair children's academic resilience [12], but creates more academic burden [13] or test anxiety [14]. Still, there are few studies on parents' psychological control practices towards children's learning autonomy. Besides, high school students as a particular group of targets who are facing life choices and are just before their adulthood deserve deeper research. Furthermore, to test whether parental psychological control would exert an effect on Chinese high school students' learning autonomy intrigues many, considering the unique cultural environment compared with the

Western world. This current research would shed some light on these areas and offer more insight for parental psychological control on high school students' learning autonomy.

2 Research method

2.1 Procedure

An online questionnaire in Chinese was published on Questionnaire Star, lasting from August 20, 2025, to August 31, 2025, and targeting high school students aged from 15 to 18 who they just finished their summer holiday and started a new semester in school. Six teachers (one from a top public high school, two from less famous public schools, two from top private international high schools, and one from an average private international high school) helped to send the questionnaire to several WeChat groups of their students from grades 9 to 12, and some students invited their peers for the test. Later on, all the data were documented and analyzed online by the SPSSAU step by step, with credible results for further discussion. First, descriptive statistical analysis was done on the demographic characteristics of the sample. Second, the reliability and validity of the scales were assessed through Cronbach's α coefficient and KMO sphericity tests. Finally, Pearson correlation analysis to examine the relationship between the two core variables, and linear regression analysis to explore the predictive effect of parental psychological control on learning autonomy were conducted.

2.2 Measures

The whole questionnaire consists of 3 major parts: the first one is composed of 6 questions featuring participants' grade, age, their parents' academic background, and whether the participants are the only child in the family; the second part is the Chinese version of Parental Psychological Control Scale [3] made up of 18 questions; and the last is the Learning Autonomy Scale [9] with 39 questions focusing on participants' learning motivation and learning results.

2.3 Parental psychological control scale

Wang et al. revised the Psychological Control Scale—Youth Self-Report invented by Barber [2] and created the Chinese version of the Parental Psychological Control Scale, which better fits the Chinese cultural environment. There are 18 items in the Parental Psychological Control Scale: item 1 to item 10 on guilt induction, item 11 to item 15 on love withdrawal, and item 16 to item 18 on authority assertion. The polled high school students reported their scores on each item based on their real experience. A Likert 5 5-point scale is used (1=not at all true; 5=very true), and the higher scores children get in total, the greater parental psychological control they feel. Cronbach's alpha for the Parental Psychological Control Scale as a whole, the sub-scale of guilt induction, the sub-scale of love withdrawal, and the sub-scale of authority assertion is respectively 0.94, 0.89, 0.87, and 0.83. Hence, as the scale is of high validity and reliability and can perfectly fit the research targeting high school students, this research applied the scale to accurately and consistently indicate the level of parental psychological control over children.

2.4 Learning autonomy scale

Learning autonomy scale was developed by Wang et al. in 2003, which includes 113 elements in total divided into 7 sections, learning motivation (22 elements), learning content (12

elements), learning time (11 elements), learning method (29 elements), learning process (13 elements), learning results (17 elements), and learning environment (9 elements). A Likert 5-point scale is used (0-never; 4-always). High scores indicate a high level of students' autonomy learning capacity. The Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale and each section is 0.97, 0.93, 0.79, 0.80, 0.93, 0.82, 0.88, 0.83, with high validity and reliability to measure learners' autonomy level. Considering the long time taken to finish all elements in the questionnaire, which would result in participants' fatigue and inaccurate results, this research only made a combination of learning motivation (22 elements) and learning results (17 elements) to measure students' level of learning autonomy.

3 General results

3.1 Frequency analysis result

From Table 1, it can be seen that 182 valid samples were gathered, with 89 boys and 93 girls. The proportion of females in the samples is 51.10%, while the remaining 48.90% of the samples are male. In terms of grade distribution, the majority of samples are from "Twelfth Grade", with a total of 84, accounting for 46.15%. Regarding age groups, "17 years old" has the highest proportion at 45.05%. As for the educational level of mothers, "Bachelor's degree or college" has the highest proportion at 53.30%; as for that of fathers, "Bachelor's degree or college" also has the highest proportion at 48.35%.

Table 1. Demographic information.

