# DIFFERENTIATING PARENTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL FROM AUTONOMY GRANTING AND EXAMINING THEIR RELATIONS WITH FAMILY DYNAMICS

by

Jennifer K. Hauser Kunz, M.S.

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## PREFACE

Parental psychological control refers to intrusive strategies that infringe upon the psychological world of the child. Parents who demonstrate high levels of psychological control pressure their children to comply with their personal standards via manipulation of the parent-child bond, negative, affect-laden comments, and excessive personal control. Research investigating the impact of parental psychological control on child adjustment has indicated that it has harmful effects on children, and is related to disruption of the child's self-system (i.e., self-will, self-regulation, and interpersonal functioning). Less is known about why some parents engage in more psychologically controlling parenting strategies than others, or about the context in which a high degree of parental psychological control is likely to occur. Moreover, questions have been raised as to the nature of the distinction between parental psychological control and autonomy granting. Contributing to this confusion is the use of the terms interchangeably in the literature, the variety of other terms used to describe the same parenting phenomena (i.e., intrusiveness, overprotectiveness, restrictive parenting, etc.), and the conceptual overlap present in most methods used to measure psychological control. Consequently, the goals of the current project were to develop a more standardized definition of parental psychological control and autonomy granting, to examine variation in the use of psychological control and promotion of autonomy, and to study the complex interrelationships between psychological control, autonomy granting, and dynamics within the family environment. In this multi-method, multi-informant study, 92 preadolescents and their parents completed several measures assessing parenting and parent/child adjustment, and participated in family interaction tasks which were later

coded for psychologically controlling parenting behaviors and parenting strategies which fostered child autonomy. Results supported the conceptualization of parental psychological control and autonomy granting as unique constructs, and supplementary analyses revealed gender differences and distinct child adjustment correlates. Interparental conflict emerged as a robust predictor of increased failure to promote autonomy across parents, but not of increased psychological control, and further exploration revealed that autonomy granting served as a mediator of the relationship between interparental conflict and child externalizing problems. Implications for future research are discussed.

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Differentiating Parental Psychological Control from Autonomy Granting
and Examining their Relations with Family Dynamics

Parental psychological control refers to intrusive strategies that infringe upon the psychological world of the child. Parents who demonstrate high levels of psychological control pressure their children to comply with their personal standards via manipulation of the parent-child bond (i.e., love withdrawal and guilt induction), negative, affect-laden comments (i.e., criticism, disappointment, and shame), and excessive personal control (i.e., possessiveness and over-involvement) (Barber, 1996; Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994; Schaefer, 1965a; 1965b; Steinberg, 1990). Research investigating the impact of parental psychological control on child adjustment has indicated that it has harmful effects on children. Studies have demonstrated, across populations, that psychological control is related to disruption of the child's self-system, including self-regulation, ego development, and interpersonal functioning (i.e., Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Baumrind, 1966; Best, Hauser, & Allen, 1997; Hauser, Powers, Noam, Jacobson, Weiss, & Follansbee, 1984; Hauser, Powers, & Noam, 1991) to internalizing and externalizing adjustment problems, (i.e., Barber & Shagle, 1992; Barber, 1996; Conger, Conger, & Scaramella, 1997; Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Garber, Robinson, & Valentiner, 1997; Herman, Dornbusch, Harron, & Harting, 1997; Mills & Rubin, 1990; Steinberg, 1990), and to low academic achievement (Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).

Less is known about why some parents use more psychological control than others, but getting a better understanding of the precipitants to this multifaceted parenting strategy is a critical next step in this body of literature. Discerning why parents would engage in such strategies is perplexing, as they do not result in model child behavior or healthy child

adjustment. A handful of studies have investigated suspected predictors of psychological control, including child adjustment problems, parental beliefs about child rearing, parental personality characteristics, parental psychopathology, and marital quality, and have found that both child and parent factors influence the degree of psychological control used by parents (i.e., Barber, 1996; Bogels & van Melick, 2004; Brody, Pellegrini, & Seigel, 1986; Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989; Fauber et al., 1990; Pettit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001; Soenens, Elliot, Goossens, Vansteenkiste, Luyten, & Duriez, 2005; Sturge-Apple, Davies, Boker, & Cummings, 2004). Yet, this line of research is limited in quantity, and has not generated a comprehensive picture of the circumstances under which higher levels of parental psychological control might be expected. Accordingly, supplementary studies are needed to fill in the gaps that remain. Follow-up studies designed to examine different antecedents, and combinations of antecedents, would facilitate a more thorough understanding of the factors that precipitate increased psychological control.

