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Family Attachment and Delinquency Among Chinese Adolescents: The Mediating Roles of Adolescent Self-Disclosure and Parental Knowledge

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Abstract

As a crucial factor in the personal development, social interaction, and emotional maturation of children, family attachment plays a prominent role in the social control theory of delinquency. However, limited attention has been paid to the disentanglement and causal ordering of the elements of family attachment. This study utilizes data drawn from a sample of youth in China aged twelve to seventeen to examine path models that specify the interrelationships among the elements of family attachment that contribute to delinquency and assess their relative strength. In addition, this study incorporates both parent-driven efforts and child-driven efforts into the path model. The results of this study provide a richer understanding of the causal mechanisms linking family attachment to delinquency.

Keywords

juvenile delinquency, social bonding, family attachment, Chinese adolescents

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Introduction

As the primary institution for early socialization, family has been recognized as one of the most important areas of research inquiry for predicting delinquency. To date, perhaps the most influential and widely tested perspective on the role of family in preventing adolescent delinquency is Hirschi's (1969) social control theory, with a central focus being the inverse association between parent-child attachment and delinquency. According to the theory, strong parent-child attachment inhibits delinquent behavior out of children's care about what their parents think of their behavior and their fear of jeopardizing the established relationships with parents. Hirschi's basic proposition has received robust verification from empirical research such that "it is safe to call it as a fact of delinquency" (Costello & Laub, 2020, p. 29). A wealth of research has demonstrated that various indicators of family attachment, such as poor parent-child communication, weak parental control and supervision, limited parental affection and love, and inadequate support and help, are associated with an increased likelihood of delinquency (e.g., Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Demuth & Brown, 2004; Higgins et al., 2010; Miller et al., 1999). However, the empirical findings on the explanatory power of parental attachment are at best mixed and inconclusive (Kierkus & Baer, 2002, also see review: Hoeve et al., 2012). Many researchers have found only weak to moderate support for the predictive strength of family attachment (e.g., Craig, 2016; Hwang & Akers, 2017).

Recognizing that Hirschi's original propositions may be "probably more incomplete than it is incorrect" (Rakin & Kern, 1994, p. 496), subsequent reformation and extension of the theory in methods, measures used, and samples to enhance its explanatory power is warranted. One limit that requires attention is the lack of conceptual specification and empirical research on the causal interrelationships among the elements of family attachment in the explanation of adolescent delinquency. Earlier research often assumes a simple additive-linear model in which the various components of family attachment operate separately and independently (Rankin & Wells, 2018). As some scholars pointed out, such theoretical structure is relatively simple without specifying which components are the most effective and how the various components of attachment specifically and collectively operate to control delinquency (Gardner & Shoemaker, 1989; Thornberry et al., 1991). Although subsequent research efforts attempted to extend the theory by exploring how the elements of family control mutually condition each other (e.g., Hoeve et al., 2007; Li et al., 2023) or operate in combination with predictors drawn from compatible theories (e.g., Bao et al., 2014; Hayes, 1997; Hoffmann, 2003; Li, 2004), limited attention has been paid to the disentanglement and

causal ordering of the elements of family attachment. To fill this gap, this study uses data drawn from a sample of youth in China aged twelve to seventeen to examine path models that specify the interrelationships among the elements of family attachment that contribute to delinquency and assess their relative strength. Specifically, we differentiate between parental knowledge, which is often treated as an indicator of parent-child attachment in prior literature, and parental supervision. In addition, we incorporate both parent-driven efforts and child-driven efforts (i.e., the role of child disclosure) into the path model. This allows us to empirically test the dynamic associations between family bonding, child disclosure, parental knowledge, and children's delinquency. The results of this study aim to provide a richer understanding of the causal mechanisms linking family attachment to delinquency.

Family Attachment and Its Dimensions

Hirschi's (1969) social control theory starts from the assumption that a natural tendency toward deviance is normal in human nature, and therefore the motivation for crime and delinquency is constant. Unlike the theories which ask why people do not obey the rules of society, Hirschi answered the question of what prevents people from committing crime. Hirschi's explanation is that individuals tightly bonded to conventional institutions are constrained from violating society's rules and regulations. At the core of the individual socialization process to establish strong bonds is the parent-children attachment within the family, which refers to the close affectionate connection that youth hold with their parents (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Attachment is essentially a social-psychological concept involving the motivational values of seeking social approval (Rankin & Kern, 1994). According to Hirschi (1969), a strong attachment to parents restrains delinquent behaviors as children seek approval from parents and consider how their parents would react if they engage in certain behaviors. Individuals with weak attachment to parents tend to be less sensitive to parental opinions, thus leaving their behavior less unregulated and more susceptible to delinquency.

