Beyond Compliance: Children's Perceived Agency and Agentic Interpretation of Parental Control in Family Decision-Making

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Abstract

Classic socialization frameworks often link parental control with reduced child agency, yet less is known about how children cognitively process external constraints. This study examines the control-agency model by investigating: (1) how maternal beliefs shape children's perceived agency within the Chinese ***Guan*** (governance) context, and (2) how children cognitively navigate situations of maximal constraint. Using a novel vignette-based family decision-making task with 82 mother–child dyads (M_{age} = 6.6) alongside parental belief questionnaires, we assessed maternal beliefs about Guan and child agency, maternal decision dominance, and children's perceived agency across everyday scenarios. Boundary cases of minimal perceived agency were further examined to probe children's interpretations of maternal control and their strategic responses. Results showed maternal beliefs significantly predicted children's perceived agency independently of decision dominance. In the learning scenario, agency beliefs positively predicted perceived agency (β = .791, p = .043), whereas control-oriented Guan beliefs negatively predicted it (β = -.510, p = .009; R^2 = .151). Additionally, in boundary cases, children's perceived agency significantly informed their interpretations and strategies, yet these two outputs frequently diverged, indicating functional decoupling. These findings indicate that children's agency is not reducible to behavioral autonomy, but also involves internal interpretive processes even under high constraints.

Keywords: Chinese Guan parenting; parental control; decision making; perceived agency; agentic interpretation; functional decoupling

Introduction

The Agency Paradox Under Parental Control

Agency is often understood through the lens of autonomy and self-determination (e.g., Gurdal & Sorbing, 2018; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). Within this tradition, higher parental control is often treated as a constraint on children's agency because it limits self-directed choice and may undermine perceived autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). This framing has contributed to the view that parental control is often linked with reduced child agency.

However, this association becomes less straightforward when children's responses are considered. Even under identical constraints, children often react in quite different ways. For example, when a teacher forbids bringing pets to school, one child may simply comply, while another may strategically conceal a kitten in a backpack. Such cases illustrate that children can maintain a sense of agency through strategic compliance rather than overt resistance, actively navigating rules to satisfy personal goals within imposed limits (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015).

This paradox is particularly salient in Chinese parenting, where *Guan* (管) beliefs are widely held. Guan refers to a culturally grounded parenting belief system that emphasizes parental governance and regulation. Parents who endorse Guan tend to exert relatively high levels of control, viewing such control as an expression of care, responsibility, and moral obligation (Chao, 1994). Although such practices might be labeled *authoritarian* in Western models, Chinese children and adolescents often interpret parental control as guidance rather than domination, and frequently report substantial autonomy even when parental regulation extends into the personal domain (e.g., friend choice; Helwig, 2006; Helwig et al., 2014). These findings raise a critical question: if control does not uniformly eliminate agency, where does children's agency reside?

Defining Agency Beyond Behavioral Freedom

To address this question, agency should be considered beyond observable behavioral freedom. It can be understood as children's subjective perception of causal efficacy, that is, the experience that one's actions can produce meaningful effects in the environment, even under constraint (Bandura, 2001, 2006). For instance, when a child strokes a kitten and hears it purr, they detect a causal contingency between their action and the outcome. This perceived causal efficacy constitutes a foundational component of agency because it links action to perceived influence rather than to the mere amount of behavioral freedom.

Within parent–child interactions, however, such causal efficacy must be situated within a relational context. From a social relational perspective, children live within asymmetrical relationships where parental authority often

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limits what they can do, yet they may still maintain a sense of causal efficacy by interpreting what the constraint means and what forms of action remain possible within it (Kuczynski, 2003). Agency therefore does not reside in action alone; it may also be maintained through children's interpretive processes as they make sense of and navigate constraint.