Item	Choice	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	89	48.9
	Female	93	51.1
Grade	Nine	11	6.04
	Ten	39	21.43
	Eleven	48	26.37
	Twelve	84	46.15
Age	Below15	11	6.04
	15	23	12.64
	16	39	21.43
	17	82	45.05
	18	27	14.84
Mother's educational level	Junior high school or below	25	13.74
	Senior high school / Vocational secondary school	24	13.19
	Bachelor's degree/College	97	53.30
	Master's degree or above	36	19.78
Father's educational level	Junior high school or below	17	9.34
	Senior high school / Vocational secondary school	31	17.03
	Bachelor's degree/College	88	48.35
	Master's degree or above	46	25.27
Total	182	100	

3.2 Validity and reliability analysis of scales

After the research, the validity and reliability of both Parental Psychological Control Scale as independent variable and Learning Autonomy Scale as independent variable were tested through the credible tool SPSSAU. As can be seen from Table 2, in the whole questionnaire with 182 valid samples, the overall Cronbach's α coefficient for Parental Psychological Control Scale consisting of 18 items is 0.930, way higher than the acceptable standard of 0.7, and the overall Cronbach's α coefficient for Learning Autonomy Scale consisting of 39 items is 0.823, exceeding the expected threshold of 0.8. Hence, the measurement items reflect high data reliability, and there are excellent internal consistency and reliability within the scales employed that they are suitable for subsequent statistical analysis.

Table 2. Validity and reliability of parental psychological control scale and learning autonomy scale.

Variables	N	Item	Cronbach.	KMO	X ²	df	P
Parental Psychological Control	182	18	0.936	0.930	2023.225	153.000	- < 0.001
Learning Autonomy	182	39	0.823	0.817	2617.581	741.000	- < 0.001

3.3 Descriptive analysis of means

Descriptive analysis characterizes the overall data situation through measures such as the mean or median. As can be seen from Table 3, there are no outliers present in the current dataset. Therefore, the absence of outliers in the data allows direct descriptive analysis using the mean.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of key study variables.

Variables	N	Missing sample	Min	Max	M	SD	Mdn
Parental Psychological control	182	0	1.000	4.722	2.755	0.852	2.778
Learning Autonomy	182	0	1.436	4.000	3.066	0.388	3.026

3.4 Correlation analysis

From Table 4, it can be observed that correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between parental psychological control and learning autonomy, with the Pearson correlation coefficient employed to indicate the strength of the correlation. Specifically, the analysis reveals: The correlation coefficient between parental psychological control and learning autonomy is 0.234, which is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This indicates a significant positive correlation between parental psychological control and learning autonomy.

Table 4. Pearson simple correlation coefficient between parental psychological control and students' learning autonomy.

Variables	N	M	SD	Parental Psychological Control	Learning Autonomy
Parental Psychological Control	182	2.755	0.852	1	
Learning Autonomy	182	3.066	0.388	0.234**	1

3.5 Linear regression analysis

The F-test is used to determine whether the regression model is statistically significant: If the model passes the F-test ($p < 0.05$), it indicates that the model is meaningful, and at least one independent variable has an effect on the dependent variable. If the model fails the F-test ($p > 0.05$), it suggests that the model is not meaningful, and none of the independent variables has a significant effect on the dependent variable. Based on Table 5, the model passed the F-test ($F = 10.428, p = 0.001 < 0.05$), indicating that the constructed model is statistically significant.

Table 5. ANOVA test.

ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Regression	1.492	1	1.492	10.428	0.001
Residual	25.754	180	0.143		
Total	27.246	181			

As can be seen from Table 6, a linear regression analysis was conducted with parental psychological control as the independent variable and learning autonomy as the dependent variable. The constant term in this regression equation is 2.772, indicating that in the theoretical scenario where the parental psychological control score is 0, the predicted learning autonomy score would be 2.772. The unstandardized coefficient for parental psychological control is 0.107, suggesting that for every one-unit increase in the parental psychological control score, the student's learning autonomy score is expected to increase by 0.107 units. The model's R^2 value is 0.055, indicating that parental psychological control explains 5.5% of the variation in learning autonomy. Furthermore, the regression coefficient of parental psychological control is 0.107 ($t = 3.229, p = 0.001 < 0.01$), indicating that parental psychological control has a significant positive effect on learning autonomy.

Table 6. Linear regression analysis results ($n=182$).

