

# *The Relationship between Parental Subjective Well-being and Parenting Concept: The Mediating Role of Rumination*

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**Abstract:** This study examined the influence of parents' subjective well-being on their parenting concepts, and the mediating role of rumination. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 784 parents of primary school students using the Subjective Well-Being Scale, Parenting Concept Scale and Rumination Scale. The results are as follows: (1) Parents' subjective well-being significantly negatively predicted unreasonable parenting concepts; (2) Parents' subjective well-being significantly negatively predicted rumination; (3) Symptom rumination and brooding were significantly positively predicted, and reflective pondering significantly negatively predicted unreasonable parenting concepts; (4) Rumination played a completely mediating role in the relationship between parents' subjective well-being and parenting concepts. Under the theory of cognitive motivation process and response style, this study verified that the lower the subjective well-being of parents, the more serious their unreasonable upbringing concepts, and rumination plays a mediating role in the relationship between the two.

## 1. Introduction

With the improvement of living standards and the availability of social educational resources, the phenomenon of "tiger parenting" has become prevalent, and in recent years, it has taken on a nationwide trend [1]. The term "tiger parenting" refers to the intense style of parenting where parents push their children to achieve better grades and gain admission to better schools. This often involves motivating children to participate in various tutoring, extracurricular classes, and competitions. Data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) show that the proportion of Chinese children attending tutoring classes outside of school hours has been increasing year by year from 2010 to 2018. Even though the implementation of the "double reduction" policy has somewhat alleviated the educational anxiety among many parents, more than two-thirds of parents still express greater concerns about their children's learning and believe that parents will spend more effort in seeking alternative methods to engage in "tiger parenting" practices [2].

"Intensive parenting", as coined by scholars, refers to a parenting style where children are the central focus, and parents invest significant amounts of time, energy, money, and emotions into their

upbringing [3]. This approach to parenting occupies a substantial portion of children's free time, depriving them of autonomy and creativity in their academic and personal lives [4], leading to decreased levels of happiness [5]. The relentless pursuit of competition and comparison can engender negative self-perceptions in children [6], fostering feelings of envy, academic disengagement, and other detrimental psychological effects [7]. In extreme cases, it may even contribute to self-harm, suicidal tendencies, and behaviors [8]. At the same time, parents themselves may experience persistent anxiety, exhaustion, and depression, often without achieving the desired educational outcomes for their children [9]. Existing research suggests that the phenomenon of "tiger parenting" is a manifestation of widespread societal and parental anxiety [10]. This anxiety stems from various sources, such as societal evaluation mechanisms, social class rigidity, and media influence [11]. However, empirical evidence supporting these claims is lacking, and there is a dearth of research exploring the micro-level psychological origins of this anxiety. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the psychological motivations and mechanisms behind "tiger parenting" to gain a deeper understanding, especially considering the limited research conducted on this topic within China.

The subjective well-being (SWB) of parents may be intricately intertwined with the phenomenon of "tiger parenting". Subjective well-being, a concept denoting the holistic evaluation of one's life quality based on self-determined benchmarks, serves as a barometer of whether individuals' present circumstances align with their subjective aspirations [12]. Prior research has predominantly regarded subjective well-being as an outcome, insufficiently acknowledging its agency in the face of life adversities. Within the framework of the family interaction system [13], the interplay of influences among family members becomes apparent. Parents' discontent with their own lives reverberates within their beliefs and behaviors pertaining to their children's education, while the acquisition of superior educational resources by offspring reciprocally assuages parental anxiety. A qualitative study illuminates that one source of intensive parenting derives from parental unease regarding their diminishing social standing [14]. Empirical investigations have also substantiated the salutary effects of children's educational attainment on parental life satisfaction [15]. Consequently, this study endeavors to illuminate the potential impact of parents' subjective well-being on their conceptualization of "tiger parenting".

