Title

Triangulation processes experienced by children in contemporary China

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Abstract

Most family-system research on triangulation processes has been undertaken in the West, with little known about this family dynamic in the East. The present cross-sectional study analysed 1,073 Chinese 3rd–12th-graders' self-reported exposure to three kinds of triangulation—cross-generation coalition, scapegoating, and parentification—in relation to family and child factors and with respect to children's school and social adjustment. Age-related analyses generally indicated that older children were less frequently exposed to all three dimensions of triangulation than younger ones. Children residing with only their parents experienced more scapegoating than those living in extended families; and boys were exposed to cross-generation coalition and scapegoating more than were girls. Higher levels of coalition and scapegoating exposure were related to poorer school adjustment and greater depression of children. Higher levels of parentification exposure, however, were associated with better school adjustment and social functioning. Findings are discussed in terms of theory and research on parent–child triangulation and cultural differences between East and West.

Keywords

China, cross-generation coalition, family process, parentification, scapegoating, triangulation

Triangulation is a dynamic family process central to family systems' theory (Bowen, 1978; Charles, 2001). It is an all-too-common, but dysfunctional, way for two persons in the family, typically mother and father, to manage their conflicts and tensions by bringing or entangling a third party, often a child, in the process. Most relevant work to date on triangulation indicates that such child involvement in parental conflicts adversely affects child and adolescent well-being (e.g., Bell, Bell, & Nakata, 2001; Bosco, Renk, Dinger, Epstein, & Phares, 2003; Buehler, Franck, & Cook, 2009; Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Etkin, Koss, Cummings, & Davies, 2014; Frank & Buehler, 2007; Fosco & Grych, 2010; Peleg, 2014; Peris, Geoke-Morey, Cummings, & Emery, 2008; Wang & Crane, 2001; Wang & Wang, 2014). Most of this research, however, has been carried out in the West. Given the importance of cultural values as a core feature of the macro system in child development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), it is unclear whether family dynamics involving triangulation operate similarly in non-Western societies. To address this issue, we conducted a cross-sectional study to examine exposure to triangulation in more than 1,000 children from Grades 3 to 12 in contemporary China.

Although China has undergone dramatic social changes over the past decades, traditional Chinese values emphasizing rules, duty, and responsibility to the family remain central to the socialization process. Unlike in the West, Chinese children are (still) expected to make sacrifices for the family (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). Such sacrifices might include children involving themselves in and even taking responsibility for parental conflicts. Given the fact that divorce has increased in China over the past several decades (Qi & Qu, 2014), we speculated that triangulation would be a common family dynamic in China today. After all, divorce often results from couples' inability to manage conflicts, and it has been found to foster triangulation processes (Afifi, Hutchinson, & Krouse, 2006; Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). These observations led us to investigate (1) age-related variation in exposure to three dimensions of triangulation, (2) family and child correlates of such exposure, and (3) associations between exposure and children's school and social adjustment.

Three dimensions of triangulation

Three dimensions of triangulation are often distinguished: cross-generation coalitions, scapegoating, and parentification (Kerr & Bowen., 1988; Shi, 2010). A *cross-generation coalition* involves a child actively or passively becoming part of an "alliance" with one parent against the other in the face of conflict between parents (Bell et al., 2001; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). An example may be that a parent speaks badly of their partner to the child (e.g., "your dad is irrational"), and the child directly takes the side of one parent over the other (e.g., "dad, it is all your fault"). *Scapegoating* involves an effort to resolve or avoid couple conflict by redirecting attention to a child problem, such as blaming or strictly disciplining the child (Bell et al., 2001). The third dimension, *parentification*, refers to the reversal of parent and child roles when a child attempts to resolve a parental conflict or comfort a parent who becomes upset by spousal conflict (Kerr et al., 1988; Peris et al., 2008). Though not originally regarded as a form of triangulation (Bell & Bell, 1979), parentification was subsequently conceptualized as such by Kerr and Bowen (1988) and Brotherton (1989) because it also can enmesh the child in a parental

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conflict. It is important to note that parental and child roles are also reversed in other ways than the three considered in this report (e.g., elder children having to take responsibility for younger children).

