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# An investigation of maternal personality, parenting styles, and subjective well-being

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## Abstract

The goal of the present study was to explore how parental BIS/BAS relates to parenting styles, and to investigate if subjective well-being (SWB) moderates these associations. Mothers ( $n = 95$ ) were asked to complete measures of personality, parenting styles, and life satisfaction (SWB). Results revealed that mothers who reported high BAS were significantly more likely to report being nurturing and were either more likely to be authoritative (high nurture and high control) or neglectful (low nurture and low control). Subsequent analyses revealed that mothers high in both BAS and SWB were significantly more likely to be authoritative, whereas mothers high in BAS and low in SWB were significantly more likely to be neglectful. Results suggest the value of considering personality in parenting research.

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*Keywords:* Parenting styles; Personality; Subjective well-being; BIS; BAS; Life satisfaction

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## 1. Introduction

Parenting is an essential component in child development and is often associated with important child outcomes such as cognitive and social competencies (Lambourn, Mounts, Steinberg, &

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Dornbusch, 1991). Understanding what contributes to parenting allows us to better predict outcomes, which may in turn aid in the development of more effective preventive measures, or in identifying people likely to have parenting difficulties. In conceptual models of the determinants of parenting, personality is considered a crucial element (e.g., Belsky, 1984). Although there has been some empirical research exploring links between parenting and the Five Factor Model of personality (e.g., Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2003), there have been no attempts to directly investigate parenting and Gray's (1981) behavioural motivation systems. As pervasive individual differences, approach and avoidance motivational orientations may help explain why people parent the way they do. Moreover, the relations between personality and parenting may not always be linear. In this paper we test the ideas that personality may predispose parents to particular parenting styles and that subjective well-being (SWB) may moderate these relations.

### 1.1. Gray's approach to personality

Gray (1981, 1982) proposed three independent motivational systems that explain variations in human personality: the *Behavioural Inhibition System* (BIS), the *Behavioural Activation System* (BAS), and the *Fight/Flight System* (FFS), though most work has focused on BIS and BAS. According to Gray (1982), differences in the strength of these two systems lead to two personality dimensions (termed anxiety and impulsivity) that fit in the conceptual two-dimensional space of neuroticism and extraversion. In Gray's original conception, the BIS is activated by conditioned cues to punishment, and produces behavioural avoidance. At a dispositional level, the BIS is associated with trait anxiety, negative affect, and neuroticism (more than extraversion; Pickering, Corr, & Gray, 1999). Conversely, the BAS is activated by conditioned signals of reward and non-punishment, and creates approach and active avoidance behaviour (Gray, 1981). People with a strong BAS are more likely to be impulsive, experience more positive affect, and score higher on extraversion (Pickering et al., 1999). The FFS was not as clearly linked with a particular personality dimension, but was thought to respond to unconditioned punishment stimuli.

More recently, Gray modified his theory, altering the proposed functions of the BIS, BAS, and FFS (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). The functions of BAS remain similar, but now also include responding to unconditioned signals of reward. The BIS and FFS functions changed more significantly. The FFS (renamed the Fight, Flight, and Freezing system or FFFS) now includes functions previously assigned to the BIS. That is, the FFFS has become the main punishment system, responding to conditioned and unconditioned punishment cues, and mediating avoidance behaviour and fear. The BIS is now viewed as a conflict monitor. It receives input from the BAS and FFFS, and detects the conflict created by activation of both (e.g., in situations with mixed reward and punishment cues). The output of the BIS is still anxiety, but the source of this anxiety is conflict rather than punishment cues per se. Finally, Gray's revision emphasizes interactions among the three motivational systems such that behaviour will typically reflect the combined output or relative strengths of the BAS and FFFS as compared by the BIS.

Although Gray made these modifications years ago, assessment instruments still rely on the original theory. For example, Carver and White's (1994) widely used questionnaire assesses BIS as punishment sensitivity, and we are not aware of valid self-report measures of the new FFFS. Assessment instruments drawing on the old theory are still useful in that they were designed to measure individual differences in the strength of a reward system (the BAS) and a punishment

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