

A Case Study on Chinese Student: Parental Control and Adolescent Depression

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Abstract

The National Blue Book of Depression 2022 revealed that 50% of the participants with depression were school students. As the mental health problems of children and adolescents are becoming more and more prominent in China, it is necessary to study the influencing factors and mechanisms of adolescent depression. Parental control is one of the key factors influencing adolescent depression. However, there are not many studies on the effects of parental control on adolescent depression. This paper initiates the discussion with a case study to analyze the depth of the association between parental control and adolescents by analyzing the case in depth. The results showed that both parental psychological and behavioral control were closely related to adolescents' depression problems. In addition, there is a possibility of intergenerational transmission of parental control. Intergenerational transmission should be included as one of the research factors in relevant studies on parental control.

Keywords: parental control, adolescent, depression

1. Introduction

As the world continues to develop, variable factors have occupied the public's constant attention, one of which is certainly the mental health issue. China, having the world's second-largest population base, provides an excellent field for studying psychological misconduct and related newly occurring trends.

Chinese are considered an ethnicity unreluctant to participate in psychological reflections and services, such as mental health counseling. This phenomenon appears because of personal beliefs that sharing privacies with innocent people is risky and the traditional view that only

'mad individuals' would seek mental health assistance (Xu, 2001). Nonetheless, one psychological issue is constantly engaging and open to discussion in China: the relationship between parental control and children's prominent psychological disorders, for instance, depression. This topic gained popularity due to the appalling data of Chinese teenagers reporting having experienced mental health problems. According to the research conducted by the Suzhou University School of Public Health, approximately 16.2% of Middle school students (grades 7-9) and 22.1% of High school students (grades 10-12) reported having experienced depression symptoms (Li et al.,

2016). Since the academic pressure undergone by the students continuously climbed and the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted, we should expect that the rate of experiencing depression symptoms among Chinese teenagers will increase. As such, children's mental health gradually becomes an overwhelmingly vital topic. In Chinese traditional culture, children are placed in the central emphasis of a family, which means parents treat their children's well-being's as the top priority. As more children's mental health and behaviors become a matter of particular concern, Chinese parents started to reconsider whether their parenting styles are appropriate for children's development.

Chinese parents are known for their prone to exert high degrees of control over their children (Rao, McHale & Pearson, 2003), thereafter, could inadvertently contribute to children's depression, including self-criticism or low self-worth (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). In the history of parental control research, there was an evolution regarding the definition and classification of parental control. Early researchers viewed control as harmful to children and described it as pressure, intrusion, and dominance (Baldwin, 1955). However, the following scholars have altered this definition to encompass other influential factors and therefore conducted further classification of the original concept. For example, according to Schaefer, parental control can be viewed as psychological control versus autonomy and firm versus lax control (Schaefer 1965a, 1965b). Psychological control includes the presence of parental dominance, aggression, rejection, and arbitrary discipline, while autonomy is defined as the absence of such characteristics. Firm and lax control, on the other hand, stands for the absence versus presence of permitting extreme independence of the subject children (Schaefer 1965a, 1965b). Baumrind, on the other hand, further suggested authoritarianism and firm enforcement as parts of parental control: parental authoritarianism is characterized by a lack of shared decision-making with children, a belief in one's own infallibility, and a tendency to withdraw from contact when upset; while firm enforcement included techniques including insisting that kids pay attention, avoiding child coercion, and enforcing compliance following early noncompliance (Baumrind, 1966, 1971).

Although there are such diverse definitions and classification methods of parental control, we will adopt the general way of splitting parental

control into psychological and behavioral control for the sake of this study.

In this paper, we will conduct a case study of a Chinese teenager living in a small city and support our hypothesis that parental control, in the form of both psychological and behavioral control, contributes to Chinese adolescents' depression.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Psychological Control

The pressing, invasive, and domineering aspect of parenting concerning what kids feel and think is known as psychological control (Wendy S. Grolnick & Eva M. Pomerantz, 2009). Parents exerting psychological control frequently attempt to interfere with children's psychological and emotional growth and pay disproportionate attention to children's thinking processes, self-expression, and attachment to the parent (Barber, Olsen & Shagle, 1994). Generally speaking, parents in Asian cultures are more likely to engage in psychologically controlling behaviors than parents in Western cultures (Wu et al., 2002). Existing research shows that some expressions of psychological control are ubiquitous among different cultures.