The Relational Context of Agency: Parental Beliefs, Practices, and Agency Space

Children's opportunities to experience agency are shaped by the relational context of parenting, including parental beliefs and the practices organized by these beliefs. Parental beliefs provide a primary cognitive framework for parenting and guide everyday practices that mediate children's developmental outcomes (Sigel et al., 2014; Bornstein et al., 2018). Beliefs about parental responsibility, children's competence, and children's agency may therefore function as distal predictors of parenting practices. More specifically, this belief – practice pathway can be observed in the Chinese Guan context: stronger parental Guan beliefs may be expressed through heightened maternal decision dominance, whereas beliefs emphasizing children's autonomy may be reflected in more autonomy-supportive practices and expanded decision-making opportunities (Ng et al., 2014; Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). These practices, in turn, establish the boundaries of children's agency space, defining what is possible, permissible, and negotiable in everyday decision-making. For example, requiring homework before play defines a child's agency space around play: whether play can happen now, later, or only after homework is completed.

Children's Cognitive Construction of Agency: Perception, Interpretation, and Action

Building on these perspectives, children's agency can be conceptualized through a functional sequence encompassing Perception, Interpretation, and Action. **Perceived agency** refers to children's evaluation of their causal efficacy within a given agency space, aligning with social–cognitive accounts that emphasize subjective efficacy over objective control (Bandura, 1982; Synofzik et al., 2008). **Agentic interpretation** encompasses children's meaning-making and evaluative reasoning about parental constraints within their agency space, through which they cognitively assess the purpose and legitimacy of regulation (Smetana, 2018). This process of cognitive reconstruction may support children's sense of being a causal agent and preserve perceived efficacy when behavioral choices are restricted (Kuczynski, 2003; Goh & Kuczynski, 2022). Finally, **Action** reflects the observable behavioral responses under constraint, including compliance, resistance, or strategic adjustment. Within this framework, compliance does not necessarily signal diminished agency; rather, it may also reflect an agentic response shaped by children's interpretation of the constraint.

Family Decision-Making as an Arena of Agency

Family decision-making provides a primary context where parental control and children's agency intersect, because everyday decisions, such as learning routines or friendships, are central to how children participate in family life and experience agency (Fattore et al., 2009). Such decisions vary in how much freedom parents grant to children and how much agency children perceive within these decisions. Thus, family decision-making makes it possible to observe both the externally structured and internally constructed aspects of children's agency.

The Present Study

Building on a social relational view of agency (Kuczynski, 2003), the present study extends existing work by examining children's agency under parental control in the Chinese Guan context. Rather than treating agency only as the amount of behavioral freedom available to children, we focus on how agency is shaped by parent – child relational structures and how children make sense of constraint when their perceived agency is limited. To this end, we addressed two interrelated questions:

First, we examined how parental beliefs about Guan and child agency shape children's perceived agency through parental decision-making practices. Parental belief questionnaires and a vignette-based family decision-making task were used to capture maternal decision-making practices and children's perceived agency in everyday contexts. We hypothesized that stronger Guan beliefs (emphasizing control) predict lower levels of children's perceived agency via higher parental decision dominance, whereas stronger beliefs about child agency (emphasizing autonomy support) will predict higher perceived agency via reduced decision dominance.

Second, we investigated how children cognitively and behaviorally respond to *Boundary Cases* in which their perceived agency is most highly constrained. Semi-structured child interviews were used to examine cognitive interpretations and behavioral responses in Boundary Cases. Guided by a Perception–Interpretation–Action framework, we expected children's responses to reflect coordinated agentic functioning across cognitive interpretation and behavioral action, even under high levels of constraint.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 82 mother–child dyads recruited from urban China, after excluding six dyads for invalid responses. Mothers were aged 30–50 years (M = 37.6, SD = 3.83) and mainly held a bachelor's degree or higher (87.7%). Children were aged 5–8 years (M = 6.6, SD = 0.84), including 45 girls and 37 boys. Mothers were recruited as the primary caregivers and everyday decision-makers in Chinese families during early childhood (Pomerantz et al., 2014). All mothers provided written informed consent, and

children gave verbal assent. Power analyses using G*Power 3.1.9 indicated that the final sample size provided sufficient power for both paired comparisons (power $\approx$ 0.95, α = .05, dz = 0.5) and multi-regression analyses (power $\approx$ 0.80, α = .05, f^2 = 0.15; Faul et al., 2007).

