

## **The Relationship between Parental Belief on Filial Piety and Child Psychosocial Adjustment among Malay Families**

**Nellie Ismail\*, Tan Jo-Pei and Rahimah Ibrahim**

*Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

*\*E-mail: ellysa\_305@hotmail.com*

### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the relationship between parental belief on filial piety and child psychosocial adjustment among Malay families. The study sample comprised 108 mother-child dyads of Malay families from the central zone of Peninsular Malaysia. Data were collected using structured questionnaires. Parental belief was measured using Parental Belief Scale, while child psychosocial adjustment was measured using Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Results showed that children whose parents believed in filial piety had significantly lower levels of total difficulties in behavioural, emotional symptoms, conduct problem, and hyperactivity or inattention. Findings implied that filial piety could be used as a positive measure of behavioural and emotional control of a child. Therefore, it is important for parents to nurture their children about filial piety expectations so as to provide them with moral education associated with positive psychosocial adjustment.

**Keywords:** Child, families, filial piety, Malay, parental belief, psychosocial adjustment

### **INTRODUCTION**

Psychosocial adjustment is taken as a form of positive development of the self through the integration of personal and other people's perceptions of oneself. The multifaceted awareness of oneself, which results from relationships with parents and peers, affects children's psychological well-being (Bracken, 1996; Steinberg and Morris, 2001). Some children can regulate different perceptions of themselves effectively while others may not be able to form a coherent identity (National Institute of Child and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN], 2004). Meanwhile, children who failed to negotiate various images of themselves might have difficulties in their psychosocial adjustment in terms of emotions, conduct,

attention or focus, peer relationship, and prosocial behaviour (Brugman, Reijneveld and Verhulst, 2001). Ultimately, problematic psychosocial adjustment early in life may have harmful consequences in adulthood (Buchanan, Flouri and Brinke, 2002).

Adjustment problems in the form of age-inappropriate, abnormal or unhealthy behaviour may also severely interfere with the everyday functioning of the child (Brugman, Reijneveld and Verhulst, 2001; Wallander, Thompson and Alriksson-Schmidt, 2003, pp. 141-158). Positive adjustment and normative functioning of children are developed through numerous relationships but most importantly through the ties between children and their parents.

Parents play an important role in socializing their children towards adopting any particular

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\*Corresponding Author

values. Parental belief or schemata refers to parents' views of developing child that affect the way they respond to the child (Gamble, Ramakumar and Diaz, 2007). Belief may have more than one goal and it is usually expressed through behaviour (McGillicuddy-De Lisi and Sigel, 2002). Variability in parental belief on child development, attitudes towards childrearing, and enforcement of certain behaviours in the daily interaction between parents and their children have lasting effects on the social functioning of the children (Parke, 2002, pp. 27-73; NICHD ECCRN, 2004). Research on parental beliefs have emphasized its effects on individuals' relationship development (Scott and Hill, 2001), important life outcomes (Katz and Windecker-Nelson, 2004), parents' childrearing, behaviour, and children's socio-emotional competence (Dunsmore and Karn, 2001).

How a child grows and develops is dictated and influenced by his/her parental belief (McGillicuddy-De Lisi and Sigel, 2002). Filial piety is one of the concepts in parental belief. As for the family-child relation, the concept of filial piety particularly emphasizes on children's love and respect for their parents. Obligation, sacrifice repayment, and respect are the traditional meanings of filial piety (Tsai, 1999). It has remained and developed among Asian societies which give guidance to the social behaviours (Chen, Bond and Tang, 2007).

Kim (2003) who studied the importance of parental belief in filial piety among Korean families, found that filial piety based on child-rearing tended to emphasize on teaching and parent role-modelling in order to prevent children from wrong-doing. In addition, Chao (2000), in her comparative study on parenting among immigrant Chinese and European American families, found that Chinese mothers endorsed the socialization goals for filial piety and structural parental involvement practice in comparison with European American mothers. These studies indicated that Asian parents were more likely to have parent-centred socialization goals.

