Published in final edited form as:

Parent Sci Pract. 2011 July 1; 11(2-3): 190–198. doi:10.1080/15295192.2011.585566.

Attributions and Attitudes of Mothers and Fathers in Thailand

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SYNOPSIS

Objective—The present study examined similarities and differences between mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving situations and progressive versus authoritarian attitudes as well as correlations between mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes.

Design—Interviews were conducted with both mothers and fathers in 88 Thai families.

Results—Mothers and fathers did not differ in mean levels of attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving situations or in authoritarian or progressive attitudes. Mothers' and fathers' perceived control over failure, authoritarian attitudes, progressive attitudes, and modernity of attitudes were significantly correlated.

Conclusions—This work suggests high similarities between Thai mothers and fathers in their attributions and attitudes related to parenting.

INTRODUCTION

Thai Culture

Thailand is the third largest country in South East Asia after Indonesia and Myanmar. As of December 2009, the National Statistical Office of Thailand recorded that the population reached 67 million, with 32.9 million males and 34.1 million females. The largest ethnic group in the country (98%) is Thai, followed by Thais of Chinese origin and other minority groups who live along Thailand's borders with neighboring countries (Wibulpolprasert, Sirilak, Ekachampaka, Wattanamano, & Taverat, 2009). The main religion in Thailand is Buddhism, with smaller groups of Muslims and Christians in various regions of the country (World Health Organization, 2006). Some population indicators reflect continuing improvement in living conditions and standards. For example, the infant mortality rate decreased from 2.6% in 1990 to 1.3% in 2008 and the under-5 mortality rate of 3.2% in 1990 decreased to 1.4% in 2008 (UNICEF, 2009). However, from another perspective, the Human Development Index (HDI), a quality of life measure based on social and economic factors (education, life expectancy at birth, and gross domestic product per capita), reflects a different picture. According to the Thailand Health Profile 2005–2007 (Wibulpolprasert et al., 2009), after the economic crisis of 1997, the quality of life of Thai people diminished between 1998 and 2004; Thailand's HDI dropped from "high" to "moderate," and the ranking fell from 59th to 76th among 174 countries and 4th among ten Association of Southeast Asian Nations member states, after Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia.

With poverty in rural areas and more opportunities in cities, large numbers of workers migrate from rural to urban areas or from agricultural to industrial and service sectors

(“Drought in the Year,” 2005). This has resulted in some rural communities with families comprising mostly children and grandparents. According to a 2006 report, this type of family represented 37% of Thai families, with a strong likelihood of continued increase (Office of Women’s Affairs, 2006). The same report also described trends of decreasing numbers of extended families and increasing numbers of single-parent families. Extended families were common during earlier times in Thailand, especially in rural areas. This type of family, in which three generations live together, often with additional support from relatives and a network of community members, offers emotional comfort, security, and nourishment for children. The decline of extended families means reduced support in situations where parents have to deal with stress from maintaining reasonable standards of living and providing for children. Although the problem of poverty has become less severe, disparities in income distribution continue to affect Thai families. Compared to urban areas, there are three times more people in rural areas whose income is under the poverty line (Wibulpolprasert et al., 2009). The income gap between the top 20% and the bottom 20% in Thailand is the largest among South East Asian countries (UNDP, 2006). Such social conditions are likely to negatively impact families and children and increase risks of poor parenting, neglect, and abuse.

Attributions and Attitudes within Thailand

Traditionally, Thai families place high value on maintaining family connections. Although autonomy is encouraged to a degree, parents expect children to be obedient and compliant to their wishes and demands (Cameron, Tapanya, & Gillen, 2006). These attitudes are reflected in old Thai sayings such as “Walk behind a grown-up and dogs will not bite you” (dern tam poo yai ma mai kad), meaning no harm will come to children who obey adults, and even government mottos such as “Believe in your leader and the nation will be led to safety” (chuer poo nam chard pone pai). These sayings and mottos are familiar to most Thais.

The majority of research studies on parenting behavior and family by Thai researchers appears to focus on the four well-known parenting styles (Maccoby & Martin, 1983): authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful (Kotrajaras & Yongkittikul, 2002; Maneesri & Uwanno, 2003). One meta-analysis compiled 37 such studies conducted with Thai participants during 1981–1988 and concluded that positive childrearing practices (warm and supportive) had positive effects on children’s personality, character, and intellectual development, whereas neglectful childrearing practices had negative effects on children, leading to aggressiveness, lack of direction, and poor anger control (Yoelao, 1992). The effect sizes in this meta-analysis ranged from small to medium. The desirable characteristics that were often listed in this group of studies included self-discipline, diligence, altruism, honesty, gratitude, respect, generosity, patriotism, and religiosity; these may reflect common attitudes among Thai people in general. The implied hypotheses of the studies were that parenting contributes strongly to such outcomes.

