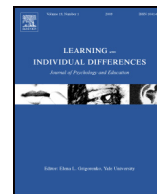




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## The role of parental control in predicting school achievement independent of intelligence

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### ABSTRACT

Intelligence explains some variance in children's school achievement, but not all. Parental intrusive control behavior on children generally negatively correlates with children's school achievement, yet nothing has been done to examine the validity of this relation independent of intelligence and parental education. Child report has mainly been used as the parental control indicator, and parental report has rarely been explored. This study assessed the validity of the associations between two parental control indicators and children's school achievement independent of intelligence and parental education. In a sample of 310 German elementary school children, we found a correlation of .67 between parents' and children's perceptions of parents' control behavior. Independent of measured intelligence and parental education, parent-perceived control behavior was significantly associated adversely with school achievement. Child-perceived control did not predict school achievement when parent-perceived control was included in the model. Reasons for this pattern were discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

General cognitive ability has long been identified as the single most important predictor of academic achievement (Deary & Johnson, 2010; Gottfredson, 2002; Greven, Harlaar, Kovas, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Plomin, 2009; Lu, Weber, Spinath, & Shi, 2011). The average correlation between intelligence and school achievement, which is typically operationalized as school grades or achievement test scores, is around .50 (Johnson, McGue, & Iacono, 2005; Spinath, Spinath, Harlaar, & Plomin, 2006). The association between intelligence and school achievement is thus substantial but far from complete, rendering necessary the exploration of additional predictors of children's school achievement (e.g., Deary, Strand, Smith, & Fernandes, 2007; Spinath et al., 2006).

Parental control is defined as parental intrusiveness, pressure, or domination intended to control children's behavior, with the inverse being parental encouragement of the same behaviors autonomously (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). In recent decades parental control has received increasing attention as an important way in which parents undermine children's psychological development and academic success (Boon, 2007; Dwairy & Achoui, 2010; Fulton & Turner, 2008; Walker & MacPhee, 2011). Yet few studies have considered whether parental control predicts school achievement independent of general cognitive ability. Moreover, the majority of studies of parental control have

focused solely on children's perceptions of parental control (e.g., Chao & Aque, 2009; Dwairy & Achoui, 2010); less attention has been given to parents' perceptions of their control behavior. Questions have been raised about which perspective could be the better indicator of school achievement. The purpose of this study was to address these outstanding questions.

#### 1.1. Parental control and academic achievement

Early scholars viewed control as pressure, intrusiveness, and domination, which are considered detrimental to children (Baldwin, 1955). Later the definition was operationalized as the amounts and forms of control which parents exerted. In the last two decades, a model proposed by Baumrind (1991) has become dominant. Baumrind (1991) classified parenting in four categories based on parents' "demandingness/control" and "responsiveness/warmth". According to this model, authoritative parenting is characterized by both high expectations for behavior and responsiveness/warmth. The idea is that parents who are authoritative firmly set rules and standards, but communicate with their children openly so that the children understand the reasons for these standards and parents can help them learn to follow the standards autonomously. The authoritarian style also has high expectations for behavior but is low on responsiveness/warmth. Authoritarian parents show high parental control and supervision, with emphasis on obedience to their authority as the means of achieving the desired behaviors. Permissive parenting is low in demandingness/control and high on responsiveness/warmth, and

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neglectful parenting is low in both demandingness/control and responsiveness/warmth (Boon, 2007; Chao, 2001; Pong, Hao, & Gardner, 2005). Previous research has found that authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful parenting were negatively associated with school grades and school engagement, whereas the authoritative style of parenting has often been associated with optimum academic, social and psychological development (Boon, 2007; McBride-Chang & Chang, 1998; Spera, 2005).

Questions have arisen surrounding Baumrind's definition of control. Most of the literature has characterized authoritative parenting as high warmth and high control, assuming that control and warmth are independent. However, Boon (2007) as well as Fulton and Turner (2008) have found moderate to high correlations between parental warmth and control.

Concerns have also been raised about generalizing this framework beyond European-American and European middle-class cultural groups. Campbell and Mandel (1990) found that Asian-American and Chinese parents applied higher levels of pressure and monitoring on their children than non-Asian American parents. Similarly, Pong et al. (2005) found that Asian-American and Hispanic-American families were more authoritarian than European-American families. Approximately 74% of a Korean-American sample did not fit any of Baumrind's types (Kim & Rohner, 2002). Consequently, the positive relation between authoritative parenting and school achievement appears relevant primarily to middle-class European-American families; studies in Chinese Americans (Chao, 1994), African-Americans (Smetana, 2000) and Korean-Americans (Kim & Rohner, 2002) have not produced similar results. More importantly, it remains unclear whether it is the warmth, the control, or some interaction between the two that affects achievement. That is, we do not know whether the association between parental control and achievement derives from presence or absence of parental warmth or from the extent of control itself. Grolnick and Pomerantz (2009) also noted that such a multi-dimensional definition of parental behavior brought confusion in interpreting results. For example, parental "structuring", "regulation" or "guidance" behaviors which are quite different from "intrusiveness" but sometimes also considered control, might show positive rather than negative associations with children's achievement.

