

## **PARENTAL AUTONOMY SUPPORT AND FILIAL BEHAVIOR: DOES THIS RELATIONSHIP DIFFER BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE ADOLESCENTS**

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### **Abstract**

Filial behavior is one of the topmost cultural practices in the majority of Asian families. Parents play a vital role in inculcating filial practices to the young generation. Although filial piety is implanted equally regardless of sex in childhood, gender differences in the strength of filial engagement have been documented. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the moderation effect of sex in the relationship between parental autonomy support and filial behavior among multiethnic adolescents in Malaysia. Cross-sectional design with cluster sampling method was used to recruit the respondents of the study. A total of 562 school-going adolescents aged 13 to 17 years old from three cities in Peninsular Malaysia participated in this study. The results indicated a significant positive relationship between parents' autonomy support and filial behavior. Male adolescents received greater autonomy support from their parents than female adolescents. Significant moderation effect of sex was only found in the relationship between fathers' autonomy support and filial behavior but not on mothers' autonomy support. In order to enhance and disseminate filial piety, the role of fathers' autonomy support on different sex of adolescents need to be considered in future studies.

**Keywords: filial behavior, parental autonomy support, sex, adolescent, moderator**

### **Presenting Author's Biography**



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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of filial piety was derived from Chinese Confucius belief. Extensive research on this topic were conducted among Chinese society such as China[1], Taiwan[2][3], and Hong Kong[4][5][6]. There was little evidence denoted the similar practice in multicultural society[7][8]. In the context of Malaysia, filial value is not only practiced by Chinese community but also accentuated by other religious teachings in the Malay and Indian cultures. Filial practices such as greeting, bowing, kissing elderly hands and with hands joined in front of the face in showing respect towards elderly are the common practices among Malaysian. Filial piety is a pathway to socialization which emphasizes the virtue and responsibility on how children should interact, respect, care and bring honor to their parents[4][9]. Filial piety is attributed as a traditional value which has been considered to be a guiding principle for normative socialization and intergeneration relationship[10]. However, filial practices have decreased due to modernization[11][3] and industrialization[10]. For example, it was found that children of dual-working parents tend to have lower filial behavior[10].

In the process of transferring the cultural value (such as filial piety), parents act as an important agent in inculcating their children with appropriate knowledge and value through the process of family socialization[12][7]. In a family institution, filial value may involve intergenerational transmission whereby parental behaviors and practices may become a role model and indicator to determine adolescents' filial engagement. Past studies have consistently proved the positive link between positive parenting such as parental warmth[13][5], parental involvement[8] and autonomy support [13][5][14][15] with adolescents' filial piety.

According to Eriksons' psychosocial developmental theory, identity seeking may appear to be the most important developmental task during adolescence year. To develop autonomy identity, it is necessary for adolescents to experience autonomy support provided by their parents and other significant socialization agents[16]. Adolescents' perception toward their parents' autonomy support allows them to make decision. This comfort and mutual emotional bonding may promote filial piety value among adolescents.

Past studies also denoted inconsistent results of sex differences in filial attitude and filial behavior. In a comparative study between Hong Kong and Beijing conducted by Chen et al. (2007), the results indicated that male tend to have stronger filial attitude than female counterparts, but sex differences was not found for filial behavior. In Chinese family, son has an important obligation to the family whereby parents believe that sons carry on the family lineage while daughter's responsibility transfers to her husband's family upon marriage[17][13]. However, this inequality has now subsided due to westernization that promotes equal educational opportunities and economic development for women, which in turn encourage filial engagement of daughter[18][19]. From the perspective of cultural norms on gender role, female is expected to practice more filial responsibility[20][21]. The role of sons and daughters marked themselves with different types of filial responsibility, with males providing more financial and material support; while females are more to emotional support by maintaining contacts with elderly parents[10][22].

