



Teachers' and parents' autonomy support and psychological control perceived in junior-high school: Extending the dual-process model of self-determination theory



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ABSTRACT

Grounded in self-determination theory, the present study investigated the perceived social-contextual relationships between junior-high school adolescents and their teachers and parents. Through a dual-process motivation mediation model, we examined the respective connections between autonomy support and autonomous motivation and between psychological control and controlled motivation, and the predictive effect on students' academic performance and school satisfaction. A sample of junior-high school students ($N = 614$) from China completed a battery of scales. Final exam scores were obtained to measure academic performance. Structural equation modeling analysis indicated that perceived autonomy support was positively correlated with autonomous and controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation further mediated the predictive effect of autonomy support on academic performance and school satisfaction. No evidence was found to support the relationship between psychological control, motivation, and academic outcomes. Teachers' autonomy support showed a similar or stronger association than parents' autonomy support to motivation and academic outcomes. The present study accentuated the role of interpersonal environment in junior-high school students' self-determination and academic outcomes and extended the dual-process motivation mediation model to include multiple sources. Results are discussed in terms of their relevance to self-determination theory.

1. Introduction

Autonomy (i.e., self-determination), usually defined as a significant human capacity to act in a volitional manner, is the core concept of Self-determination Theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 1987, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT regards people as inherently self-motivated and active and eager to succeed by nature. In the realm of education, autonomy has been found to result in high-quality learning and enhance personal growth at all levels of education (e.g., Garcia & Pintrich, 1996; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Taylor et al., 2014). Empirical evidences repeatedly show that socialized practices derived from parental support are critical to children's autonomy development (Boles, 1999; Quintana & Lapsley, 1990). As individuals begin adolescence, their interactions with teachers also increase steadily as they spend longer time in school activities. How do parents' and teachers' supportive and controlling

behaviors predict adolescents' motivation and academic outcomes? This question is of our interest to investigate.

1.1. Types of motivation in SDT

SDT has been applied broadly in education to explain motivation development and academic functioning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeve, 2009; Taylor et al., 2014; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). SDT is concerned with how social-contextual factors affect human development and thriving through the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs. The three fundamental psychological needs are the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Satisfaction or frustration of these basic needs may have diverse consequences on growth, integrity, and well-being through motivational processes.

SDT differentiates types of motivation along a continuum from

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autonomous to controlled behavioral regulation. When experiencing *autonomous motivation*, people are generally self-determined and are willing to engage in certain behaviors. *Intrinsic motivation*—behaviors are motivated for their inherent satisfactions—is considered as autonomous by its nature (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In contrast to intrinsic motivation, *Extrinsic motivation* motivates behaviors deemed valuable by social regulations and refrains from behaviors deemed problematic albeit enjoyable. Extrinsic motivation may take varied forms of regulation—external regulation, introjected regulation, identified motivation, and integrated motivation. These four types of regulation have different motivation dynamics and are varied in terms of the degree of internalization. External and introjected regulation is mostly driven by external controls and is categorized as *controlled motivation*, while integrated and identified regulation is more internalized in the self and is regarded as autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018).

It has been under debate whether the motivation types should be measured as a continuum or as multidimensional. The types of motivation are originally defined along the intrinsic-extrinsic continuum. Grolnick and Ryan (1987) developed the relative autonomy index (RAI) to indicate the level of autonomy, which was calculated from weighted subscale scores of different motivational regulations and has been widely used in empirical studies (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Niemiec et al., 2006; Soenens, Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Dochy, & Goossens, 2012). Recently, the use of RAI has raised concerns in terms of its psychometric properties and the underlying assumption of the continuum structure of self-determination (Chemolli & Gagné, 2014; Howard, Gagné, & Bureau, 2017; Litalien et al., 2017; Sheldon, Osin, Gordeeva, Suchkov, & Sychev, 2017). There is a consensus that the quality of motivation is more important than the quantity of motivation in predicting behaviors (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Chemolli & Gagné, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the present study, we followed the recent practices by adopting the autonomous-controlled dichotomy (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2018; De Meyer et al., 2014; Guay, Ratelle, Larose, Vallerand, & Vitaro, 2013).

1.2. Social-contextual environment on motivation in school

How can we facilitate an individual's experience of autonomy? A significant approach is to provide a relatively autonomous environment, especially in family and school. Previous studies have found that autonomy-supportive (versus psychologically controlling) behaviors from parents and teachers not only affect the academic achievement of learners, but also have influence on their autonomy development (Soenens, Sierens, et al., 2012; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018).