Hirschi conceptualized affectional identification, intimate communication, and supervision as components of parental attachment. Affectional identification, or the love and respect between the parent and the child, was noted by Hirschi as the crucial element of attachment because youths with strong affectional ties to their parents are more likely to care about the normative expectations of their parents. The stronger the affectional ties, "the more likely the person is to take it into account when [s]he contemplates a criminal act" (Hirschi, 1969, p. 91). Conversely, even if youths may acknowledge their parents' disapproval of delinquency, they might not see parental

detection as a significant deterrent if they do not care for their parents. In addition to affectional identification, Hirschi recognized that attachment is facilitated by the intimacy of communication between parents and children. Intimate communication refers to youths' willingness to share their activities and personal thoughts and feelings with their parents. Children are less likely to engage in delinquent acts when they consistently discuss their thoughts and activities with parents and seek parental opinions, as such communication reinforces a strong psychological presence of parents. Parental psychological presence can also be enhanced by virtual supervision afforded by parents who effectively monitor their children's activities even when they are physically absent. The concept suggests that children with strong parental attachment often refrain from delinquency, stemming from the child's perception that their parents are aware of where they are, who they are with, and what they are doing. Further, the self-perception of the watchful presence of the parents matters: a child may abstain from the temptation to engage in delinquent behaviors, not due to the actual knowledge of the parents regarding the child's whereabouts, but because of the child's self-perception that the parents are aware of their location (Hirschi, 1969).

Parental Knowledge and Youth's Self-Disclosure

The strength of Hirschi's social control theory lies in its simplicity and subsequent clarity, explicating how the elements of social control function to curtail delinquent behavior (Thornberry et al., 1991). However, this inherent simplicity also comes with certain limitations due to the theory's emphasis on the individual and independent effect of each element and a lack of conceptual development regarding the interrelationships among various elements of family control (Rakin & Wells, 1994). Although each component represents a distinct restraining process, effective family control requires the collective operation of numerous components. Previous research has shown that a narrow focus on a unidimensional indicator or one component of family control alone is not a sufficient explanation for delinquent behavior and that the total family control is not simply the sum of the effect of all family control components (Ingram et al., 2007; Seydlitz, 1993; Wright & Cullen, 2001). For example, research has shown that elements of family attachment have limited direct effects on delinquency when two or more conceptually related elements are examined simultaneously (Ingram et al., 2007). Moreover, the patterns of relationships between different elements of family attachment remain unclear. Another important limitation of the social control theory arises from its overemphasis on parent-driven effects in predicting child behavior. While the role of parental socialization in shaping a child's delinquent trajectory is

evident and influential in the field of criminology, it is important to recognize that the family-to-child causal explanation of the association between family control and child criminality is likely oversimplified (Jackson & Beaver, 2015). What's often overlooked is that parental efforts to curb delinquency may be constrained, and in some cases, may even lead to poorer, rather than better, outcomes when youths are unwilling to involve their parents in their lives.

These limitations are exemplified in existing studies that have often confounded the effect of parental supervision, which typically implies proactive monitoring by parents of their children's activities, with parental knowledge. Parental knowledge is a concept that primarily reflects parents' awareness of a child's whereabouts, activities, and social networks. Drawing from Hirschi's conceptualization of family attachment, many studies examined parental supervision in terms of parents' knowledge of their children's routines with the assumption that well-informed parents actively regulate their children's behavior and seek such information from them (e.g., Hardie, 2021; Peterson et al., 2016; Seydlitz, 1993). However, Kerr and Stattin (2000) questioned this assumption by suggesting that parental knowledge and parental supervision represent different forms of parental behaviors as parental knowledge does not explain how they acquire that knowledge, therefore not adequately capturing the essence of parental supervision. For example, parents can actively set rules or passively obtain knowledge of their children. They may have limited knowledge about a child if the child is under strict supervision but does not share much information with them.

Indeed, recent research has indicated that parents are primarily dependent on passive means, such as voluntary disclosure from children, to gain knowledge about children's daily activities, rather than relying on active parental efforts to solicit information or enforce rules (Keijsers et al., 2010; Soenens et al., 2006; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). In a cross-sectional study of youths in Sweden, Stattin and Kerr (2000) observed that children's voluntary descriptions of their free-time activities, rather than parental control and solicitation, served as the main source of parental knowledge and was identified as a key factor most closely associated with youth delinquency. Parental knowledge, therefore, is largely a result of a child's willingness to spontaneously disclose information about their activities to their parents. In line with this finding, subsequent studies have revealed that the previously observed negative association between parental supervision and delinquency becomes less pronounced or even disappears when supervision is operationalized in terms of active parental efforts instead of parental knowledge (Keijsers et al., 2010; Kerr et al., 2010).

The Present Study

The growing research highlights the importance of investigating the process through which various components of family control interplay to achieve their effects. However, much of the literature has concentrated on the independent and direct effect of the social bond that causes delinquency. This narrow focus, as noted by some scholars, may impede theory testing and development, particularly if the impact of social control on delinquency is largely indirect (Agnew & White, 1992). In the present study, we aim to bridge the gap by using data from a sample of high school students in Guangzhou, China, to examine whether and how the components of family attachment are related to each other and to delinquency. First, unlike conventional studies of social control that equate parental control with parental knowledge, we distinguish parental knowledge from parental control and investigate the sources of parental knowledge. As previous studies suggest, mere parental knowledge does not reveal how parents came to be knowledgeable, and it may not fully capture the construct of parental control (e.g., Crouter & Head, 2002; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Our study, therefore, explores the pathway from parental control to perceived parental knowledge and to delinquency. Second, our study adds to the social control perspective by incorporating child-driven effect (i.e., child self-disclosure) in the pathway. We challenge the notion that family control primarily involves parent-driven efforts to solicit information and control delinquency, as proposed in previous tests of social control theory. Instead, we assess the combined and interrelated effects of both parent-driven factors and child-driven factors in the prediction of parental knowledge and consequent delinquent behavior.