According to Wendy, parental love withdrawal (withholding their love) and guilt induction (making their kids feel guilty when disobeying parental orders) are among the most substantially-appearing forms of psychological control worldwide (Wendy S. Grolnick & Eva M. Pomerantz, 2009). Love withdrawal functions by hinting that love and acceptance will not return unless the child alters his or her conduct to fit parental expectations; this mental guidance may be hostile since parents could use this implying message to manipulate the attachment bond with the child (Barber, 1996). Guilt induction, on the other hand, might be a less unpleasant kind of psychological restraint (Fung & Lau, 2012). Parents influence children's behavior by making them feel guilty. Parents might highlight the potential negative consequences of the child's actions or make the child feel responsible for fulfilling the parent's emotional expectations. Although Fung and Lau suggested that the youngster can develop empathy and sensitivity to other people's opinions and feelings by being made to feel guilty or by focusing on the parent's point of view (Fung & Lau, 2012), the extent of guilt induction should be reasonably managed. Otherwise, abuse of guilt induction

may result in negative consequences such as children's internalizing problems (Donatelli, Bybee & Buka, 2007; Rakow et al., 2009).

Research has shown that the child's capacity to become independent and form a positive sense of self and personal identity is hampered by psychological control (Barber, 1996); excessive psychological control would yield internalized problems among children, including depression (Barber & Harmon, 2002). However, we should be extremely alert to avoid the conclusion that all psychological controls are negative. Psychological controls should remain to a reasonable extent; otherwise, children will perceive the intrusion of their private domain and potentially injure the parent-child relationship. Moreover, psychological controls generate different effects according to domains. Children find parental control over moral or conventional topics more legitimate than private issues.

2.2 Behavioral Control

Behavioral control "refers to an individual's or a group's ability to influence, manage, or steer their or others' activities," as defined by the psychology dictionary (N. & Sam, 2013). Parents' behavioral control of Children should be considered from the perspective of individuals and nations through internal and external effects.

Based on the national influence factors like cultures and histories in China, an inevitable famous thinking is Confucianism, founded by Confucius, who was born in Lu during the Zhou dynasty. Confucianism emphasizes ordering and hierarchy, which attributes humans to being a gentleman. Related thinking shows in Confucius and his follower's works: *Analect*. For example, the statement "lord reacts as a lord, minister reacts as a minister, father reacts as a father, and son reacts as a son" (Confucius, 479 BC - 221 BC) shows each identity's basic ordering and duties. Based on Confucianism, widespread through centuries, thinking transforms to the individual's external behaviors gradually nowadays.

To be more specific, the parents control their children's behavior based on carrying out their duty of taking care of their children and performing themselves as the parent's identity, which pointed as regulation with construction defined by Soenes and Vansteenkiste (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). However, Confucianism was pointed out a long time ago and may not be

suitable in today's society anymore, leading to some harmful influences nowadays. For example, Confucianism emphasizes ordering, which shows in Chinese family relationships that younger generations must respect elders. However, a phenomenon appears: elders, especially parents, own absolute rights and power to gain respect from their children, but some of them do not treat their children well. Then, there needs to be an unbalanced hierarchical relationship in many Chinese traditional families.

Then, some parents' external behaviors may cause those unbalanced family hierarchy relationships, like shouting and beating their children to have absolute power in the family, which defined parental behavior with the meaning of controlling and pursuing the environment of absolute rights and powers (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010), parental pursuing and maintaining the family environment by shouting and beating their children may cause children's stereotyped behavior, which shows in solid body feel and cold sweating. Worse, children will get depression with potential suicide actions, which, same as the student Hui's psychology consulting case will be mentioned later.

The reason for those parents who shout and beat their children may be traced to gene effects, their growing environment, and their educational attainment. Based on genes, the emotional parents will have emotional children with a considerable percentage of possibility which is hard to change, but as the heritage spreads to the next generations. However, except for genes which are the fixed factor, a parent's growing environment also has one possibility which affects their behaviors: based on childhood experience, the concept of violence and abuse will stay in parent's brains, which are hard to remove but send to their children. At the same time, the parents who do not attend higher education may use their values to force their children to listen to them instead of using reasonable teaching methods like explanation and analysis but directly to the wrong answer they used to experience.

