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The interplay of parental support, parental pressure and test anxiety – Gender differences in adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study examined gender-specific relationships between adolescents' perceptions of school-related support/pressure from their parents and test anxiety. A sample of German students ($N = 845$; $M_{\text{age}} = 15.32$; $SD = .49$) completed questionnaires that measured their perceived parental support/pressure (for mother and father separately) as well as the four main components of test anxiety (worry, interference, lack of confidence, and emotionality). Gender-specific relations were identified using multigroup structural equation modeling: For girls, perceived maternal pressure was positively associated with emotionality and interference; for boys, perceived father pressure and father support were positively associated with interference and worry, respectively. For both genders, perceived mother pressure and support were related to lack of confidence. Our findings suggest that adolescents' perceptions of maternal attitudes are associated with students' self-confidence irrespective of the child's gender, whereas the remaining facets of test anxiety follow same-sex trajectories between perceived parental attitudes and adolescents' test anxiety.

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Introduction

Many students suffer from heightened test anxiety (TA), which is considered to be a situation-specific form of anxiety, namely the disposition to perceive situations of assessment as threatening and thus respond with heightened state anxiety (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995; Zeidner, 2007). In the context of schooling, TA is associated with debilitating effects such as lower (intrinsic) achievement motivation, reduced engagement in academic tasks, as well as impoverished academic performance (e.g., Cassady & Johnson, 2002; Zeidner, 2007). TA is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct featuring three distinct cognitive facets: worry (disruptive concerns about individual performance and the consequences of failure), interference (distraction from academic tasks by intrusive, unrelated thoughts) and lack of confidence (low self-confidence and a

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lack of self-esteem). The facet of emotionality describes the autonomic expression of physical reactions (e.g., stomach ache, high pulse and perspiration) accompanied by intense affect (Hodapp, Rohrmann, & Ringeisen, 2011; Zeidner, 2007).

Relations between parental behavior and test anxiety in adolescents

Research has sought to understand how the intensity of emotions is linked to students' performance and achievement such as TA and/or the relationships between them as they are shaped by features of their social contexts. Existing research on this topic is condensed in socio-contextual models of achievement and its related emotions, which portray how the behavior of specific social groups might influence students' self-perceived competence, academic performance and/or related emotions (e.g., Eccles, 2007; Lowe et al., 2008; Simpkins, Fredricks, & Eccles, 2012). Besides teachers and peers, parents constitute an important social group for adolescents as their behavior may be linked to their children's scholastic adjustment, performance and achievement-related emotions, especially anxiety, during adolescence and early adulthood (cf. Bois, Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009; Putwain, Woods, & Symes, 2010; Shadach & Ganor-Miller, 2013). Among the diverse types of parenting behavior, perceived parental support and pressure have received considerable attention in contemporary research on self-perceived competence, performance and/or related emotions in students (e.g., Laible & Carlo, 2004; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2006; Putwain et al., 2010; Raufelder, Hoferichter, Ringeisen, Regner, & Jacke, 2015). Parental support primarily indicates socio-academic support, which includes helping the child to prepare for a test (behavioral level) or encouraging the child to trust in his/her ability to accomplish various academic tasks (emotional level). In contrast, socio-academic pressure describes behavior such as pushing the child to work more intensely for school (behavioral level), setting high academic expectations, and/or criticizing academic performance, which may exceed the capability of the child (emotional level) (Ommundsen et al., 2006; Putwain et al., 2010; Raufelder et al., 2015; Reitzle, Metzke, & Steinhausen, 2001).

Adolescence is characterized by school transitions, which require students to manage growing academic demands in increasingly formal classroom environments typified by constant evaluation and competition, which is often associated with increased TA (for an overview see Hanewald, 2013; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). The transition to high school usually entails the loss of previous valuable relationships with peers and teachers. As a result, many students suffer from increased anxiety and socio-emotional maladjustment, which highlights their need to maintain close and supportive relationships with significant others during this tumultuous period (DeWit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain, 2011; Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2009; Martinez, Aricak, Graves, Peters-Myszak, & Nellis, 2011). Accordingly, low attachment to parents is likely associated with adolescents' impaired emotional adjustment and impoverished scholastic performance (Duchesne, Ratelle, Poitras, & Drouin, 2009; Kenny, Lomax, Brabeck, & Fife, 1998; Papini & Roggman, 1992). In contrast, parental support is crucial if students are to meet high academic demands, develop positive attitudes towards their capabilities, and regulate their achievement-related anxieties (e.g., Frey et al., 2009; Martinez et al., 2011). Research has found that adolescents with high parental support – characterized by high attachment, supportive communication, and/or encouragement of personal growth – reported better performance and lower general anxiety as well as lower test anxiety (Chapell & Overton, 1998; Papini & Roggman, 1992; Peleg-Popko & Klingman, 2002; Wolfradt, Hempel, & Miles, 2003) than adolescents with less parental support. In contrast, high parental pressure correlated positively with general anxiety and test anxiety (Besharat, 2003; Wolfradt et al., 2003), especially with the cognitive facets of worry, interference, and/or lack of confidence (Gherasim & Butnaru, 2012; Putwain et al., 2010). One study also identified a positive association between pressure and emotionality (Putwain et al., 2010). Yet no study has differentiated the stated effects by parents' gender (mother/father), and/or the gender of the adolescent child (Brand & Klimes-Dougan, 2010).

Gender-specific associations between parental behavior and test anxiety

Research on gender socialization and differentiation suggests that mothers and fathers set distinct examples for their children, where the same-sex parent usually constitutes the primary gender role model (for an overview see e.g., Martin, 2000; Payne, 2001; Ruble & Martin, 1998): Although the mother as primary caretaker has a significant influence on the later development of girls and boys alike, the interaction patterns or the relationship quality between each parent and their daughter/son may be associated differently with school-related attitudes, behavior and socio-emotional adjustment during childhood and adolescence (Duchesne et al., 2009; Maccoby, 2002; Martinez et al., 2011; Raufelder et al., 2015).

To address these gender-specific patterns, Eccles and colleagues refined the assumptions that underpin socio-contextual models of achievement and related emotions, suggesting that parents' own gender, their gender stereotypes, and/or their child's gender can influence the interplay of parental behavior and the child's academic performance, and/or achievement emotions (Eccles, 2007; Jacobs & Eccles, 1992; Simpkins et al., 2012). However, few studies have investigated gender-specific relationships between parental behavior and adolescents' test anxiety. Studies on parental support have identified the mother as the primary source of support: her behavior is positively associated with academic self-confidence, improved performance/competence, and better emotional adjustment such as reduced worry, and/or anxiety in both adolescent girls and boys (e.g., Chen, Liu, & Li, 2000; Duchesne et al., 2009; Gomez & McLaren, 2006; Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995; Laible & Carlo, 2004; Peleg-Popko, 2004). In contrast, the empirical evidence for father support is equivocal: some studies (e.g., Biller & Lopez-Kimptom, 1997; Gomez & McLaren, 2006; Holahan et al., 1995; Wang & Liu, 2000) have found emotional support from fathers such as caring and empathetic understanding, to predict better psychological adjustment, such as low distress, low social anxiety, and greater academic confidence, whereas others cannot attest to such associations (Flouri, 2008; Laible &

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