



## Parental psychological control dimensions: Connections with Russian preschoolers' physical and relational aggression <sup>☆</sup>

David A. Nelson <sup>\*</sup>, Chongming Yang, Sarah M. Coyne, Joseph A. Olsen, Craig H. Hart

School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Parental psychological control generally consists of overinvolved/protective and critical/rejecting elements, both being linked to children's psychosocial maladjustment. The critical/rejecting element is multidimensional in nature, and few studies have explored this conceptual fullness. It is possible that some dimensions, if they can be statistically differentiated, are uniquely tied to various child behaviors. This may help resolve some of the inconsistency apparent across studies, such as studies of relational aggression. Accordingly, we examined the association between parental psychological control and childhood physical and relational aggression using a dimensional approach. Participants were 204 Russian preschoolers and their parents. The results revealed that dimensions of psychosocial control (i.e., shaming/disappointment, constraining verbal expressions, invalidating feelings, love withdrawal, and guilt induction) could be statistically differentiated, even though most dimensions tended to be significantly correlated. Furthermore, all dimensions, except for invalidating feelings, were significantly associated with childhood aggression, but predominantly in same-gender parent-child dyads.

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Psychological control is the practice of parents who “manage their children's behavior through manipulation of their children's emotions, intrusion on children's autonomous activity, or restriction of their children's range of experiences” (McShane & Hastings, 2009, p. 481). From toddlerhood through adolescence, studies show that psychological control is consistently associated with child maladjustment. In this paper, we focus on a preschool sample, a valuable age period in which to assess parenting correlates of child behavior. Specifically, children of this age may be more open to parental influence than children in later developmental periods.

A fair number of studies have assessed parental psychological control in the context of young children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. In regard to internalizing problems, Rapee's (1997) review pointed to parental rejection and inappropriate control as key factors associated with children's anxiety and depression. In the past decade, studies of psychological control in early childhood have further confirmed Rapee's summary, with both overinvolved/protective and critical/rejecting elements of psychological control being consistently tied to anxiety and depression. For example, Bayer, Sanson, and Hemphill (2006) found that overinvolved/protective psychological control was

positively associated with the development of internalizing difficulties in two-year-olds. McShane and Hastings (2009) found maternal overprotection and paternal critical control to be associated with preschoolers' internalizing problems and anxiety. Moreover, children's anxious behaviors predicted parents' overprotection and critical control, suggesting a bidirectional influence at work. Beyond bidirectional influences, Mills et al. (2007) showed how the psychological status of the parent increases the chances of engagement in psychological control. In particular, proneness of parents to self-directed shaming may either produce parental anxiety or anger that is projected on to the child in either overprotective or critical/rejecting forms of psychological control.

Whereas studies of internalizing behaviors have considered both overprotective and critical/rejecting forms of psychological control, studies of children's externalizing behaviors have frequently focused on the latter. In particular, critical/rejecting psychological control may be considered a form of aggressive parenting that may encourage more of the same in children. This line of thinking is consistent with social learning theory, in which parents may serve as models of social behavior for their children. This seems particularly relevant when considering the prediction of different types of child aggression.

Specifically, in recent years, physical aggression has been differentiated from relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) and similar constructs like indirect aggression or social aggression (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Garipey, 1989; Feshbach, 1969; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). Relational aggression entails behaviors that seek to manipulate or impair social relationships. Common strategies include

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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author at: School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, 2102C JFSB, Provo, UT 84602-0720, United States.

E-mail address: david\_nelson@byu.edu (D.A. Nelson).

rumors, gossip, and social exclusion. Based on social learning theory, some researchers initially presumed that children reared by psychologically controlling parents may employ similar manipulative strategies with peers (Nelson & Crick, 2002). Indeed, the nature of relational aggression appears to parallel some dimensions of psychological control. For example, such parents may threaten to withdraw love or attention unless a child is compliant with parental wishes. Such behavior mirrors the relationally aggressive child's threats to end a friendship unless a friend proves compliant. In contrast, spanking might be most predictive of physical aggression, as spanking models the resolution of problems via physical force. Accordingly, specific connections between forms of aversive control and aggression subtypes are expected.

A number of studies confirm that parental psychological control is related to children's relational aggression, even in non-Western cultures (e.g., Casas et al., 2006; Kuppens, Grietens, Onghena, & Michiels, 2009; Loukas, Paulos, & Robinson, 2005; Nelson & Crick, 2002; Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006). However, both physical and relational aggression are usually associated with both physical and psychological control, so the theoretical specificity (suggested above) is lacking (cf., Kuppens et al., 2009). The gist is that aversive parenting models aggressive behavior more generally.