Filial piety in the Asian culture focuses on respect and care for the elders in the family

and these help to maintain family order by promoting responsibility, interdependence, sacrifice, and family harmony (Bengtson and Putney, 2000). The lifelong loyalty to one's parents explains why the quality of relationship between parents and adult children remains positive in East Asian samples, even if there are imbalances in the exchange of support over the life course (Trommsdorff, 2006, pp. 143-184). Asian culture remains more traditional and familistic than most Western industrialized societies (Kojima, 2000). As a case in point, despite shifts in values (due to modernity), filial piety is sustained within the Chinese societies through education (Cheung and Kwan, 2008). This is in contrast with the Western culture which places emphasis on independence, self-fulfilment and self-reliance (Sung, 2000), as well as reciprocity in the form of a balanced exchange within a parent-child relationship (Trommsdorff, 2006, pp.143-184). Therefore, filial piety can be seen as a form of lifelong mutual dependence (Schwarz, Trommsdorff and Chakkarath, 2004) and parenting continues to be one of the most enduring forms of commitment and investment in a parent-child relationship.

What the parents believe about the process of development in general and the capabilities of their own children in particular are likely to be a major influence on parental practice (McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). This hypothesis was based on the Personal Construct Theory developed by Kelly (1955). According to the theory, each individual formulates personal constructs through which the world is viewed and interpreted. These constructs are defined as templates that fit over the realities composed by individuals. Personal constructs are used to predict events and assess accuracy of such predictors after events have occurred. Thus, one constructs guide behaviour when interacting with others.

Parents' belief about children can be viewed as a means through which events are categorized and the parent's own behaviour is guided just as Kelly's personal constructs are seen as the directing source of behaviours. Such belief about children is constructed on the basis of

experience with one's own child, as well as on the basis of the parent's own experiences as a child in a family (McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). This belief system provides a framework for assimilating new information or knowledge. The parent's belief system is built from information obtained in the course of interactions with children and it systematizes the grouping of constructs so as to minimize psychological inconsistencies between these cognitive elements.

Every parent has their own belief on what competent parenting consist of. Parenting is a dynamic adaptation process which develops in accordance to the developing needs of the child. The problem is, not all parents may understand how imperative it is to adjust their belief to the development of the child. Some parents may feel that their belief should be consistent and it is not necessary to change as the child develops. Other parents may understand the importance of adjustment; however, they do not adjust their parenting in a manner that promotes healthy parent-child relationships and child development. As a result, the child is being negatively affected in their psychosocial adjustment.

In sum, theory and research have indicated that every parental belief leads to parental behaviour, which then yields a particular child outcome. The present study therefore examined the relationship between parental belief on filial piety and child's psychosocial adjustment among Malay families, in addition to describing the levels of both variables.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Research Design*

The study employed a quantitative survey methodology to gather information on the relationship between parental belief and child psychosocial adjustment. A set of standardized, bilingual survey questionnaire was administered during the data collection process, in which questions focusing on the respondents' demographical characteristics and standardized instruments were included.

### *Participants*

The participants for this study were drawn from a larger sample that took part in a study of parenting behaviour and child adjustment in two culturally divergent family environments (the intercultural and the monocultural family). Only participants who are from the monocultural family were included in the present analyses.

A total of 108 Malay mother-child dyads were recruited for the study. All families involved in this study resided in the central zone of Peninsular Malaysia. The respondents were identified using a purposive sampling, drawn from the Department of National Unity and Integration (JPN). The sampling frame from the JPN was built on the registration records of kindergartens (TASKA) run by the state department. The unit of analysis for the study was mother-child dyad, therefore only mothers and the targeted children, aged 8-19 years old, were recruited for the study.

### *Procedure*

Malay and English languages are the major mediums of communication among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. Thus, a set of standardized Malay-English bi-language survey question was used to gather information from the respondents. The questionnaire was aimed at collecting information on parental belief and child psychosocial adjustment as well as demographic information. Anonymous questionnaires were used and consent forms provided a brief description of the study, and emphasised the confidentiality of participants' responses and the uses of the data. Before administering the questionnaire, participants were informed about the limits to confidentiality and the related procedures.

In most instances, interviewers worked in pairs and thus enabled the mother and child to be interviewed separately so as to allow for confidentiality and maximise the comfort of the participants. The questionnaires were either self-administered or administered by the interviewers. If it was administered, the interviewers asked questions based on the

standardized questionnaire, indicated the response options to the questions, and recorded the participant's answer. The administration method was depended on the educational background of the participants. Most mothers preferred to be interviewed by the interviewers, especially those from working-class families and those living in the rural areas. Generally, children aged older than 12 were offered self-administration, where at least one of the interviewers was present throughout the administration to monitor and respond to any questions and concerns. Children younger than 12 year old or for those who were not confident in self-administration of the questionnaire, the interviewer read the questions aloud to them and recorded their responses on the survey form. The questionnaires, data collection procedures, informed consent forms, and instructions were reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford.

