Behavioral and Emotional Problems Among Chinese and American Children: Parent and Teacher Reports for Ages 6 to 13

Andrew M. Weine, Jeanne S. Phillips, and Thomas M. Achenbach

This study compared behavioral and emotional problems reported by parents and teachers in Chinese urban and rural samples and demographically similar American samples. Parents of 469 6-to-13-year-old children of each nationality completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). Teachers completed the Teacher’s Report Form (TRF). Cross-cultural differences were generally modest in magnitude. Chinese children scored higher on TRF Delinquent Behavior and Anxious/Depressed syndromes, and on Internalizing. American children scored higher on CBCL Aggressive Behavior and TRF Attention Problems syndromes. Boys exhibited more externalizing behaviors across both cultures. The mean correlation between parent and teacher ratings was .36 in the Chinese sample and .29 in the American sample, a nonsignificant difference. Findings indicate considerable similarity between problems reported for children in very different societies.

In the early stages of a field’s development, research is often shaped largely by “local” factors. In the study of child psychopathology, such local factors include the conceptual orientation and methodological background of particular workers, the nature of the institutions where they work, funding contingencies, the available subject populations, and the feasibility of various types of research. The methodology and findings emerging from a particu-
lar local context are of unknown generality until tested elsewhere. Although no single approach can take account of all the variations among all local contexts, an advancing field must determine the degree to which methods and findings developed in one context are generalizable to other contexts.

One level of generalization is across the variations that occur within a country. A second level is across societies that differ in language and culture but share similar social structures, values, and views of development and psychopathology. A third level of generalization is across societies that differ more radically in social structure, values, and relevant views. The present study was designed to test the generalizability of a standardized assessment methodology and its findings across societies that differ radically in many ways. This was done by comparing behavioral/emotional problems reported on the same standardized instruments by parents and teachers of children in the People's Republic of China versus the United States.

There has been relatively little psychological research on child behavior in China, probably in large part due to that country's ambivalence over the years toward psychological assessment (Zhang, 1988). Recent studies have reported on various aspects of Chinese children's behavior, such as aggression, gender differences, prevalence of deviant behavior, and the effects of single-child status on behavior (Ekblad, 1989; Matsuura et al., 1993; Tseng et al., 1988; Xin, Chen, Tang, Lin, & McConville, 1992). However, none of these studies provided rigorous comparisons of Chinese children with children in other countries.

Although lacking demographically similar cross-cultural samples with which to make direct statistical comparisons, several studies have made inferential comparisons between children in China and other countries. For example, in a study of 267 nine- to 13-year-old children in Beijing, Ekblad (1989) concluded that aggressive behavior in Chinese children was as stable over time as aggressive behavior in Scandinavian children assessed with the same measure, Olweus' (1975, 1984) Aggression Inventory.

In another study that lacked direct comparisons between demographically similar samples, Matsuura et al. (1993) reported problem prevalence rates for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean children assessed with the Rutter Parent and Teacher Scales (Rutter, Tizard, & Whitmore, 1970). The sample of 2,432 children from Beijing evidenced more antisocial behavior (destructive acts, disobedience, lying, bullying) than neurotic behavior (worried, miserable, fearful). Yet Chinese parents reported less deviant behavior overall than did Korean and Japanese parents. Chinese parents also reported less deviant behavior than parents in other prevalence studies using the Rutter scales in Britain (Rutter et al., 1970) and New Zealand (McGee, Silva, & Williams, 1984). When rated by teachers, Chinese and Japanese children showed lower rates of deviant behavior than children studied in