

**Parental Monitoring, the Concept of “Guan” and Teenage Sexual
Debuts in Taiwan**

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Abstract

This paper applies empirical data to investigate the correlation between parental monitoring and the onset of adolescent sexual initiation in Taiwan. The data used in this study is derived from Taiwan Youth Project conducted by the Institute of Sociology, Academic Sinica, Taiwan from 2000 – 2007. Incorporating the concept of “guan” that is exclusive in Chinese cultural context, this paper aims to show a cultural sensitive conceptualization of parental monitoring and investigates to what degree different factors, including those of cultural specific values, influence the timing of teenage sexual onset.

Introduction

Parenting practices consist of a wide range of parenting behaviors that can affect and shape adolescent behaviors. Empirically, parental control has been found to reduce the likelihood of social and behavioral problems, poor academic achievement, and school adjustment difficulties (Vandivere et al., 2003). Other than academic performance, parental control is also closely linked to lowering the odds of adolescent sexual initiation (Longmore, Manning and Fiordano, 2001; Sieverding, Adler, Witt and Ellen 2005). Amongst forms of parental control, parental monitoring is found to be one of the most effective in terms of its protective function. However, parental monitoring, as a concept invented in the West, might not be adequate enough to explain parenting practices in other cultures, such as that of Taiwan. Whilst the Western parenting style inclines to be democratic, Chinese parenting style is usually considered to be more authoritarian in comparison in the Western literature (Baumrind; 1971).

The idea of authoritarian parenting usually carries a negative connotation, which tends to describe a parenting style that is equated with manifestations of parental hostility, aggression, mistrust and dominance (Rohner & Pettengill, 1985). However, this rather simplistic, ethnocentric take on Asian parenting style might lead to overgeneralization. Eastern Asian parenting, especially that of Chinese, is heavily influenced by Confucian values such as maintaining the familial unity and societal goals of harmonious relations and the integrity of the family unit based on the respect for seniority and honoring the requirements and responsibilities of the role relationships (Chao, 1994; Lau and Cheung, 1987; Bond and Hwang 1986). In order to better understand parenting styles in the Chinese context, Chao (1994) first used the concept of “guan” to theorize Chinese parental control in a sample of Chinese

immigrants living in California. “Guan”, as a concept, refers to “chiao shun” which means *teaching and training* and stems from a set of values, beliefs and ideologies essential to Sinic culture.

The topic regarding adolescent sexual debut in relation to parental control has been a popular theme for academic research (Manning, Giordano & Longmore, 2006; Dittus, Miller, Kotchick and Forehand, 2004; Longmore, Eng, Giordano and Manning 2009; Kim, 2008). In general, the public attitude towards sexual debut and sexual behaviors among adolescents in Taiwan, as well as other East Asian countries, is much more conservative compared to that in the West. Although the younger generation in Taiwan entertains a more liberal attitude towards sex and sexuality and the westernized ideal of romantic relations, adolescent premarital sex, after all, is still highly stigmatized as a deviate, socially unacceptable behavior. However, even there is a more strict social climate, early adolescent debut or teenage sexual promiscuity still present themselves as social problems that have on the teens themselves as well as the society as a whole. A large number of social science researches indicate that parents have a profound influence on their teen children’s sexual debut and behaviors; for instance, nearly two thirds of all teens share their parents’ values on the topic of sex in the United States (Kim, 2008).

In this paper, we focus on parental monitoring, which is recognized to be the most effective aspect of parental control for its protective function (Crouter, 1990; Small, 1993; Laird et al., 2003). Combining the concept of “guan” that is exclusive in Chinese cultural context, we apply empirical data to investigate the correlation between parental monitoring and adolescent sex debut in Taiwan. Such concept of “guan” implies parents’ guidance, accommodation to child’s goal for success and child’s understanding and obedience (Wu and Yi, 2008). This paper aims to show a cultural sensitive conceptualization of parental monitoring and its effect on teen sex

debut which can then contribute to policy making and academic research in countries which hold similar cultural values.

