Does democracy in the family and school promote adolescents’ psychological well-being?: Findings from urban and rural China

Shaogang Yang [Guangdong University of Foreign Studies]
Sharon To [University of Toronto]
Charles Helwig [University of Toronto]
Autonomy and Freedoms (Universalist Perspectives)

Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001):

- autonomy is a universal need or requirement.
- thwarting of autonomy needs has negative effects on psychological well-being.
- by autonomy here I mean individuals’ ability to pursue their desires or interests free from coercion or undue influence and to have a say in how their lives are led. Such theorists have proposed that when individuals feel unduly coerced or lacking in autonomy, their psychological well-being suffers as a result of this basic need being unfulfilled.
Social Domain Theory (Nucci, 1981; Turiel, 2006):

Personal domain (personal choice, agency).

- Provides psychological basis for moral concepts of freedoms and rights and perhaps democracy (Helwig & McNeil, 2011)
- They have linked the development of autonomy to universal processes in which children are believed to increasingly claim greater areas of personal jurisdiction as they get older, sometimes in conflict or negotiation with adults.
The construction of a personal sphere of decision making is believed to facilitate the development of moral concepts of freedoms and rights. The idea of personal agency or choice may also be a psychological requirement for the notion of democracy, or the idea that people should have a voice or say in decisions that affect them.
And here we mean democracy in the widest sense of the term, not just in its political sense as applying only to government. So, we could speak of more democratic families or schools, for example, if they are structured so as to allow individuals to have input into decisions, rather than hierarchically with authorities making decisions for others unilaterally.
Perceptions of Democratic Climate

- There is some existing research on this topic, most of it conducted in Western cultural contexts like North America. Way, Reddy, & Rhodes (2007) surveyed over 1400 US adolescents over the 6th-8th grades.

- It found that when adolescents perceived school climate as more democratic (i.e., more voice or say in school or classroom decisions), they experience less depressive symptoms, show higher self-esteem, and have fewer adjustment problems.
School and family environments that are more democratic in structure (e.g. allow for greater involvement of children in decision making) contribute positively to children’s psychological well-being (leads to less depression or anxiety). But there is virtually no research looking at this issue in non-Western cultures, especially in highly traditional, rural settings like those found in Mainland China.
This issue is particularly important for current debates within psychology about whether or not rights and democracy are relevant beyond Western cultures.
Heinrich et al. (2010) have argued that Western psychology has presented a distorted view of the person by focusing on “Weird” people, or those from Western, European, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies. One of the results of studying WEIRD people is that autonomy or choice is overemphasized in psychological theory and research. W.E.I.R.D = Western, European, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic
Similarly, proponents of the highly popular Individualism and Collectivism dichotomy have contrasted the independent self, emphasizing autonomy and choice, found in individualistic societies such as those in the West, with the sociocentric self that emphasizes harmony and fitting into the collective, found in many or most non-Western societies. Individualism: Collectivism (e.g., Triandis, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 2010, 1991)
Shweder (1990)

Along these lines, the anthropologist Richard Shweder has contrasted different moralities appropriate to different types of societies. An “ethics of Autonomy” is claimed to be dominant in the West and emphasizes individual rights and democratic social structures, in contrast to the “ethics of community” which characterizes many East Asian societies and emphasizes the subordination of the individual to the group or authority.
These different ethics are seen as having implications even for psychological well-being. As Shweder and his colleagues put it:
Implications for Psychological Well-being

“Overall, in many East Asian contexts, personal sense of well-being is tied less to meeting an individual’s goals (the ethics of autonomy) and more to doing what is required in a given situation, or doing something the right or appropriate way (ethics of community)”. Shweder et al., 2006, p. 760.
These claims, however, have not been tested empirically, as the previous research has largely explored relations between democratic family and school environment and psychological well-being in Western societies or in urban environments.
In our research, we examined this question in both urban and rural China to see if democratic family and school environment and autonomy support would show positive relations with adolescents’ psychological well-being.
Sample

- N = 395 Chinese adolescents
- 2 age groups:
  - Junior High (12-16 year-olds)
  - Senior High (15-19 year-olds)
- 2 Research Sites:
  - Urban China (Guangzhou City)
  - Rural China (Renhua County in Northern Guangdong)
These sites were selected to provide a contrast between a modern, economically-developed city and a much more traditional, agriculturally-based, rural community with far less exposure to Western influences.
Urban Sample Demographics

- Most parents worked in service occupations or trades, or family businesses in city.

- Education Level of parents:
  - 9% university education
  - 75% high school only
  - 14% grade school only
Rural Sample Demographics

- Most parents were farmers by occupation

- Education Level of parents:
  - 2% university
  - 14% high school
  - 49% junior high only
  - 28% grade school only
  - 1% no education
  - (6% did not respond)
Measures

In this study, we developed on our own measure of democratic climate. Our measure included items similar to those of other measures of democratic climate, such as whether or not children’s input was sought and they had a say in decisions. It also included some other standard features of democracy, such as support for freedom of expression, and due process.
For example, we asked adolescents about whether the adults also had to follow the rules and regulations like the children (so do the school rules apply equally to teachers and students or are the teachers “beyond the law”), and we asked about whether students could comfortably express disagreement with authorities or say what they really thought.
Measures

- Other than democratic climate, we also looked at general autonomy support and responsiveness in the family and school environments, as they might also be associated with well-being.