Family and child correlates of triangulation

Perhaps because family-systems' thinking was not originally cast in developmental perspective, there is only limited work examining whether and how variation in exposure to triangulation processes is related to children's age. One cross-sectional investigation of 10–18-year-olds in the US found that older adolescents were more likely to feel drawn into an alliance with mother or father than younger adolescents (Buchanan et al., 1991). Intriguingly, such results contrast with those from cross-sectional Taiwanese work on 13–18-year-olds, which found that older teenagers were less involved in such family dynamics than younger ones (Guo, 2003). Conceptually, adolescents may be more involved in triangulation than younger children because of increased power, but they may also be more able to escape a conflicted family environment, thereby reducing their involvement in parental disagreements. Given the mixed findings, additional work is needed to further elucidate the relation between triangulation exposure and age. In the current study, we compare children from Grade 3 to Grade 12 (i.e., age 8–18) in their triangulation experience.

Because of the enduring influence of Confucianism in China today (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010), it is common for Chinese grandparents to live with their adult children and to provide care for their grandchildren. Grandparents might mediate parental conflicts directly, or protect children from becoming involved in parental conflict. It is also possible that grandparents increase couple conflicts and thus the risk of children becoming entangled in them. We therefore examine whether children growing up in two-parent-only families and extended families (i.e., with grandparents) differ in their exposure to triangulation. It is important to note, however, that in this study we only focus on children's report of parental conflict, which does not involve grandparents.

Diverse viewpoints exist as to whether boys or girls are more likely to become involved in parental conflicts. Whereas some contend that girls are more inclined to be caught in triangulation because they are more relationship-oriented than boys (Gilligan, 1982), others believe that boys are more likely to be involved because parents often have greater expectations of them for taking responsibility in the family (Zhang, 2000). The latter point is an especially important consideration in the Chinese context given the patriarchal nature of traditional Chinese society. Mixed findings also exist in empirical research examining gender differences in triangulation exposure. For example, Buchanan et al. (1991) found that girls were more likely than boys to ally with their mother or father in the face of interparental conflict. In work which distinguished dimensions of triangulation, however, Bell and associates (2001) observed that while 11–19-year-old American and Japanese girls were more likely to become a coalition partner with a parent, boys were more likely to be scapegoated. Clearly, gender differences in child triangulation merit further attention.

Triangulation and child functioning

Theoretically, triangulation is regarded as a dysfunctional process because it positions children in untenable and age-inappropriate situations. More specifically, triangulation is presumed to undermine child well-being in three distinct ways—by violating intergenerational boundaries, by causing emotional distress (e.g., threat, confusion, self-blame), and by providing problematical models of ways to address interpersonal conflict and tensions (Bowen, 1978; Buehler et al., 2009; Kerr et al., 1988).

Most empirical evidence supports the notion that triangulation undermines child well-being. Greater exposure to triangulation has been found to be associated with less mature ego development (Bell et al., 2001), poorer peer relationships (Buehler et al., 2009) and troubled parent-adolescent ones (Fosco et al., 2010), as well as with internalizing and externalizing problems (Buehler et al., 2009; Etkin et al., 2014; Fosco & Grych, 2010). We seek to extend this work by not only studying associations between exposure to triangulation processes and child functioning in China, but also focusing on both children's school adjustment (e.g., academic achievement, peer relationships, student–teacher relationship, self-acceptance) and social adjustment (e.g., depression, aggression, self-esteem).

In addition, most prior research investigating associations between triangulation and child functioning has examined only one or two dimensions of triangulation (coalition and/or scapegoating) and rarely considered parentification. Yet, the latter observation is particularly important because some research suggests that parentification might actually promote adjustment, including social responsibility and altruism (Kerig, 2005). Especially noteworthy is Zhang's (2000) Taiwanese research showing that *greater* adolescent exposure to parentification predicted *fewer* internalizing and externalizing problems, even though *greater* exposure to coalition and scapegoating predicted *more* such problems. Apparently, the association between triangulation and child development may vary with respect to dimensions of triangulation and cultural context.