Consistent with Grolnick and Pomerantz (2009), we focused on parental control specifically defined as intruding, pressuring, or dominating behavior by parents that is intended to coerce their children to behave as the parents expect. A handful of studies of parental control using similar definition have found it to be one of the dimensions most strongly associated with children's behavior problems (Braungart-Rieker, Garwood, & Stifter, 1997; Gaylord-Harden, 2008) and poor school achievement (Barber, Stolz, Olsen, Collins, & Burchinal, 2005; Singh-Manoux, Fonagy, & Marmot, 2006).

Though parental control has been negatively associated with school achievement in several studies, few have studied whether parental control can explain variance in children's school achievement independent of general cognitive ability and parental education. Intelligence and parental education could influence the correlation between parental control and children's school achievement in many ways. Many believe that parental education has important direct or indirect influence through family socioeconomic status (Hauser-Cram, 2009). Parental education has also been observed to predict both parental involvement (Keith et al., 1998) and parents' education-related expectations for their children. Englund, Luckner, Whaley, and Egeland (2004) found that more educated mothers had higher achievement expectations and more frequently visited their children's schools. They suggested that those practices have positive effects on children's achievement later on, even after accounting for children's IQ. Karbach, Gottschling, Spengler, Hegewald, and Spinath (2013) found that parental control and structuring predicted school achievement after controlling "g" and parental education. At the same time, better-educated parents tend to have higher IQ scores, and intelligence shows substantial genetic

influence. Karbach et al. (2013) also observed that associations between parental education and school grades were no longer significant when recognizing the association between general cognitive ability and parental education. This means that well-educated parents likely pass their genes for high intelligence to their children. If they are also more interested in their children's educational progress, have more involvement in children's school activities, help more with homework, and/or have more knowledge of ways to motivate children, this sets up gene-environment correlation, in which environmental circumstances reinforce already existing genetic tendencies.

Children's intelligence also has association with educational attainment. Measurement of intelligence is designed to assess students' educational potential, but the association is reciprocal, as students' education predicts their intelligence scores too (Ceci, 1991, 1996). It is still up for discussion, however, to what extent education causes intelligence and vice versa (Deary & Johnson, 2010). If parental education and thus child intelligence are correlated with parental control behavior, controlling for parental education and intelligence in statistical analyses of the association between parental control and school achievement may remove relevant variance, understating the extent of association. In addition, gender has been found to be confounded with some education-related constructs. Although girls in general outperform boys at school, especially in languages (Geske & Ozola, 2009; Marsh & Yeung, 1998; Pajares & Valiante, 2001), sex differences in general intelligence are not usually observed (Halpern & LaMay, 2000; Lynn, 1994). Controlling gender by including it as a covariate therefore may provide more balanced results.

### 1.2. Parental control from both parents' and children's perspectives

Children's reports tend to be reasonably informative about their own behavior or traits (e.g., behavioral problems, depression, anxiety), compared with peer- or parents-reports, both in clinical and community samples (Becker, Hagenberg, Roessner, Woerner, & Rothenberger, 2004; Epkins & Meyers, 1994; Stöber, 1998). However, the reliability and validity of children's reports of parents' parenting behavior are still unclear. Children's reports of parenting may be less valid because they may not accurately report actual parental behavior, due to their youth and lack of any other experience as well as to their positions as the object of the parental behavior. However, Schaefer (1965) argued that children's reports of parental behavior have shown general reliability and validity, and significantly associations with other data on parent-child relationships, even though children's perceptions of their parents' behavior may be more related to their own adjustment than to the actual behavior of their parents. Parental control thus has primarily been assessed from children's perspectives (e.g., Alkharusi, Aldhafri, Kazem, Alzubiadi, & Al-Bahrani, 2011; Chao & Aque, 2009; Dwairy & Achoui, 2010; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998).

Yet parents' reports, on the other hand, are generally more accurate than children's self-reports of children's personalities, and the same could be true of their reports of their own parental behavior due to greater maturity and life experience. However, in the western samples on which most studies have been based, parents' excessive controlling behavior to their children is often discouraged in the popular media. It has been suggested that self-reports may provide distorted information especially for high socially evaluative traits (e.g., agreeableness, irritability) in comparison with neutral traits (e.g., extraversion, talkativeness) in personality assessments (John & Robins, 1993). Parents might thus hesitate to convey their actual levels of controlling behavior when they are aware that such behavior is often considered socially undesirable. Yet, controversy remains whether to take children or parents as reporters for parents' excessive control behavior. Therefore, we assessed both children's and parental reports.

A few studies have looked into inter-rater agreement. Schwarz, Barton-Henry, and Pruzinsky (1985) have found moderate inter-rater agreement among family members, namely mother, father, child and

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