---Parent and Teacher Autonomy Support and Control Questionnaire (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Robbins, 1995)
In particular, we assessed adolescents’ perceptions of how responsive their parents and teachers were to their needs, as well as their perceptions of general autonomy support from parents and teachers (this is a Self Determination Theory measure that looks at adult support for children’s autonomy).
This measure partially overlaps with our measure of democratic climate but isn’t the same thing. For example, in addition to assessing adult provision of personal choice and freedom, this measure of autonomy also includes things like “encouraging children to explore their own interests”, which supports their autonomy but isn’t directly a part of democracy per se.
Our measure of democratic climate, then, focuses more specifically on the purely democratic aspects of autonomy (like voice in decisions, freedom of speech and due process). By including both measures we were able to see whether these democratic aspects of autonomy uniquely predicted adolescents’ psychological well-being, over and above more general autonomy support as conceptualized by Self-Determination Theory.
And for psychological well-being, we had three separate measures:

- Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS-2)
- Children’s Depression Inventory (CDI)
- Student’s Life Satisfaction Scale (Terry & Huebner, 1995)
Measures

Lastly, we also assessed participants’ attitudes toward children’s rights issues.

Children’s Rights Attitudes scale (CRA)

(Peterson-Badali, Morine, Ruck, & Slonim, 2004)
Studies in the West have shown that both children and adults distinguish between two types of rights when thinking about children’s rights: Nurturance Rights and Self-determination rights.

- **Nurturance Rights** (right to medical care, education, emotional support from parents)

- **Self-determination Rights**
  -- e.g., choice of recreational activities, friends, freedom of expression
We wanted to see specifically whether endorsements of rights would follow the same developmental pattern as found in Western countries, with nurturance rights generally endorsed at all ages and self-determination rights showing an age-related increase.
We also wanted to explore whether and how endorsements of rights are related to psychological well-being. This is an issue that has not been examined in previous research, so we had no specific hypotheses here.
Findings

- General autonomy support: highly correlated with psychological well-being for both family (r = 0.39, p < 0.001) and school environment (r = 0.20, p < 0.001)
That means that when Chinese adolescents perceived their environments as more autonomy supportive and responsive to their needs, they were less anxious, less depressed, and reported higher levels of overall life satisfaction.
And this applies to both family and school environment, with the family environment having a higher correlation to psychological well-being compared to the school environment. These findings support Self-Determination Theory’s proposition that when basic psychological needs like autonomy are violated, individuals’ psychological well-being suffers.
And as with autonomy support and responsiveness, democratic climate (both family and school democratic climate) were strongly correlated with psychological well-being for (family = .40, $p < .001$; school = .20, $p < .01$).
To answer the question of whether democratic climate uniquely predicted psychological well-being, we used hierarchical regression to control for the contribution of the other variables (e.g., parent and teacher responsiveness and general autonomy support).
Findings

- Democratic family climate contributes unique variance to psychological well-being ($\rho < .01$) after controlling for other variables (autonomy support and responsiveness).
So, then, specifically democratic features of autonomy (i.e., voice, freedom of expression, and due process) appear to be uniquely predictive of various indicators of psychological well-being among adolescents from both urban and rural China.
Findings for rights attitudes

- First, overall, a developmental pattern was found, in which adolescents are more likely to endorse both nurturance rights and self-determination rights as they get older.
  - in older adolescents (vs. younger age group)
  - Urban (vs. rural group)
In studies in the West, the developmental patterns applied mainly to self-determination rights, but in China we found that both types of rights were endorsed more highly as adolescents got older. A setting difference was also found, in which adolescents from the urban setting overall endorsed higher levels of these rights compared to their counterparts from the rural setting.
Surprising Findings

- In relation to psychological well-being, significant negative association was found with support for self-determination rights
  - But only for a small subset of participants (5%) who endorsed self-determination rights very highly and who also reported very low autonomy support and responsiveness in the family

- Indication of a reactive pathway

- Significant negative relationship between rights endorsement and psychological well-being disappears after removing these participants
So, in general (besides those few reactive participants), Chinese adolescents’ attitudes toward rights don’t appear to show any clear direct relation to psychological well-being. Although how they perceive themselves to be treated by parents and school authorities with respect to the autonomy they are actually given, is highly related to their psychological well-being.
Conclusions:

Chinese Adolescents:

- Assert both nurturance and self-determination rights.

- Self-determination (and nurturance) rights become more salient with increasing age in both rural and urban contexts.

- Perceived personal autonomy and democratic climate positively related to psychological well-being.

- Concepts of rights and freedoms have their source in universal needs for autonomy and developmental processes, rather than culturally-transmitted orientations (e.g., Individualism/Collectivism).
And, whether Chinese adolescents perceived their families or schools as supporting their personal freedom or democratic rights to participation, freedom of expression, and due process, was related to various indicators of psychological well-being. Rights and democracy, and how these notions are instantiated in families and schools, appear to have functional significance for these adolescents’ psychological health.
Despite the fact that these adolescents came from mainland China, a country often described as highly collectivistic and less supportive of freedoms, individual rights, and democratic autonomy than Western societies, our findings were true even for much more traditional rural populations within Mainland China, so these findings cannot be explained in terms of urbanization or cosmopolitanism or globalization.
More broadly, our findings suggest that concepts of rights and freedoms may have their source in universal needs for autonomy, and in how these needs intersect with developmental processes, rather than in purely culturally-defined and transmitted moral orientations.
Autonomy and Democracy

May not be so W.E.I.R.D!*  

*Western, European, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic
Thank you!