



Adolescents' unconditional acceptance by parents and teachers and educational outcomes: A structural model of gender differences



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to detect gender specific patterns in the network of relations between unconditionality of parental and teacher acceptance in the form of unconditional positive regard and a range of educational outcomes, as indexed by academic self-perception, academic intrinsic motivation, and academic achievement. To test the role of gender as a moderator, a multi-group analysis was employed within the framework of structural equation modelling with increasing restrictions placed on the structural paths across genders. The results on a sample of 427 adolescents in grades 7–9 showed that conditionality of acceptance undermined level of perceived acceptance for both social agents. Moreover, unconditionality of teacher acceptance exerted stronger influences on students' educational outcomes than unconditionality of parental acceptance, with effect sizes being larger for girls than for boys.

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Although many studies have examined the associations between interpersonal relations and educational outcomes, such as academic intrinsic motivation, academic self-perception, and academic achievement, fewer studies have investigated the effect of acceptance – and in particular unconditional acceptance in the form of unconditional positive regard – on the aforementioned variables, and the role of gender as a moderator of these associations.

Theoretical approaches and research data support the hypothesis that positive relationships with significant others foster young people's capacity to function effectively in a broad range of domains, such as the social, affective, and academic domains. Within the academic domain, numerous studies have consistently revealed that high-quality interpersonal relationships in students' lives are very important for their academic motivation, engagement, and achievement (Ali, 2011; Assor & Tal, 2012; Barber, Xia, Olsen, McNeely, & Bose, 2012; Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Côté, Bouffard, & Vezeau, 2014; Madjar, Nave, & Hen, 2013; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Reeve, 2009). Research data show also that positive relationships with significant others, such as parents and teachers, are associated with one's sense of acceptance and that the extent to which acceptance is perceived as conditional undermines the quality of these relationships (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004; Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005; Forehand & Nousiainen, 1993; Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996; Makri-Botsari, 2001a; Pallock & Lamborn, 2006; Pelegrina, García-Linares, & Casanova, 2003; Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990).

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In the present study, we were interested in two relationship contexts – parents and teachers – and in two core aspects of relationships with these two social agents – unconditionality of acceptance and perceived acceptance. The purposes of the study were to explore the relationships of unconditionality of acceptance and perceived acceptance by parents and teachers with students' learning outcomes, and to detect gender specific patterns in the associations among the aforementioned constructs. Academic intrinsic motivation, academic self-perception, and academic achievement were used as indices of students' learning outcomes.

Theoretical framework

Conceptual clarification and definition of terms

Given that varying conceptualizations may lead to potential confusion over how terms are to be interpreted or make the interpretation of findings very difficult, if not impossible, it is critical to clarify the terminology employed and to define the constructs being investigated in this study, that is, perceived acceptance, unconditional acceptance, academic intrinsic motivation, and academic self-perception.

Perceived acceptance is the belief that one is loved and valued by significant others (Pelegrina et al., 2003; Sarason et al., 1990). Perceived acceptance refers to the warmth, affection, care, comfort, nurturance, support, or simply love that one individual can express towards another (Güngör & Bornstein, 2010; Rohner & Khaleque, 2010).

Over half of a century ago, Rogers defined unconditional acceptance, in the form of unconditional positive regard, as the complete acceptance of the individual along with his experiences and behaviour, without any critical assessment or possessive and autocratic tendencies (Rogers, 1951; Rogers & Dymond, 1954). Unconditionally accepted students are liked not because of what they can do or achieve, but just because they are themselves (Tassoni, Beith, Bulman, & Robinson, 2005). Unconditional acceptance communicates that the child is inherently worthy of love and involves constructive feedback and affirmations, reassurance of worth, approval, praise, and appreciation not on the basis of one's performance and behaviour but on the basis of one's existence. Rogers (1959), and subsequently other researchers (Assor et al., 2004; Assor & Tal, 2012; Harter, Marold, & Whitesell, 1992; Roth & Assor, 2012; Roth, Assor, Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009), introduced the concept of conditional acceptance in order to contrast it with that of unconditional acceptance. Conditional acceptance is where positive regard, praise and approval, depend upon the individual conforming to significant others' standards. Hence, the individual is not loved for the person he or she is, but on condition that he or she displays particular behaviours or attributes that significant others unilaterally demand. This type of acceptance is also referred to as conditional positive regard and, sometimes, as love withdrawal, i.e., making social agents' care contingent upon the child's compliance to their demands (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Barber et al., 2012; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Luyten, 2010). Based on Barber's (1996) proposal that love withdrawal is a key component of psychological control, which represents manifestations of an autonomy-suppressing relationship (Soenens et al., 2010), a number of researchers consider conditional acceptance/regard as a highly controlling behaviour and a core feature of psychological control (Assor et al., 2004; Barber et al., 2012; Roth et al., 2009; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010; Soenens et al., 2010).

Academic intrinsic motivation is defined as enjoyment of school learning characterized by an orientation toward mastery, curiosity, persistence, task-endogeny, and the learning of challenging, difficult, and novel tasks (Gottfried & Gottfried, 2009).

Academic self-perception refers to the degree to which the individual feels able to learn the content and accomplish the tasks given in a subject matter (Byrne, 1996; Hardré & Sullivan, 2008; Harter, 1999). In this study, academic self-perception, self-perception of academic competence, and academic self-concept are used interchangeably.

Unconditional acceptance and its relations to perceived acceptance and educational outcomes

Conditionally accepted children feel that acceptance is only forthcoming if they meet significant others' standards and learn that only part of them is respected and supported, an experience that may invoke feelings of resentment towards significant others such as parents (Assor et al., 2004). As children feel that significant others do not really know who they are, they also experience a lack of empathy that may undermine children's feelings of relatedness to adults important in their lives, especially parents (Soenens, 2007). Research data show that the extent to which acceptance is perceived as conditional undermines children's level of perceived acceptance for both social agents (Assor et al., 2004; Barber et al., 2005; Forehand & Nousiainen, 1993; Harter et al., 1996; Makri-Botsari, 2001a; Pallock & Lamborn, 2006).

In the domain of academics, indices of parental and teacher acceptance, such as warmth, positive regard, respect, and love for children, have been linked to a wide array of educational outcomes, including perceived scholastic competence, motivational orientation, and academic achievement. For Kohn (2005a, 2005b), accepting students for who they are – as opposed to for what they do – is what children require in order to flourish.

Regarding the association of acceptance with academic self-perception, there is consensus among theorists that children's perceptions of warmth and positive regard by social agents, such as parents and teachers, are essential prerequisites for positive self-evaluation. A literature review conducted by Ali (2011) revealed that perceived teachers' and parents' acceptance significantly accounts for children's psychological adjustment and that children with low acceptance from parents and teachers have lower perceived school competence as compared to those who enjoy positive relation with only teachers, only parents, or both parents and teachers. Within the family context, parental acceptance and support encourage the child to

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