Specifically, our study focuses on two key dimensions of family attachment as outlined by Hirschi: affectional ties and supervision. The affectional dimension is often represented by parental behaviors toward the child that make the child feel accepted and approved, such as affection, love, warmth, and support (Hirschi, 1969). Whereas social control identifies a relationship between affectional identification and antisocial behavior, there is no consensus on the mechanisms that mediate this relationship. Our study emphasizes the role of disclosure and parental knowledge in the process. Children's view of supportive parenting may contribute to building intimacy and strengthening the parent-child relationship, making children more willing to share information with their parents. The increased parental knowledge about children's activities can, in turn, reduce delinquent behavior.

In addition, the supervision dimension involves setting regulations and guidelines for acceptable behavior, which does not necessarily require the physical presence of parents (Romero & Ruiz, 2007). When children believe

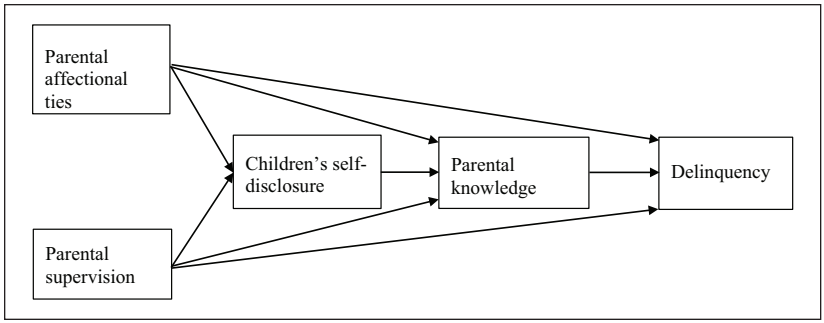

Figure 1. A theoretical model of the influence of family attachment on adolescent delinquency.

that their parents are watchful and considerate of their actions, they are likely to be inhibited from committing delinquent acts (Costello & Vowell, 1999). However, this type of parental control may become weakened over the course of adolescence as adolescents spend more time outside the family context and gain emotional and behavioral autonomy (Keijsers et al., 2010). There is evidence that excessive supervision efforts from parents can be ineffective or even lead to some forms of poor adjustment when adolescents become resentful, rebellious, and consequently less emotionally warm and open with their parents (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Thus, it can be argued that the effectiveness of parental supervision may depend on adolescents' voluntary and spontaneous disclosure, which helps their parents gain knowledge of their everyday activities.

Based on the discussion above, we propose a theoretical model linking family affectional ties and supervision, children's disclosure of information, parental knowledge, and adolescent delinquency involvement. The primary objective of this study is to investigate both the direct and indirect effects of family attachment, including parental affectional ties and parental supervision, on adolescent delinquency. As shown in Figure 1, we hypothesize that higher levels of parental affectional ties and supervision would be directly associated with lower levels of delinquency. Furthermore, taking into account the role of child disclosure in information solicitation, we also examine the potential mediating effect of child disclosure and parental knowledge, hypothesizing that higher levels of parental affectional ties and supervision would be associated with higher levels of child disclosure and consequent higher levels of parental knowledge, which in turn would be associated with lower levels of delinquency.

Data

The current study utilized data drawn from a sample of high school students in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province in China. Guangzhou is the third largest city in China with a population of over 13 million in 2015 (when the data was collected). As a coastal city and the capital of Guangdong province, Guangzhou has experienced rapid economic development and an increase in crime rates over the past four decades, making it an ideal site for researchers to study juvenile delinquency. Multilevel cluster sampling methods were employed to select respondents from ten city districts of the urban area of Guangzhou, each consisting of regular middle and high schools and vocational schools. Middle and high school students typically aim to excel in the College Entrance Examination to gain admission to universities and colleges, whereas vocational school students focus on developing technical skills for future employment in the labor market after graduation. To ensure adequate representation, one middle/high school and one vocational school were chosen from each district, representing the ten administrative districts of Guangzhou. Within each selected school, three classes were randomly chosen from the roster of all classes, encompassing six grade levels in middle school (Grades 1–3) and high school (Grades 1–3), and all the students in the selected classes were invited to participate in the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and trained research assistants explained the research purpose and the voluntary nature of the survey to the students. The anonymous, self-reported questionnaires were then administered to the students in their classrooms without the presence of their teachers. Through this sampling and data collection process, a total of 1,532 completed questionnaires were collected, resulting in a response rate of 95.75%. Table 1 presents descriptive data (e.g., mean, standard deviation, range, and alpha) for all included variables.