#### *Measures*

##### **Dependent variable**

##### ***Children's psychosocial adjustment***

The 25-item Malay version of Goodman's Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) was used to measure 5 types of behavioural attributes among children/adolescents: 1) The *prosocial subscale* (5 items) focused on the positive (strength) aspects of behaviour ( $\alpha = 0.58$ ); 2) The *emotional symptoms subscale* (5 items) measured emotional problems among the children/adolescents ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ); 3) The *conduct problems subscale* (5 items) measured behaviour such as anger, fighting, cheating, and stealing ( $\alpha = 0.66$ ); 4) The *hyperactivity subscale* (5 items) focused on child/adolescent restlessness, fidgetiness, and distraction ( $\alpha = 0.43$ ) and 5) The *peer relationship problems subscale* (5 items), assessed child/adolescent relationship with peers ( $\alpha = 0.55$ ).

Subscale scores were computed by summing scores on relevant items (after recording reversed

items; ranged 0-10). Based on Goodman's recommendation for pro-social subscale, scores higher than the cut-off point of 5 reflect a normal level of behaviour, whereas scores higher than the cut-off points for the other four subscales reflect borderline or abnormal behaviour (cut-off points: *Emotional symptoms* = 3; *Conduct problem* = 2; *Hyperactivity* = 5; *Peer problem* = 2). A total difficulty score was also calculated by summing the scores of the emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and peer relationship problems subscales. A higher total score for difficult behaviour indicates higher levels of problem in psychosocial adjustment. An adequate Cronbach alpha coefficient was recorded for the sample ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ).

##### **Independent variable**

##### ***Parental beliefs***

An 8-item scale, which aimed to measure the dimension of filial piety of parental beliefs in an Asian culture, was developed based on the parental belief and family culture of Malays and Chinese families (Chao, 1995; Ho, 1994; Kling, 1995; Chao, 2000; Chao and Tseng, 2002). In addition, some items for the scale were adapted and modified from the existing scales to capture the child-rearing belief among Asian parents (Chao, 2000). In more specific, this scale was designed to assess perspectives emphasizing patriarchy and children's filial behaviour that includes family honour and respect, caring for parents, good etiquette and behaviour, as well as succeeding in school (i.e. how important it is for a child to grow up: 'honouring the family'; 'being obedient'; 'respecting their elders'). Mother and child were asked to indicate their opinion and expectations for child's behaviour based on a 4-point Likert scale (1= 'Not at all desired/Strongly disagree' to 4= 'Strongly desired/Strongly agree'). Higher total score indicates stronger emphasis of parental belief on filial behaviour among children. The Cronbach alpha value for the scale is 0.76.

**RESULTS**

*Descriptive Analysis*

Of the 108 children studied, there were equal numbers of boys and girls with ages ranged from 8 to 19 years (Mean = 11.95). Most (61.1%) of the children were still in their middle childhood, and aged between eight to twelve years, while the rest (38.9%) were in their adolescence. About half of the children were the eldest child in the family (Table 1). The mean age of the

mothers was 38 years. About two-third of the mothers had achieved at least upper secondary education qualification (66.1%) and were not working (63.0%) during the time of this study.

*Child's Psychosocial Adjustment*

Goodman (1997) noted that approximately 20% of a community sample could be expected to score in the abnormal or borderline band, with the remaining 80% scores in the normal

TABLE 1  
Distribution of respondents' background (N = 108)

