



## Research article

# Do hostile attributions and negative affect explain the association between authoritarian beliefs and harsh parenting?



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 17 August 2016

Received in revised form 3 January 2017

Accepted 13 February 2017

## Keywords:

Childrearing

Parenting beliefs

Child transgressions

Vignettes

## ABSTRACT

The present study examined the associations between authoritarian parenting beliefs, attributions of hostile intent, negative affect, and harsh parenting practices. General population parents ( $N = 183$ ; 31.1% fathers) completed self-report measures of authoritarian parenting beliefs and read vignettes describing children engaging in transgressions. Following each vignette, parents indicated the extent to which they would attribute hostile intent to the child, feel negative affect, and respond with harsh parenting practices (e.g., yelling, hitting). As hypothesized, parents who subscribed to higher levels of authoritarian beliefs attributed more hostile intent to the child and expected to feel more negative affect in response to the transgressions. In turn, higher levels of hostile attributions and negative affect were associated with increased likelihood of harsh parenting practices. Results from a path analysis revealed that the association between authoritarian parenting beliefs and harsh parenting practices was fully explained by attributions of hostile intent and negative affect.

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## 1. Introduction

Parents hold a variety of beliefs about childrearing and these beliefs influence both parenting behavior and child outcomes (Azar, Reitz, & Goslin, 2008; Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Milner, 2000; Rubin et al., 2006; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). For example, authoritarian parenting beliefs emphasize the importance of parental authority and control over children's behavior (Baumrind, 1971; Coplan, Hastings, Lagace-Seguin, & Moulton, 2002; Damon & Smetana, 1994). Parents who endorse authoritarian parenting beliefs tend to think that children should always obey, that they need to be taught to do the "right" thing, and that teaching obedience is the most important goal of parenting (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985).

Research indicates that authoritarian parenting beliefs tend to be associated with a variety of adverse child outcomes. For example, authoritarian parenting beliefs assessed during a child's second year of life are inversely associated with children's behavioral, cognitive, and language development assessed at 24 and 36 months (Shears, Whiteside-Mansell, McKelvey, & Selig, 2008). Among grade school children, higher levels of authoritarian parenting beliefs are associated with higher levels

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of teacher reported externalizing behavior problems, lower levels of social skills, and lower levels of academic achievement (Mulvaney & Morrissey, 2012; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004). Results from another prospective study revealed that authoritarian parenting (as assessed during preschool years) predicted lower levels of competence and higher levels of internalizing symptoms in adolescence (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010).

Although considerable research has linked authoritarian parenting beliefs to adverse child outcomes, the mechanisms through which authoritarian beliefs influence child outcomes warrant additional research (see Darling & Steinberg, 1993 for additional discussion of this point). According to Baumrind et al. (2010), one of the factors that distinguish authoritarian parents from other parents (e.g., authoritative parents) is their more frequent use of coercive power assertion strategies, including verbal hostility, arbitrary discipline, psychological control tactics (e.g., guilt, love withdrawal), and severe physical punishment. Interestingly, Baumrind et al. found that harsh/coercive parenting practices partially accounted for the association between authoritarian parenting style during preschool years and subsequent maladjustment in adolescence.

So why is it that harsh/coercive parenting tactics are more commonly used by parents who endorse higher levels of authoritarian beliefs? One possible explanation is that authoritarian parents simply believe harsh/coercive parenting practices are the most effective ways to manage children's misbehaviors. Such a notion is consistent with research demonstrating that, compared to parents who never spank, parents who report spanking their children are more likely to believe that spanking is an effective means of getting children to behave appropriately (Holden, Miller, & Harris, 1999). Moreover, frequent spankers (compared to parents who never spank) are more likely to believe that spanking fosters long-term socialization goals and teaches children to respect parental authority (Holden et al., 1999). These findings suggest that authoritarian parenting beliefs may be associated with more frequent selection of harsh/coercive parenting practices because such practices are expected to bring about positive outcomes (e.g., compliance, respect).