The current study

Despite evidence summarized above pertaining to triangulation in Taiwan and the West, little is known about triangulation experienced by children in mainland China today, and the potential effects of the different dimensions of triangulation on child development. Thus, we conducted the first large-scale study on triangulation processes in contemporary China, in which we sought to extend prior work by investigating demographic variation in the three dimensions of triangulation and their associations with contemporaneous measures of child functioning. Because of the mixed findings in previous research, we made no hypotheses regarding how child age and gender would relate to triangulation. However, we predicted that Chinese children growing up in extended families would experience less triangulation than those growing up in two-parent households. We also expected greater exposure to cross-generation coalition and scapegoating to predict poorer school and social adjustment, but that the opposite would be true for exposure to parentification. Notably, our cross-sectional design means that support for these predictions would not necessarily imply causation.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 1,073 children recruited from one elementary school ($n = 270$) and two high schools ($n = 386$) in a large northeastern Chinese city (Jinan), and from one elementary school ($n = 277$) and one high school ($n = 140$) in a large northern Chinese

Table 1. Summary of participants' characteristics.

Demographic variables		M or %
Local	Northeastern	61.0%
	Northern	39.0%
Parental education	Elementary school or less	8.5% (6.4%)[a]
	Junior-high school	31.5 (29.0%)
	Senior-high-school or technological-school	33.9 (32.2%)
	Junior-college (2 or 3 years)	11.5 (14.7%)
	College/university graduates or above (4 or more years)	14.6% (17.7%)
Family structure	Two-parent families	82.0%
	Extended families	18.0%
Grade	Grade 3	12.0% (9 years old)
	Grade 4	12.0% (9.86 years old)
	Grade 5	13.0% (10.89 years old)
	Grade 6	14.0% (11.84 years old)
	Grade 7	9.0% (12.72 years old)
	Grade 8	8.0% (13.82 years old)
	Grade 9	8.0% (14.84 years old)
	Grade 10	8.0% (15.84 years old)
	Grade 11	8.0% (16.70 years old)
	Grade 12	8.0% (17.70 years old)
Gender	Female	51.8%
	Male	48.2%

Note. [a]The percent outside parenthesis is maternal education level, and the percent in parenthesis is paternal education level. $N = 1,073$.

city (Tianjin). Descriptive statistics of the demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Two thirds of parents were high-school graduates (65.4% of mothers, 61.2% of fathers). A smaller percentage of parents had college or university experience (26.1% of mothers, 32.4% of fathers). Less than 10% of parents had failed to advance beyond elementary school (8.5% of mothers, 6.4% of fathers). We compared parental education level in this sample with that from the sixth nationwide population census conducted in 2010 (http://www.gov.cn/test/2012-04/20/content_2118413.htm). The statistics suggest families in our study have more education than Chinese families in general (elementary school or less: 26.1%; junior-high school: 37.9%; senior-high school: 13.7%; some college: 8.7%).

At the time of data collection, the large majority of children resided with both biological parents (two-parent family), with the others living with both biological parents and one or more grandparents (extended family). Roughly half the children were girls (51.8%); and child gender was unrelated to family structure and parental education. Nevertheless, there were more boys (52.2%) in the elementary-school subsample and more girls in the junior-high (53.4%) and senior-high (59.6%) subsamples, $\chi^2(2, 1054) = 9.89, p < .01$.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, we gained approval for the research from the Shandong Normal University Scientific Institute Ethical Committee, as well as written informed consent from mothers and assent from children themselves. Almost all parents and children agreed to participate (i.e., response rate $\geq 98\%$ for each grade). All data collection was carried out by trained psychology graduates working in school classrooms in October and November 2013. It typically took children 40–50 minutes to complete the administered

questionnaires. Children were permitted to ask for help when there was something they did not understand. If the children were not sure about their parents' education, they were instructed to obtain this information which was then recorded by research assistants within days from the administration of the original questionnaire. All participants received a small gift for their participation.

