



A model of perceived parenting, authenticity, contingent self-worth and internalized aggression among college students

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ABSTRACT

The present study builds upon previous findings by examining parental psychological control in relation to two distinct traits of the self (i.e., authenticity and contingent self-worth) and internalized aggression. A model was proposed with authenticity and contingent self-worth as serial mediators of the relationship between parental psychological control and internalized aggression. Structural equation modeling demonstrated near perfect fit of the model. Parental psychological control was inversely related to authenticity, lower authenticity was related to higher contingent self-worth, and contingent self-worth was positively related to internalized aggression. Results are discussed within the context of previous findings and directions for future research are proposed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Parenting

For several decades, parenting practices have been studied through the categorizations of authoritarian, authoritative, neglectful and permissive parenting (Baumrind, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Research surrounding Baumrind's (1971) categories have helped delineate the elements of these distinct parenting styles. For example, authoritarian parenting is understood to consist of not only controlling, autonomy limiting parenting practices, but also high standards and expectations against which the child is measured (Baumrind, 1989). When standards and expectations are not met, an authoritarian parent tends to be emotionally harsh and critical of the child (Baumrind, 1989). Conceptually, emphasis has often been placed upon parenting styles and not on the individual parenting practices. What has become clear through years of research is that parenting plays a significant role in the lives of people (e.g., Chan, 2010; Flouri, 2007). As such, it is important to consider not only the collective whole of parenting styles, but also the underlying individual parenting practices.

1.1.1. Psychological control

Recent research suggests that Baumrind's (1971) dimensions of warmth and demandingness may not fully capture the parenting practices that distinguish the four parenting styles (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Empirical work examining parental warmth, autonomy granting, and

behavioral and psychological control (Barber, 1996; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992) has demonstrated that these elements can be distinguished. Warmth reflects the caring, responsive, support that parents provide. Autonomy granting refers to providing developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to express their autonomy. Behavioral control often includes monitoring children's activities as well as establishing rules about appropriate activities. Finally, psychological control is a harsh controlling practice in which parents attempt to control their children's thoughts, opinions, and feelings.

The focus of the current study is the implication of psychologically controlling parenting practices. Psychological control consists of parenting that relies heavily on guilt, harsh criticism, love withdrawal, and restriction of free expression (Barber, 1996). Previous studies on authoritarian parenting and its relation to negative outcomes have implicated psychological control as a significant factor for maladaptive outcomes such as anger and aggressive tendencies (Campbell, 1999; Coie & Dodge, 1988; Eron, Huesmann, & Zelli, 1991; Rubin & Burgess, 2002). Research on the self has also shown that psychologically controlling parenting is related to maladaptive outcomes such as lower authenticity (Robinson, Lopez, & Ramos, 2014) and instability of self-esteem (Kernis, Brown, & Brody, 2000; McArdle, 2009; Wouters, Doumen, Germeijs, Colpin, & Verschueren, 2013).

Clearly psychologically controlling parenting can impact development in a number of ways. It is likely to limit opportunities for development and undermine conceptions of the self by conveying that the child is not capable or worthy (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003). Psychologically controlling parenting is likely to orient the child toward outward sources for approval. For some children, competence becomes meeting the demands of harsh, critical parents (Deci & Ryan, 1985). There are likely other impacts of psychologically controlling parenting but this

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manuscript is focused on the ways in which psychological control may relate to (a) lower rates of authenticity, (b) conceptions of the self that are dependent on the approval of others (contingent self-worth), and (c) patterns of anger and aggression that are internalized and self-directed. Fig. 1 depicts a proposed model of the relations among psychological control, authenticity, contingent self-worth, and internalized aggression to be developed and tested in the current project.

1.2. Psychological control and authenticity

Building upon the definitions from Rogers (1961) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1995), authenticity is defined in the current study as the unobstructed operation of one's true self in one's daily enterprise (Goldman & Kernis, 2002). Deci and Ryan (1995) suggest that authenticity occurs when individuals self-regulate in effective ways to meet psychological needs for competence, self-determination, and relatedness. Kernis (2003) theorized that authenticity can be undermined by psychologically controlling parenting. In essence, the legitimacy of the child's inner experience can be compromised when it is denied, repressed, or even punished by parents (Kernis, 2003). Over time, such experiences can lead a child to reject their own inner-experiences in favor of the parental figure (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This can potentially result in the child demonstrating inauthentic behaviors that are untrue to the child's self but congruent with the desires of the parent. An example may be a child who desires to play with a classmate but is banned from doing so by the parent because of the socioeconomic status of the classmate. Over time, the child's friendships and relationships may be shaped more by the parent's ideals than the child's personality and desires.