Variables

Endogenous Variable

Delinquency. An additive 12-item delinquency scale was constructed through the use of delinquent acts reported by the adolescent respondents. Children were asked about whether or not they committed various delinquent acts, such as graffiti, vandalism, shoplifting, burglary, robbery, theft, weapon carrying, group fighting, attacking others, piracy, drug dealing, and animal abuse. This scale has a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .84.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for All Variables.

Variable	*M* or %	*SD*	Min	Max	*N*
Delinquency	0.37	1.30	0	12	1,346
Parental affactional ties	4.27	0.78	1	5	1,421
Parental supervision	3.42	0.96	1	5	1,446
Childen's self-disclosure	3.31	1.13	1	5	1,447
Parental knowledge	3.83	0.96	1	5	1,464
Gender	0.53	0.50	0	1	1,509
Han ethnicity	0.97	0.16	0	1	1,516
Age	15.28	2.20	10	23	1,181
Hukou	0.71	0.45	0	1	1,490
Family SES	3.33	1.27	1	6	1,495
Self-control	6.52	6.01	0	27	1,383
School bond	2.85	0.74	1	4	1,440
Deinquent friends	0.16	0.65	0	5	1,365

Exogenous Variable

Parental Affectional Ties. The measure *parental affectional ties* was assessed using three items: "I get along just fine with my parents," "I can easily get emotional support and care from my parents," and "I get upset when I disappoint my parents." Respondents rated these items with a scale ranging from 1 = fully agree to 5 = fully disagree. All the items were reversed scored and then averaged to create a composite score. Higher scores represented stronger parental bonding. Cronbach's α was .80.

Parental Supervision. The scale of *parental supervision* measured ways in which parents set regulations and rules to control adolescents' behaviors. The measure was based on two items: (1) when I go out at night, my parents require me to be home by a certain time, and (2) when I am out and it starts to get dark, I have to call my parents to let them know. Adolescents responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = never, 2 =, 3 =, 4 = often, and 5 = all the time). The items were averaged, with a higher score reflecting a higher level of parental monitoring. Cronbach's a was .73.

Intervening Variables

Parental Knowledge. *Parental knowledge* was measured by a scale consisting of three items: When I go out, my parents usually know (1) where I am, (2)

whom I am with, and (3) what I do. Each of these items is rated on a five-point scale (1 = always, 2 = often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = rarely, and 5 = never). After reverse coding responses, all items were averaged to create a composite score, with higher scores representing a higher level of parental knowledge. Cronbach's α was .84.

Self-Disclosure. The child disclosure scale measures adolescents' voluntary disclosure to their parents about their activities during their spare time. The scale was based on three times: (1) I tell my parents who I am hanging out with, (2) I tell my parents where I am after school, and (3) I tell my parents what I do in my free time. Adolescents rated these items with a five-point Likert ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. The three items were averaged, with a higher score reflecting a higher level of adolescent disclosure. Cronbach's α was .87.

Control Variables

This study included a set of control variables to account for possible selection effects. Among them are a set of demographic variables that have often been associated with delinquency in prior research, including *gender* (1 = male, 0 = female), *ethnicity* (measured with a dichotomous variable with *Han* ethnicity, the largest ethnic group in China, coded as "1" and non-*Han* ethnic minorities coded as "0"), and *age* (in years). This study controlled for *hukou* (household registration system) as this deeply entrenched system divides the population in China into agricultural and nonagricultural sections and influences one's access to life chances and resources. *Hukou* was divided into urban (coded as 1) and rural (coded as 0).

This study also controlled for individual and social factors related to adolescent delinquency. *Perceived family socioeconomic status* was measured by asking respondents how they felt about their family's economic situation compared to most other families they know, with responses ranging from 1 = Very poor to 5 = Very good. The *self-control* scale was derived from nine items similar to the items employed by Grasmick et al. (1993), including the attitudinal dimensions of impulsivity (three items, e.g., "I often do whatever brings me pleasure here and now, even at the cost of some distant goals"), risk-seeking (three items, e.g. "Sometimes I will take a risk just for the fun of it") and self-centeredness (three items, e.g. "I try to look out for myself first, even if it means making things difficult for other people"). Response categories ranged from 1 = fully agree to 4 = fully disagree. An index was developed

for measuring the respondent's self-control by summing the scores for all nine items. The *self-control* index had a Cronbach alpha of .91. The measure of *school bonding* was constructed by combining four items into a scale, namely "if I have to move, I would miss my school," "I like my school," "The courses at school are interesting," and "Most mornings, I want to go to school." Adolescents' responses to the questions ranged from 1 = fully agree to 4 = fully disagree. The scale of school bonding was the average of these items with a Cronbach alpha of .74. *Association with delinquent peers* was measured using five items. The respondents were asked whether or not their friends had done any of the following: taking soft or hard drugs, shoplifting, burglary, extortion, or hurting someone badly with a stick or a knife. The scale of *delinquent peers* was created by summing up these items and had a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .80.

