Parent Child Boundary Dissolution Across Cultures: A Comparison of College Student Perceptions in India and the United States

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Thesis submitted to the University Honors Program

Miami University, Oxford, OH

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, May 2011

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ABSTRACT

In Western cultures, appropriate parent-child boundaries are considered crucial to healthy child development. Parent-child boundary dissolution, the loss of psychological distinctiveness between parents and their children or confusion of interpersonal roles (Kerig, 2005), is thought to interfere with child well-being. Developmental psychology research has implicated parent-child boundary dissolution in negative child mental health outcomes in Western cultures (Barber 1996). However, it is reasonable to suspect that cultures vary in individuals’ subjective experience of parent-child boundary dissolution. The purpose of this study was to use mixed-methods to compare the reports of subjective experience of parent beliefs and behaviors typically associated with parent-child boundary dissolution in college students in India (n=110) and those in the United States (n=250). Results indicate that parent beliefs and behaviors associated with enmeshment and role reversal were reportedly experienced more frequently and perceived more positively in Indian emerging adults as compared to those in the US. Results are discussed in the context of cultural differences in parenting goals and parent-child relationships.
Acknowledgments

I would first like to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. Vaishali Raval, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Miami University, for initial development and continuous guidance on this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Aaron Luebbe, Assistant Professor of Psychology, and Emily Bendikas, doctoral student of clinical psychology at Miami University, for their suggestions and guidance after reading the final draft of this paper. In addition, I would like to acknowledge Pratiksha Raval, at Gujurat University, and Shwetang Trivedi, at H.K. Arts College, in India, for their contributions with data collection for this project.
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In Western cultures, appropriate parent-child boundaries are considered crucial to healthy child development. Parent-child boundary dissolution, the loss of psychological distinctiveness between parents and their children or confusion of interpersonal roles (Kerig, 2005), is thought to interfere with child well-being. A bulk of the research has linked one type of parent-child boundary dissolution, parental psychological control, with negative child outcomes in Western cultures (e.g., Barber, 2001). Parental psychological control, as defined by Barber (1996), is “control that constrains, invalidates, and manipulates children’s psychological and emotional experience and expression” (p.3296). Examples of psychological control are parents’ withdrawal of love or guilt induction as punishment for a child (Becker 1964).

Both parent-child boundary dissolution and, more specifically, parental psychological control, have been identified as risk factors for child psychopathology (Howes & Cicchetti, 1993; Minuchin, 1974; Sroufe & Ward, 1980). Perceived parental psychological control is predictive of youth internalizing problems and, to a lesser extent, externalizing problems (Barber 1996). However, cross-cultural research examining the link between parental psychological control and child outcomes has demonstrated mixed results. In some studies, parental psychological control is linked to negative child outcomes across cultures (e.g., Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005), while in other studies the relationship between parental psychological control and negative child outcomes is stronger in Western than in Eastern cultures (e.g., Rudy & Halgunseth, 2005). One possible explanation for cross-cultural variation in the link between parental psychological control and child outcomes is that children’s subjective experience of parent behaviors related to parental psychological control, and more broadly, those related to
parent-child boundary dissolution, may vary across cultures. Thus, this study utilized mixed methods to examine perceived frequency of parenting beliefs and behaviors typically associated with parent-child boundary dissolution and college students’ subjective experience of those parent beliefs and behaviors in India and the United States.