Measures

Family/child factors. Children reported on their gender, grade, family structure ("who do you live with?"), and parental education level. Parental education was reported for each parent. In the analyses, maternal and paternal education level were averaged because they were highly and positively correlated ($r = .65, p < .001$).

Triangulation. Students reported their involvement in parental conflict on a revised, three-dimension triangulation scale originally developed in China by Zhang (2000). The scale was found in previous studies (Wang & Wang, 2014) to have good internal consistency (alpha: .69–.88). The original scale consisted of 45 items, each rated on a 3-point Likert scale (1: *totally disagree*; 2: *agree to an extent*; 3: *totally agree*). In the present study, 22 items were removed due to length consideration, or lack of association with other items as determined by exploratory factor analysis. The factor analysis identified three factors accounting for 51.23% of variance. One factor reflected *cross-generation coalition* (e.g., "Then my parents quarrel with each other, I have to choose to stand by my father or mother"). A second factor reflected *scapegoating* (e.g., "When my parents quarrel with each other, they will blame me"). A third factor reflected *parentification* (e.g., "When my parents quarrel with each other, I will find ways to distract their attention"). Higher scores on each derived subscale reflected greater exposure to the particular kind of triangulation. Cross-generation coalition and scapegoating were significantly and positively correlated ($r = .47, p < .001$), but parentification was unrelated to coalition ($r = -.01, p > .05$) and scapegoating ($r = -.05, p > .05$). Internal consistencies for the three subscales are displayed in Table 2.

Child development. Elementary-school students reported on school adjustment and older students on social adjustment, including depression, aggression and self-esteem. *School adjustment* was measured using a 36-item questionnaire, originally developed in China by Wu (1997) to assess five constructs: *school regulation* (e.g., "It's difficult for me to arrive at school on time"), *peer relationship* (e.g., "I'm very lonely in my class and it looks like that nobody knows about me well"), *teacher–student relationship* (e.g., "I think my teachers treat me unfairly and biasedly"), *self-acceptance* (e.g., "I dislike my appearance"), and *academic competence* (e.g., "The homework is too much for me to handle"). Exploratory factor analysis revealed that these five constructs accounted for 62.16% of the variance in the current sample. *Depression* was measured using the 20-item Center for Epidemiological Studies on Depression Scale (CES-D, Radloff, 1977); *self-esteem* with the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) Self-esteem Scale; and *aggression* with the 17-item aggression subscale of Youth Self-report (Achenbach, 1991). Chinese versions of the three measures of social adjustment used in this study were developed by Chinese psychologists; they are widely used in China and have been found to be reliable and valid (Wang, Wang, & Ma, 1999). Table 2 displays internal consistencies of all child development measures used in this study.

Table 2. Descriptive information and reliability information.

Variables		M	95% CI	No. of items	α
Triangulation					
Coalition	Male	1.32	[1.29, 1.35]	8	0.79
	Female	1.28	[1.26, 1.31]		
	Two-parent families	1.30	[1.28, 1.32]		
	Extended families	1.29	[1.26, 1.34]		
Scapegoating	Male	1.44	[1.41, 1.47]	10	0.75
	Female	1.34	[1.32, 1.37]		
	Two-parent families	1.40	[1.37, 1.42]		
	Extended families	1.37	[1.34, 1.42]		
Parentification	Male	2.26	[2.22, 2.29]	4	0.72
	Female	2.23	[2.20, 2.26]		
	Two-parent families	2.24	[2.21, 2.27]		
	Extended families	2.25	[2.20, 2.31]		
School adjustment				36	0.94
School regulations		2.72	[2.69, 2.75]	8	0.75
Peer relationship		2.62	[2.58, 2.66]	8	0.88
Teacher-student relationship		2.57	[2.54, 2.61]	8	0.79
Self-acceptance		2.51	[2.48, 2.55]	7	0.73
Academic		2.25	[2.21, 2.29]	5	0.64
Social adjustment					
Depression		1.66	[1.62, 1.70]	20	0.86
Aggression		0.46	[0.43, 0.48]	10	0.87
Self-esteem		3.19	[3.15, 3.24]	17	0.84

Note. Item anchors for each variable are as follows: Triangulation: 1–3; School adjustment: 1–3; Depression: 1–4; Aggression: 0–2; Self-esteem: 1–4. Higher values indicate more of the quality. $N = 1,073$.