Analytic Strategy

We began our analysis by investigating the correlations between parental affectional ties, parental supervision, parent-child communication, parental knowledge, and delinquency. In the second step, we conducted path analysis exploring the associations among these variables, with a series of demographic and theoretically relevant variables controlled. Because the distributions of our dependent variables were slightly skewed, we applied maximum likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) to adjust for the non-normality (Bollen, 1989). In terms of model fitting evaluation, we used standard model fitting indices, including the Chi-square test, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) to assess whether the path model fits the data (Hooper et al., 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Finally, to formally test whether parent-child communication and information exchange mediated the effects of family bonding and control on children's delinquency, we adopted the bootstrapping approach suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to calculate indirect and total effects.

Moreover, we addressed our missing data by applying the Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) method, which computes maximum likelihood estimates and standard errors using observed data points (Enders, 2006; Little & Rubin, 1987). Previous research has demonstrated that compared with traditional techniques, FIML provides a more efficient estimation of statistical parameters and a less biased estimation of standard errors. We used the statistical program Mplus 8.6 to perform all the multivariate analyses (Muthén & Muthén, 2012).

Results

Bivariate Analyses: Correlation Matrix

We first examined the bivariate correlations among children's delinquency, parental affectional ties, parental supervision, and parent-child communication and information exchange (Table 2). The bivariate findings indicated that children's delinquency was negatively associated with parental affectional ties ($r=-.056$, $p<.05$) and parental supervision ($r=-.160$, $p<.01$). Children's engagement in delinquency was also significantly associated with the two hypothesized mediators, that is, parental knowledge of children's behavior ($r=-.230$, $p<.01$) and children's willingness to reveal their daily activities ($r=-.161$, $p<.01$) were negatively and significantly associated with children's delinquent involvement. Moreover, the two parent-child control measures were significantly associated with the two hypothesized mediators. Strict parental supervision substantially increased children's willingness to communicate with their parents about their daily activities ($r=.558$, $p<.01$) and parental knowledge of their children's behavior ($r=.508$, $p<.01$). Similarly, parental affectional ties increased children's willingness to reveal their daily activities ($r=.363$, $p<.01$) and parental knowledge of these routine activities ($r=.333$, $p<.01$). Finally, the correlations of the control variables were in the posited directions. For example, association with delinquent peers and low self-control were positively associated with delinquency and were negatively associated with family bonding/control as well as measures of parent-child communication and information exchange. School bonding, on the other hand, was negatively associated with delinquency involvement but positively associated with family bonding/control and parent-child communication and information exchange (Table 2).

Path Model

After demonstrating the bivariate correlations among the key independent and dependent variables, we proceeded to test the hypothesized path model (Figure 1). The full model controlled demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, and ethnicity), family socioeconomic status (i.e., *hukou*, and perceived family socioeconomic status), delinquent peer affiliation, school bonding, and children's level of self-control. The full model fitted the data well. The chi-square test of the overall model fit was statistically insignificant ($\chi^2(2)=1.86$, $p=.39$), suggesting that the reproduced correlation matrix derived from the hypothesized model did not differ significantly from the observed data. Moreover, fit indices such as CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, and

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Delinquency	1												
2 Parental knowledge	−.230**	1											
3 Children's self-disclosure	−.161**	.616**	1										
4 Parental affectional ties	−.056*	.333**	.363**	1									
5 Parental supervixion	−.160**	.508**	.558**	.270**	1								
6 Sex (male = 1)[a]	0.037	−.101**	−0.021	−0.017	−.135**	1							
7 Age	0.049	−.187**	−.146**	−0.014	−.194**	.131**	1						
8 Ethnicity (Han = 1)[b]	−.223**	.079**	0.043	0.038	.063*	0.031	.059*	1					
9 Hukou (urban = 1)[c]	−.070*	.167**	.112**	−0.045	.094**	−.058*	−.410**	0.015	1				
10 Family SES	−.084**	.053*	0.041	.061*	.064*	−0.036	−.261**	0.033	.136**	1			
11 Delinquent friends	.484**	−.248**	−.200**	−.090**	−.264**	0.048	0.052	−.231**	−.101**	−.070**	1		
12 School bond	−.221**	.363**	.394**	.222**	.310**	0.015	−.239**	0.048	.130**	.149**	−.220**	1	
13 Self-control	.246**	−.241**	−.155**	−.142**	−.188**	0.047	.165**	−.136**	−.082**	−.106**	.276**	−.164**	1

Note. $N = 1,529$.
[a]Female is the reference group.
[b]Minority is the reference group.
[c]Rural is the reference category.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