Growing literatures of filial piety emphasize more on filial attitudes but less attention is given to the actual filial engagement. Moreover, most of the past studies focused on youth and college students and focused less on adolescents. Adolescence is the transition period of children on their coming-of-age and they experience major developmental changes that may

have a significant lasting effect in their life. Past studies denoted that filial piety can reduce adolescents' ill-being and promote well-being[15]. The effect of parental autonomy support in the engagement of filial piety is noted; however, parents may have different expectation and autonomy support towards their children's sex. Male may be granted with more autonomy support than female due to the diverse expectation and goal of the parents. In accordance to the mentioned knowledge gaps, this study intended to examine the moderation role of sex in the relationship between parental autonomy support and filial behavior among adolescents in Malaysia.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample and procedure**

A total of 562 secondary school adolescents were recruited from three states (Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan) in Peninsular Malaysia. The samples consisted of 52% of female adolescents. The respondents' age ranged from 13 to 17 years old with the mean of 15.07 and standard deviation of 1.03. About 48% of the samples were Malay, followed by Chinese (27.8%) and Indian (24%) adolescents. The respondents of the study were recruited by using cluster sampling method. A series of approvals such as the approval of Ministry of Education, Malaysia (MOE), Department of Education for each selected state and schools' principles were obtained prior to the actual data collection. Besides, parental consents form were also distributed and collected before adolescents responded to the questionnaire. The process of data collection was approved by the Scientific and Ethical Review Committee of the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman.

### **Measure**

#### *Parental Autonomy Support*

Parental autonomy support was measured by using Parent as Social Context Questionnaire (PASCQ)[23] based on child report. This measure consisted of 24 items, which were assessed in six dimensions of parenting (involvement, structure, rejection, chaos, coercion and autonomy support) and with the separate respond of perception towards mother and father. However, this study only utilized autonomy support sub-scale with four items to measure both father and mother autonomy support. Participants rated the items on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (very true) to indicate their perception toward autonomy support from their parents. A mean score was computed with high score indicates high autonomy support. The Cronbach alpha for the scale both father and mother were .78.

#### *Filial Behavior Scale (FBS)*

Filial behavior was measured by using the 25-item Filial Behavior Scale[10]. Participants rated on a 5 point-Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always) to indicate how often they display each of filial behaviors towards their parents. There were two reverse scored items and average score was computed. High score indicates more frequent practices filial behavior. The scale yielded a coefficient alpha of .85.

### **Data analysis**

The data of the study was analyzed by using IBM SPSS version 21. The data was first subjected to normality checking with the condition of both skewness and kurtosis in the range of +/- 2 to ensure the normality of the data. Descriptive statistics was computed to determine the frequency distribution of the variables. Next, Pearson correlation analysis was performed

to examine the relationship between parental autonomy support (father and mother autonomy support) and adolescents' filial behavior. Independent *t*-test was conducted to examine sex difference in both parental autonomy support and filial behavior. Lastly, the moderation effect of sex in the relationship between parental autonomy support and filial piety was tested by using Hayes's SPSS macroPROCESS[24]and to generate values to plot the meaningful graphical figure and the values of post-hoc probing.

## RESULTS

### Correlation among parental autonomy support and filial behavior

The results of Pearson correlation analysis indicted that both father and mother autonomy supports were positively related to adolescents' filial behavior (refer to Tab. 1). Adolescents who received higher parental support tend to be more filial to their parents.

**Tab. 1** Descriptive Statistics, and Correlations among Variables (N= 562)

Variables	Skewness	Kurtosis	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Father Autonomy Support	-.636	-.202	3.386	.487	1		
2. Mother Autonomy Support	-.777	.115	3.438	.466	.714***	1	
3. Filial behavior	-.383	-.314	3.827	.431	.448***	.418***	1

Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$

### Sex difference on parental autonomy support and filial behavior

Independent sample *t*-test was conducted to examine sex difference in parental autonomy support and filial behavior (refer to Tab. 2). The results denoted that there was significant sex difference in both father ( $t = -2.653, p = .008$ ) and mother ( $t = -2.761, p = .006$ ) autonomy support. Specifically, male adolescents perceived more father and mother autonomy support than female adolescents. Female adolescents, on the other hand, scored slightly higher in filial behavior than male adolescents; however, this difference was not significant.