Moreover, questions have been raised in this literature as to the nature of the distinction between parental psychological control and autonomy granting. While these dimensions have typically been conceptualized as opposing ends of one continuum, some purport that psychological control and autonomy granting should be considered unique constructs (Barber & Harmon, 2001; Silk, Morris, Kanaya, & Steinberg, 2003; Steinberg, 1990). This calls into question not only the standard definition of psychological control, but also the measures that have been traditionally used to assess it. All methods of measurement created to assess psychological control have been built upon the idea that a lack of psychological control implies increased autonomy granting (i.e., Barber, 1992; Schaefer, 1965a; Steinberg, 1990). However, it is possible for a parent who uses very little

psychological control to concurrently fail to promote the child's autonomy, and vice versa. For example, a parent could simultaneously make few guilt-inducing, condescending comments to control their child's behavior, and also fail to be open-minded and receptive to their child's opinions. That is, just because a parent is not psychologically controlling does not inevitably mean that the parent actively promotes their child's autonomy. Consequently, our understanding of vital parenting dynamics may be limited by conceptualizing psychological control and autonomy as the same construct.

*The Current Study*

The first goal of the current study was to determine whether psychological control and autonomy granting could be empirically distinguished by adapting an observational coding scheme. Once independent psychological control and autonomy granting scales were created, this provided the opportunity to explore substantive differences between these constructs. In particular, unique child adjustment correlates and relations with family dynamics were examined.

The second goal was to examine predictors of psychological control in an effort to understand how and why highly psychologically controlling parents are different from parents who rarely engaged in such methods. Based on prior theory and research, maternal and paternal anxiety and depression (as defined in the DSM-IV-TR; 2000), marital conflict, and marital satisfaction were assessed as predictors of highly psychologically controlling parenting (Bogels & van Melick, 2004; Brody, et al., 1986; Chorpita et al., 1996; Cox et al., 1989; Fauber et al., 1990; Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997; Stone et al., 2001). Since the differentiation of psychological control and autonomy granting is speculative in nature, the remainder of this section will refer only to precursors of parental psychological control.

In the present study, predictors were examined with the intention of evaluating whether they differentially predicted high levels of psychological control rather than deficits in other parenting domains, and to assess whether a combination of predictors better accounted for variance in psychological control than one predictor alone. It is important to note that one of the objectives of this project was to provide more specificity with respect to the prediction of increased psychological control. Consequently, other domains of parenting, specifically warmth and co-parenting, were included as contrasting outcome variables. This allowed for the evaluation of the differential predictive utility of parental anxiety, marital satisfaction, and marital conflict.

Providing clarification with regard to parental psychological control and delineating the parental characteristics and relationship qualities that predict it will supply researchers and clinicians with information that may aid in preventing the occurrence of excessive psychological control. Improved recognition and treatment of parental psychopathology and poor marital quality may help to reduce the amount of maladaptive parenting, specifically in the form of excessive psychological control, that children experience. Given what is known about the detrimental impact of psychological control on child adjustment, decreased levels of psychologically controlling parenting would facilitate the improvement of both child and family functioning.

Definition and Measurement of Psychological Control and Autonomy Granting

*Domains of Parenting*

Decades of research on parenting have shown that competent parenting promotes attachment security, cooperation, compliance, and achievement in children, whereas incompetent parenting promotes uncooperative and problematic behavior (Maccoby &

Martin, 1983). This research indicates that children tended to be more well-adjusted when they: (1) experience consistent positive emotional bonds with significant others such as parents (warmth), (2) have fair and unvarying limits placed on their behavior by both parents (consistency), and (3) are permitted to experience, value, and express their own thoughts and emotions, leading to the development of a stable sense of self and identity (psychological autonomy) (Barber, 1996; Barber & Olsen, 1997; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rollins & Thomas, 1979; Steinberg, 1990).

In her examination of parenting typologies, Baumrind (1966; 1971) consistently demonstrated that authoritative parenting, which was described as high in warmth, consistent co-parenting, and autonomy granting, was associated with more positive outcomes and reduced risk for negative adjustment outcomes in children. In contrast, authoritarian parenting, which was described as high in behavioral control, low in warmth, and low in autonomy granting, fostered an environment in which children were more susceptible to a variety of psychological and behavioral problems.