Results

Three sets of results are presented. They focus respectively on (1) grade-related variation in exposure to triangulation, (2) family and child correlates of such exposure, and (3) associations between triangulation and child functioning.

Child grade and triangulation

The first set of regression analyses evaluated linear and non-linear grade-related variation in triangulation exposure ($R^2 \geq .02$, $ps < .001$). Inspection of Figure 1 revealed that, in general, older children (i.e., those in higher grades) were less often exposed to all three dimensions of triangulation (i.e., cross-generation coalition, scapegoating, parentification) than younger children (i.e., those in lower grades). There were three notable—and non-linear—exceptions to this pattern, however. In the case of both coalition and scapegoating, extent of exposure was higher in Grades 8 and 9 than at younger or older ages. In the case of parentification, a similar pattern emerged, but with higher levels of exposure evident in Grade 11 relative to Grades 10 and 12.

Family and child correlates of triangulation

Three separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted, with each of the three triangulation measures serving as the dependent variable, in a four-step prediction model. Effects of

location (Jinan versus Tianjin) and parental education served as covariates entered in the first step. Linear and quadratic effects of grade were entered in the second step. The family-level variable, family structure, was entered in the third step; and child gender was entered in the fourth step. Inspection of Table 2 and Table 3 indicates that children experienced more scapegoating when they resided in two-parent families rather than extended families, and that boys more than girls experienced cross-generation coalitions and scapegoating.

Triangulation and child functioning

Because preliminary regression analyses revealed significant linear and quadratic effects of grade on each school- and social-adjustment measure ($R^2 \geq .03$, $ps < .001$), these linear and quadratic grade effects were controlled in all child-functioning-related analyses. Noteworthy, too, is that we examined the possibility that associations between triangulation and school and social adjustment varied by age. Because no evidence of such age-related moderation emerged, only main effects of triangulation are presented.

A series of hierarchical regression analyses were carried out in an effort to predict each measure of child functioning. All the family and child factors were entered as covariates in the first step; the three standardized triangulation subscale scores were entered in the second. Inspection of Table 4 reveals that children who reported greater exposure to coalition and scapegoating scored lower on school adjustment and higher on depression. In contrast, the more parentification children experienced, the better their school and social adjustment.

Discussion

The present study is the first large-scale examination of family triangulation experienced by children in China today, based on their self-reports. Significant variation in triangulation as a function of child age/grade, family structure, and child gender was observed. Notably, associations between different dimensions of triangulation and child functioning proved both similar to and different from those typically detected in the West, just as expected.

Child grade and triangulation

Cross-sectional analyses of age/grade differences indicated that child exposure to all three dimensions of triangulation measured herein varied across childhood and adolescence. Perhaps most notably, younger children generally reported more frequent exposure to triangulation than did older ones. Before considering why this might have been the case, it needs to be appreciated that grade-related findings from a cross-sectional analysis (of different children in different grades) cannot be presumed to reflect the grade-related pattern that would emerge in longitudinal work that repeatedly measured the same children in different grades. Thus, only future longitudinal research will be positioned to determine the extent to which the grade-related findings under discussion accurately reflect the experiences of children studied over time.