Research Design

Parental Belief → Parenting Practice → Perceived Agency Mothers' Guan and agency beliefs were assessed, and mother–child dyadic reports on the same decision-making task were used to evaluate maternal decision dominance and children's perceived agency. This approach allows examination of the transmission path from maternal belief to children's perceived agency.

Perception–Interpretation–Action Semi-structured interviews focused on *boundary cases* to elicit children's interpretations of parental constraints and corresponding behavioral strategies. This method enables in-depth analysis of children's Perception–Interpretation–Action processes under high constraint.

Overall, this design allows examination of how parental beliefs shape parenting practices and how children perceive and navigate parental control cognitively and behaviorally.

Measures

Parental Belief Measurement Mothers completed two subscales of a Parental Belief Questionnaire validated in prior work: Guan beliefs (7 items; e.g., "*Parents discipline their children when they do something wrong*"; α = .74) and Agency beliefs (23 items; e.g., "*Child can make their own choice*"; α = .92). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

Family Decision-Making Task An illustrated vignette-based task was developed to assess children's perceived agency across seven decision-making contexts, comprising six everyday scenarios (i.e., digital content, study time, friend choice, clothing choice, dinner choice, and book choice) and one low-agency control scenario (doctor visits). Scenarios were selected based on reports from 48 parents as representative of daily parenting. Each vignette contrasted a **Self** condition (child-led decision) with a **Parent** condition (mother-led decision) to anchor children's understanding of decision authority (see Figure 1).

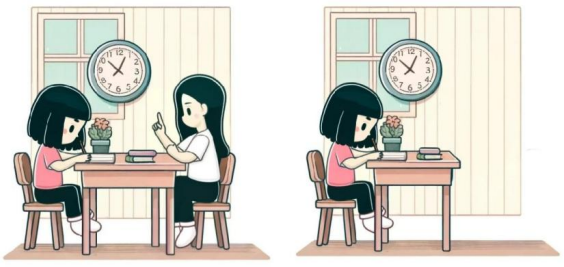

Figure 1: Example of the study-time scenario. Children were asked, "Who primarily decides when you study? "

Children completed a **two-step** procedure: (1) indicating *who primarily made the decision* in each scenario (self vs. mother), capturing the perceived boundary of decision authority; and (2) reporting *how often* this pattern occurred (always, often, sometimes), indexing perceived agency. Children's responses were scored on a 6-point scale (0–5), with higher scores reflecting greater subjective control and causal efficacy. Within children's reports, mother-led decisions were scored 0–2 (0 = always, 1 = often, 2 = sometimes) and child-led decisions 3–5 (3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always).

Mothers completed the same task to index maternal decision-dominance practices. Responses were scored such that higher values reflected stronger maternal decision dominance (*Mother decides*: 5 = always, 3 = sometimes; *Child decides*: 2 = sometimes, 0 = always).

Although mothers and children responded to identical scenarios, their reports captured distinct constructs: children reported their subjective experience of causal agency, whereas mothers reported on their parenting behavior (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). Conceptually, lower maternal decision-dominance scores indicate more agency-supportive decision-making, whereas higher scores reflect stronger maternal control.

Boundary Cases Interview To examine children's responses under highly constrained scenarios, semi-structured interviews were conducted focusing on Boundary Cases, defined as scenarios in which children reported the lowest perceived agency in the vignette task. Children's reactions to parental authority are mediated by reasoning rather than being automatic or reflexive (Smetana, 2006; Goh & Kuczynski, 2022). This approach isolates children's internal cognitive processes under maximal constraint, allowing assessment of how they interpret parental control, experience emotional responses, and formulate behavioral strategies.