### **1.1 The relationship between life satisfaction and parenting concepts**

Parenting concepts encompass the conscious and subconscious beliefs and ideas that parents employ and express regarding their children [16]. Serving as the precursors to parental caregiving behaviors, these concepts exert notable influences on parenting styles, parent-child relationships, and children's self-concept and cognitive development outcomes [16, 17]. According to cognitive motivation process theory, individuals with higher levels of happiness possess more positive self-concepts and exhibit more adaptive and positive coping strategies compared to their less fortunate counterparts [18]. Parents with lower levels of subjective well-being may extend their negative self-concepts into their educational beliefs concerning their children, perceiving their own lack of achievement as attributable to insufficient educational qualifications, consequently believing that their children "must possess high educational qualifications to attain success". Empirical research has found that parents with lower incomes are more likely to adopt authoritarian approaches in child-rearing, and parental anxiety often manifests in parenting styles, subsequently impacting children's psychological well-being through these styles of caregiving [19,20]. Therefore, this study posits the following hypothesis:

H1: Parents' subjective well-being significantly and negatively predicts their adoption of unreasonable parenting concepts.

## 1.2 The mediating role of rumination

According to cognitive motivation process theories of subjective well-being, individuals with lower levels of well-being are more likely to engage in rumination on negative or ambiguous events [18]. Rumination refers to the spontaneous repetition of thoughts that individuals experience after experiencing negative life events or when facing stressful situations [21,22]. Goal pursuit theory also suggests that rumination occurs when individuals fail to achieve expected goals, particularly when the failure is related to higher-order goals that individuals have constructed. When parents perceive unhappiness in their current lives, they may engage in repetitive thinking about their present circumstances, further influencing their beliefs and behavioral manifestations at the self and family levels. Empirical research has also found a significant negative correlation between subjective well-being and rumination[23]. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Parents' subjective well-being significantly negatively predicts their engagement in rumination.

Goal progress theory suggests that rumination leads individuals to perceive the motivation and emotions associated with pursuing a particular goal, thereby activating their attention towards the goal and focusing on thoughts related to obtaining important goal-related concepts [24]. In Chinese culture, the deeply rooted beliefs of "hoping for children's success" and "raising children to support parents in old age" regard child-rearing as an important family investment strategy. Parents view investing in their children's education as a source of hope for the family's future and an important avenue for achieving social status [25]. According to response style theory, rumination leads individuals to continuously focus on their own behaviors and thoughts rather than actively problem-solving. This mode of thinking perpetuates negative cognitive tendencies and interferes with constructive problem-solving behaviors [22]. The continuous rumination on "unhappiness in life" may drive parents to adopt more extreme and authoritarian beliefs and behaviors in their children's upbringing. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3: Rumination significantly positively predicts unreasonable parenting concepts;

H4: Rumination plays a mediating role in the relationship between parents' subjective well-being and parenting concepts.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research object

A stratified random sampling method was employed to distribute paper questionnaires to parents of students from two selected primary schools in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. A total of 933 questionnaires were distributed, and after excluding questionnaires with regular and incomplete responses, 784 valid questionnaires were obtained, resulting in a questionnaire validity rate of 84.03%. Among the valid questionnaires, 231 (29.5%) were completed by fathers and 553 (70.5%) were completed by mothers. As for the students, 265 (33.8%) were in the lower grade level, 223 (28.4%) were in the middle grade level, and 296 (37.7%) were in the higher grade level.

### 2.2 Research tool

*Subjective well-being:* The subjective well-being component of the Comprehensive Happiness Scale was used in the study [18]. This component consists of three dimensions: life satisfaction, positive emotions, and negative emotions, totaling 17 items. The negative emotions items are reverse-scored. The scale is scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1 strongly disagree" to "7 strongly agree" for life satisfaction and positive emotions, and from "1 never" to "7 always" for negative

emotions. Higher scores indicate a stronger subjective well-being. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of this scale in the current study was 0.803.