**Culture and Parenting**

Bornstein and Cheah (2006) describe parenting as an expression of cultural values. Parental ethnotheories, or commonly held ideas about parenting practices within cultural groups, reflect cultural models of expected parenting behaviors (Lamm, Keller, Yovsi, & Chaudhary, 2008). These cultural models influence parents’ beliefs, socialization goals, and interactions with their children (Bornstein & Cheah, 2006). As described by Lamm et al. (2008), the cultural model of independence conceptualizes the individual as a separate whole and is apparent in parent goals and socialization of qualities such as assertiveness and competition. The contrasting model of interdependence values interpersonal relatedness and is supported through parenting goals such as obedience and respect. In line with these cultural models, individuals from Eastern cultures are more likely to view the self as a part of an interrelated whole, while self-construal in Western cultures is more singular (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Differences between Eastern and Western cultures in the conceptualization of self-construal may influence perceptions of beliefs and practices associated with parent-child boundary dissolution and contribute to differences in outcomes across cultures. For instance, loss of psychological distinctiveness between the parent and the child may be experienced negatively in Western cultures that value an individual’s separateness from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Conversely, in Eastern cultures that value interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), loss of psychological distinctiveness may not be experienced negatively.
Because of differences in parenting goals across cultures, such as the development of an autonomous child or the development of a socially interdependent child (Keller & Otto, 2009), similar parenting strategies may be perceived differently depending on the context of cultural expectations. Parenting goals provide a context for different perceptions of parent beliefs and behaviors associated with boundary dissolution between youth and parents from India and the US. For example, in Western cultures it is considered adaptive for young children to engage in a separation period following secure attachment formation (Ainsworth, 1970; Goldberg 2000). This is a time in which the child can explore without direct parental guidance. Similar to the period of separation within secure attachment formation, adolescents in Western cultures typically differentiate and separate themselves from the family system in an individuation process (Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). In adolescence, this separation is considered crucial to autonomy and identity development. In Eastern cultures, however, such periods of separation may not be expected, reflecting the greater value of interdependence in such cultures (Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). Therefore, cultural models of parenting expectations and perceived normativity of parenting behaviors may influence differences in the subjective experience of parenting across cultures.

**Parent-Child Boundary Dissolution and Youth Outcomes**

Parent-child boundary dissolution has broadly been identified as maladaptive for child adjustment and well-being (Kerig, 2005). In addition to psychological control, one of the most commonly researched types of parent-child boundary dissolution is role reversal, in which a child takes on caregiving responsibilities or expectations from the parent (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Minuchin, 1974). Two subtypes of boundary dissolution measured in the present study, adultification and parentification, fall under the broader category of role reversal.
Adultification describes a situation in which a child assumes developmentally inappropriate expectations or responsibilities (Jurkovic, 1997), while in the case of parentification, the responsibilities assumed by the child are those typically expected of a parent (Byng–Hall, 2002; Jurkovic, Morrell, & Thirkield, 1999). For example, adultification may involve expectations for a child to act as a friend or peer of the parent (Walsh, 1979), while in the case of parentification, the child may be expected to provide a parent with physical and emotional care (Jurkovic, Morrell, & Thirkield, 1999). Role reversal has typically been seen as detrimental in Western cultures due to the tendency for children in such situations to sacrifice their own needs as they instead provide care for their parents (Alexander, 2003; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973).

Other types of parent-child boundary dissolution that have been associated with maladaptive youth outcomes in Western cultures include infantilization, enmeshment, and spousification. Infantilization, also described as overprotection, is nearly the opposite of role reversal, and involves parents’ underestimation of their children’s abilities (Levy, 1943). Enmeshment is a type of boundary dissolution that usually describes a family in which individuals are not distinct or separate, but are instead overly involved with each other (Minuchin, 1974). Spousification is another form of boundary dissolution in which the child is treated as an intimate partner, either in a seductive or hostile fashion (Sroufe & Ward, 1980). The present study examines spousification in the hostile sense, which has also been described as “spillover” from marital conflict (Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993).

**Parent-Child Boundary Dissolution across Cultures**

Cross-cultural research on parent-child boundary dissolution and youth outcomes has largely been limited to the subtype of parental psychological control. Barber, Stolz, & Olsen (2005) examined the link between parental psychological control and maladaptive adjustment
among adolescents, ages 13-17, in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America. The study measures included child reports of parental support, parental psychological control, parental behavioral control, adolescent social initiative, depression, and antisocial behavior. Barber and colleagues found maladaptive effects of parental psychological control across cultures, especially as a predictor of depression and, to a lesser extent, antisocial behavior. In a study with similar intent, Rudy and Halgunseth (2005) examined youth outcomes of parental psychological control among mothers and their children ages 7-13. Participants were of European, Middle Eastern, and South Asian descent and completed self-report measures regarding mothers' child rearing practices, endorsement of collectivism, maternal cognitions, child self-esteem, and child school grades. While the study reported higher levels of parental psychological control in participants from Middle Eastern and South Asian descent, children and mothers from those groups did not demonstrate elevated maladaptive outcomes and parental psychological control was not associated with child outcomes in any of the cultural groups, including the European sample. However, parental psychological control was associated with maladaptive maternal cognitions in the European sample, but not the other cultural groups. These mixed findings underscore the need for further research examining parent-child boundary dissolution in general and parental psychological control in particular across cultures.