Cognitive Response (Interpretation) Children were asked, "*Who do you think should make the decision in this situation? Why?*" to assess how they cognitively interpret parental control. Their responses were coded into a four-level agency continuum grounded in the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) framework of internalization: (1) Passive Acceptance (Non-agentic = 0): unquestioning obedience reflecting external regulation (e.g., "*Mom should decide because I just need to obey her*"); (2) Conditional Compliance (Low agency = 1): strategic obedience based on perceived consequences (e.g., "*Mom should decide, because I will go blind if I don't limit my screen time*"); (3) Internalized Acceptance (Medium agency = 2): agentic reframing of control to align with personal goals (e.g., "*Mom should decide, because studying helps me to get into top university*"); and (4) Autonomous Justification (High agency = 3): assertion of personal competence through rational arguments (e.g., "*Mom should not arrange my study schedule because I am capable of planning my own learning*"). This coding captures the increasing internalization and rationalization of the child's cognitively

agentic role, moving from a passive recipient of control to an active interpreter of social constraints (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Pomerantz et al., 2014; Smetana, 2006).

Emotional Response Children's boundary cases were elaborated into concrete parental-control scenario (e.g., "*If mom says you must study now, but you don't want to...*"). They then selected an emoji best representing their feelings (Sad face = 1, Neutral face = 2, Happy face = 3) and were encouraged to briefly describe their emotions to validate the selection (e.g., "*sad*," "*helpless*," or "*calm*").

Behavioral Response (Action) Children were then asked, "*What would you do if mom wants you to study, but you don't want to?*" to elicit their strategies under constraints. Responses were coded on a four-level scale ranged from passive compliance (e.g., "*I would just listen to her*") to active negotiation (e.g., "*ask for 20 more minutes rest*"), reflecting increasing agentic action. Behavioral responses were coded using the same agency continuum as cognitive responses. Interviews were video-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and each response coded for the highest-attained agency level.

Procedure

Child assessments were conducted individually in a quiet laboratory setting following a brief practice trial to ensure comprehension of the task. In this trial, children demonstrated sticker–frequency mapping by matching small, medium, and large stickers with "sometimes" (1–2 days per week), "often" (3–4 days per week), and "always" (every day), respectively. Then, children completed seven vignette decision-making scenarios and reported their perceived agency. Vignettes were presented in random order. Finally, they participated in a semi-structured interview for their selected boundary case, providing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Mothers independently completed the Parental Belief Questionnaire first and then the same decision-making task online.

Results

Context-Dependent Patterns of Agency

To facilitate comparison, maternal dominance was reverse-scored in descriptive analyses as decision-level *agency support* (lower dominance scores indicate higher support). Mothers' average Guan beliefs score was M = 3.61 (SD = 0.39), and agency beliefs was M = 3.85 (SD = 0.53). Maternal agency support and children's perceived agency varied significantly across the seven decision scenarios (Mothers: Friedman $\chi^2(6) = 226.13$, $p < .001$; Children: Friedman $\chi^2(6) = 178.87$, $p < .001$), revealing a context-dependent pattern.

Comparing maternal and child ratings (see Figure 2), study-time emerged as the most "agency-constrained" domain for both mothers (M = 1.72) and children (M = 1.51), mirroring traditional academic pressure in Chinese families (Shek & Lee, 2006). Notably, mothers systematically overestimated children's agency in less structured domains like friend-choice (M_{mother} = 4.52, M_{child} = 3.77; $p < .001$). High within-group consensus in the doctor-visit baseline (100% of mothers identified "Mother decides" and 78% of children reported 0) validated the scale and confirmed task comprehension.