In the last twenty years, research on parenting has shifted away from the study of typologies toward the examination of specific parenting behaviors and the interrelationship between those behaviors and child adjustment problems. It has been proposed that future research should explore the specific components and processes that encompass competent parenting (Belsky, 1984), rather than focusing on broad parenting categories. Most work in this field has focused on the first two components of competent parenting (warmth and consistency), whereas less attention has been given to the study of psychological autonomy. This is surprising, given how salient autonomy development is to a child's successful navigation through adolescence. Research has yet to provide explicit guidelines for parents

seeking to find a balance between allowing their children to explore their sense of self without going so far as to encourage distance between parent and child. While finding such a balance is likely situation-specific, this is still an exceptionally important challenging that all parents face in their role as "socializer" of their children.

As children grow as individuals and begin to see themselves as unique from their families, effective parents respect the child's expression of self but also encourage their children to develop an understanding of societal norms. What is more, parents must find a way to provide an environment in which children feel free to explore their individuality, while at the same time providing both nurturance (i.e., "warmth") and consistent structure (i.e., "consistency"). Cooper, Grotevant, and Condon (1982; 1983) insisted that the most effective family system is able to avoid both enmeshment (where individuality is discouraged in support of family harmony and intertwined lives) and disengagement (where family members are so separate that they hardly influence one another). They described the effective parent as one who was able to maintain a balance between individuality (clear, differentiated presentation of one's own point of view) and connectedness (sensitivity to, and respect for, the perspectives of others) (Cooper et al., 1982; 1983). Bowlby (cited in Allen et al., 1996) used the term "autonomous-relatedness" to describe the successful resolution of this developmental challenge.

Adolescence has been consistently identified as a critical phase for children's identity formation. At this developmental juncture, children have reached a level of cognitive and emotional functioning that allows them to understand themselves as an entity separate from their parents and family. Their role (and the expectations placed upon them) in the family and community changes, and peer relationships become more salient socialization influences.

Yet, research suggests that parenting remains a significant element of the child's individuation experience; namely, whether or not the parenting promotes or inhibits the child's exploration of autonomy (Cooper et al., 1982; 1983). As Youniss (1983) suggested, "Development may consist not so much in breaking the [parent-child] bond as in transforming it and the persons within it." (p. 93).

As children approach adolescence, the balance of power between parents and children begins to shift. When children are young, parents justifiably have a great deal of power concerning their young children's behavior. At this stage of development, parents attempt to cultivate or oversee the development of values and attitudes in their young children. However, this facet of parenting must be modified for healthy development to ensue. While the socialization methods used by parents of 8 or 9-year-old children may have been appropriate at that stage of the child's development, such methods may become unsuitable for children who are 11 or 12 years of age. As children move into adolescence, most want the chance to take on greater responsibility for their lives and need to formulate their own perceptions and point of view (Conger et al., 1997). It is during this critical stage of development that autonomy becomes particularly significant.

*Defining Autonomy Granting and Psychological Control*

Schaefer (1965a) was one of the first researchers to explore psychological autonomy in his study of children's reports of parental behavior. Akin to the later work of Baumrind (1966; 1971), Schaefer's (1965a) research prompted him to claim that psychological autonomy vs. control was a salient domain of parenting. Schaefer conceptualized psychological autonomy and control as distinct endpoints of one continuum, and nearly all

research that followed continued to conceptualize psychological autonomy and control in this manner.

Hauser, Allen, and colleagues' (see Allen et al., 1996; Hauser et al., 1984) work was one exception to this rule. Hauser and colleagues (1984) viewed parent-child communication as either enabling (promoting) individuality or constraining (inhibiting) individuality. Their work suggested that interactions of a constraining nature undermined children's participation in family discussions and discouraged children's expressions of perceptions, ideas, and observations. Moreover, Hauser et al. (1984) found that parental enabling was positively associated with adolescent ego development, whereas, parental constraining was negatively associated with adolescent ego development. Allen and Hauser's collaborative work focused on the development of adolescent relatedness to and autonomy from their parents (Allen et al., 1996). In this work, they found that the establishment of autonomy and relatedness in child-parent interactions was likely a key task of adolescence, since it was closely associated with other indices of adolescent psychosocial development, such as ego development and self-esteem. Findings from this research also indicated that hostile family behaviors functioned as both precursors to and consequences of difficulty establishing autonomy and relatedness during adolescence (Allen et al., 1996).

