



The costs of parental pressure to express emotions: Conditional regard and autonomy support as predictors of emotion regulation and intimacy[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

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This research focuses on offspring's perceptions of their parents' usage of conditional regard and autonomy-supportive practices in response to the offspring's experiences of negative emotion. Participants were 174 college students (60% were females). As predicted from self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), students' perceptions of parents as hinging their regard on students' expression or suppression of negative emotions predicted a maladaptive pattern of emotion regulation and intimacy capacity. In contrast, autonomy-supportive parenting predicted more adaptive emotion regulation and intimacy patterns. Also as predicted, emotion-regulation mode mediated the relations between parental practices and intimacy capacity. The innovative aspect of the study is the finding that parents who use conditional regard to encourage children's expression (sharing) of negative emotions may actually undermine their children's socioemotional capacities.

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The concept of parental conditional regard (PCR) as coined by Rogers (1959) involves parents' provision of more affection when their child engages in parentally desired behaviors or attributes and less affection when the child does not. Some researchers have argued that reinforcement practices similar to PCR lead children to behave in ways their parents believe are good for them (Aronfreed, 1968; Gewirtz & Pelaez-Nogueras, 1991), whereas others (e.g., Rogers, 1951) argued that PCR undermines self-esteem, exploration, and self-regulation. More recently, theorists have argued that PCR prompts contingent self-esteem and diminished psychological functioning (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004; Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997; Harter, 1993; Roth, 2008).

In the first direct study of PCR and its correlates, Assor et al. (2004) examined young adults' perceptions of their parents' conditional regard in relation to their own internalization and behavior in four domains: academic, sport, prosocial, and emotion control. The findings indicated that PCR predicted internal compulsion to comply with parents' expectations, which in turn predicted behavioral engagement. Internal compulsion was an indicator of introjected internalization, which, according to self-determination theory (SDT; Deci, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000), is a conflicted and shallow type of internalization (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2006; Ryan & Connell, 1989). Moreover, PCR correlated with anxiety before performance, shame and guilt after failure, short-lived satisfaction after success, and fluctuations in self-esteem.

Roth (2008) elaborated on the work of Assor et al. (2004) by showing that PCR correlates with self-oriented helping (egoistic helping) through internal compulsion, whereas autonomy-supportive parenting (ASP; which provides rationales for desired behaviors and takes the child's perspective) correlated with other-oriented helping through a sense of choice. Thus, in addition to its associations with negative feelings and conflicted internalization, young adults' perception of their parents'

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conditional regard also correlated with a low quality helping orientation. Together, these results suggest that the use of PCR may be convenient but also has associated costs.

Especially relevant to the present study are findings concerning the relation between PCR and offspring's emotional functioning (Assor et al., 2004; Roth, Assor, Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). Suppression-oriented PCR has predicted young adults' suppression of negative emotions through a sense of internal compulsion (Roth, Assor et al., 2009). Elaboration on this research has differentiated among three modes of emotion regulation based on SDT conceptions: dysregulation, suppressive regulation, and emotional integration (Roth, Assor et al., 2009; Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006). Dysregulation involves children's experience of emotions but inability to regulate them; that is, children unintentionally express the behavioral tendencies inherent in the emotions (e.g., Deci, 1980; James, 1890). Suppressive regulation involves avoiding or minimizing the experience of negative emotions. Finally, emotional integration involves a differentiated awareness of one's emotional states and the capacity to use this sensitivity to regulate behavior intentionally. SDT proposes that integration is essential for optimal emotional regulation because it allows *exploration*, experience, and choices in how to express emotions, rather than suppression or stifling of emotions (e.g., Rogers, 1961). Children can thus explore their emotions without being overwhelmed by them, so they can use the emotions autonomously as a guide for adaptive behavior.

Furthermore, Roth, Ron, and Benita (2009) also differentiated between the two components of PCR, that is, conditional positive regard (providing more affection when the child engages in parentally desired behaviors) and conditional negative regard (providing less affection when the child fails to meet parental expectations). Results based on two samples of adolescents showed that suppression-oriented conditional negative regard predicted dysregulation, and suppression-oriented conditional positive regard predicted suppressive regulation and dysregulation. Alternatively, adolescents' perceptions of ASP predicted integrative regulation.

Overall, previous research on PCR and ASP has indicated that conditional regard correlates with maladaptive or non-optimal functioning, whereas autonomy support correlates with more positive outcomes. However, several important issues linked to the phenomenon of emotion regulation and its interpersonal consequences have not yet been adequately addressed.

First, although research thus far has only focused on the use of conditional regard to promote suppression of negative emotions, it is quite possible that parents may actually use conditional regard to promote expression and sharing of negative feelings. This may be particularly relevant in adolescence or emerging adulthood, when some youth try to create distance between themselves and their parents (e.g., Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005). Youngsters may simply want to sort things out by themselves before disclosing what they feel, or at times they may be too flooded with emotions to be able to talk about them. In such cases, many well-intentioned parents may want to encourage their older children to share their negative feelings. Yet, based on SDT, we would expect that using conditional regard to promote such sharing would also lead to negative outcomes, perhaps because emotions are perceived as highly personal and delicate; therefore, the pressure to share them may be experienced as especially intrusive. Hence, in the present research on negative emotions, we examined not only suppression-oriented conditional regard, but also expression-oriented conditional regard and its effects on emotion regulation and intimacy.

Another scarcely examined issue in previous research pertains to specific relational consequences or costs of PCR in the emotion-regulation domain. Given that conditional regard is likely to lead to non-optimal modes of emotion regulation, it is reasonable to hypothesize that PCR would undermine offspring's relational capacities, especially in the romantic domain (e.g., Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2003), by reducing their ability to regulate emotions adaptively.

Based on the foregoing considerations, the present study aimed to explore parents' use of expression- and suppression-oriented conditional regard and autonomy support as related to modes of emotion regulation and to intimacy capacity in young adults (college students). Moreover, we hypothesized that PCR would predict less-than-optimal regulation of negative emotion, which in turn would predict difficulties in intimacy capacity. In contrast, we expected that ASP would predict more adaptive emotion regulation, which in turn would predict improved intimacy capacity. Based on SDT and previous research, the following section describes the different emotion-regulation modes and intimacy outcomes that we expected the different parental practices to predict.

Parental practices and modes of emotion regulation

In line with extant research showing that stifling and suppression of emotions is harmful for healthy psychological development (Gross & John, 2003; Ryan et al., 2006), past findings highlighted the emotional and behavioral costs for children associated with PCR that focused on the suppression of negative emotions (Assor et al., 2004; Roth et al., 2009). However, these negative costs may stem from the children's very suppression and stifling of their emotions, and not from children's experience of controlling parenting. In line with this assertion, one may expect that PCR focusing on the expression of negative emotions would be less problematic for children's emotional and behavioral experiences.

As already noted, the phenomenon of parental pressure to express negative emotions is of special interest because it lends itself to different interpretations. At first glance, expression-oriented PCR may appear quite benign because it may convey acceptance of the child's negative emotions and provision of an opportunity to share negative emotions with parents. However, based on SDT, we would like to suggest that forcing a child to express and share personal feelings could elicit an experience of intrusion and coercion, which is quite different from the experience of parental endorsement of expression (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). Therefore, we would expect that the negative consequences of this approach result from the parental controlling practice itself, rather than from the actual expression or sharing of negative emotions.

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