In any event, there are several possible reasons why older children generally experienced less triangulation than younger children. First, older children usually have a better understanding of parental conflict due to their advanced cognitive development than
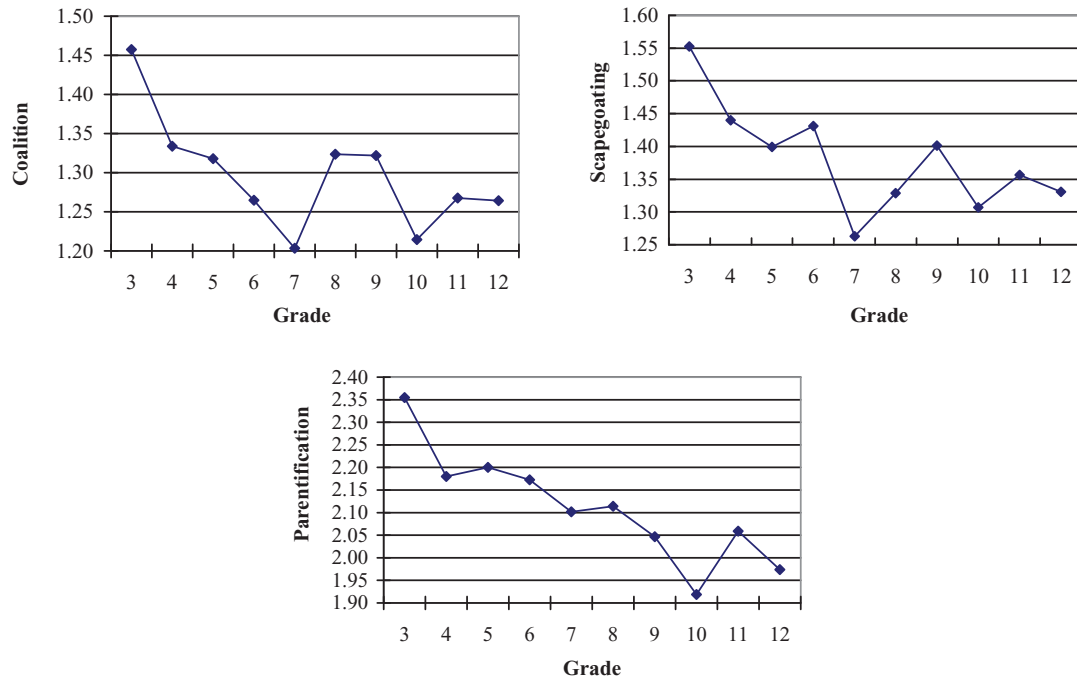
Figure 1. Mean triangulation subscale scores across Grade 3 to Grade 12 ($N = 1,073$).

Table 3. Summary of hierarchical regression analyses predicting the three measures of triangulation.

	Coalition				Scapegoating				Parentification			
Variable	ΔR^2	B	95% CI	β	ΔR^2	B	95% CI	β	ΔR^2	B	95% CI	β
First step	0.01				0.00				0.00			
Location		0.02	[0.00, 0.04]	0.04		0.02	[−0.01, 0.05]	0.02 0.03		0.04	[0.00, 0.07]	0.04
Parental education		−0.02	[−0.05, −0.01]	−0.06*		−0.01	[−0.03, 0.01]	−0.02		−0.02	[−0.04, 0.01]	−0.05
Second step	0.04				0.03				0.02			
Grade		−0.08	[−0.11, −0.03]	−0.68***		−0.05	[−0.07, −0.03]	−0.45**		−0.07	[−0.11, −0.02]	−0.35**
Grade²		0.02	[0.01, 0.03]	0.46***		0.02	[0.01, 0.03]	0.36**		0.01	[0.00, 0.02]	0.14†
Third step	0.00				0.04				0.01			
Family structure[a]		−0.04	[−0.09, 0.01]	−0.05		−0.07	[−0.10, −0.04]	−0.08*		−0.03	[−0.09, 0.04]	−0.02
Fourth step	0.01				0.05				0.01			
Gender[b]		−0.04	[−0.07, −0.01]	−0.07*		−0.10	[−0.14, −0.06]	−0.14***		−0.01	[−0.07, 0.03]	−0.01

Note. [a]Use the two-parent families as the referent group (= 0). [b]Use male as the referent group (= 0). ΔR^2 = change in R^2. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$; †$p < .10$.
$N = 1,073$.

do younger children (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Thus, they may be less likely to ascribe the cause of parental conflict to themselves (Chi & Yu, 2008). This may, then, influence their self-reported exposure to triangulation processes. Second, due to older children's greater interest in and involvement with peers (Masten, Telzer, Fuligni, Lieberman, & Eisenberger, 2012), they may be less focused on or exposed to parental conflict than younger children. This would presumably lower their likelihood of becoming involved in it. Another possible explanation of the grade-related variation documented in this cross-sectional inquiry is that marriages which endure longer—and thus involve older rather than younger children—may simply be better functioning. In other words, younger children may be more exposed to problematic relationships that provide more chance to become involved in parental conflict.