3. Method

The content of our case was provided by one of the authors' friends, Hui. We interviewed her as the subject of the case study, and she agreed to share this case. As a teenager diagnosed with

severe depression who also had family conflicts simultaneously, we consider her an appropriate candidate for our study. This paper will analyze her experiences and explain how they build on the existing scholarly works.

3.1 Case Introduction

This case is allowed to share by the subject. Considering the protection of the subject's privacy, we will refer to the subject as Hui in the rest of the case description and avoid mentioning sensitive place and people's names.

Hui came to psychological counseling two years earlier in junior high school because she wanted to commit suicide. Before pursuing the psychological counseling service, she was diagnosed with depression after a visit to the city's brain hospital. However, Hui stopped seeking psychological counseling one year ago, and was unwilling to share why.

As Hui reflected, she was intelligent, diligent, and outstanding in her academic study as a student; she was excellent in science and liberal arts subjects and has published several short novels online. However, her parents had never honored or even recognized her efforts and achievements. For example, her parents neither attempted to read her publications nor believed that Hui was able to complete such creations. At the same time, Hui's decision to pursue further education was not supported by her mother. Although Hui's teachers predicted she would receive a promising score in the high school entrance examination and be qualified to enter the best high school in the small city she resided, her mother never believed that. Hui's mother firmly convinced herself that Hui was not competent to study and even graduate from high school; therefore, Hui's mother mobilized her friends and siblings to preach Hui how useless attending high school was. Since Hui insisted on seeking education in high school, she faced obstructions and squabbles from her parents.

In the last semester of Hui's junior high, the unpleasant atmosphere in her family fostered. Hui's parents expressed their dissatisfaction with the child in the parent counseling sessions. They judged that the child was not smart, did not pay attention to her studies, and had problems interacting with her classmates. Her mother indicated that Hui showed no self-esteem when she dated a boy and was still entangled with the boy who wanted to break up

with her. On the other hand, Hui's father considered his daughter too close to her female classmates and had lesbian tendencies. Hence, Hui was a real nothing in the mouths of her parents.

In that semester, Hui's father and mother often beat her. One time it was horrible; there was her mother cursing, her father outraging, abusing unbearable words, and hitting the child's legs, bottom, and back with a stick. Then, the mother opened the window and shouted to Hui, 'Why didn't you jump off the window?' and 'You were so useless but ridiculously wanted money to go to high school?' From then on, Hui's parents often ignored her presence and stopped responding to her words. She had no meals offered after school, as if her parents disappeared besides the time they beat Hui. Hui was deadly disheartened.

Hui did not abandon her will to live until her mother frequently called her and motivated her to commit suicide by jumping into the water on her way back home, keeping saying Hui was disappointing and avaricious. What is worse, accompanied by increased pressure as the examination approached and repeated tests and quizzes every day, Hui found life incredibly dull and unpleasant. Therefore, Hui decided to end her life.

The counselor kept communicating with Hui's parents hoping to investigate where the root of crisis lay, and they finally revealed more information about their family of origin in one parent counseling session.

3.1.1 Father's Family Situations

Hui's father was the third child in a rural family with low social-economic status. Hui's grandfather divorced her grandmother, who was pregnant at that time due to an indifferent marital relationship. When Hui's father was born, the grandfather had a look at him and then left home without ever returning. Hui's father has perceived himself as unwelcome since his father's traumatic left. Although Hui's father has two elder sisters (Hui's aunt A and B) who care about his well-beings, he still felt depressed throughout his childhood.

Hui's father had long been criticized for his weakness in communicating with others. His professional career was not successful as he expected. Although he was good at studying, managed to enter a top university in China, and obtained a stable job, the majority of Hui's

family expenses, including the housing payment, were supported by Hui's mother. Therefore, Hui's father constantly felt self-abased and inferior compared to his surrounding peers.

3.1.2 Mother's Family Situations

Hui's maternal grandmother lost her parents when she was only five, experienced inadequate love growing up, married Hui's maternal grandfather when twenty-year-old, and then gave birth to Hui's mother. Since the holistic family was patriarchal, Hui's maternal grandmother had to bear a boy, who was Hui's uncle. During the maternal grandmother's pregnancy, Hui's mother was sent to her relatives' home and faced challenges in developing sanity without parental care and optimal socialization. For example, Hui's mother sometimes acted and dressed like a small girl in adulthood. Throughout her childhood, the

family treated Hui's mother and uncle differently due to their gender. Hui's mother was ordered to serve the family business and earn more money to support her brother financially; therefore, she quit the school she previously attended, focusing all her attention on business operations.