Alternatively, the association between authoritarian parenting beliefs and selection of harsh parenting practices may be explained by other cognitive/emotional factors. For example, parents who subscribe to higher levels of authoritarian parenting beliefs may utilize hostile/coercive parenting strategies more often because they believe that misbehaving children are intentionally trying to be annoying. Specifically, parents who endorse higher levels of authoritarian beliefs may be more likely to attribute hostile intent to transgressing children, which in turn may trigger aggressive responses (i.e., harsh/coercive parenting practices).

Indeed, attributions of hostile intent have been found to be robust precursors of aggressive behavior (Orobio de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002); thus, it is plausible that hostile attributions may explain why parents who endorse higher levels of authoritarian parenting beliefs more often use harsh/coercive parenting strategies when responding to children's misbehaviors. In an effort to demonstrate the influence of parental attributions on parenting behavior, Slep and O'Leary (1998) observed mothers interacting with their children after a brief induction procedure designed to increase the likelihood of either hostile or benign attributions. To induce hostile attributions, mothers in the experimental group were told that children intentionally misbehave in order to gain attention and control. In contrast, mothers in the control condition were told that children misbehave unintentionally because they don't have much self-control. Mothers who were led to believe that their children were responsible for their misbehavior (compared to mothers in the control condition) were rated as significantly more overreactive in their discipline during subsequent interactions with their children.

The link between authoritarian parenting beliefs and attributions of hostile intent has received only limited attention. Burchinal, Skinner, and Reznick (2010) examined the associations between authoritarian parenting beliefs, attributions of hostile intent, and maternal sensitivity in a sample of mothers of infants between the ages of 2 and 18 months. Results revealed that both authoritarian parenting beliefs and hostile attributions to infants were inversely associated with maternal sensitivity as observed during parent-child interactions. Qualitative data from a subset of parents in this study revealed that "some mothers believed that infants can misbehave intentionally and need to be punished to stop the bad behavior" (p. 79). However, the associations between authoritarian parenting beliefs, attributions of hostile intent, and harsh/coercive parenting behaviors were not directly examined in this study. Related research indicates that authoritarian mothers make more internal/fewer external attributions for children's aggression and disobedience (Coplan et al., 2002; Hastings & Rubin, 1999) and they consider children to be more blameworthy in ambiguous situations (Dix & Reinhold, 1991).

It should also be noted that attributions of hostile intent tend to be associated with negative affect, and both factors may increase the risk of reactive parent-to-child aggression (Berkowitz, 1990, 1993; Bugental, 1992; Milner, 2000; Shay & Knutson, 2008; Slep & O'Leary, 1998). Indeed, prior research suggests that negative affect is often a precursor to harsh/coercive parenting behavior (e.g., Ateah & Durrant, 2005; Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995). For example, Ateah and Durrant (2005) surveyed a sample of mothers regarding their use of physical punishment during the past two weeks and found that maternal anger was a significant predictor of use of physical discipline (even after controlling for parental belief in the value of corporal punishment and perceptions of the seriousness/intent of the child's misbehavior). Similarly, Pidgeon and Sanders (2012) found that parents who reported clinically elevated levels of anger (compared to parents without clinically elevated anger) rated children's negative and ambiguous behaviors as more stable, intentional, and blameworthy, and they reported engaging in higher levels of harsh/coercive parenting practices. Collectively, findings across a number of studies suggest that authoritarian parenting beliefs may function as a cognitive framework that influences interpretations of children's behaviors, parental affect, and selection of parenting responses (Azar et al., 2008; Coplan et al., 2002; Lin, 2005).

Guided by the aforementioned literature and theory, the present study was designed to examine (a) whether authoritarian parenting beliefs are associated with the selection of harsh parenting practices in response to vignettes describing child transgressions and (b) whether attributions of hostile intent and anger in response to child transgressions explain the

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