The Present Study

This study utilized mixed methods to examine the perceived frequency of parent beliefs and behaviors typically associated with parent-child boundary dissolution and the subjective experience of those parent beliefs and behaviors among college students in India and the United States. The college student population was chosen for this study due to participants’ state in a transition toward adulthood, or emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is the stage between
adolescence and young adulthood with a range of ages from approximately 18 to 25 in industrialized societies where entry into adult roles is delayed (Arnett, 2000; Sirsch, Dreher, Mayr, & Willinger, 2009). Many Eastern cultures may not have a period of time between adolescence and adulthood. However, young people of urban areas in developing countries like India are more likely to experience a stage of emerging adulthood given some similarities to Western cultures in the form of delayed marriage and parenthood, particularly alongside the desire to obtain higher education (Arnett, 2000). Thus, the present study focused on perceptions of parent-child-boundary dissolution in emerging adulthood.

A mixed-methods approach is particularly suited to the study of parent-child boundary dissolution because it facilitates an examination of the prevalence of specific parent beliefs and behaviors associated with parent-child boundary dissolution, as well as an exploration of associated subjective experience (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). Thus, in the present study, a quantitative data collection method was used to assess college students’ perceptions of frequency of parent beliefs and behaviors typically associated with parent-child boundary dissolution. Given that parent beliefs and behaviors associated with parent-child boundary dissolution may be more in line with cultural parenting goals in India, they may also be more normative in the Indian culture. Thus, it was hypothesized that college students in India would report parent beliefs and behaviors associated with parent-child boundary dissolution as occurring more frequently than college students in the US.

In order to assess college students’ subjective experience of parent beliefs and behaviors typically associated with parent-child boundary dissolution, a qualitative method of data collection was used. Due to differences in cultural philosophies including parenting goals and self-construal, previous research suggests that students in India and the US would report different
perceptions of their own experiences with parent-child boundary dissolution. Specifically, it was hypothesized that Indian students would provide more positive descriptors of their affective experience of beliefs and behaviors associated with parent-child boundary dissolution as compared with students from the US.

Method

Participants

Participants included 110 (60% female) college students in India and 250 (66% female) college students from the United States. Participants in India were recruited through announcements made in second and third year undergraduate psychology classes at a college in the northwestern state of Gujarat. Participants in the United States were recruited through the psychology department undergraduate participant pool at a mid-sized university in Southwestern Ohio.

The mean age of participants in India was 19 ($SD = 1.1$) and the mean age of participants in the US was 18.9 ($SD = .93$). Participants in the US were predominantly Caucasian (88%) with fewer participants identifying as African American (3%), Asian (3%), and Hispanic (2%). The remaining participants (4%) did not provide racial identification. In India, participants were predominantly Hindu (96%) with small percentages reporting as Jain (3%) and Muslim (1%).

Procedure

In both countries, written consent was obtained from each participant in their native language prior to measure administration. In the US, participants completed an adapted version of Parent-Child Boundaries Scale-III (PBS-III, Kerig, 2007) in English in paper format in groups of 20-30. Participants received course credit for participation. For the Indian sample, the adapted version of PBS-III was translated from English to Gujarati and back-translated to ensure conceptual and linguistic equivalence. Indian participants then completed PBS-III in Gujarati in
a paper format in groups of approximately 30-40. They received stationary materials as compensation.

**Measures**

The PBS-III, a 35-item self-report questionnaire, lists statements describing parental beliefs and behaviors (e.g., “My mother tries to change how I feel and think about things”). Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Sometimes*, 4 = *Often*, and 5 = *Almost always*. The items are organized into seven subscales: enmeshment (4 items), infantilization (6 items), psychological control (6 items), role reversal (adultification and parentification: 5 items each), hostile spousification (5 items), and protection from boundary dissolution (4 items). Protection from boundary dissolution is a construct added to the PBS-III by Kerig (2007) with the intent of measuring parents’ explicit attempts to prevent parent-child boundary dissolution from occurring. Therefore, the subscale assesses parenting beliefs and behaviors opposite from the other subtypes of parent-child boundary dissolution. The present study excluded one item on the protection subscale due to typing errors in some surveys, and so a total of three items were included for this subscale. Participants in the present study completed the measure solely in regard to perceptions of maternal parenting beliefs and behaviors. The PBS-III adolescent/college student version has demonstrated good reliability with subscale alphas ranging from .70 to .90 for youth reports (Kerig, 2007). In the present study, the PBS-III was adapted such that after each statement describing a specific maternal belief or behavior (e.g., “My mother tries to change how I feel and think about things”), an open-ended prompt followed to capture the subjective affective experience associated with each statement (“This makes me feel _______”). As evident from Table 1, Cronbach’s alpha values were lower for the Indian
sample than the US sample, and these values were quite low particularly for protection, adultification, parentification, and infantilization subscales.