1.2.1. Autonomy support

In educational settings, a major source of autonomy support is from teachers. Autonomy-supportive teachers will take students' frame of reference, conduct less intrusive and controlling behaviors to students, and adequately respect their ideas, perspectives, and emotions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A line of research on autonomy support is grounded in the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT, Deci & Ryan, 2000) within SDT. Empirical studies have repeatedly showed a positive association between teachers' autonomy support and the need satisfaction across various school settings and in sports and exercises (e.g., Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Haerens, Aelterman, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Petegem, 2015). Some longitudinal studies suggested that teacher's autonomy support increased the need satisfaction of students (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012, 2016). Other researchers manipulated the autonomy-supportive features in the study environment and demonstrated an enhanced performance in learning tasks (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens, & Matos, 2005). There seems an overall agreement that teachers' autonomy support predicts a higher

level of autonomous motivation or relative autonomy (as measured by RAI).

As for learning and social development in the context of schools, studies of parental influences are relatively few compared with those of teachers (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parental autonomy support refers to a broader range of aspects, such as understanding children's thoughts, providing as many choices as they can, and helping children to explore and establish their own values and interests (Grolnick, 2002; Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995). Parental autonomy support showed a general positive connection with the autonomous motivation, school achievement, or psychological adjustment (e.g., Gottfried, Marcoulides, Gottfried, & Oliver, 2009; Guay & Vallerand, 1996; Katz, Kaplan, & Buzakashvily, 2011; Niemiec et al., 2006; Ratelle, Larose, Guay, & Senécal, 2005; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005).

Even fewer studies have examined the relative influences of teachers compared with parents. Guay and Vallerand (1996) found that autonomy support from parents (rather than from teachers and school administration) was a stronger predictor of self-determination and academic achievement. On the contrary, Chirkov and Ryan (2001) found that teachers' autonomy support was a stronger predictor of motivation compared with that of parents. In a large sample of Canadian high-school students, Guay et al. (2013) compared the autonomy support from father, mother, and French teachers and found that the academic performance of students were more strongly correlated with teachers' autonomy support. A few studies in other life domains have investigated the relative quantity and quality of autonomy-supportive relationships from parents, siblings, friends, or romantic partners (Laursen & Mooney, 2008; Ratelle, Simard, & Guay, 2013; van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2015; van der Kaap-Deeder, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Mabbe, 2017). Generally, autonomy support from different sources tended to function independently but the results did not converge on their relative importance.

1.2.2. Psychological control

In the interpersonal climate at home or in a classroom, supportive and controlling behaviors sometimes are regarded as two sides of the same coin (Chua, Wong, & Koestner, 2014). Parental psychological control refers to parents' manipulation and utilization of parent-child emotional connection, which involves a conditionally approving attitude, negative emotional expressions, and criticisms (Becker, 1964; Schaefer, 1965). Improper parent-child interactions could reduce children involvement in family and prevent the expression of their own feelings and ideas (Hauser, Powers, & Noam, 1991). For example, it has been found that psychologically controlling behaviors from parents negatively predict the emotional well-being and positively predict emotional ill-being of children (Wang, Pomerantz, & Chen, 2007).

In recent years, the scope of research in psychological control has been extended to teachers. Psychologically controlling teaching (PCT) refers to teachers using intrusive and subtle behaviors to pressure students to act, think, and feel in specific ways (Soenens, Sierens, et al., 2012). Soenens, Sierens, et al. (2012) found that student's perceived PCT could negatively predict their autonomy levels, learning strategy use, and academic performance. Madjar, Nave, and Hen (2013) found that perceived PCT could positively predict student's performance goal orientation and negatively predict mastery goal orientation.

From the perspective of SDT, the obstruction and disturbance from psychologically controlling behaviors impair children's feeling of autonomy and restrict their options. In a worse case, children may eventually lose their autonomy and act to meet the expectations from parents and teachers (Hare, Szwedo, Schad, & Allen, 2015). Using a diary method, van der Kaap-Deeder et al. (2017) found that perceived psychological control from mother was a much stronger predictor than that from teachers or siblings for children's need frustration and ill-being. Few other studies have directly compared psychological control from parents and teachers.

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