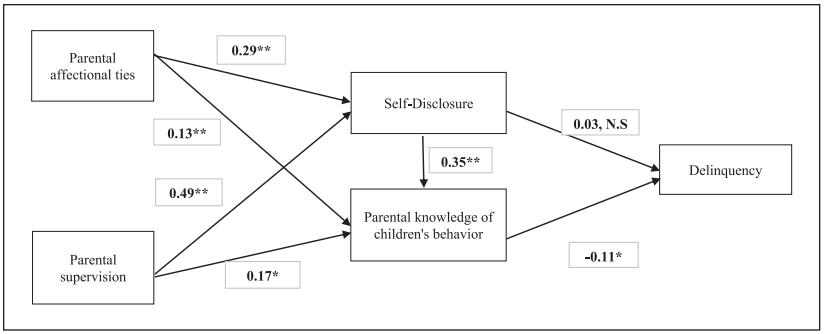

Figure 2. Path model investigating associations between parental affectional ties, parental supervision, parental knowledge, children's discosure, and delinquency (All control variables were included in the model).
Note. $N = 1{,}529$. N.S = non-significant. Model fit: χ^2 (2) = 1.86, $p = 0.39$; CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, SRMR = .003.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

SRMR = .003 indicated that the model fit the data almost perfectly (Hooper et al., 2008; L. Hu & Bentler, 1999). To simplify the presentation, we did not report regression coefficients of control variables in Figure 2, but details of the full model can be found in Appendix 1.

The path model revealed that parental control and bonding did not directly influence children's delinquency involvement; rather, the effects were indirect through improved parent-child communication and more frequent information exchange. Overall, there appeared to be two significant paths linking parental affectional ties/parental supervision and children's delinquency. First, parental affectional ties ($b = .13$, $p < .01$) and parental supervision ($b = .17$, $p < .01$) increased parental knowledge of their children's behavior (i.e., whereabouts, with whom, and doing what), which inhibited children's involvement in delinquency ($b = -0.11$, $p < .05$). Second, a higher level of parental affectional ties ($b = 0.29$, $p < .01$) and stricter parental supervision ($b = 0.49$, $p < .01$) increased children's willingness to reveal their friendship associations and daily activities during leisure time to their parents, which improved parental knowledge about their children's behaviors ($b = 0.35$, $p < .01$). Parental knowledge of children's behaviors, in turn, decreased children's delinquency involvement ($b = -0.11$, $p < .05$). This path model also revealed that there was no direct association between children's self-disclosure and their involvement in delinquent activities ($b = 0.03$, $p > .05$).

Although not the focal point of this study, this path model also found that many of the control variables had significant effects on children's

delinquency and parent-child information exchange (see Appendix 1). For example, children's association with delinquent friends ($b = 0.80$, $p < .01$) increased their delinquency involvement, while strong bonding with school decreased children's engagement in delinquency ($b = -0.16$, $p < .01$). Moreover, children with urban hukou ($b = 0.14$, $p < .01$) or those bonded closely with school ($b = 0.31$, $p < .01$) were more likely to self-reveal their daily activities to their parents. In the same vein, children with urban hukou ($b = 0.17$, $p < .01$), those bonded strongly with school ($b = 0.11$, $p < .01$), and children with high self-control ($b = -0.01$, $p < .01$) reported that their parents knew more about their daily activities. Finally, girls were more likely to report that their parents knew their association with friends and other daily routine activities than boys ($b = -0.11$, $p < .01$).

Indirect Effects Analyses

To formally test whether the associations between parental affectional ties/parental supervision and children's involvement in delinquency were mediated by parent-child communication and information exchange, we calculated the total and indirect effects (Table 3). Following the guideline recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008), we investigated the significance of these effects using the bias-corrected bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamplings (Table 3).

The indirect effect analyses provide further support for the findings of the path model. Regarding the effects of parental affectional ties on delinquency, both the total effects and the total indirect effects through children's disclosure were non-significant; however, two specific pathways were statistically significant. First, the indirect effect of parental affectional ties on children's delinquency through parental knowledge of their children's behavior was statistically significant ($b = -0.014$, 95% CI [−0.032, −0.003]), suggesting that parental affectional ties increased parental knowledge about their children's activities, which in turn, decreased children's delinquency involvement. Second, the indirect effect of parental affectional ties through children's self-disclosure and parental knowledge was significant ($b = -0.011$, 95% CI [−0.023, −0.002]), indicating that strong parental affectional ties precipitated more frequent self-disclosure, which increased parents' knowledge about their children's daily routines, ultimately reducing children's delinquency involvement.

The identical pattern was observed when examining the indirect effect of parental supervision on children's delinquency. First, the indirect effect of parental supervision on children's delinquency through parental knowledge was statistically significant ($b = -0.018$, 95% CI [−0.039, −0.004]),

Table 3. Parental Affectional Ties, Parental Supervision, Parental Knowledge, Children's Discosure, and Delinquency: Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects.