Hui's uncle was incompetent. In high school, he met Hui's aunt (Aunt C) and no longer paid attention to his academic studies. Because Aunt C was pretty, he pursued her in high school, spending uncountable amounts of money on her and indulging in the relationship. As a result, he failed the college entrance examination. After initiating his career in the family business, Hui's uncle started to embezzle money from the family company to gift Aunt C, which resulted in substantial financial flaws. Hui's mother has to work day and night to clean up his mess.

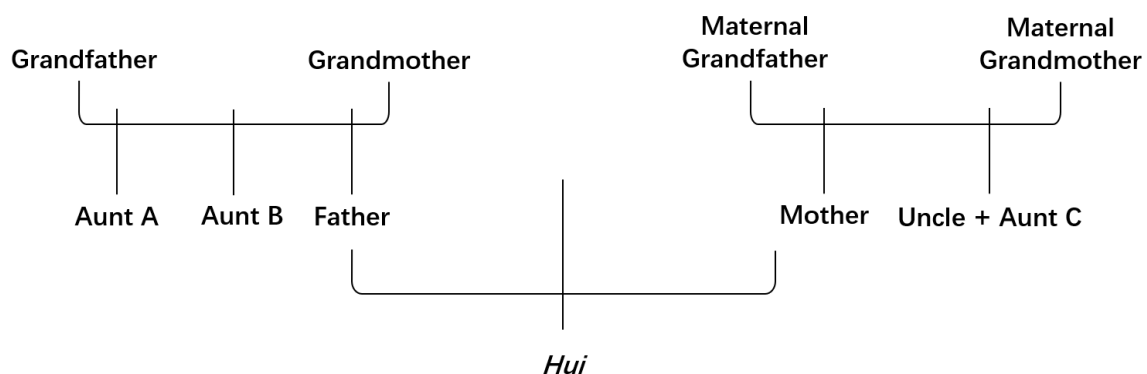


Figure 1. Hui's family tree

Note: This figure only demonstrates a portion of Hui's family and aims to give readers a clear sense of the component of it.

4. Results

4.1 Psychological Control

The most prevalent forms of psychological control — love withdrawal and guilt induction — both appear in this case. When Hui's parents stopped conveying love actions such as communication to Hui, they used the love withdrawal technique to trigger Hui to obey their willing. Guilt induction, on the other hand, was performed more directly. Hui's parents stated Hui spent the family's fortune to enroll in high school to appeal to Hui's guilt, thus threatening and preventing Hui from pursuing high school. Both psychological control methods concerned Hui's private issues and were in stunningly intense forms, deteriorating Hui's

psychological well-beings and vanishing her interest in living. Therefore, the two forms of psychological control mentioned above both play a role in shaping Hui's depression. This finding supports our hypothesis that parental psychological control contributes to Chinese adolescents' depression.

4.2 Behavioral Control

In Hui's case, her parents' punishment was qualified as behavioral control, including shouting at and beating her. In a more general definition of behavior, Hui's parents attempted to shape and regulate Hui's behaviors, such as interaction modes with friends and suicidal behaviors, which again fit Soenens' definition of behavioral control (Soenens & Vansteenkiste,

2010). In this case, we observe that the parental behaviors served as pushing forces to exploit Hui's mental health and significantly contributed to Hui's depression. This conclusion particularly proves our hypothesis that parental behavioral control could promote Chinese adolescents' depression.