From a different perspective, similar to many other Asian countries, middle-income and upper-income Thai families, especially those in urban areas, appear to embrace the ideology of “success” at any cost (Fitzpatrick, 2006) by pressuring children to attend tutoring schools or participate in activities that will enhance their chance of achievement in life. The business sector enthusiastically responds to this demand as evident by a multitude of tutoring schools proliferating in urban communities. Consequently, parents have to spend more time earning more money to pay for the added expenses, and parents and children end up having less time together.

One study investigated attitudes and attributions of fathers / husbands in family life (Limanond, 1998). However, the focus was on how Thai men were influenced by paternalistic attitudes and did not participate adequately in parenting and family activities.

Other research also has found that Thai fathers tend to be less involved in direct childcare than are Thai mothers (Tulananda, Young, & Roopnarine, 1994).

The Present Study

From reviewing studies on parenting in Thailand, it is apparent that scarce attention has been given to attributions and attitudes of Thai parents (Shwalb, Shwalb, Nakazawa, Hyun, Le, & Satiadarma, 2009). One goal of the present study was to contribute knowledge in this area. This study tested for differences between Thai mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving situations and parenting attitudes and examined correlations between mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes.

METHOD

Context

The community selected for recruitment of participants is in Chiang Mai, the Northern capital of Thailand with a population of 1.6 million (Chiang Mai Provincial Statistical Office, 2009). The majority of the population resides in and around the city center, which has seen rapid expansion during the last two decades. There are a large number of migrant workers from nearby areas, from the hill-tribe minority groups, and from neighboring countries who come to work in the city to support the tourist industry. As a result, Chiang Mai is a vibrant city replete with all kinds of amenities that make visiting and staying attractive to many. There are two large universities and one teachers' college housing over 20,000 students, seven international schools, and over 30 regular schools ranging from elementary level to high school level, both private and government run. Thus, many parents send their children to schools in Chiang Mai, many commute daily, and many more stay in numerous dormitories and apartment buildings.

Participants

Upon obtaining ethics approval from the Chiang Mai University review board, our research team contacted three local elementary schools. We received approval from school principals to ask teachers to send our brochures and invitation letters home with students to give to their parents. The schools were selected with the intention that they represent children and families from upper-, middle-, and low-income levels. From 200 letters and information sheets given out with contact information, the research team was able to recruit 120 families, 40 from each school, for data collection. Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of the participating families. Thailand is a relatively large and diverse society, both geographically and culturally. Each region has distinct ethnic origins, local dialects, and cultural practices. Therefore, this sample cannot be assumed to be representative of the entire population of Thailand.

Procedures

For ease of scheduling appointments and security reasons for research assistants, families who agreed to participate were invited to come to their children's respective schools. The research team sought and received approval from the three schools to use school facilities to conduct the interviews. Each researcher had access to a room with adequate privacy to conduct interviews with participants. They completed a demographic questionnaire, a measure of social desirability bias (Reynolds, 1982), and two parenting measures.

The analyses in this paper focus on constructs from two measures of attributions and attitudes (see Lansford & Bornstein, 2012). First, parents completed the short form of the Parent Attribution Test (Bugental & Shennum, 1984), which was developed to measure parents' perceptions of causes of success and failure in hypothetical caregiving situations.

Parents are presented with a hypothetical scenario that involves either a positive or negative interaction with a child (e.g., “Suppose you took care of a neighbor’s child one afternoon, and the two of you had a really good time together.”). Parents then are asked to respond to a series of questions regarding reasons that the interaction was positive or negative. Parents rate on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *very important*) how important factors such as the child’s disposition and the parent’s behavior were in determining the quality of the interaction. The amount of power or control attributed to oneself versus children is the key dimension of interest. This measure yielded four variables: (1) attributions regarding uncontrollable success (6 items; e.g., how lucky you were in just having everything work out well); (2) attributions regarding adult-controlled failure (6 items; e.g., whether you used the wrong approach for this child); (3) attributions regarding child-controlled failure (6 items; e.g., the extent to which the child was stubborn and resisted your efforts); and (4) perceived control over failure (the difference between attributions regarding adult-controlled failure and attributions regarding child-controlled failure).

Second, parents completed the Parental Modernity Inventory (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985), which assesses parents’ attitudes about childrearing and education. Each of 30 statements is rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). This instrument yielded three variables: (1) progressive attitudes (8 items; e.g., Children have a right to their own point of view and should be allowed to express it.); (2) authoritarian attitudes (22 items; e.g., The most important thing to teach children is absolute obedience to their parents.); and (3) modernity of attitudes (the difference between the progressive attitudes score and the authoritarian attitudes score). Alphas for each variable are shown in Table 2; given the low alphas for the adult-controlled and child-controlled failure attributions, these results should be interpreted with caution.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 2, parents made relatively high attributions for uncontrollable success in caregiving situations. On average, both mothers and fathers were more likely to attribute failures in caregiving situations to themselves than to their children. Parents reported authoritarian and progressive attitudes that were above the scale midpoints, on average, but were higher in progressive than authoritarian attitudes.