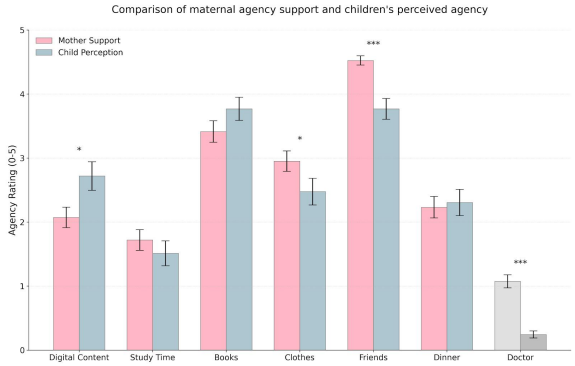

Figure 2: Comparison of agency ratings between children and mothers (N = 82)

Beliefs, Practice, and Agency

To examine our hypothesized belief → practice → agency pathways, analyses focused on three links: (1) maternal beliefs→maternal decision dominance (belief→practice), (2) maternal decision dominance→children's perceived agency (practice→ agency), and (3) maternal beliefs→maternal decision dominance→children's perceived agency (belief →practice→ agency).

Beliefs–Practices Link: Context-Specific Effect Regression analyses controlling for maternal age and education, child age, school status, and gender, indicated that Guan beliefs did not predict maternal decision-dominance practices across any scenario. In contrast, maternal agency beliefs significantly predicted lower decision dominance in the book-choice scenario (β = -.229, p = .044, 95%CI [-1.30, -0.002]) but not in the study-time scenario, a highly structured and academically salient scenario where mothers reported higher dominance (M_{study} = 3.28 vs. M_{book} = 1.59). This pattern suggests that situational constraints in structured contexts may limit the behavioral expression of maternal agency beliefs (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009).

Practice–Agency Link Across Domains Maternal decision dominance negatively predicted children's perceived agency in three scenarios. Specifically, higher decision dominance was associated with lower perceived agency in academic contexts (study-time: $\beta = -.255$, p = .025; digital content: $\beta = -.24$, p = .03) and in a personal domain (clothing choice: $\beta = -.39$, $p < .001$). This pattern indicates that even in Chinese families where parental control is culturally accepted, children aged 5–8 remain sensitive to parental control (Ng et al., 2014). This is consistent with prior findings that Chinese parents often exert high control over children's academic performance and frequently extend control to personal domains (Cheung et al., 2016; Helwig et al., 2014). No significant associations emerged in the remaining scenarios ($ps > .05$), suggesting

that the impact of parental control on children's perceived agency is highly context-dependent.

Divergent Belief–Agency Pathways in a Learning Context Our prior analyses suggest that Chinese parents' Guan beliefs comprise two dimensions: care (e.g., "*Parents main concern is child's needs*") and control (e.g., "*Parents should discipline children when they do something wrong*"). Mediation analyses revealed no significant indirect effects through the pathway maternal beliefs→maternal decision dominance→children's perceived agency. In the study-time scenario, however, direct effects revealed a divergent pattern: maternal agency beliefs positively predicted children's perceived agency (β = .791, p = .043), whereas the control facet of Guan beliefs negatively predicted it (β = −.51, p = .009; R^2 = .151, $f^2 \approx 0.178$).

These opposing effects suggest that, in structured learning contexts, different parental belief dimensions exert contrasting influences on children's perceived agency, challenging the *belief→behavior→child outcome* model (Bornstein et al., 2018), which assumes that parental beliefs shape child outcomes primarily through observable parenting practices such as decision sharing. Instead, maternal beliefs may be transmitted through subtle, non-behavioral channels, including verbal encouragement (e.g., "*What do you think?*"), offering bounded choices (e.g., "*After you finish homework, you can play for a while*"), or subtle affirmations (e.g., nodding, smiling) (Lerner & Grolnick, 2020). These cues may signal respect for the child's agency even when behavioral choices are constrained.

Consistent with Sigel et al.'s (2014) theory of belief hierarchies, this discrepancy may reflect the situated nature of parental belief expression. In highly structured learning contexts, context-specific priorities (e.g., normative expectations that child should complete homework) may impose a behavioral ceiling, limiting the extent to which agency beliefs can be enacted through observable practices. Under such conditions, it is the control-oriented dimension of Guan beliefs, rather than the care-oriented dimension, together with these context-specific demands that suppresses observable expressions of autonomy support, even when parents endorse agency at the belief level. As a result, children's perceived agency in structured learning contexts is shaped both by maternal decision dominance, which was found to negatively predict perceived agency in this scenario, and by how parental intentions and meanings are communicated within constrained interactional spaces.