Parental monitoring and adolescent sex debuts: facts and theories

A large number of social sciences research concerning parental supervision and parental rules show a positive correlation between these factors and reduced teen sexual activity (Huebner and Howell, 2003; Longmore, Manning and Giordano, 2001; Rodgers, 1999; Pittman and Chase-Lansdale, 2001; Baumer and South, 2001; Bersamin, Todd, Fisher et al., 2008; DiClemente, Wingood, Crosby et al., 2001) as well as later onset of sexual activity (Miller et al., 1992; Small & Luster, 1994). In a study of 750 children aged 13 and older, adolescents who received more parental monitoring were more likely to delay sexual initiation one year later compared to peers who received less monitoring from their parents (Longmore, Manning and Giordano, 2001). In a study of young minority adolescent boys from low income areas of Chicago, Boston and San Antonio, those who reported greater levels of parental monitoring were less likely to initiate sexual activity before age 15 compared to peers who received less parental monitoring (Lohman and Billings, 2008).

Amongst all parental factors that offer strong protection against the onset of early sexual debuts, such as parent's disapproval of adolescent sex and an intact family structure, parental monitoring is the most influential one. Parental monitoring usually concerns with the extent to which parents know the whereabouts and activities of their children outside home and school. Rather than being a one-way interpretation, parental monitoring provides a two-way interaction between parents and their children. In this, Stattin and Kerr (2000) argued that the success of parental monitoring for adolescents is not only dependent on parent's own efforts to find out what their children do but also rested on children's disclosure. Hence in this paper we have paid

special attention to the three elements of parental monitoring: *parent's knowledge of children's activities, whereabouts and companions.*

On adolescent sex debut: Chinese “guan” vs. Western parental monitoring

Cultural differences exist in attitudes and beliefs towards sexuality (Ng & Lau, 1990). In societies dominated by Sinic cultures, sexual conservatism is viewed as vital to the maintenance of family unity (Chan, 1994). Sexuality is not only a matter that belongs to the realm of private self. Unmarried singles, especially for females, virginity prior to marriage is highly valued (Liu, 1997). In contrast, premarital sex is less demonized and attitudes towards sexuality, especially that of young people, are more lenient and liberal in the West. In that sense, sex related problems for teenagers such as adolescent promiscuity or teenage pregnancy are also significant social issues in Asia and that concerned of parents in Taiwan and other Chinese societies.

Various research and surveys of the Western academia indicated that parents are the ones who have the most influence on their children's decisions about sex, as adolescents reveal themselves (Kim, 2008). When it comes to the topic of adolescent sex, both youngsters and their parents report high levels of communication regarding this subject matter in the West (Kim, 2008). Nearly 90 percent of parents report having had a helpful conversation about delaying sex and avoiding pregnancy with their adolescent children, compared to 71 percent of teenagers who report having had such a conversation with their parents (Jaccard, Dittus and Gordon, 1998). Sex is not an embarrassing topic for parent-children discussion, rather, it is common for Western parents to talk about this subject with their teenagers and provide them proper sex education and advice. However, sexuality as a topic of discussion is usually a taboo in a Chinese family. Most Chinese parents either ignore the need of educating their adolescent children about sex or tend to give very little or inaccurate ideas or

information about it. In worst cases these bad sex education backfired and make adolescents either feel shameful or dirty about sex or propel them to have earlier sex debut due to lack of knowledge regarding sex.