In support of this hypothesis, Robinson et al. (2014) reported that perceived parental antipathy (a measure of hostile controlling parenting) was related to lower rates of authenticity among adults. This is important because authenticity likely plays a role in psychological well-being (Theran, 2011; Wenzel & Lucas-Thompson, 2012), the promotion of adaptive behaviors (i.e., non-aggressive tendencies; Pinto, Maltby, Wood, & Day, 2012) and psychologically adaptive conceptions of the self (Goldman & Kernis, 2002).

1.3. Authenticity and contingent self-worth

Reduced levels of authenticity likely play a role in the development and maintenance of contingent self-worth. According to Deci and Ryan (1995), "Contingent self-esteem refers to feelings about oneself that result from- indeed, are dependent on- matching some standard of excellence or living up to some interpersonal or intrapsychic expectations" (p. 32). Children are learning that their value depends on meeting the demands of others. Additionally, these children are missing opportunities to develop more independent, autonomous behavior. Without the opportunities to behave autonomously, children may learn to be sensitive to the demands of authority across contexts and therefore behave inauthentically outside of the family environment. If this inauthentic behavior is condoned by authority figures in other contexts (e.g., school) and is reinforced, the conditions are in place for the child to evaluate the self based on successfully meeting the demands of others. Therefore, we hypothesize that low authenticity will lead to increases in contingent self-worth. Although this causal path has not been

investigated, there is evidence of an inverse relationship between authenticity and contingent self-worth (Vonk & Smit, 2012; Goldman & Kernis, 2002). Participants who reported lower authenticity also reported greater external standards of self-worth.

Given the relationship of psychologically controlling parenting to authenticity (Robinson et al., 2014) and contingent self-worth (Wouters et al., 2013; McArdle, 2009), and the relation of authenticity to contingent self-worth (Vonk & Smit, 2012), it is possible that authenticity serves as a mediator between parental psychological control and contingent self-worth. As parents impose their own standards above the desires and experiences of the child, it is plausible that inauthenticity and the acceptance of parental standards can play a major role in development and maintenance of contingent self-worth.

1.4. Contingent self-worth and anger/aggression

Contingent self-worth is related to a number of internalizing problems, including depression (Bos, Huijding, Muris, Vogel, & Biesheuvel, 2010; Lopez et al., 2014) and anxiety (Bos et al., 2010). We hypothesize that contingent self-worth predisposes individuals to internalize anger and aggression, rather than directing the expression of these emotions toward others. That is, if self-worth is dependent on the evaluations of others, individuals are probably less likely to direct anger or discontent toward those powerful others. Dependency on the evaluations of others as the source of self-esteem likely limits one's repertoire of personally acceptable responses to anger. We are suggesting a dual process for individuals with highly contingent self-worth where the importance of contingent judgment contributes to higher sensitivity in negative situations (Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008) and also where the importance of contingent judgment limits one's perceived acceptable aggression responses, resulting in the internalization of anger and aggression.

We are interested in the internalization of anger. Tangney et al. (1996) argue that anger and aggression can take many forms and that the predictors likely vary depending on the specific type of anger/aggression under consideration. Tangney et al. (1996) identified five types of maladaptive, aggressive responses that can occur in response to anger: direct aggression, indirect aggression, displaced aggression, self-directed aggression, and anger held in. We hypothesize that individuals with higher contingent self-worth will be more likely to respond to negative situations with both self-directed aggression, a tendency to "berate oneself or to become disproportionately angry with oneself" (Tangney et al., 1996, p. 781), and anger held in, ruminating thoughts of an anger-eliciting event or the repression of bitter, resentful feelings (Tangney et al., 1996). In support of this, Borton, Crimmins, Ashby, and Ruddiman (2012) found that contingent self-worth predicted self-directed punishment. Similarly, Paradise and Kernis (1999; as cited in Kernis, 2002) reported that among women, contingent self-worth was related to greater internalization of anger. With self-directed aggression and anger held in sharing an internal orientation, our model combines the two to form the variable of internalized aggression.

1.5. Hypotheses

Based upon the discussed research and theory, the present study extends previous findings by examining the relationships among perceived parental psychological control, authenticity, contingent self-worth, and internalized aggression. As can be seen in Fig. 1, we



Fig. 1. Model of internalized aggression.

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