4.3 Intergenerational Transmission

Due to the influence of the traditional Chinese family concept and the aging of the population, it is very common in Chinese society for three generations of to live together under the same roof, constituting a family structure in which the G2s bear the dual responsibility for the upbringing and old-age care of the G1s and G3s at the same time. In this family structure, grandparents need to assist and even take on the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren. Recent studies show that only 5% of the children aged 0-3 years old receive institutionalized child care services. At the same time, there is a serious shortage of resources for public kindergartens for 3-6 year olds, creating a predicament where it is difficult to enroll in child care or kindergarten. At present, preschool children in China are still mainly cared for by their mothers and their grandparents (Li et al., 2013). In this case, Hui's family has been living with her maternal grandparents since she was born, so her maternal grandparents' poor upbringing had a direct or indirect impact on Hui and her parents. One noteworthy detail is that Hui's maternal grandparents asked Hui to address herself as her paternal grandparents, which is a situation that exists only in Chinese families, and this detail actually reflects the psychological control that Hui's maternal grandparents have over Hui. In Piaget's four stages of cognitive development theory, children between the ages of 2 and 7 are still at the stage of recognizing the external world as a label corresponding to a thing. At this stage, Hui's maternal grandparents instill the wrong name into Hui, and impose their own traditional will and thinking with feudal colors on Hui. Research has shown that children between the ages of 3 and 6 have already formed a stable pattern of family relationships in their minds, which undoubtedly controls Hui's cognition and mental construct.

Hui's parents (G2) suffered from early childhood trauma due to their family of origin, which included severe parenting problems in their family of origin. This caused Hui's parents to have serious psychological problems that were

revealed during parenting (G3). According to attachment theory, a child's intimate relationship with his or her parents shapes the individual's personality, so problems such as low self-esteem and parenting problems can be traced back to the individual's attachment history (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Both of Hui's parents were traumatized by their parents' poor parenting styles and their absence during a critical period of childhood. Hui's grandmother, who already had Hui's mother, defied the Chinese government's "family planning" policy and took the risk of hiding out in the countryside for a year to give birth to an additional son, Hui's uncle. During this time, Hui's grandmother sent Hui's mother to her relative's home. It was during this time that Hui's mother was deprived of the love and care that she should have received from her mother. So much so, that as an adult, Megumi's mother exhibits many childlike interests and behaviors, such as wearing dresses with large butterflies. Similarly, Hui's father has been in a state of depression due to the lack of fatherly love in his childhood and the brokenness of his family of origin.

Hui's parents grew up with a dysfunctional upbringing and naturally projected the bad upbringing that they experienced in their own childhood onto Hui. Hui's parents' childhood was shrouded in the shadow of patriarchy, especially Hui's mother. Because of their own unfortunate experiences with son preference in their childhood, they have a subconscious sense of son preference, which is reflected in Hui's life. Her mother believes that Hui is not university material and tries to prevent her from going to school by all means after she gets into the school of her choice, and shows strong resentment and denial towards her.

5. Discussion

The results of this study suggest that parental control over children's psychology and behavior can lead to mental health problems such as depression in adolescents. This study also identified the possibility of intergenerational transmission of parental control. In the process of research, case study is the main research tool. Through this typical case, we explored the effects of parental psychological control and behavioral control on adolescent psychological problems.

Intergenerational transmission refers to the fact that parents' personality traits, behaviors and

values are significantly positively correlated with those of the next generation, and have a predictive effect on the personality traits, behaviors and values of the next generation (Li, Xu, 2013). Numerous studies have shown that there is an intergenerational transmission of individual psychological and behavioral variables such as trauma, depression, anxiety and other negative traits (Hammen et al., 2011; Saxbe et al., 2015). However, the intergenerational transmission of parental control as a mediating variable is still understudied, especially the intergenerational transmission of parental control and adolescent mental health problems.

Exposure to stress and abuse as a child directly affects how that child will go on to parent their

children, explains psychotherapist Robin Balbernie (Balbernie, 2017). In the course of our research, we found that there is a possibility of intergenerational transmission of poor parenting styles dominated by parental control. G1's control-dominated parenting styles further influence G3 through G2 (Figure 2). The poor parenting styles that G2 receives in his family of origin are practiced on his offspring (G3) many years later (Figure 3), which creates a circular, non-linear loop, as if the debate over whether the chicken or the egg came first would be a never-ending discussion. Furthermore, we argue that poor parenting styles in G1 have a direct impact on G3 as well, in addition to G2, especially in a typical Chinese family with three generations living together.