Chinese parenting has been described as controlling, restrictive and authoritarian in Western literature (Baumrind, 1971; Chiu, 1987; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Robers & Fraleigh 1987; Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992). However, such description is rather misleading and inadequate to illustrate the cultural differences of a non-Western parenting style. Chao (1994) first theorized the style of Chinese parental control using the concept of “guan”. Based on a set of Confucian values and beliefs that are essential to Sinic culture, the meaning of “guan” is the equivalent of *Chiao Shun* (teaching and training). Such concept revolves around parental obligation and responsibilities of assuring familial unity and maintaining harmonious relations between their children and others. “Guan” can be divided into two distinctive categories, ideological “guan” and behavioral “guan” (Lin, 2003). The former refers to parent’s belief of what is essential and important training for their adolescent child and the latter pertains to parental activities in favor of child’s advancement to a higher goal in their perspective. In their research, Ming-Yeh Wu and Chin-Chun Yi (2008) further conceptualizes parental control based on the notion of “guan” and applies empirical data to investigate how traditional Chinese parental belief are important factors in determining parental control practices.

In the case of how the concept of “guan” is applied to parental monitoring concerning adolescent sex debut, it works on the ideological and psychological level as well as behavioral level. Ideologically, parents’ instill ideas and values regarding appropriate and acceptable timing of sex and the meaning of sex to their teen children which serve as moral guidelines. In this, parents define and etch what is socially acceptable regarding sexual behaviors, proper timing of sexual debut and meanings of

sexual relations in the minds of their children. Behaviorally, parents set rules that directly and indirectly affect their teenagers' sexual debut and sex behaviors through deterrence and restriction (Shananhan, 2000). For example, an early curfew and the prohibition of sleeping over at a friend's house or going on a date with a member of opposite sex might influence the timing of sex debut for their adolescent children.

Taking a life course perspective

Concerning the nature of our data and to best reflect the reality of the correlation between parental monitoring and teenage sex debut, the research was conducted from a life course perspective. The data we had drawn from involves a few years of consecutive survey and questionnaires regarding lives and interactions completed by youngsters and their parents. This perspective considers parental monitoring in relation to adolescent sexual initiation as they are structured by transitions and trajectories within different social contexts in adolescents' lives. It also enables us to see age-graded and context specific aspects of parental monitoring for adolescents in different stages. In a life course perspective, behavior is largely determined by the norms, expectations and constraints that characterize the age grades, net works and institutions inhabited by an individual (Elder, 1994; Crosnoe and Riegle-Crumb, 2007).

A life course perspective is vital to our studies as the style of parental monitoring from year one of our observation until the last is constantly shifting. As our adolescent respondents grew older, the expectations from their parents as well as those of the society change. Also important are transition points, which are major changes in setting, role or stage. Because a transition involves change in personal or social circumstances, it can either alter or reinforce behavior. For example, when teen moves out from home to study in another college, the distance then presents a challenge to

parental monitoring or when he or she enters college, the friends provided by a new social environment will bring new kind of peer pressure.

Methodology

Data and sample

The data used in this study is drawn from a longitudinal panel study titled “The Taiwan Youth Project” conducted by the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. The first phase of this project, dated from 2000 to 2007, contains eight waves of annual surveys for student respondents as well as four waves of surveys of their parents. The research loci include three regions in Northern Taiwan: Taipei City, which is the largest metropolitan city as well as the capital of Taiwan; Taipei County, where economic activities include industry, manufacturing and agriculture and Yi-Lan County, which is a primarily agricultural region. For our study, the entire sample is consisted of four waves of parental surveys and student surveys, which were completed in students’ third year of junior high school (first wave), second year of high school (fourth wave) and sophomore (sixth wave) and senior year (eighth wave) in college.

Our sample covers four waves of surveys, which represent significant transition points in adolescents’ life course trajectories, so it is feasible for us to trace and capture changes regarding aspects of parental monitoring, such as parental knowledge of adolescent whereabouts and their relationships, over the course of eight years. For instance, the parents might be stricter in terms of monitoring their adolescents during the years prior to national entrance exam and become more lenient after they enter colleges. Also, college life usually accompanies with moving out of one’s original home to the dorm or rented student apartment which implies more freedom and possibility to dates and sexual activities. Moreover, we also aim to study how the

changes in parental monitoring would affect the timing of teenage sexual initiation.