There were three adolescent-related exceptions to the general trend already noted of younger children experiencing more triangulation than older ones. Recall that children in Grades 8 and 9 experienced somewhat more coalition and scapegoating than younger and older children and that the same was true of children in Grade 11 with respect to parentification. Quite conceivably, pubertal changes provoked mother–father conflict in early adolescence and, thereby, triangulation; this seems particularly plausible given evidence that such somatic development of the child can lead to family conflict (Steinberg, 1987). In fact, this could result in increasing chances of young adolescents being pulled in (coalition) or pushed out (scapegoating) of parental conflict. Whatever the merits of this speculative analysis, it would not seem to apply to parentification, given that the non-linear change chronicled in this case did not occur until Grade 11. Perhaps the seemingly delayed

Table 4. Summary of simple regression analyses linking triangulation with school adjustment and social adjustment (depression, aggressive behavior and self-esteem)[a].

Triangulation		school adjustment						social adjustment		
		School regulations	Peer relationship	Teach-student relationship	Self-accept	Academic	Total score	Depression	Aggression	Self-esteem
Coalition	B	−0.06	−0.08	−0.06	−0.06	−0.07	−0.07	0.07	0.03	−0.02
	95% CI	[−0.10, −0.04]	[−0.12, −0.04]	[−0.10, −0.03]	[−0.09, −0.02]	[−0.12, −0.04]	[−0.10, −0.04]	[0.03, 0.12]	[0.00, 0.06]	[−0.08, 0.03]
	β	−0.21***	−0.17**	−0.14**	−0.13**	−0.16*	−0.20***	0.14***	0.08	−0.04
Scapegoating	B	−0.10	−0.18	−0.15	−0.17	−0.14	−0.15	0.18	0.12	−0.14
	95% CI	[−0.13, −0.08]	[−0.22, −0.14]	[−0.19, −0.12]	[−0.20, −0.13]	[−0.17, −0.12]	[−0.18, −0.12]	[0.13, 0.22]	[0.08, 0.14]	[−0.20, −0.09]
	β	−0.31***	−0.38***	−0.35***	−0.39***	−0.30***	−0.42***	0.37***	0.37***	−0.26***
Parentification	B	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.04	−0.07	−0.04	0.13
	95% CI	[0.01, 0.07]	[0.03, 0.11]	[0.00, 0.07]	[0.02, 0.09]	[−0.02, 0.06]	[0.02, 0.07]	[−0.12, −0.05]	[−0.06, −0.02]	[0.09, 0.17]
	β	0.10*	0.10*	0.06	0.09*	0.03	0.10*	−0.15**	−0.12**	0.26***
ΔR²		0.20***	0.24***	0.18***	0.21***	0.15***	0.29***	0.24***	0.19***	0.14***

Note. [a]Effects of demographic variables were controlled; school adjustment only measured in elementary school, and depression, aggressive behavior and self-esteem only measured in junior and senior high school. ΔR² = change in R². *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. N = 1.073.

change in parentification was due to the fact that it is a more active and less passive triangulation process.

Notably, the age/grade-related findings just summarized appear inconsistent with results of prior investigations. Consider in this regard the finding of Buchanan et al. (1991) that older American children and adolescents were more likely to feel caught between their parents than younger ones. What is difficult to know is whether the inconsistency between this American research and the current Chinese research was a function of culture, cohort (1980s vs. 2000s), the more limited age range studied in the US study, its exclusive focus on conflict between divorced/separated parents and/or its reliance on only linear analyses of change. Intriguingly and with regard to the last possibility just raised, we also detected a positive and significant association ($r = .13$, $p < .05$) between age/grade and triangulation exposure when we re-analysed our data the way Buchanan et al. (1991) did; that is, by focusing only on students of roughly the same ages as those in the Buchanan et al. (1991) inquiry, while considering only linear effects (by using simple correlations between age and triangulation). This, of course, raises the very real possibility that, like the current study, Buchanan et al. (1991) might have chronicled non-linear, age-related changes had this possibility been investigated.