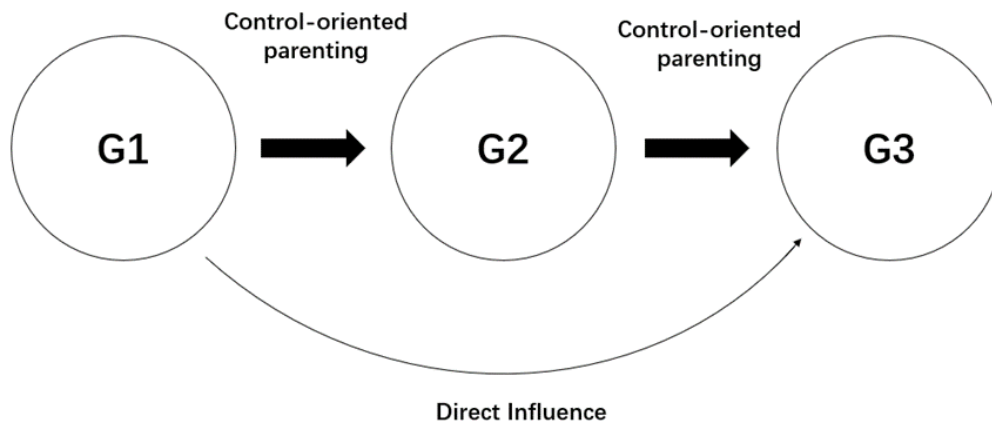


Figure 2. Intergenerational transmission of parental control

Note: The figure demonstrates longitudinally the mechanism of intergenerational transmission of parental control. In addition to the existence of parental control by G2 over G3, there is also intergenerational parental control by G1 over G3.

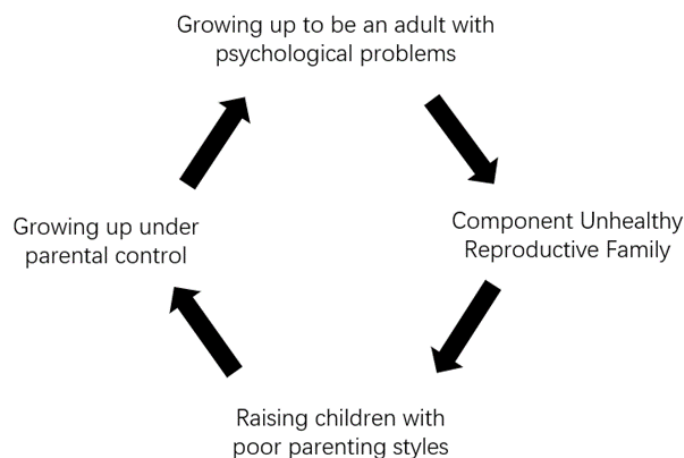


Figure 3. The vicious cycle of poor parenting caused by parental control

Note: The figure demonstrates the detrimental effects of parental control on its implementers and their next generation. This deleterious effect creates a closed loop that continues on and on.

Previous researchers have suggested that there are at least three possible pathways through which intergenerational transmission occurs: genes, children's imitative learning, and direct parental education (Dohmen et al., 2012). On the basis of the case studies, this study concludes that the parenting styles received from significant others in childhood (specifically poor parenting styles dominated by parental control) affect the parenting styles of one's own offspring in adulthood, i.e., the poor parenting styles suffered by one's own offspring are projected on to one's offspring.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

The limitation of this study is that our research only focused on the negative effects of parental psychological and behavioral control on children, but whether there is a possibility of positive effects on children is still open to debate. Unfortunately, at this time we are unable to determine from definitive data to what extent parental control affects adolescent mental health. In addition, as this study takes a case study approach to research, the results of this study are case-specific and not generalizable. In future studies, the sample capacity should be expanded to conduct relevant research on three-generation families in different cultures. Similarly, in the cases selected for the study, we did not find the various effects of parental control in the various stages of adolescent development, and in the future, we will conduct further research through experiments and provide reasonable explanations for the results found.

Notably, in this study, we creatively linked parenting styles and perceptions of the grandparents' generation to adolescents' psychological problems after being under parental control and noted a link between poor parenting styles of grandparents and the development of children's mental health problems. This study inferred the possibility of intergenerational transmission of parenting styles dominated by parental control. Encapsulating grandparenting styles in the study of adolescents' psychological problems following parental control is an important element in further testing our hypothesis of the existence of intergenerational transmission of parental control as well as in future follow-up studies of adolescent psychological problems.

5.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, the parent's control of behavioral

and psychological factors truly affects children's mental and physical issues like depression and stereotyped behavior... However, this case may not be able to cover the whole parent's control behaviors conditions. Then, we need to do more related research and gain convincing data in the future to offer solutions to reduce this condition.

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