

Perceived Control as a Mediator of Family Environment in Etiological Models of Childhood Anxiety

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Recent developments in cognitive and emotion theory emphasize the importance of cognitive dimensions related to control and helplessness. Drawing from evidence in the area of control and explanatory style, the present study used a cross-sectional design to evaluate structural models investigating the relation of perceived control and attribution to family environment, negative affect, and clinical disturbance. It was hypothesized that the anxiogenic and depressogenic influences of a controlling family environment on negative affect would be mediated by cognitive dimensions. A mixed clinical and nonclinical sample of 93 children and their families was assessed, and findings suggested superior fit for the model in which the dimension of perceived control mediated between family environment and negative affect. The findings are discussed with respect to models of the etiology of childhood anxiety.

It is a common premise of most psychological theories of anxiety and depression that events in childhood play an important etiological role (e.g., Alloy, Kelly, Mineka, & Clements, 1990; Barlow, 1991; Beck & Emery, 1985). However, research emanating from these theories has focused mostly on adult populations. For example, several theorists (Barlow; Beck & Emery; Teasdale, 1983) point to the early emergence of cognitive diatheses or vulnerabilities for anxiety or depression, yet little empirical work has been conducted along these lines (Cole & Turner, 1993). Consequently, a cleft has

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developed between the elaborate evaluation of childhood events in the developmental literature and the increasingly refined understanding of the cognitive nature of emotional disturbance by theorists in the area of anxiety and depression. Although some work has been done to address this gap with respect to depression (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1992), the lack of a specific empirical connection between developmental and clinical disturbances is especially salient in the area of anxiety.

What many of the more recent conceptualizations of anxiety share is their emphasis on the notion of perceived control, whether they involve concepts of "mastery and controllability" (e.g., Barlow, Chorpita, & Turovsky, 1996) or "helplessness and hopelessness" (e.g., Alloy et al., 1990). A large body of evidence suggests that early experience with limited control may play a role in the development of anxiety (see Chorpita & Barlow, in press, for a review). For example, research on parenting has shown that adults with anxiety and depressive disorders tend to recall family environments that afforded them limited experiences with control over events (e.g., Parker, 1983). In a review of the animal literature, Mineka (1985) concluded that the experience of uncontrollability may have a profound influence on the development of anxiety. In one of the clearest examples, experience with control over appetitive stimuli during the rearing of infant monkeys had substantial effects on subsequent approach and exploratory behavior in the face of frightening stimuli (Mineka, Gunnar, & Champoux, 1986). Despite such advances, neither existing parenting or animal studies have suggested whether these anxiety effects are mediated by a sense of diminished control.

The study of control in human children has typically involved self-report measures of locus of control, a construct representing the degree to which the occurrence of reinforcement is under personal control (described as internal versus external control). Higher scores of externality reflect a diminished sense of control over the environment and are therefore expected to be associated with higher levels of negative affect (i.e., a shared vulnerability for anxiety and depression; Clark, Watson, & Mineka, 1994). Along these lines, a number of studies have documented a relation between self-reported external locus of control and trait anxiety in both clinical and nonclinical child samples (e.g., Finch & Nelson, 1974; McCauley, Mitchell, Burke, & Moss, 1988; Nunn, 1988). Despite such evidence, it remains unclear whether this dimension of perceived control functions as a mediator between environmental events and negative emotion.

The issue of cognitive dimensions related to the development of negative affect has been more clearly evaluated in the area of childhood depression. Drawing from recent cognitive theories of depression, studies have investigated the role of attributional style as a possible cognitive vulnerability. For example, attempting to clarify the structural relation of attribution, stressors, and depressive symptoms, Cole and Turner (1993) examined a nonclinical sample of 356 4th-, 6th-, and 8th-grade students. They comparatively tested structural models depicting mediational and moderational effects of attribu-

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