Variables

Parent's and adolescent's characteristics were used as control variables in our data sets. These variables include: city of residence (1 = Taipei City; 2 = Yi Lan County; 3 = Taipei County), parental marital status (1 = married; 2 = divorced or separate and other), parental sex (1 = male; 2 = female), adolescent sex (1 = male; 2 = female) and family status (1 = intact; 2 = other) in the first wave of the survey. To be fully compatible, the measure of parental mental health was united by items selected from the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised. Responses were scored from 1 (very serious) to 5 (not at all) for each individual items. A summated score is added up for each individual in the sample. The categories of parental educational levels were coded as the following: (1 = junior high school; 2 = high school and vocational high school; 3=vocational and polytechnic; 4 = college and above).

Adapting from a measure by Small and Kerns (1993), parental monitoring was assessed by three items mentioned earlier in this paper. It refers to how much parents know about their adolescents' daily activities, whereabouts and companions. In addition, two Confucius values that serve as the ideological cornerstone of the concept of "guan" also serve as control variables. Deriving from the Confucius idea of *maintaining familial piety and unity*, there are four variables related to it: familial piety towards parents, obedience to the parents and teachers, respect for the elders and responsibility as a good student. For the idea of *maintaining harmonious relations with others and the society as a whole*, the four variables are as the following: appropriate conduct, humility, being in harmonious relationships with others and not showing off. These variables concerning the concept of guan makes the measurement of the effect of parental monitoring in Taiwan more accurate by providing cultural

distinctiveness and sensitivity. Since guan is fundamentally about training children to know their responsibilities to the family and society as a whole, Chinese parents usually have higher expectations towards children's academic performance. Education is being viewed as a requirement of a successful life. Therefore, we also incorporate two variables which concern with both the *parental expectation towards children's academic performance* and *satisfaction of children's academic performance*.

As for time-varying covariates, there are information regarding parental knowledge of adolescents' whereabouts (1 to 5, from always to don't know), adolescents' current enrollment status (1= in school; 2 = other including employed) and living at home with parents (1 = yes; 2 = no). To be fully compatible, self-rated household economic status by adolescents are coded as following: (1= above average; 2 = somewhat above average; 3 = average; 4 = somewhat below average; 5 = below average). All these time-varying covariates are not fixed; they could change over time depending on respondents' condition.

Analytic Strategy

In order to analyze the timing of sexual initiation of the Taiwanese youth cohort under parental monitoring along the concept of "guan", a sequential model of sexual debut of the youth that assumes sexual debut as a distinct event is used here. The analytic strategy of the study involves estimating discrete-time event history model that observes the youth transition to first sexual debut. The discrete-time survival model was first proposed by Cox as a sort of logistic regression (Cox, 1972) to analyze life-tables, and was later adopted by other social scientists to analyze event occurrence over time (Allison, 1982, 1984; Singer and Willett, 2003). More specifically, the survival function is the cumulative proportion of cases surviving up to the respective time interval. In our analysis, those youths in each wave of each

survey who had their first sexual experience are considered as “failures” when they were at the third year of junior high school; those who had not experience their sexual debut are the “survivors”. When applying discrete-time survival models, we assume each youth-year at risk experiencing the first sexual experience constitutes a separate observation. The hazard function, $h(t)$, is the conditional probability that a sexual debut will occur in a particular time interval, provided that the youth under study “survived” through the end of the previous time period. Here, T is supposed as a discrete random variable indicating the time interval between sexual debut by a Taiwanese adolescent. Hazard $h(t)$ or the conditional probability that the birth occurred at $T=t$, given that the sexual debut did not occur before $T=t$, it can be expressed as follows:

$$h(t)=Pr(T=t/T \geq t),$$

In contrast to the continuous-hazard model where the hazard is an “instantaneous rate,” the hazard for the discrete-time event model is a conditional probability bound in the range from 0 to 1. One benefit of the “conditionality” inherent in the discrete-time survival model is that the hazard probability will objectively deals with the censoring problem by allowing all individuals to remain in the risk set until the end of the episode. Another good reason to use the discrete-time model is the ease to incorporate the time-varying covariates in the analyses (Allison, 1982, 1984; Yamaguchi, 1991) Because of our focus on youth sexual debut, we are particularly interested in measures associated with trajectories of youth transitions from adolescence to young adulthood. For example, after graduating from high school, a child may leave home and move out for university out of town. Under such circumstance, parental monitoring and supervision of her/his child may gradually diminish against his or her will. It therefore needs to model whether variation in parental monitoring patterns is significantly related to their child sexual debut for