*Rumination:* The Chinese revised version of the Ruminative Response Scale (RRS) [21, 26] was used in the study. It consists of three dimensions: symptom rumination, brooding, reflective pondering, totaling 22 items. The scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1 not at all true” to “5 extremely true”. Higher scores indicate a higher level of rumination. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of this scale in the current study was 0.955.

*Parenting concepts:* An adapted version of the Early-stage Parenting Concept Scale was used in the study [27]. Specifically, items that align with the concept of “tiger parenting” and intensive education were selected (e.g., “Children must not fall behind at the starting line” and “Only through receiving good education can children change their destiny”), resulting in a total of 11 items. The selected items were reviewed by three psychology experts to ensure good face validity and content validity. The scale is scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “1 strongly disagree” to “7 strongly agree”. Higher scores indicate more authoritarian and unscientific educational beliefs. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of this scale in the current study was 0.718.

### 2.3 Research procedure and data analysis

The school teachers were cordially invited to distribute the paper questionnaires to the students, with a request for their respective mothers or fathers to willingly complete them. Upon the completion of data collection, the statistical software SPSS 24.0 was employed for conducting the statistical analysis.

## 3. Research Results

### 3.1 Test of common method biases

The Harman’s single-factor test was utilized to conduct a principal component factor analysis on all items within the scales, without performing factor rotation [28]. A total of nine factors were extracted based on the criterion of eigenvalues greater than one. It was observed that the first factor accounted for a variance explained of 25.6%, which was found to be below the critical threshold of 40%. Consequently, it was concluded that this study did not exhibit significant common method bias.

### 3.2 Correlation analysis of life satisfaction, parenting concepts and rumination

Table 1: Correlation matrix of subjective well-being, rumination and parenting concepts ( $N=784$ )

	M±SD	LS	PE	NE	SWB	RS	BR	RP	RU	PC
LS <sup>2</sup>	4.97±1.16	1								
PE	5.16±1.20	0.41** <sup>1</sup>	1							
NE	5.71±1.04	0.20**	0.09*	1						
SWB	5.29±0.80	0.75**	0.76**	0.58**	1					
RS	1.94±0.73	-0.30**	-0.25**	-0.34**	-0.42**	1				
BR	2.39±0.78	-0.25**	-0.12**	-0.26**	-0.30**	0.80**	1			
RP	2.20±0.79	-0.15**	-0.08*	-0.22**	-0.21**	0.78**	0.81**	1		
RU	2.10±0.71	-0.27**	-0.19**	-0.31**	-0.36**	0.96**	0.91**	0.90**	1	
PC	3.14±0.53	-0.06	-0.02	-0.15**	-0.11**	0.34**	0.31**	0.25**	0.33**	1

<sup>1</sup>\* $p<0.05$ ,\*\* $p<0.01$ ,\*\*\* $p<0.001$ ; <sup>2</sup>LS=Life satisfaction, PE=Positive emotion, NE=Negative emotion, SWB=Subject well-being, SR=Symptom rumination, BR=Brooding, RP=Reflective pondering, RU=Rumination, PC=Parenting concepts.

According to Table 1, it can be observed that the negative emotion dimension of subjective well-being is significantly negatively correlated with parenting concepts. Furthermore, subjective well-being and its various dimensions exhibit negative correlations with rumination and its various dimensions. On the other hand, rumination and its various dimensions demonstrate a significant positive correlation with parenting concepts.

### 3.3 Test of moderating model

According to the results presented in Table 2, the impact of parental subjective well-being on their parenting concepts, as well as the mediating role of rumination, were analyzed using the Process macro in SPSS. The findings indicate that parental subjective well-being significantly predicted parenting concepts in a negative direction ( $\beta = -0.07, p = 0.003$ ), confirming H1. Additionally, subjective well-being significantly predicted symptom rumination ( $\beta = -0.38, p = 0.000$ ), brooding ( $\beta = -0.29, p = 0.000$ ), and reflective pondering ( $\beta = -0.21, p = 0.000$ ), validating H2. Moreover, symptom rumination, brooding, and reflective pondering all significantly predicted parenting concepts ( $\beta = 0.25, p = 0.000$ ;  $\beta = 0.10, p = 0.019$ ;  $\beta = -0.09, p = 0.029$ ), while the prediction of parenting concepts by subjective well-being became non-significant ( $\beta = 0.04, p = 0.124$ ). These results suggest that rumination fully mediates the relationship between subjective well-being and parenting concepts, thus validating H3 and H4.