Agency Under Constraint: Functional Decoupling

To examine how children navigate maximal constraints, we analyzed boundary cases in which children reported lowest perceived agency (M = 0.71, SD = 1.16). Most children identified study-time as their boundary case (64.6%), followed by digital-content choice (18.3%). This distribution indicates that academic regulation represents the most salient constraint in the Chinese Guan context, providing a stringent "stress-test" environment for observing agentic functioning under pressure.

Limitations of Linear Pathways in the Perception–Interpretation–Action Framework To test the hypothesized Perception—Interpretation—Action (P – I – A) framework, a bootstrap mediation analysis with 5,000 resamples was conducted for the pathway from perceived agency → agentic interpretation → strategic behavior. The indirect effect was ab = -0.007, 95% BCa CI [-0.159, 0.163], indicating that the mediation was not statistically significant.

Ordered logistic regressions further tested whether perceived agency predicted cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Perceived agency significantly predicted agentic interpretation (β = 0.539, p = .005, 95% CI [0.16, 0.92]) and strategic behavior (β = 0.465, p = .028, 95% CI [0.05, 0.88]) but not emotional reactions (p = .551). These results suggest that under high constraint, children's perceived agency does not translate into action through a simple linear pathway; rather, the relationship between perception, interpretation, and action follows a more complex, non-linear architecture.

Functional Decoupling under High Constraint By comparing the ordinal levels of agentic interpretation (I) and strategic action (A), we identified a core phenomenon: *Functional Decoupling*. Rather than exhibiting a matched "perception–interpretation–action" profile, a vast majority of children (80.4%) showed a dissociation between their cognitive interpretations and behavioral responses.

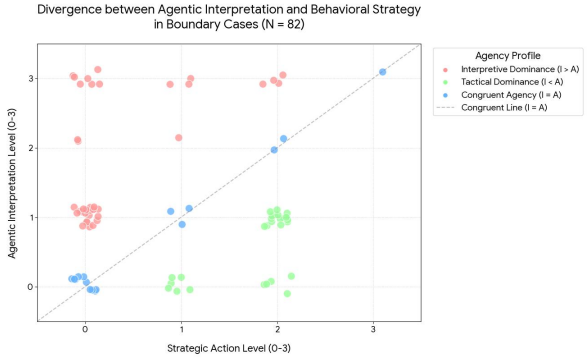

Figure 3: Divergence between agentic interpretation and behavioral strategy in boundary cases (N = 82).

Based on these divergences, three distinct agency profiles emerged (see Figure 3): **Interpretive Dominance** (I > A; 46.3%) was the most prevalent profile. These children maintained high-level agentic interpretations while displaying behavioral compliance. Their responses ranged from internalized acceptance of parental goals to explicit assertions of autonomous capacity (Level 2-3), suggesting that even when overt behavioral choice is constrained, children utilize cognitive reframing to preserve an internal sovereignty. **Tactical Dominance** (I < A; 34.1%): These children displayed action-led agency. Characterized by behavioral negotiation or tactical delay strategies (e.g., micro-protests like asking for water), they probed the boundaries of authority despite offering limited interpretive justification. **Congruent Agency** (I = A; 19.5%): Only a

small minority of children showed aligned levels of interpretation and behavior, representing either total submission or successful integrated resistance.

Crucially, supplemental analyses revealed that these profiles were independent of child age, maternal education, and schooling stage (*ps* > .60). While older children showed higher absolute interpretive sophistication ($p < .05$), the decoupling between interpretation and action remained a robust psychological feature across 5–8 year age range.

