



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Understanding the joint effects of perceived parental psychological control and insecure attachment styles: A differentiated approach to adolescent autonomy

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Autonomy
 Psychological control
 Attachment
 Self-determination theory
 Well-being

ABSTRACT

With a sample of 469 Chinese adolescents aged 12–16, the present study aimed to examine the joint effects of perceived parental psychological control and insecure attachment styles on adolescents' autonomy, and whether these effects could be extended to adolescents' well-being. Guided by recent clarification of two prevailing conceptualizations of autonomy (volitional functioning and independent decision making), we adopted both. Our findings indicated that both psychological control and insecure attachment styles were negatively associated with volitional functioning, whereas only psychological control was negatively related to independent decision making. Low avoidance could serve a protective function by minimizing the negative effects of psychological control on both volitional functioning and independent decision making. The negative effect of psychological control on volitional functioning could also be concealed at a high level of anxiety. The indirect effect of psychological control on well-being through volitional functioning was significant and moderated by attachment styles, whereas the indirect effect through independent decision making was nonsignificant.

1. Introduction

Many studies indicate that pubertal maturation brings a more egalitarian relationship between adolescents and their parents, with adolescents becoming more autonomous as family influences decline (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Given the important role of autonomy in adolescents' adjustment (Van Petegem, Beyers, Vansteenkiste, & Soenens, 2012), it is valuable to explore how autonomy is encouraged among adolescents. As clearly demonstrated by a growing body of research on this topic, parents who are responsive, warm, and empathic toward their child's emotional and psychological needs enhance the child's sense of autonomy (Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005), whereas a controlling and pressuring parenting style inhibits a child's progression toward autonomy (Oudekerk, Allen, Hessel, & Molloy, 2015). It has been found that, with their parents' help, secure adolescents can safely explore their environment in a self-confident and autonomous manner (Van Petegem, Beyers, Brenning, & Vansteenkiste, 2013). On this basis, we examine whether secure attachment can be a protective buffer against the negative effects of inappropriate parenting styles, such as psychological control, and help adolescents to develop optimal autonomy, and in turn, achieve well-being.

1.1. Differentiated views on adolescent autonomy

Recent research increasingly underscores the distinction between two perspectives on autonomy. Originally rooted in psychoanalytic theory, the first perspective defines autonomy as independence, referring to the degree to which adolescents decide, act, or think without relying on others (Steinberg, 2014). Independent decision making, which is conceived as one prototypical indicator of independence, has been focused on in numerous studies (Van Petegem et al., 2012; Van Petegem et al., 2013). However, this definition has been criticized by many authors, especially advocates of the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; SDT). They argue that people can be either autonomously or heteronomously dependent. Within SDT, autonomy is defined as volitional functioning, referring to the extent to which one acts upon genuinely valued goals, interests, or fully internalized regulations (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Emerging research has revealed that these two autonomy definitions relate differentially to antecedents (Van Petegem et al., 2013) and adjustment outcomes (Van Petegem et al., 2012), thereby emphasizing the need for a differentiated approach to autonomy.

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1.2. Psychological control and autonomy

Psychological control refers to parental behaviors that are intrusive and manipulative of children's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, including guilt-induction, contingent love, and instilling anxiety (Barber, 1996). Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that psychological control can threaten one's volitional functioning and lead to controlled motivation. Accumulated empirical evidence has confirmed the negative association between psychological control and volitional motivation (Chua, Wong, & Koestner, 2014; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Apart from volitional functioning, psychological control may also negatively affect adolescents' independence. Pérez and Cumsille (2012) found psychological control to be associated with adolescents' reduced decision-making independence in the personal domain. Similarly, in a longitudinal study, Oudekerk et al. (2015) found that adolescents who perceived psychological control reported more difficulty maintaining their individual opinions and were more susceptible to significant others.

1.3. Attachment and autonomy

Numerous studies have revealed that secure attachment, characterized by responsiveness, supportiveness and noncontingent acceptance, leads to several meaningful outcomes, including autonomy (Cai, Hardy, Olsen, Nelson, & Yamawaki, 2013). It has been found that adolescents who develop a secure attachment can master new situations independently and confidently within the realms of their competence, as well as request help when necessary and appropriate (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). However, adolescents may develop an insecure attachment, manifested through either an avoidant or anxious attachment bond. Attachment avoidance refers to attempts to withdraw from parents to achieve complete independence, while attachment anxiety refers to attempts to maintain connections with parents at the cost of appropriate independence (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). In Van Petegem et al.'s (2013) recent study, besides the positive association between secure attachment and volitional functioning, a negative association between attachment anxiety and independent decision making was also reported.