Table 2: Regression analysis of subjective well-being, rumination and parenting concepts ( $N=784$ )

Regression equation			Model fitting			Coefficient	
	Dependent variable	Independent variable(s)	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	$\beta$	t
M1	Parenting concepts	Subjective well-being	0.11	0.01	8.72	-0.07	-2.95** <sup>1</sup>
M2	Symptom rumination	Subjective well-being	0.42	0.18	167.44	-0.38	-12.94***
M3	Brooding	Subjective well-being	0.29	0.09	74.33	-0.29	-8.62***
M4	Reflective pondering	Subjective well-being	0.21	0.04	35.55	-0.21	-5.96***
M5	Parenting concepts	Subjective well-being	0.36	0.13	28.10	0.04	1.54
		Symptom rumination				0.25	5.39***
		Brooding				0.10	2.35*
		Reflective pondering				-0.09	-2.19*

<sup>1</sup>\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

The above mediation model was tested using bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method with 5,000 bootstrap samples, and the results are presented in Table 3. The findings indicate that the mediating effect of rumination is significant, with an effect size of -0.11. This mediating effect is generated through three parallel mediation paths, namely symptom rumination (effect size -0.10, Bootstrap 95% CI = [-0.14, -0.06]), brooding (effect size -0.03, Bootstrap 95% CI = [-0.06, -0.01]), and reflective pondering (effect size 0.02, Bootstrap 95% CI = [0.003, 0.04]). The theoretical model of this study is depicted in Fig. 1.

Table 3: Bootstrap test of mediating effect

Paths	Effect value	Boot SE	95% CI	Relative mediating effect
SWB-RU-PC <sup>2</sup>	-0.11* <sup>1</sup>	0.01	[-0.14, -0.08]	73.75%
SWB-SR-PC	-0.10***	0.02	[-0.14, -0.06]	66.37%
SWB-BR-RP	-0.03*	0.01	[-0.06, -0.01]	20.30%
SWB-RP-PC	0.02*	0.01	[0.003, 0.04]	12.85%

<sup>1</sup>\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; <sup>2</sup>SWB=Subject well-being, SR=Symptom rumination, BR=Brooding, RP=Reflective pondering, RU=Rumination, PC=Parenting concepts.

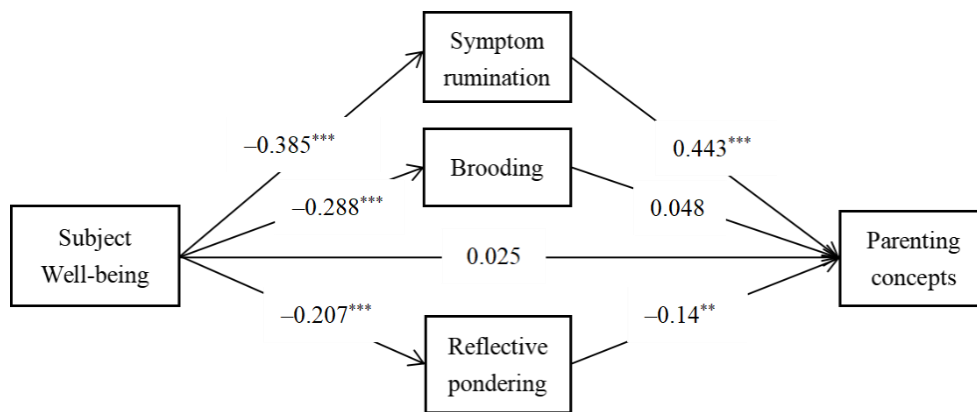


Figure 1: The mediating role of rumination in the relationship between subjective well-being and parenting concepts