Despite the fact that Allen and Hauser's work highlighted the importance of studying autonomy granting apart from psychological control, most researchers continued to conceptualize psychological control and autonomy as one construct. However, a few questioned this conceptualization (i.e. Steinberg, 1990; Barber & Harmon, 2001), arguing that psychological autonomy and control may be distinct constructs. Only one study to date has evaluated psychological control and autonomy granting separately, and the findings

support a conceptualization of psychological control and autonomy as two separate dimensions (Silk et al., 2003). Silk et al. (2003) defined psychological control similarly to Barber (1996) when he suggested that it involved coercive, intrusive control techniques. They also argued that this parenting strategy seemed to manifest itself principally through covert methods, such as invalidating feelings, guilt induction, and the creation of an environment in which acceptance is conditional (i.e., love withdrawal). Silk and colleagues' (2003) description of psychological autonomy granting was consistent with that of other researchers (i.e., Hauser et al., 1984; Allen et al., 1996; Barber, 1996) who defined it as parental encouragement of children's individual expression and decision-making. They went on to emphasize that parents who strongly promote autonomy permit their children to make choices about things they take part in, hence fostering the development of independence.

Where Silk and colleagues (2003) diverged from the traditional conceptualization was in their argument that the absence of autonomy granting did not equate to high levels of psychological control. They stressed that by viewing psychological control and autonomy granting as opposite ends of one continuum, important information about parenting and the potential overlap between psychological control and autonomy granting would be neglected. Silk et al. (2003) emphasized that parents who fail to encourage autonomous development may also refrain from psychologically controlling parenting strategies in the same instance. For instance, it is possible to have a parent who is not encouraging of their child's participation in family decision-making, but who also does not use coercive, hostile parenting strategies to control the child's behavior. In this instance, the parent would score low on psychological control, but also low on autonomy granting. In contrast, if psychological control and autonomy granting were scored along one continuum, the parenting described in

the example above would not be captured.  See Figure 1 for an illustration of this conceptualization.

To assess the distinctiveness of psychological control and autonomy granting, Silk et al. (2003) identified items from Steinberg's parenting scale that appeared to tap into psychological control and autonomy granting (Steinberg et al., 1992), and conducted confirmatory factor analyses (for both a one and two factor model) with data collected from close to 10,000 high school students.  Normed fit indices supported a two-factor model, suggesting that psychological autonomy granting and psychological control would be best conceptualized as distinct constructs (2003).  Moreover, this two-factor structure was replicated across gender and ethnicity.  Table 1 depicts this two-factor model (and the item loadings).  Interestingly, Silk and et al. (2003) also found that psychological control was related to internalizing problems in children, whereas a lack of autonomy granting was not.  These findings suggest that psychological autonomy and control may have different child adjustment correlates and support the need to further investigate whether the constructs should be distinguished.

*Measurement of Psychological Control and Autonomy Granting*

Psychological control has been assessed via several different modalities, including child-reports, parent-reports, and observational coding systems.  Research suggests that each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses.  Children's reports of parental behavior are widely utilized because it is thought that children will respond with honestly and genuineness (Barber & Harmon, 2001).  Moreover, feeling restricted, devalued, coerced, and criticized is a subjective experience (Barber, 1996).  However, while children may be able to report on whether a parenting behavior occurs, it may be more difficult for them to report

Figure 1. *Conceptualization of Psychological Control and Autonomy Granting*

<u>Traditional Conceptualization</u>

←――――――――――――――――――――――――――――――→

High Psychological Control                    High Autonomy Granting

<u>New Conceptualization</u>

←――――――――――――――― – – – – – – – →

High Psychological Control                    Low Psychological Control

← – – – – – – – ――――――――――――→

Failure to Promote Autonomy                   High Autonomy Granting

*Note*: Dotted lines represent information lost in the traditional conceptualization.

Table 1. *Items and Factor Loadings: Two-Factor Model of Psychological Control*

<u>Psychological Control Items</u>

.37     When I get a poor grade, my parents make me feel guilty.
.34     When I get a good grade, my parents say my other grades should be as good.
.65     My parents tell me that their ideas are correct and I shouldn't question them.
.59     My parents answer my arguments by saying something like, "You'll know better when you grow up."
.54     My parents say that I should give in on arguments rather than make people angry.
.48     My parents emphasize that I shouldn't argue with adults.
.32     My parents act cold and unfriendly if I do something they don't like.
.27     My parents won't let me do thing with them when I do something they don't like.

<u>Autonomy Granting Items</u>

.73     My parents emphasize that every member of the family should have some say in family decisions.
.63     My parents emphasize that it is important to get my ideas across even if others don't like it.
.52     My parents say that you should always look at both sides of an issue.
.37     My parents talk at home about things like politics or religion, where one takes a different side from others.
.39     My parents keep pushing me to think independently.
.26     My parents let me make my own plans for things I want to do.
.31     When I get a good grade, my parents give me more freedom to make my own decisions.
.43     My parents admit that I know more about some things than adults do.