Gender Similarities and Differences in Parents’ Attributions and Attitudes

Repeated-measures linear mixed models with gender of parent as the within-subjects fixed factor tested for differences between mothers and fathers in attributions for success and failure in caregiving situations and progressive versus authoritarian attitudes. Test results are presented with and without controls for mothers’ and fathers’ ages, education, and possible social desirability bias. As shown in Table 2, there were no significant main effects of gender on any of the seven constructs of interest. Thai mothers and fathers did not differ in their attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving situations or in attitudes regarding parenting.

Within-Family Correlations Between Parents’ Attributions and Attitudes

The final columns of Table 2 present bivariate correlations of mothers’ attributions and attitudes with fathers’ attributions and attitudes. As shown, four of the seven analyses revealed significant concordance between parents within a family; two remained significant after controlling for parents’ age, education, and possible social desirability bias. Significant positive correlations were found for mothers’ and fathers’ attributions regarding perceived control over failure, progressive attitudes, authoritarian attitudes, and modernity of attitudes, with moderate effect sizes.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined parenting attributions and attitudes among mothers and fathers in Thailand. No significant differences were found between mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving situations or in their attitudes about parenting. Mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding perceived control over caregiving failures, progressive attitudes, authoritarian attitudes, and modernity of attitudes were found to be moderately correlated.

As in several other countries, fathers in Thailand have been found in previous research to be less involved in caring for children than are mothers (Tulananda et al., 1994). However, these differences in behavior may not be related to differences in attributions and attitudes. Findings from this study provide evidence for more similarities than differences between Thai mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes. It is possible that cultural messages regarding the importance of children's obedience and compliance to their parents' demands (Cameron et al., 2006) transcend gender boundaries and shape both mothers' and fathers' thinking about parenting.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Methodologically in the present study, the internal consistencies of the scales reflecting mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding adult-controlled failure and child-controlled failure were unacceptably low. Thus, findings with those variables should be interpreted with caution. Beyond the present study, with the large and diverse population of Thailand, people from different regions of the country vary in terms of local cultures and values. Each part of the country is influenced by the neighboring countries' cultures. For example, the Northern region where Chiang Mai is located has been influenced by Myanmar and China through long historical connections, whereas the Southern province where there is a large population of Muslims has been influenced by Malay's culture. One limitation of the present study is that all of the participants were from Chiang Mai and thus could not represent the Thai population in general. Future research may benefit from including participants from other regions of Thailand as well.

Conclusions

This work suggests more similarities than differences between Thai mothers and fathers in their attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving and in their authoritarian versus progressive attitudes. Both mothers and fathers attributed moderately high importance to adult and child factors as explanations for failures in caregiving (and somewhat more importance to adult than child factors), and both mothers and fathers had slightly more progressive than authoritarian parenting attitudes. Together, these results suggest that Thai parents most likely form a cohesive coparenting unit in terms of consistency in attributions and attitudes that they convey to their children.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development grant RO1-HD054805.

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TABLE 1

Demographic Characteristics of Children and Families

Child's gender (% female)	49%
Child's age in years	7.70 (.64)
Mother's age in years	36.80 (6.45)
Father's age in years	39.72 (6.99)
Mother's education in years	12.47 (4.70)
Father's education in years	12.72 (4.22)
Parents' marital status (% married)	79%
Number of children in household	1.80 (.84)
Number of adults in household	3.33 (1.50)

M (SD)

TABLE 2
Parenting Attributions and Attitudes: Alphas, Tests of Gender Differences, and Correlations for Mothers and Fathers

	Mothers		Fathers		Mothers		Fathers							
	<i>a</i>		<i>a</i>		<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>F^a</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>d^a</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r^a</i>
Attributions														
Uncontrollable success	.75		.66		5.42 (1.05)		5.24 (.94)		1.49	3.44	.18	.27	.02	.07
Adult-controlled failure	.35		.10		4.54 (.84)		4.34 (.74)		2.56	1.11	.25	.17	-.07	-.12
Child-controlled failure	.08		.01		4.14 (.63)		4.07 (.72)		.56	.62	.10	.11	.15	.15
Perceived control over failure	-		-		.40 (.91)		.27 (1.07)		.94	.13	.13	.05	.24*	.24*
Attitudes														
Progressive attitudes	.74		.64		3.22 (.37)		3.21 (.33)		.05	.19	.02	.05	.41***	.32**
Authoritarian attitudes	.87		.72		2.72 (.37)		2.73 (.27)		.12	.44	-.05	-.10	.21*	.05
Modernity of attitudes	-		-		.50 (.58)		.48 (.45)		.14	.66	.04	.11	.39***	.16

Note. *Ns* range from 80–88. Repeated-measures linear mixed models with gender of parent as the within-subjects factor. Cohen's *d* was computed using Equation 3 for paired samples in Dunlap, Cortina, Vaslow, and Burke (1996).

^aControlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias.

*
p < .05.

**
p < .01.

p < .001.