Consistent with prior work, the present study is predominantly framed by this social learning perspective. However, other theoretical perspectives have been proposed to explain the association between parental psychological control and children's relational aggression (Kuppens et al., 2009; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, Duriez, & Niemiec, 2008). In particular, a parent's use of coercive or psychological control may weaken the attachment relationship between parent and child, thereby denying the child of a sense of acceptance in this formative relationship. Relational insecurity may generalize to anxiety and accordingly precipitate difficulties in peer relationships. This perspective is consistent with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), both of which propose a fundamental human need for relatedness—close, emotionally secure relationships. The child may inappropriately cope with relationship insecurity by lashing out at peers (e.g., preemptively deterring aggression and threats to their social status; Soenens et al., 2008).

Alternatively, social-information processing theory (Crick & Dodge, 1994) suggests that children's aggressive behavior is often the result of the unique manner in which children process social information as they interact with peers. For example, children may exhibit a hostile attribution bias, in which they perceive provocation when the true intent of the supposed provocateur is ambiguous (and may be benign; Nelson, Mitchell, & Yang, 2008). Coercive and controlling parenting may promote these social cognition difficulties, and the child's subsequent aggressive behavior toward peers (Nelson & Coyne, 2009; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992).

#### *Dimensionality of critical/rejecting psychological control*

When Barber (1996) renewed the study of parental psychological control, he conceptualized it as multidimensional. In particular, he described the critical/rejecting side of psychological control with six different dimensions. Love withdrawal and erratic emotional behavior, for example, both reflect dimensions in which feelings of parental acceptance are manipulated. Other dimensions include invalidation of the child's feelings (e.g., telling the child how to feel or think) or constraining their verbal expressions (e.g., speaking for the child). These actions communicate to the child that their feelings and verbal expressions are not valued. The child's sense of self may accordingly be undermined. Parents may also induce hurt feelings or shame in the child through the use of negative criticism (shame, disappointment, personal attack) and guilt induction. For example, parents may continually remind the child of all the sacrifices they have

made for the child, hoping thereby to coerce a child's obedience to the parent's wishes. Together, these dimensions compose a substantial portion of psychological control construct.

Despite the initial emphasis on multidimensional nature of psychological control, few studies have adequately approached measurement of the construct in this manner. Barber's (1996) 16-item psychological control scale (youth self-report) is only composed of two to three items per each of the dimensions described above. This limited number of items may hamper effective factorial assessment of whether dimensions may be considered independently. Indeed, Barber's factor analysis of the 16-item measure reduced the final set to 8 items, which represented the constraining verbal expressions, invalidating feelings, and love withdrawal dimensions. Accordingly, use of the 8-item measure does not reflect half of the originally proposed dimensions of psychological control. Other studies of psychological control have followed suit, with psychological control scales that reflect a selected cross-section of the dimensions, rather than the full range of dimensions (e.g., Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeilly-Choque, 1998; Nelson & Crick, 2002).

Accordingly, it may be argued that psychological control has not been explored in its conceptual fullness. With the narrow scope of items in most studies, it is understandable that psychological control is often empirically reduced to a unidimensional structure (although an adequate Cronbach's alpha is hardly sufficient evidence of the unidimensional nature of a construct). Alternatively, a larger bank of psychological control items might allow for a dimensional assessment of psychological control. Accordingly, the present study departs from past practice by assessing psychological control with sufficient items for confirmatory factor analysis and the ability to reduce an item bank down to dimensions that are expected to be significantly correlated yet statistically distinguished. We then consider whether greater predictive precision might be obtained with such an approach. Specifically, the narrow measurement of psychological control in prior studies may have hampered our knowledge of its actual associations with child physical and relational aggression.

Although the majority of existing studies have established a link between parental psychological control and relational aggression, the first, conducted with a Russian preschool sample (Hart et al., 1998), is an exception. The focus on psychological control in that study was in keeping with Bronfenbrenner's (1970) earlier observations of Soviet childrearing, wherein he described the presence of "love-oriented" discipline. Results of the study showed that psychological control could indeed be successfully measured in a contemporary Russian sample of preschool parents. Contrary to expectations, however, parental psychological control was predictive of physical but not relational aggression. Hart et al. used a composite psychological control scale which included items representing love withdrawal, guilt induction, and negative criticism (shaming/disappointment). Accordingly, the potentially unique influence of the three individual dimensions was diluted by mixing them, and other dimensions of psychological control (i.e., erratic emotional behavior, constraining verbal expressions, invalidating feelings), which may be significantly associated with relational aggression, were absent from the scale. Thus, it remains to be seen whether specific dimensions of parental psychological control might be more useful in prediction over an omnibus scale (particularly one of limited breadth). Accordingly, in this study, we revisit the Russian preschool data with a dimensional approach. The emphasis of this paper, then, is not so much on a cultural context (in this case, Russia) as it is on the predictive utility of a dimensional approach to psychological control.

Our approach builds on one prior study with similar goals. Working with a group of U.S. preschoolers and their parents, Casas et al. (2006) formed five dimensions of psychological control (erratic emotional behavior, love withdrawal, guilt induction, invalidating feelings, and directiveness). Two other dimensions (i.e., personal attack, constraining verbal expressions) were also assessed but did

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