Taiwanese youths. Time-varying covariates are defined at the beginning of each wave of parental interview. Only youth at risk of experiencing sexual debut are included in the analysis.

In discrete-time survival model the dependent is a binary variable (variables with only two values – zero and one) which is similar to conventional logistic regression analysis. The dependent variable of the statistical model here represents whether the Taiwanese youth had their first sexual experience when we started to observed them at first wave while they were in the senior year at junior high school. To avoid treating the left censor problem inherited in the data, we discarded those youths who reported their first sexual experience before they entered the study. In addition to the time intervals between first sexual debuts, we included variables in our models that we expect to affect the risk of sexual debut significantly. Based on our research plan, these variables include parental monitoring in the concept of “guan” in the thrust our analysis as well as parental sociodemographic characteristics and time-varying factors, such as parental knowledge of children’s whereabouts, household economic status and whether the youth is at school, or living at home at each observational spells.

Since the present study is based on four waves of the parental sample, we need to compromise to re-calculate the person-year at risk from youth self-reported at sexual debut age. We linked parent’s file with their children’s file first. As a result it yields 1,268 parental data records from four-waves. Then, we divided each youth at risk of sexual debut into four distinct at risk spells. The risk of sexual debut is evaluated using the age at sexual debut reported by the child sample that corresponding to interview time of parent’s data file. We thus capture a fairly proximal relationship between parental monitoring and changes in youth trajectories of life course and the transition to the first sexual experience. The current analyses are consisted of a file containing 4,479 records of the Taiwan youth sexual debut from four-waves of 1,269

parental data file.

Influences on Taiwanese youth sexual debut are investigated in four nested models of parental socio-demographic characteristics, parent monitoring and “guan”, household characteristics, parental involvement with his/her child’s at school, parental expectation of her/his child’s future educational achievement, and time-varying covariates whether parental knowing the whereabouts of their child, household economic conditions, if child currently at school, and if child is still living at home at the time of interview.

Results

Table 1 reports discrete-time survival models of Taiwan youths’ transition to their first sexual experience linked with their parental data. Model 1 is typical of discrete-time survival analyses where the time indicator D1 to D4 representing the conditional log odds of transition to sexual debut in each parental wave for the Taiwan youths in the baseline of age groups. Here, D1, D2, D3 and D4 each represents the value of logit hazard from age 15 , age 16 to 18, age 19 and 20, and age 21 and above respectively. Since other predictors related to youth sexual debut is not included in the baseline model, the risk of first sexual experience increases somewhat steadily over time, but drops suddenly at age 21 and above. Before age 18, the odds of first sexual experience is 0.028, by age 18 it almost increases eight times to 0.16, and by age 20 it has increased to 0.17, but the odds has dropped to 0.057 at age 21 and above. Model 2 adds the main effects of the parental socio-demographic characteristics to the main effect of youth age. Of the parental socio-demographic characteristics, parental educational background significantly impedes the transition to youth sexual debut in Taiwan. Parents with vocational school and polytechnic education and college education and above, the odds ratio of their child transition to first sexual experience

is 34% and 44% later than adolescents whose parents are of only junior high and lower educational levels. In addition, growing up in a family other than an intact one is also marginally significant related to the earlier transition to first sexual experience for adolescents in Taiwan. For youngsters living in Taipei, Taipei county or Yi-Lan county at first wave of interview, the location does not significantly affect the timing of sexual debut.