	Lower 2.5%	Beta	Upper 2.5%
Effects from parent-child bonding to delinquency			
Total effects	−0.040	−.017	0.000
Total indirect effects	−0.040	−.017	0.000
Parental affectional ties→parental knowledge→delinquency	**−0.032**	**−.014**	**−0.003**
Parental affectional ties→children's self-disclosure→delinquency	−0.011	.009	0.029
Parental affectional ties→children's self-disclosure →parental knowledge→delinquency	**−0.023**	**−.011**	**−0.002**
Effects from parental monitoring/supervision to delinquency			
Total effects	−0.054	−.023	0.005
Total indirect effects	−0.054	−.023	0.005
Parental supervision→parental knowledge→delinquency	**−0.039**	**−.018**	**−0.004**
Parental supervision→children's self-disclosure→ delinquency	−0.018	.014	0.049
Parental supervision→children's self-disclosure→parent knowledge→delinquency	**−0.037**	**−.019**	**−0.003**

Note. $N = 1{,}529$. Numbers in bold indicate that the effects are sigificantly different from zero.

suggesting that parental supervision increased parental knowledge, which then decreased children's delinquency. Second, the indirect effect of parental supervision through children's self-disclosure and parental knowledge was statistically significant ($b = -0.019$, 95% CI [−0.037, −0.003]), indicating that high parental supervision increased children's self-disclosure, which improved parental knowledge and in turn reducing children's delinquency. Combined, these results provide strong empirical evidence that parent-child communication and information exchange served as mediators linking parental control/bonding and children's engagement in delinquency.

Discussion

As a significant factor in the personal development, social interaction, and emotional maturation of children, family attachment plays a prominent role in the social control theory of delinquency. While Hirschi's key predictions

regarding the elements of family attachment have been well supported across various measures, methods, and samples, previous research often examined these elements as separate antecedents to delinquency, overlooking their potential causal associations. Moreover, the explanation of social control primarily emphasizes the role of parents in socialization and control processes but does not fully recognize the active role of children in the equation (Gordon, 2012). The key issue this study addressed is the process through which the elements of parental attachment work together to predict delinquency and the role of adolescents as active agents in the process.

First, the findings of this study reveal a significant indirect effect where strong parental affectional ties and supervision lead to increased parental knowledge of children's daily activities, which, in turn, contributes to a reduction in delinquency among participants. Our results challenge the notion that parental affectional ties and supervision directly decrease children's involvement in violent offending behavior. Instead, the effects of parent-child attachment (i.e., affectional ties and supervision) are indirect, mediated by parental knowledge of their children's activities. This underscores the importance of specifying the dynamic associations between parental supervision, affectional ties, and parental knowledge as elements of familial attachment in the theoretical model. Parental knowledge of children's activities is often used as a measure of parental supervision, which fails to capture potential sources of such knowledge (e.g., parent-child bonding). Our findings show that while children whose parents were well-informed reported stronger affectional ties with the parents and stricter supervision from their parents, parental bonding/supervision and parental knowledge are, in fact, intricately related but conceptually independent aspects of parent-child attachment. Parents can obtain knowledge through active surveillance efforts to track their children, as well as by developing a warm parent-child relationship.

In addition to the parental strategy to provide regulation and structure in adolescents' lives, this study also emphasizes the role of child-driven communication—children's disclosure—as another major source of parental knowledge. The pathway that accounts for adolescent-driven communication, running from high parental affectional ties and supervision to high adolescent self-disclosure to high parental knowledge and to low delinquency, is significant in this study. Our results echo some critique that the degree of conceptualization and commonly employed measures may be insufficient to capture the complexity and dynamic nature of parent-child relationships (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987). Despite that Hirschi suggested that family attachment is facilitated by intimate communication between parents and children, intimate communication is typically measured by assessing parental-driven communication, including explaining rules, helping with child

confusion, and expressing parent emotions, with an emphasis on the active role of parents as communication agents (e.g., Unnever et al., 2009). In research that expands the scope of communication indicators and incorporates both parent-driven and child-driven communication, these aspects of communication are sometimes combined into a single measure of the intimacy of communication (e.g., Weber et al., 1995). However, our study shows that parental knowledge also depends on the children's willingness to confide in their parents and consequently share details of their lives. By providing a way through which parents become knowledgeable, youth disclosure may become an increasingly important aspect of parent-child communication in the later year of adolescence characterized by increasing autonomy and independence on the side of adolescent and a more egalitarian distribution of power in the parent-child relationship (Boele et al., 2019; Willoughby & Hamza, 2011). Adolescents can manage their parents' involvement in their lives by regulating the information they choose to share with their parents.

Finally, consistent with the social bonding theory, this study indicates that parental attachment remains a powerful tool for parents to influence their children's behavior. We found that a high quality of the parent-child relationship, indicated by strong parental affectional ties and supervision, contributes to children's voluntary openness to parents, which in turn, steers them away from delinquency. The finding sheds light on the mechanisms and processes within the parent-adolescent dynamic that are conducive to the development and maintenance of adolescent disclosure. A common critique of social control theory is its lack of clarification about how the components of parental attachment specifically operate (Rankin & Wells, 2018). Previous findings have even indicated that excessive parental control can be associated with higher levels of delinquency and can come with the cost of increased depression, resentment, and hostility (e.g., Kerr et al., 2010). However, our study provides a more nuanced perspective. Although we did not find strong evidence for a direct influence of parental attachment on adolescents' delinquency, we emphasize that parental attachment serves as a vital form of family influence by promoting self-disclosure and mutual trust. Children are inclined to respond with a higher amount and depth of information when they feel that their parents are interested, ready to listen, express emotional warmth, and maintain an open demeanor. This form of parental control evolves and remains effective even as children gain more autonomy and independence during their adolescent years. Our finding highlights that children's willingness to share information should be viewed within the context of the interpersonal environment established by parents to facilitate parent-child interaction. This aligns with studies suggesting that the decision of children to reveal or conceal information from their parents largely depends on

the quality of the parent-child relationship (e.g., Keijsers et al., 2010). For example, parenting styles that are highly responsive, practice high behavioral control, and minimize psychological control tend to encourage greater child disclosure (Soenens et al., 2006).