Variables	N (%)
Child's gender	
Male	54 (50)
Female	54 (50)
Standard deviation = 0.50	
Child's age (years)	
8-12	66 (61.1)
13-14	15 (13.9)
15-19	27 (25.0)
Mean = 11.95 (years)	
Standard deviation = 3.25	
Eldest child in the family	
Yes	51 (47.2)
No	57 (52.8)
Standard deviation = 0.50	
Mother's age	
< 34	26 (24.1)
35-43	62 (57.4)
> 44	20 (18.5)
Mean = 38.41 (years)	
Standard deviation = 5.56	
Mother's education	
Primary school (year 1-6)	15 (13.9)
Lower secondary (Remove-Form 1-3)	14 (13.0)
Higher secondary (Form 4-5, GCE O level)	49 (45.4)
Vocational/technique (Form 4-5)	2 (1.8)
After secondary (Form 6, GCE A level)	13 (12.0)
Higher education (Polytechnique, Teachers Training College/University)	14 (13.0)
Missing	1(0.9)
Mother's occupational status	
Working	40 (37.0)
Not working	68 (63.0)

band. Based on the parents' report, 81.5% of the children were considered as normal for the overall psychosocial adjustment, while 18.5% reached borderline/abnormal levels in the SDQ total difficulties score. For the individual subscales, the highest percentage of borderline or abnormal level was reported in their child's symptom of peer relationship problems (30.6%), and this was followed by a lack of pro-social behaviour (20.4%), conduct problems (19.4%), hyperactivity (16.7%), and emotional symptoms (14.8%).

As shown in Table 3, parents tend to report higher scores for filial piety (Mean= 29.70, SD = 2.33), as compared to their children (Mean=28.23, SD = 3.70). Results from the comparative analysis also showed that there were significant score differences between the parent's and child's perceptions on the importance of filial piety in parental belief. This finding suggested that Malay parents tend to perceive familial obligation and respecting elders as more

important elements in child's socialization than their children.

*Relationship between Parental Belief and Child's Psychosocial Adjustment*

Correlational analyses were conducted to assess the relationship between both parent- and child-reported parental belief and, child's psychosocial adjustment. The results showed significant negative relationships between child self-reported parental belief on filial piety with child's overall difficulties ( $r = -.23, p < .05$ ), conduct problems ( $r = -.25, p < .05$ ), hyperactivity/inattention ( $r = -.20, p < .05$ ), and emotional symptoms ( $r = -.20, p < .05$ ) (see Table 4). Nevertheless, no significant relationship was detected for peer relationship problems and pro-social behaviour. These findings demonstrated that children who had reported higher levels of parental emphasis on filial piety were more likely to experience lower levels of

TABLE 2  
Parents' report on child's psychosocial adjustment (N = 108)

Children's Behaviour	N (%)
Emotional symptoms	
Normal (Score 0-5)	92 (85.2)
Borderline/Abnormal (Score 6-10)	16 (14.8)
Conduct problems	
Normal (Score 0-3)	87 (80.6)
Borderline/Abnormal (Score 4-10)	21 (19.4)
Hyperactivity/Inattention	
Normal (Score 0-5)	90 (83.3)
Borderline/Abnormal (Score 6-10)	18 (16.7)
Peer relationship problems	
Normal (Score 0-3)	75 (69.4)
Borderline/Abnormal (Score 4-10)	33 (30.6)
Pro social behaviour	
Normal (Score 6-10)	86 (79.6)
Borderline/Abnormal (Score 0-5)	22 (20.4)
Total difficulties	
Normal (Score 0-15)	88 (81.5)
Borderline/Abnormal (Score 16-40)	20 (18.5)

TABLE 3  
Parent's and child's reports on parental belief (N = 108)

Filial Piety	Mean	SD
Parent's report	29.70	2.33
Child's report	28.23	3.70
	t-value (Df)	3.80 (107)***

Note: SD: Standard deviation; Df=Degree of Freedom; \*\*\*p<.001

TABLE 4  
Correlations between parental belief on filial piety and child self-report on psychosocial adjustment (N = 108)

	Parent's Report on Filial Piety	Child's Report on Filial Piety
Emotional symptoms	- 0.07	- 0.20*
Conduct problems	0.07	- 0.25*
Hyperactivity/Inattention	0.03	-.0.20*
Peer relationship problems	0.15	0.03
Pro social behaviour	- 0.14	0.05
Total difficulties score	0.04	- 0.23*

Note: \*p < 0.05

overall psychological difficulties, less conduct problems, and lower levels of hyperactivity and emotional symptoms. However, the study did not detect any significant relationship between parent-reported parental belief and child's psychosocial adjustment.

### DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between parental belief and psychosocial adjustment among Malay families. This study showed that only child-reported parental belief on filial piety had a significant relationship with child's overall difficulties, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and emotional symptoms, while parent-reported parental belief was found to have no significant relationship with child's psychosocial adjustment. Based on the results, it can be concluded that parents are not the only ones who instil filial piety in their children (Yeh and Bedford, 2004). Nearly

all aspects of the society that a child comes into contact with may play a role in emphasizing the values of filial piety. For example, television programmes, advertisement, relatives, friends, and teachers may contribute to socialize children with the norms of filial piety (Yeh and Bedford, 2004). In other words, parents are not the only source of filial values.

Filial behaviours, such as respect to and caring for parents, are associated with lower levels of children's overall emotional and behavioural difficulties. The study showed that filial piety is the root of good conduct and has significant association with the development of proper conduct (Ho, 1994). The finding also provided support to the notion about the importance of filial piety as a core principle in a family system (Chan and Lim, 2004). This study has shown that children, who believe in respect and caring to their parents, tend to experience lower levels of overall difficulties, hyperactivity and conduct problems and emotional symptoms.

Similarly, Yeh and Bedford (2004) demonstrated that greater filial belief did correspond to a reduced incidence of inappropriate behaviour.

In this study, filial piety is perceived as an influential parental belief among Malay families. Previous studies also indicated that Malays in Singapore (Kau and Yang, 1991) and in Malaysia (Krishnan, 2004) tend to believe in filial piety. Filial piety in Asia is manifested in many forms of respectful attitudes and behaviours towards the elderly, such as “kissing their hands, bowing, and with hands joined in front of the face”, specifically in the Malay and Indian cultures (Ingersoll-Dayton and Saengtienchai, 2009, pp. 305-306). In addition, although Asian cultures value independence, they place more value on interdependence with others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Moreover, Asian cultures strongly believe in the family unit and are depending on one another as a family (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) and as such, filial piety cuts across generations of parent-child relationships since children can never fully repay the debt of gratitude owed to their parents, except by investing in the next generation (Trommsdorff, 2006, pp. 143-184). These evidences show that the concept of filial piety is still an important socialization goal among today’s parents who often live a less traditional lifestyle.

These results support the Theory of Personal Construct which recognizes the relationship between parental belief and child’s psychosocial adjustment. Parents will hold a favourable attitude towards a given behaviour if they believe that performing the behaviour will lead to mostly positive outcomes in their children. More importantly, it can be seen that parents play an important role in regulating the child’s psychosocial outcome. The implication of this study is that parental emphasis on filial piety may be considered as an effective and positive measure of behavioural and emotional control of a child. Therefore, it is important for parents to nurture their children about filial piety belief and expectations, so as to provide them with moral education associated with positive psychosocial adjustment.

The present study attempted to determine the relationship between parental belief on filial piety and child psychosocial adjustment among Malay families. However, there are several limitations which should be highlighted and taken into consideration. First, this study did not focus on parental belief among fathers. Future research should examine the role of fathers in parental belief. This is because fathers serve important functions as they are sensitive, supportive, and gently challenging companions for the child in exploration beyond the family (Marsiglio, Amato, Day and Lamb, 2000) and make a unique contribution to their children’s development (NICHD ECCRN, 2004). This is an important limitation because there is little information available in the literature regarding parental belief among fathers.

Additionally, the sample for this study was derived from Malay families. The findings may not be generalized to all ethnic groups. Therefore, future studies should address this gap. Ethnicity and culture seem to play a huge role in parental belief (Cote and Bornstein, 2000). Parents interpret, respond, and shape child’s behaviour in accordance with culturally prescribed expectations and socialization goals (Bornstein and Cheah, 2005). As such, the adaptive or maladaptive nature of social behaviours appear to depend on the meanings given to them within the cultural context (Cheah and Park, 2006).

The present work is also limited in the sense that there was no measurement at all levels that might be relevant for child’s psychosocial adjustment. For example, the researchers have no sound measurement of individual temperamental of children or peer’s relationship that may play a role in these processes. Future research may include these measurements when assessing its effect or the relationship on child’s psychosocial adjustment. Finally, because of the correlational nature of the data gathered in the present study, the researchers were unable to make conclusions about the direction of effects. Future studies may include any other statistical analysis in order to find interesting findings regarding the effect of



parental belief on child psychosocial adjustment. Despite these limitations, the present study has helped to fill a gap in the understanding of how parental belief on filial piety is linked to child's psychosocial adjustment. Such findings provide crucial information which can be used to help parents in making proper adjustment in order to help the child develop more effectively.

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