	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	P	Collinearity Statistics		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
Constant	2.772	0.095	-	29.145	0.000**	-	-
Parental Psychological Control	0.107	0.033	0.234	3.229	0.001**	1.000	1.000
R^2	0.055						
Adjusted R^2	0.050						
F-statistic				$F(1,180)=10.428, p=0.001$			
D-W value				1.919			

4 Discussion

Chinese culture advocates mutual support among family members. From generation to generation, especially for parents in recent decades, with the development of the economy and education, they make every effort to nurture their children, wishing to offer children the best material life, colorful leisure activities, and precious educational opportunities. There is an increasingly popular trend in China that when there is more than one child in a family, the mother or even the father sometimes chooses to quit their job but become a housewife or a househusband just in order to have more time to take good care of the children for their better growth. When seeing parents' sacrifice, children show their gratitude by following their

parents' orders to save their parents' energy, particularly in terms of learning. When children grow up, they are supposed to support their old, weak parents to show their filial piety: some create an extended family by living together with their parents, and some give their old parents money on a regular basis. Therefore, it is evident that a close family bond or the need for relatedness is extremely cherished in Chinese culture. That is to say, though this study had not tested participants' attribution style toward parental psychological control, the first possible reason why parental psychological control can boost children's learning autonomy is that children regard parents' control as caring, and they behave as expected to show their own understanding and support to their parents.

As for the second hypothesis, characteristics of parents could be a significant factor, and parental psychological control takes effect like parental behavior control. In this study, 53.3% of participants out of 182 reported that their mothers have a bachelor's degree, and the proportion for fathers is 48.35%. That is to say, these well-educated parents, even though saying some offensive words, behaving indifferently, or refusing their children's voice, have justified attempts on the matter of children's academic learning based on their successful learning experience. As mentioned above, although participants' attribution style toward parental psychological control had not been tested in this study, it could be assumed that children might have the acknowledgement that their parents' academic advice is truly helpful despite their manipulative way of talking that upsets them emotionally. Also, as parental psychological control emphasizes parents' verbal expression, such as threatening children to withdraw their love, telling children their sacrifice to induce guilt, and asserting authority to refuse children, parents' voice and tone in their expression of requirements in terms of children's academic study matter significantly. Some parents yell angrily, but some parents just nag. Thus, it is possible that children would be irritated or intimidated in the first case, but just ignore parents' nagging in the second case, for the sake of avoiding a fight but maintaining a peaceful family relationship. Even though this study did not test how parents give academic suggestions to children or how children actually feel in that situation, this is still a plausible hypothesis that deserves more in-depth exploration through qualitative interviews or other methods in future research. Overall, given today's parents' educational background, there is a high possibility that parents try to persuade children into the right academic behaviors or decisions, but just in a mild way of manipulation, which ultimately means a thing or two in helping children with their learning.

Finally, the special characteristics of high school students might contribute to their higher level of learning autonomy in relation to parental psychological control. According to Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development and Erik Erikson's 8 Stages of Psychosocial Development, high school students aged 14 to 18 are developing abstract thought beyond concrete thinking to understand abstract concepts such as morality and hypothetical situations. Their personal cognition, academic capability, emotions, and critical thinking skills are under rapid development. Besides, they are at a critical period of their lives when they start to contemplate their future choices of college, careers, and even life after high school, which is both motivating and anxiety-provoking. In this study, 46.15% of participants polled are in grade 12, a critical school year right before college, so their academic pressure might be even more overwhelming than ever. Thus, when parents are expressing their ideas on children's learning and wish students behave accordingly, children have a strong judgment to tell that parents' intrusive words or manipulative behaviors about their learning are well-intended rather than really controlling them. Probably, sometimes children might be emotionally upset by such parenting, which was not tested in this study, but children might still be pushed or reminded to be autonomous learners. This is also because children in high school have developed a high level of sense of family responsibility. In order to function as a responsible family member and for the good of parents as well as for children themselves, children in

high school respond positively to parental psychological control on their learning, and their learning autonomy actually does not decline.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, after structured and systematic research and analysis along with the employment of reliable scales, this study predicted that there is a positive correlation between parental psychological control and high school students' learning autonomy, and that parental psychological control slightly helps with the learning autonomy of high school students. Three assumptions are raised to discuss such results: special characteristics of Chinese culture that advocate relatedness within a family, parents' high educational level that makes their words well-intended to children, and high school students' developed cognition or judgment towards parents' expectations. In spite of these positive results, further researches in qualitative interviews or other methods are expected to focus on the emotional exchange between parents and children in high school while parents are trying to psychologically control their children. Today's parents, frequently troubled by their children's academic performance, are still advised to care about their parenting styles. When carefully differentiating parental psychological control, parental behavioral control, and parental autonomy support, etc., they should resort to the most appropriate methods of parenting to ensure the best family functioning that facilitates children's development in many aspects.

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