Our study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, its cross-sectional nature means that it cannot establish definitive causal relationships among family variables and delinquency. The instrument was administered to respondents only once at a single moment in time, making it challenging to establish causal relationships among family variables as well as between family variables and delinquency. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine the sequence and direction of the above relationships. Second, the possibility of a bi-directional or reciprocal connection between family attachment and delinquency warrants attention. Recent research recognized that children's delinquency is not only a product of parenting but also has an effect on their parents' behaviors in the transition from childhood to adolescence (e.g., Gault-Sherman, 2012; Yoo, 2017). More empirical research is needed to incorporate reciprocal effects into research on delinquency to further understand the dynamics in the relationship between family attachment and delinquency. Third, the reliance on self-reported data administered only to adolescents who answered the questions regarding parent-child closeness, supervision, and communication from their point of view introduces potential bias. Because adolescent respondents provided measures of parental attachment, the pattern observed may indicate information bias and may be limited to the subjective perception of adolescents. The literature suggests that the scales of parental control would benefit from evaluating both children's and parents' responses to the survey items (Melotti et al., 2018; Stattin & Kerr 2000). Future studies should include multiple sources of data collection. Fourth, our sample focuses on adolescents in China, which limits the ability to generalize findings across different cultural contexts. In Chinese culture, there is a strong emphasis on respect for and obedience to parents, reflecting the collectivistic orientation of many Eastern societies. Strict or even harsh parental control is often negatively related to delinquency in many Eastern studies (e.g., Bao et al., 2014; Cheung & Cheung, 2008). This may help explain our finding that parental supervision in China leads to increased child disclosure. However, this contrasts with Western research, where strict parental discipline usually has a relatively strong positive relationship with delinquency (Agnew, 2015). Future comparative analysis across different cultures is needed to examine how cultural values such as filial piety in Eastern cultures and individualism in Western cultures influence parent-child relationships and consequent delinquency.

In summary, our results of the significant effect of family attachment on delinquency are supportive of the social control framework. Our study goes further by highlighting the critical mediating role of parental knowledge and parent-child information exchange and providing compelling evidence for an indirect relationship between family attachment and delinquency. Specifically, our results illustrate the potential causal interrelationship among the various elements of family attachments when multiple causal factors are involved, reinforcing the notion that the impact of family attachment on adolescent delinquency is more subtle than direct. Therefore, it is important not to simply interpret the lack of significance in the association between family attachment and delinquency as evidence of weak to moderate support for social control theory. This view overlooks the important fact that specific elements of family attachment, such as affectional ties and supervision, may exert substantial influence on delinquency indirectly by creating an environment where children are more likely to share details of their lives with parents, which in turn enhances parental knowledge. Furthermore, our investigation contributes to the debate concerning whether delinquency prevention is predominately driven by parents or children. The findings from our study suggest that the efforts of parents and children are not mutually exclusive but are interconnected aspects of the parent-child relationship. Parental influence in curbing delinquency may be limited when children withhold information from their parents. Meanwhile, parents' consistent investment in developing and maintaining a trusting parent-child relationship is crucial for encouraging children's self-disclosure and guiding them away from delinquent behaviors.

Appendix 1. Path Model: Parental Affectional Ties, Parental Supervision, Parental Knowledge, Children's Disclosure, and Delinquency.

	Self revelation		Parent knowledge		Delinquency	
	B	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*
Sex (Male = 1)[a]	0.09	0.05	−0.11**	0.04	0.05	0.07
Age	0.00	0.01	−0.01	0.01	−0.02	0.02
Ethnicity (Han = 1)[b]	−0.06	0.16	0.15	0.12	−0.91	0.59
Hukou (urban = 1)[c]	0.14*	0.06	0.17**	0.05	−0.04	0.08
Family SES	−0.04	0.02	−0.02	0.02	−0.03	0.03
Delinquent friends	−0.03	0.04	−0.07	0.03	0.80**	0.19
School bonding	0.31**	0.04	0.11**	0.03	−0.16**	0.05
Self-control	0.00	0.00	−0.01**	0.00	0.02	0.01
Children's self-disclosure			0.35**	0.02	0.03	0.04
Parental knowledge					−0.11*	0.05
Parental affectional ties	0.29**	0.03	0.13**	0.03		
Parental supervision	0.49**	0.03	0.17**	0.03		
R^2	.41		.36		.27	

Note. $N = 1{,}529$.
[a]Female is the reference group.
[b]Minority is the reference group.
[c]Rural is the reference category.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

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