Family and child correlates of triangulation

Several findings documented associations between family and child characteristics and triangulation. Turning to family structure, results revealed that, as anticipated, Chinese children growing up in extended families reported less triangulation than did those from two-parent families. As postulated in the introduction, we suspect this is due to the fact that other adults in the household, especially grandparents, protect children from involvement in parental conflict. Conceivably, they may even take place of the child when it comes to third-party involvement in such family processes. In light of this possibility—and others—it would seem useful for future investigations to examine grandparent involvement in husband-wife disagreements, a process which was beyond the scope of the current inquiry.

Turning to child gender, boys were significantly more likely to report exposure to cross-generation coalition and scapegoating, with the same, but non-significant trend evident in the case of parentification. In terms of scapegoating, these findings are in line with previous studies (Bell et al., 2001; Zhang, 2000). Perhaps this consistency results from boys usually manifesting more externalizing problems, such as aggression and delinquency (Rescola et al., 2007), and thus being more likely to be noticed by their parents.

In contrast to the findings just discussed, the gender differences in cross-generation coalition and parentification, which boys reported experiencing more than girls, proved opposite to those discerned in research in the West (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Bell et al., 2001). This might reflect differences in cultural values across East and West. Because of the patriarchal nature of traditional Chinese society, when parents have conflict with each other, they may be more inclined to seek the support of sons than daughters; this would be in line with the notion that boys have greater responsibility for their family, at least traditionally, than do girls. Future investigators might be advised to measure parents' and children's gender-related attitudes and beliefs, as these could help illuminate when and why gender differences emerge—or do not.

Triangulation and child functioning

The current study extended prior work by investigating associations between three different dimensions of triangulation and child functioning. Recall that results indicated that children reporting greater exposure to cross-generation coalition and scapegoating scored lower on school and social adjustment; such findings are consistent with those reported by others in the West highlighting risks to well-being of involvement in triangulation processes (Buchanan et al, 1991; Buehler et al., 2009; Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Fosco & Grych, 2008). At the same time, however, the contemporaneous associations under consideration might indicate that exposure to parentification is good for children. Recall that the more parentification children experienced, the better their school and social adjustment. Although such results contrast markedly with those documented in research conducted in western societies (Burnett et al., 2006; Hooper, DeCoster, White, & Voltz, 2011), they are notably consistent with findings from Taiwan (Guo, 2003).

It would appear, then, that the process of "parentification" operates differently across East and West. Indeed, it may be the case, as Jurkovic (1997) speculated, that when a family process like parentification proves normative in a given society, its effect on children will be positive rather than negative. From this perspective, parentification may reflect the greater responsibility of the child to serve the needs of the family in the East relative to the West, including when parents are in conflict. In any event, readers should not lose sight of the fact that ours is a cross-sectional study, so there is no way of knowing whether the contemporaneous associations linking triangulation processes with child functioning reflect parent effects, child effects or, alternatively, the effects of some third and unmeasured factor(s) associated with both family dynamics and child functioning. Ideally, future longitudinal inquiry will provide greater opportunity to disentangle such alternatives.

Strengths and limitation of current research

This research had notable strengths, including the large sample, the multiple ages studied, the focus on three separable triangulation constructs and, of course, the research locale. Nevertheless, it was not without limits, as we have made clear already in discussing the cross-sectional design. We also need to highlight the fact that the three dimensions of triangulation were measured only by means of children's self-reports. Certainly results might have been different had we relied on parental (or grandparent) reports, a worthy focus of future work. Important to appreciate, however, is that prior research indicates that adolescent assessment of triangulation in the family is a stronger predictor of adolescent well-being than is parental report of triangulation (Afifi et al., 2007).

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