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 The influence of subjective well-being on parenting concepts

This study has uncovered a significant negative association between subjective well-being and unreasonable parenting concepts. This finding aligns with prior research [20]. Traditional Chinese educational ideologies tend to prioritize a child-centric approach, with aspirations of achieving personal goals and social class mobility through their children’s educational success. The underlying “tiger parenting” phenomenon reflects broader societal concerns regarding social mobility and stratification. It signifies a shift in adult coping mechanisms from self-redemption to investing in their children’s education [25]. This observation emphasizes that the “tiger parenting” phenomenon extends beyond mere educational implications, encompassing wider social implications. Although the implementation of the “double reduction” policy has alleviated academic pressure among compulsory education students to some extent, it may not fully address the fundamental issue of educational intensification. In response to this phenomenon, it is imperative for parents to engage in effective psychological adjustment when faced with pressure, thereby avoiding inadvertently transferring their own life stress onto their children. Furthermore, society should strive to shape a more equitable and balanced educational environment while strengthening regulatory measures and guidance to address unreasonable parenting practices.

### 4.2 The mediating role of rumination

This study revealed that rumination, through the mediating paths of symptom rumination, brooding, and reflective pondering, played a significant mediating role in the relationship between subjective well-being and unreasonable parenting concepts. This finding provides empirical support for the application of goal pursuit theory and response style theory within the context of family interactions. The experience of parental goal frustration leads to the emergence of rumination, as parents, feeling powerless in the face of current challenges, unconsciously transfer their stress onto their children. This maladaptive cognitive style not only influences parents’ parenting concepts but also has the potential to impact their parenting behaviors. Moreover, this not only affects the overall well-being and healthy development of children but may also impede their own career development. Scholars have even coined the slogan “Being a tiger mother is not as good as being a tiger oneself” to highlight the potential consequences of such parenting practices [29].

Furthermore, the study results also revealed that the reflective pondering within rumination



negatively predicted unreasonable parenting concepts, whereas rumination symptom and brooding positively predicted such beliefs. This suggests that parents who possess a capacity for self-reflection and attributional thinking, enabling them to effectively cope with challenges, are less likely to develop unreasonable parenting concepts. Future research could delve deeper into this issue from the perspective of attributional processes to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

### 4.3 Innovation and limitation of research

This study contributes to the empirical research on unreasonable parenting concepts and behaviors by exploring the social phenomenon of “tiger parenting” that has garnered significant public attention. By taking subjective well-being as the independent variable, the study focused on individuals’ subjective agency when facing life challenges and its influence on their concepts and behaviors within the educational context. By considering rumination as a mediating variable, the study further elucidated the psychological motivations and mechanisms behind parents’ development of unreasonable parenting concepts at the individual micro-level.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, there is a lack of a well-established and culturally appropriate measurement tool for parenting concepts. While scholars have developed the Intensive Parenting Attitudes Scale [30], there is yet to be a localized and revised version specifically for the Chinese context. Future research could focus on developing and revising measurement tools that are more suitable for studying related phenomena in the Chinese context. Secondly, this study utilized a cross-sectional research design with a single data source. This design may not effectively reveal the temporal causal relationships between variables. To address this limitation, future research could employ multi-source data or longitudinal research designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between variables.

## 5. Conclusions

The present study examined the impact of parental subjective well-being on their parenting concepts, as well as the mediating role of rumination. The findings revealed the following: Firstly, parental subjective well-being significantly and negatively predicted their unreasonable parenting concepts. Secondly, parental subjective well-being exhibited a significant negative association with rumination. Thirdly, symptom rumination and brooding positively predicted unreasonable parenting concepts, while reflective pondering demonstrated a significant negative prediction. Lastly, rumination mediated the relationship between parental subjective well-being and parenting concepts.

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