Model 3 in Table 2 adds the thrust of the present study about the Chinese practices of “guan” when parents raise their children. The addition of these variables does not improve the model’s fit and ability to predict Taiwanese youth transition to their first sexual experience. Two Confucian values which serve as the cornerstone of the concept of “guan”—familial unity and piety and seeking for harmonious relationship with others—have no significant effects. We also add other characteristics of the household, such as amount of books the parent keep at their home, parental educational expectation of their children, in the first wave and second wave when their children are in the last year at junior high and third year at senior high school in the equation. Only one factor, parents who have not been attending PTA, is significant at the margin 0.1. Perhaps, this is a nuisance parameter, and it is quite hard to explain the effect of this factor.

Model 4 in Table 1 again adds the sex of the adolescents, and other time-varying covariates to the previous model. The addition of these variables largely improves the model’s ability to predict Taiwan youths transition to their sexual debut. The estimated odds of transition to sexual debut are almost nearly half of Taiwanese girls to that of Taiwanese boys. As the time-varying covariates indicate that those parents who know the whereabouts of their adolescent children in each wave of study, the likelihood for their children to enter sexual debut late is higher. The variable regarding children’s current enrollment status is related to significant decrease of their early

transition to sexual experience. However, another time-varying covariate in the model which concerns with children's living at home with their parent, in fact, has no significant effect in contributing to the transition to an early sexual experience.

Discussion

From our analysis we can see that the variables of the values derived from the concept of "guan" and Confucianism have little significance in influencing adolescents' choice of timing in initiating sexual activities. However, we argue that *parental caring* might be the key to protecting adolescents from early onset of sexual activities. Our results demonstrate that a youth in our sample if she is a female in an intact home, has a well educated parents, initially performed well in senior year at junior high school, the youths will tend to delay sexual debut until age twenty-two. In the result we also observe that if the parents know where their children daily activities, investing in providing their children's higher education and making sure that they stay in school rather than working or dropping out, the children usually entertain a later beginning of sexual activities.

In addition, this study does not aim to dictate whether adolescent premarital sexual activity is morally right or not. Rather, we wish to emphasize on the risks caused by early teenage sexual initiation and the prices that these problems might cause to the society as a whole. These risks include teenage pregnancy, high drop-out rates, the contraction of Sexually Transmitted Diseases if protection is not applied as well as the emotional and psychological trauma caused by unpleasant sexual experiences in early adolescence which might lead to delinquent behaviors in the later stage of one's life. In this sense, parental caring serves more effective protective function in combating the possibilities of the occurrence of these problems by delaying the timing for the onset of teenage sexual activities. The close tie with one's

family in Chinese culture might provide a strong emotional support for adolescents in making the right decisions when it comes to sexual initiation. The delay provided by proper parental caring give the teenagers time and room to wait until they have a more mature and stable personality and mentality to decide whether they want to be involved with someone sexually.

Conclusion

As Taiwan has become increasingly westernized, the public attitude towards premarital sexual activities has also become more and more liberal. Problems and issues associated with early onset of adolescent sexual initiation need to be addressed immediately without delay. Parental intervention and monitoring serve important roles in preventing adolescent sexual initiation. For parents from societies that are dominated by Confucian ideas, their parenting style is culturally specific which is represented by the concept of “guan”. However, our analysis reflects the fact that the Chinese parenting style which based on training might not maximize its effect in delaying the onset of adolescent sexual activities in Chinese societies. The results of our research reflect the universality in the positive effect of *parental caring* and *involvement* in reducing the odds of adolescent sexual initiation. In other words, if a parent wants to exert influence in their teenagers’ choice of timing for first sexual experience, training them by instilling traditional values in them might be less powerful in effects compared to simply having the knowledge of their whereabouts and leisure activities. Caring and understanding the life of adolescents seem to be the best form of parenting that secures the bond between the parents and adolescents and preventing them from seeking love and approval from sexual activities in an early age.

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