**Tab. 2** Differences in Parental Autonomy Support and Filial Behavior by Sex (N=562)

Variable	Mean		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Male	Female		
Father Autonomy Support	3.44	3.33	-2.653**	.008
Mother Autonomy Support	3.49	3.39	-2.761**	.006
Filial behavior	3.80	3.86	1.631	.103

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$

### The moderating role of sex in the relationship between parental autonomy support and filial behavior

Moderation effect of sex on how fathers' autonomy supports predict adolescents' filial behavior was performed by using Hayes's SPSS macro PROCESS analysis (refer Tab. 3). The combination of adolescents' sex, fathers' autonomy support and the interaction product explained 22% of the variance in predicting adolescents' filial behavior. The results signified that all variables significantly predicted adolescents' filial behavior. The results of the study revealed that the interaction variables which was father autonomy support X sex ( $\beta = .14, p <$

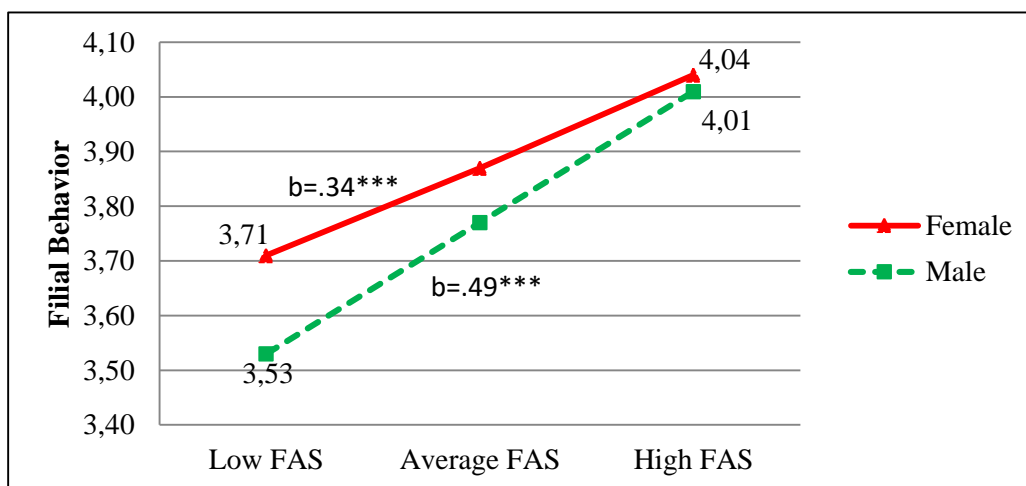
.05) significantly predicted adolescents’ filial behavior. These findings confirmed that adolescents’ sex did indeed moderate the relationship between fathers’ autonomy support and filial behavior.

**Tab. 3** SPSS Macro PROCESS Analysis in Predicting Adolescents’ Filial Behavior from Sex and Fathers’ Autonomy Support (N=562)

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	F	R <sup>2</sup>	df	Beta	t	p
<b>Model</b>		55.72***	.22	(3,558)			
Filial behavior	Sex (0=Female, 1=Male)				-.10***	-3.22	.000
	Father autonomy support				.41***	12.71	.000
	Father autonomy support X Sex				.14*	2.20	.030

Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*  $p < .05$

Analyses of post hoc probing tests were conducted to examine the significant effect of sex in the relationship between parental autonomy support and filial behavior. As presented in Fig. 1, the results of the moderation effect for male and female can be seen clearly. The results indicated that the simple slope was statistically significant for both male ( $b = .49, p < .001$ ) and female ( $b = .34, p < .001$ ) in the relationship between father autonomy support and filial behavior. This meant that when there was low score of father autonomy support, male adolescents tended to be less filial to elderly compared to female adolescents. On the other hand, when there was a higher level of father support, both male and female adolescents scored almost similar level of filial behavior. The moderation effect proved that father autonomy support had more positive effect on males than females.



**Fig. 1** Interaction between Father Autonomy Support (FAS) and Sex in Predicting Adolescents’ Filial Behavior

With regard to mothers’ autonomy support and its effect on adolescents’ filial behavior, the results of Hayes’s SPSS macro PROCESS indicated that the interaction of mothers’ autonomy support and adolescents’ sex did not significantly predict filial behavior (refer Tab 4.). The moderation effect of adolescents’ sex was not supported in the relationship between

mother autonomy support and their filial engagement. Therefore, the interaction figure was not presented.