The stability and prevalence of this decoupling indicates that behavioral compliance should not be equated with the loss of agency. Instead, it represents a resilient, modular reconfiguration of the self. By decoupling internal representation from external execution, children are able to satisfy the social demands of parental authority while simultaneously preserving self-efficacy and sense of autonomy within a private cognitive space. This internal-external partition could be a key psychological mechanism through which children achieve agency Beyond Compliance in highly regulated environments.

Overall Discussion

This study examined children's agency under parental control in the Chinese Guan context. The findings reveal two key patterns. First, children's perceived agency was shaped not only by maternal decision-making practices, but also by parental Guan and agency beliefs. Second, in highly constrained situations, children showed a functional decoupling between cognitive interpretation and behavioral responses. Together, these findings suggest that children's agency should not be reduced to behavioral choice alone. Rather, agency is shaped by the relational context of parenting and by children's interpretive processes within that contexts.

Parental Beliefs as Implicit Scaffolding

Consistent with control–agency models, maternal decision dominance in academically salient contexts (e.g., study time) was negatively associated with children's perceived agency. Crucially, however, we identified a parallel *implicit pathway*: parental Guan and agency beliefs directly shaped children's perceived agency, even when parents largely retained decision authority.

This direct association suggests that children's perceived agency is not merely granted through behavioral choice, but may also be calibrated by their developing understanding of parental intentions and expectations. Through subtle relational cues, such as voice tone and facial expressions. Children may infer parents' intention and attitude, and gradually accumulate into prior knowledge about consistent patterns of parental decision control. Such prior knowledge may allow children to anticipate and gauge their agency space in specific contexts (Gopnik & Wellman, 2012; Ridao et al., 2021). This can be supported by the significant discrepancies between mothers' and children's reports of agency and decision-maker in several scenarios (e.g., friend choice, McNemar χ^2, $p < .001$). Ultimately, our findings suggest parental beliefs may act as an implicit relational scaffold that directly shapes children's perceived agency.

Children as Active Agents Under Constraint

In highly constrained boundary cases, we observed a functional decoupling between children's external compliance and internal agency. Even when behavioral options were limited, children differed in how they interpret maternal decision dominance. For instance, in the study-time scenario, one child may view the mother's decision as simply something to obey, whereas another may understand it as helping them finish homework earlier. Such cognitive reconstruction allows children to preserve a sense of causal efficacy even when they do not control the final decision.

The widespread functional decoupling indicates that behavioral compliance should not be equated with passivity. Instead, children actively interpret constraints and act strategically based on their perceived agency. This finding challenges traditional assumptions embedded in Guan parenting that emphasize adult guidance and environmental shaping, positioning children instead as active interpreters of control. Moreover, although children's agentic interpretations tend to increase with age between 5 and 8, the organization patterns of interpretation and action, whether interpretive-dominant, tactical-dominant, or congruent, remain largely unchanged. This stability of profiles suggests a developmental pattern that warrants further investigation. Future cross-cultural work could examine whether interpretation–action decoupling reflects a broader mechanism of children's agency under constraint, or whether it is shaped by culturally specific meanings of parental control.

These findings extend existing accounts of autonomy and agency under constraint. Whereas self-determination theory emphasizes how controlling environments may undermine perceived autonomy and internalization (Deci & Ryan, 2000), social relational theory highlights children's capacity to construct meaning within parent-child relationships (kuczynski, 2003). Our findings further specify how agency operates under constraint by showing that children may cognitively organize restricted situations in ways that diverge from their outward behavior, especially in a cultural context where parental control is often framed as care and responsibility.

Future Direction

Methodologically, this study uses a vignette-based family decision-making task and Boundary Case interviews to examine how 5- to 8-year-old children perceive, interpret, and respond to constrained parent – child interactions. However, because parental control was not experimentally manipulated and the proposed mechanisms were not directly tested, future work should use manipulations, especially in learning contexts, to test how children's interpretations of constraint shape perceived agency, persistence, strategy use, and learning outcomes. Computational models could further help formalize this cognitive process.

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