**Results**

**Perceived Frequency of Parent-Child Boundary Dissolution**

Participants’ reported frequency of maternal beliefs and behaviors associated with parent-child boundary dissolution were compared on each of the seven PBS-III subscales for samples in India and the US. Means of reported frequencies on PBS-III subscales were compared between India and the US using independent samples t-tests. Consistent with the hypothesis, significant mean differences were found between the frequency of participants’ experience of three subtypes of parent-child boundary dissolution in the Indian and US samples, as shown in Table 1. Participants in India reported experiencing parenting beliefs and behaviors associated with parentification \((p<.001)\), enmeshment \((p<.01)\), and adultification \((p<.05)\) at higher rates than participants in the US (See Table 1). There were no significant differences across the two cultural groups in reported frequency of psychological control, infantilization, spousification, or protection from boundary dissolution.

**Perceived Subjective Experience of Parent-Child Boundary Dissolution**

**Strategy for analyzing qualitative data.** Based on the review of the responses to the open-ended prompts accompanying each of the 35 PBS-III statements, a coding scheme was developed. Using this coding scheme, a qualitative content analysis was performed on participants’ responses to the open-ended prompts. Native speakers of each respective language coded the open-ended responses and grouped them into common categories such as “happy,” “general positive,” “sad,” and “general negative.” In addition to a specific affect category, each response also received a secondary code of neutral, positive affect, or negative affect. The
principal investigator coded all responses from the US sample in English and another rater coded one third of the US responses to establish inter-rater reliability, with Cohen’s Kappa demonstrating 100% agreement for the secondary codes of neutral, positive affect, or negative affect that were used in present analyses. The faculty advisor coded responses from the Indian sample in Gujarati, and another rater coded one-third of the responses in Gujarati with Cohen’s Kappa demonstrating 100% agreement for the secondary codes of neutral, positive affect, or negative affect. Reported emotion categories for both Indian and US participants are listed in Table 2. Following coding, the qualitative data were quantified in order to compare the overall valence of responses between cultural groups. For each participant, a total positive affect score for each subscale was calculated by adding the positive affect codes across items that comprised the subscale. A total negative affect score for each subscale was calculated by adding the negative affect codes across items that comprised the subscale. A difference score for each subscale was calculated for each participant by subtracting total negative affect from total positive affect. The values for difference scores ranged from +5 (indicating more positive than negative affect cited in response to the subscale) to -6 (indicating more negative than positive affect).

**Main findings.** Independent samples t-test showed mean affect difference scores were significantly different between Indian and US participants on the subscales of infantilization, parentification, adultification, and enmeshment, as displayed in Table 3. Indian participants provided more positive affect descriptors in the open-ended response prompt as compared to participants in the US, indicating that for statements pertaining to the aforementioned subtypes of parent-child boundary dissolution, Indian participants’ subjective perceptions of the relevant parenting beliefs and behaviors were more positive. Descriptors pertaining to other subtypes of
parent-child boundary dissolution (e.g., spousification and parental psychological control) tended to be negative for both Indian and US participants, while the mean affect difference scores on the protection subscale were close to neutral.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare college students’ perceptions of parent beliefs and behaviors typically associated with parent-child boundary dissolution in college students in India and the United States. Preliminary analyses revealed low internal consistency of the parent-child boundary dissolution self-report measure for the Indian sample, which will be discussed first, followed by the discussion of main findings.

Internal Consistency of PBS-III Subscales

The present findings demonstrated that Cronbach’s alpha values for PBS-III subscales were lower for the Indian sample than the US sample, and these values were quite low particularly for protection, adultification, parentification, and infantilization subscales in the Indian sample.