**Tab. 4** SPSS Macro PROCESS Analysis in Predicting Adolescents' Filial Behavior from Sex and Fathers' Autonomy Support (N=562)

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	F	R <sup>2</sup>	df	Beta	t	p
<b>Model</b>		40.03***	.19	(3,558)			
Filial behavior	Sex (0=Female, 1=Male)				-.10***	-3.07	.000
	Mother autonomy support				.40***	10.70	.000
	Mother autonomy support X Sex				-.04	-.51	.610

Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study examined the relationship between parental autonomy support and filial behavior among adolescents in Malaysia. In addition, this study examined the moderating role of sex in the relationship between parental autonomy support and filial behavior. The results of the study supported the positive relationship between fathers' and mothers' autonomy support and filial behavior. The findings were in line with the literatures that positive parenting (e.g., parental support & warmth) plays an important role in adolescents' filial emotion and behavior[13][25][26][5][14][15]. Parental autonomy support was one of the indicators of positive parenting which promoted interaction between parents and adolescents. The results implied that positive relationship with parents could be the antecedent factor of adolescents' filial engagement[27].

Even though both parents autonomy supports were positively related to filial behavior. Both male and female adolescents reported that they received more autonomy support from mother than father. This finding was consistent with Asian parenting style that mothers were identified as the primary caregivers who were more involved with their children emotionally and physically[13]. Moreover, this study also observed the significant sex difference in perceiving parental autonomy support. As expected, male adolescents tended to receive relatively more autonomy support from both parents than female adolescents. In relation to filial behavior, no significant difference was found between male and female adolescents. This finding was consistent with the study conducted by Chen et al. (2007) which denoted the insignificant difference between male and female in filial behavior. This insignificant sex difference in filial obligation most probably may due to the gender role difference whereby females tended to exhibit emotional attachment while male tended to provide more on financial and material supports. Besides, sex equality in term of education, employment and decision making participations of women may also contribute to the equal filial obligation and engagement between male and female.

The results of the study also provided statistical evidence in suggesting sex act as a moderator in the relationship between parental autonomy support and filial behavior among

adolescents. The results of the study despite both male and female adolescents also denoted a significant relationship only in fathers’ autonomy support and filial behavior but not in the relationship between mothers’ autonomy support and filial behavior. Even though both male and female adolescents showed significant effect on fathers’ autonomy support, males tended to have stronger effect in the relationship between fathers’ autonomy support and filial behavior. Interestingly, females tended to be reported with higher filial behavior than male when fathers’ autonomy support was low. In adolescence, females experienced puberty and early maturation than male adolescents. It made females more obedient and responsible to their parents. Besides, male adolescents’ filial behaviors were highly depending on their perception toward their fathers’ autonomy support. This phenomenon may be related to the position of father as the authority and decision maker in a traditional family to maintain and support the family to keep functioning[13] where male adolescents needed more independence during their adolescence years. Thus, male adolescent who perceived their father as supportive and provided freedom for them to make decisions reported to have higher filial engagement. Hence, fathers’ support in adolescents’ autonomy development had an enhancement effect to filial behavior as adolescents had been granted the freedom and rights of decision-making in their life.

The findings of this study offered insights into the development of filial behavior. First, adolescents’ filial behavior could be explained by autonomy support from both parents. It was, therefore, important for parents to be aware of their children’s perception towards their parenting practices, which may affect the development of filial engagement of their children. Besides, the results of the study also denoted that adolescents’ sex may impact the relationship between perceived parental autonomy support and filial engagement.

Several limitations need to be considered in interpreting the results of the study. First, the study only focused on adolescents’ perception. The overlooked parents’ point of views may limit the understanding of the effect of parenting practices on adolescents’ filial behavior. Future studies may consider to gather more information from both adolescents and their parents in order to have a clearer picture on how parenting influences the development of adolescents’ behavior. The cross-sectional research design was not able to draw the casual relationship of the variables. Longitudinal design might need to be considered in the future to keep track on the developmental changes and to confirm the casual effect of the variables understudies. Finally, ethnic group differences should be investigated. It is believed that culture may shape the expectation of and belief in the parenting practices as well as the filial values.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We acknowledge Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman for funding this study. We are also thankful towards the Ministry of Education and Departments education of states as well as to the participants for their voluntary participation.

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