1.4. Interactions of the two perspectives on adolescent autonomy

SDT suggests that the groundwork for facilitating internalization is to provide a sense of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Both field studies and laboratory experiments support this view (for a review, see Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, using a sample of Chinese children, Bao and Lam (2008) confirmed their hypothesis that mother-child relatedness moderated the effect of choice on children's motivation. Only when relatedness is high will obeying parents' decisions passively not decrease volitional functioning, as internalization facilitated by relatedness can leave the sense of volition intact. On the basis that secure adolescents perceive their families as supportive and successfully maintain relatedness with parents (Cai et al., 2013), it is reasonable to expect that secure attachment can buffer the negative impact of external contexts on adolescents' volitional functioning.

However, we expected a somewhat different pattern when exploring independent decision making. According to SDT, volitional functioning is not synonymous with complete independence from parents (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, while secure adolescents might have higher volitional functioning, they might not also gain higher decision-making independence. In line with the findings that secure attachment is associated with empathic responding (Cassidy, Jones, & Shaver, 2013) and that individuals from high power-distance cultures are prone to viewing controlling strategies positively (Chua et al., 2014), we assume that Chinese secure adolescents may take into account their parents' perspective and reach agreement with them, even when feeling controlled. Given that avoidant adolescents often fail to assert their views during discussions with parents (Becker-Stoll, Delius, & Scheitenberger,

2001), while also seeking to cut themselves off from their parents (Van Petegem et al., 2013), they may tend to passively obey when feeling controlled but make their own decisions at other times. Yet anxious adolescents may be inclined to obey their parents even if they do not feel forced to, since they typically worry about the availability of attachment figures and are tenaciously dependent on them (Van Petegem et al., 2013).

1.5. The motivational mechanisms of adolescent well-being

Prior research has confirmed the mediating role of volitional functioning between parenting and adolescents' well-being (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Furthermore, parent-child relatedness can buffer the negative effect of a lack of choice on adolescents' emotional functioning (Qin, Pomerantz, & Wang, 2009). However, unlike volitional functioning, prior research has not achieved consensus on the psychological meaning of independent decision making. Qin et al. (2009) yielded a concurrent positive association between independent decision making and emotional functioning. However, Van Petegem et al. (2012) found no association between independent decision making itself and healthy adjustment; rather, it was the motives underlying decision making that worked. We, thus, suggest that secure attachment can protect against the negative effects of psychological control on adolescents' volitional functioning and well-being, and that its protection of well-being can be realized through volitional functioning, rather than independent decision making.

1.6. The present study

Using a Chinese sample, the present research aims to examine the joint effects of psychological control and attachment styles on two distinct conceptualizations of adolescents' autonomy (volitional functioning and independent decision making), investigating whether these effects could be extended to adolescents' well-being. Research has indicated that Chinese parents tend to be more psychologically controlling than their Western counterparts (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011). The detrimental effects of parental psychological control on Chinese adolescents' psychological functioning have also been documented (Wang, Pomerantz, & Chen, 2007). There is, thus, an urgent need to identify the possible buffers against the harms of parental psychological control on Chinese adolescents' autonomy and well-being. On the other hand, Chinese culture values close relationships and interdependence (Bao & Lam, 2008), which makes China a useful context to investigate the possible interaction of parental psychological control and secure attachment. As a framework for organizing our aims, Fig. 1 provides a conceptual model of the hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1.

- Psychological control and both insecure attachment styles will be negatively associated with volitional functioning.
- Secure attachment (low attachment avoidance and anxiety) will moderate the association between psychological control and volitional functioning.
- Secure attachment will also moderate the association between psychological control and well-being through volitional functioning.

Hypothesis 2.

- Psychological control and attachment anxiety will be negatively associated with independent decision making.
- The negative impact of psychological control on independent decision making will be particularly salient among avoidant adolescents. Anxious adolescents will engage in less independent decision making regardless of the level of psychological control.
- The moderating effects of insecure attachment styles on independent decision making will not extend to well-being.

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