Reports of Frequency and Subjective Experience of Types of Boundary Dissolution

Overall, the results supported the hypotheses. Specifically, Indian participants reported experiencing boundary dissolution more often for the subscales parentification, adultification, and enmeshment. Hypotheses were further supported as college students in India reported experiencing their mothers’ beliefs and behaviors related to infantilization, enmeshment, role reversal (adultification, parentification) more positively than US students, though the hypothesis was not supported for perceptions of parental psychological control.

The present findings provide further support for the idea that parent-child boundary dissolution may be more common and positively perceived in cultures that embrace
interdependent parenting goals and self-construal, as compared to those that promote more independence among youth. Therefore, findings from the present study provide a richer context in which to further examine cross-cultural outcomes of parent-child boundary dissolution.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The present sample of college students was recruited from the Northwestern Indian state of Gujarat and from the Midwestern US state of Ohio. India and the US are diverse countries and the present sample cannot be considered representative of each entire country. Future research may compare reports of parent-child boundary dissolution within different communities in India and the US. Secondly, the present study utilized participants’ self-reports of their perceptions of frequency and their subjective experience of beliefs and behaviors associated with parent-child boundary dissolution. Although self-reports have been prominent in examinations of parent-child boundary dissolution, observational studies and those that include reports from multiple sources (e.g., both parents and youth) may be helpful in future research. Third, the present study utilized a well validated measure of parent-child boundary dissolution, and the internal consistency of the PBS-III subscales were lower in the Indian than US sample. Thus, it is unclear whether constructs tapped by these subscales are reliable and culturally relevant in India, and caution should be exercised in interpreting present findings. Factor analytic techniques may be used in future research to examine whether constructs measured by PBS-III are valid in India. In addition, open-ended interviews may provide rich narrative data concerning the construct of parent-child boundary dissolution across cultures. Finally, the present study included the examination of only youth reports of their perceptions of parent-child boundary dissolution. In order to examine the impact of parent-child boundary dissolution on youth outcomes, future
research should include measures that assess college students' subjective experience of the parent-child boundary dissolution, as well those that assess college student outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the current study contributed to the scarce cross-cultural literature concerning youth perceptions of parent-child boundary dissolution. Specifically, the current study examined various types of parent-child boundary dissolution that have received relatively less attention in the cross-cultural literature, and explored youth’s subjective experience of parent beliefs and behaviors associated with parent-child boundary dissolution in two cultural groups.
Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for PBS-III subscales in India and US

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PBS-III subscale</th>
<th>India ($n = 108$)</th>
<th>US ($n = 260$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Control</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infantilization</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enmeshment</td>
<td>2.62**</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adultification</td>
<td>3.04*</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parentification</td>
<td>2.68***</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spousification</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Independent samples t-tests showed that mean differences between India and US were significant (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$) for Enmeshment, Adultification, and Parentification subscales.
Table 2
Affect Descriptors Reported in India and the US

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Feeling Words</th>
<th>Negative Feeling Words</th>
<th>Neutral Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good/content/generaliized positive</td>
<td>Bad/uncomfortable/generaliized negative</td>
<td>Okay/fine/neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Sad/disappointed</td>
<td>Responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proud</td>
<td>Worried/fearful/nervous</td>
<td>Needed**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding/sympathetic</td>
<td>Angry/frustrated/annoyed</td>
<td>Uncodable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loved/respected/valued</td>
<td>Guilty/regretful/apologetic</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close/connected</td>
<td>Lonely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly/like a friend*</td>
<td>Immature/disrespected/controlled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe/supported/trusted</td>
<td>Stressed/burdened</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature/responsible</td>
<td>Worthless/incompetent**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grateful/fortunate**</td>
<td>Embarrassed**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * reported only in India; ** reported only in the US; the remaining categories reported in both groups
Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Affect Difference Scores in India and US

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PBS-III subscale</th>
<th>India ($n = 108$)</th>
<th>US ($n = 260$)</th>
<th>$t$ (376)</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Control</td>
<td>-1.19</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>-1.49</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infantilization</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>-1.24</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enmeshment</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adultification</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parentification</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spousification</td>
<td>-.37</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>-.58</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each participant, the total positive affect for each subscale was calculated by adding the positive affect codes across items that comprised the subscale. Total negative affect for each subscale was calculated by adding the negative affect codes across items that comprised the subscale. Difference score for each subscale was calculated for each participant by subtracting total negative affect from total positive affect. The values for difference scores ranged from +5 (indicating more positive than negative affect cited in response to the subscale) to -6 (indicating more negative than positive affect).
References


