Antecedents of provided autonomy support and psychological control within close friendships: The role of evaluative concerns perfectionism and basic psychological needs

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ABSTRACT

Although receiving autonomy support within close friendships has been found to relate to higher levels of psychosocial well-being, less is known about why some friends are more autonomy supportive or controlling than others. The present study investigated the role of individuals' evaluative concerns perfectionism and experienced need satisfaction or frustration within the friendship as predictors of provided autonomy support and psychological control towards their best same-sex friend. Participants were 108 young adults (M_{age} = 23.18; SD = 2.26; 66.7% women) who reported on their level of evaluative concerns perfectionism, friendship need satisfaction and frustration, and provided friendship autonomy support and psychological control. Results showed that evaluative concerns perfectionism related positively to provided psychological control and negatively to provided autonomy support via, respectively, higher need frustration and lower need satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Multiple previous studies indicated the beneficial effects of autonomy support (e.g., Ferguson, Kasser, & Jahng, 2011) and the detrimental effects of psychological control (e.g., Pettit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001) for the recipient's psychosocial functioning. Although previous studies mostly investigated these relations within vertical relationships (e.g., the parent-child relationship), similar findings have been reported within friendships (i.e., a horizontal relationship) (e.g., Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006; Padilla-Walker, Fraser, Black, & Bean, 2015). Less is known, however, about why some friends are more likely to provide autonomy support or psychological control within a close friendship. As evaluative concerns perfectionism (ECP) was found to relate to a higher level of provided parental psychological control (e.g., Soenens et al., 2005), we propose that ECP may also foster friends' engagement in less autonomy-supportive and more psychologically controlling interactions. Additionally, based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and preliminary evidence linking ECP and need frustration (Boone, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, Van der Kaap-Deeder, & Verstuyf, 2014), we examined whether reduced or elevated levels of, respectively, need satisfaction or need frustration would

account for the relation between ECP and provided autonomy support or psychological control.

1.1. Autonomy support and psychological control in close friendships

Within SDT, a broad theory on motivation and socialization, autonomy support is characterized by the nurturance of volitional functioning (e.g., Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). Autonomy-supportive friends take an active interest in and acknowledge the perspective of their friend. Doing so helps them to provide friend-attuned advice and to stimulate a sense of autonomy in their friend (Grolnick et al., 1991; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). In contrast, psychologically controlling friends minimize, ignore, or deny the friend's perspective, thereby imposing their own point of view by making use of a variety of psychologically intrusive strategies (e.g., guilt induction and shaming) (Barber, 1996; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

Multiple studies within vertical relationships (with one figure having the authority; e.g., parent-child relationship) showed that whereas autonomy support contributes to the recipient's well-being including prosocial behavior and enjoyment (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2011), psychological control impedes this well-being and engenders feelings of ill-being including depressive symptoms and internalizing distress (e.g., Pettit et al., 2001) (for an overview see Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Fewer studies examined these constructs within friendships. These studies have shown that perceived autonomy support from friends related to both a higher relationship quality as well as a higher level of

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well-being (e.g., life satisfaction) (e.g., Deci et al., 2006; Kasser & Ryan, 1999). Regarding psychological control, only one study thus far examined this controlling style within the friendship relationship and showed a negative relation with prosocial behavior towards friends in general (Padilla-Walker et al., 2015).

1.2. The role of evaluative concerns perfectionism

As higher levels of autonomy support and lower levels of psychological control within friendships have been demonstrated to be vital for individuals' well-being, we deemed it important to investigate what processes foster such interaction styles. Herein we focused on ECP, which is characterized by doubts about one's performance, concerns about making mistakes, and harsh self-scrutiny (Blatt, 1995; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). We expected that individuals high on ECP would be more likely to act less autonomy supportive (e.g., by being less in tune with their friend's feelings and needs) and more psychologically controlling towards their friend (e.g., by imposing their own agenda and displaying conditional regard) as they are more focused on maintaining a positive self-image than on experiencing interpersonal intimacy (Mongrain & Zuroff, 1995). Additionally, these individuals have been found to be rather competitive towards their friends (Santor & Zuroff, 1997), which further precludes their ability to foster their friend's volition functioning. There is some indirect evidence for this hypothesis showing ECP to be linked to interpersonal malfunctioning. For example, previous studies have found individuals scoring high on ECP to be more likely to perceive others to be critical and highly demanding (Blatt, 2008; Dunkley & Kyparissis, 2008), which can eventually impede the interpersonal bond (e.g., Van der Kaap-Deeder, Smets & Boone, 2016). Elevated levels of ECP have also been found to relate to lower levels of provided social support (Zuroff, Sadikaj, Kelly, & Leybman, 2016). Although no study thus far examined the relation between ECP and provided psychological control or autonomy support within the friendship relationship, several studies have shown a link between parental ECP and provided psychological control (e.g., Soenens et al., 2005). No study thus far examined the relation between ECP and provided autonomy support.

1.3. The mediating role of basic psychological need frustration and need satisfaction

Besides looking into the relation between ECP and provided friendship autonomy support and psychological control, we also investigated the mediating role of the basic psychological needs. Within SDT, it is stated that there are three basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness), of which the satisfaction is crucial for an optimal intrapersonal and interpersonal psychological functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec & Soenens, 2010). The need for autonomy concerns experiencing a sense of volition and choice when carrying out an activity. Regarding friendships, satisfaction of this need will show when individuals experience the freedom to express emotions in interaction with their friend, while this need will be frustrated when individuals feel forced to take part in certain activities with their friend. The need for competence entails the experience of mastery in executing daily activities. In close friendships, this need will be satisfied when individuals feel capable of resolving conflicts with their friend, while competence frustration will be apparent when individuals feel inadequate in supporting their friend. Finally, the need for relatedness signifies having warm and trusting relationships. Within friendships, the need for relatedness will be satisfied when individuals feel connected with and appreciated by their friend, while relatedness frustration will be evident when individuals feel rejected or excluded by their friend.

An abundance of studies (for an overview see Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013) support the notion that satisfaction of the basic psychological needs relates positively to a variety of beneficial

outcomes (including greater engagement, vitality, and positive affect), while frustration of these needs has been found to relate to adverse outcomes (including depressive symptoms, disordered eating, and problem behavior). With respect to interpersonal functioning, several studies have shown that whereas need satisfaction as experienced within the friendship or in general relates to a better relationship quality (e.g., more happiness within the friendship; Demir & Davidson, 2013), need frustration compromises relationship functioning (e.g., Costa, Ntoumanis, & Bartholomew, 2015). Previous studies have also shown that need satisfaction and need frustration as experienced by one partner within a relationship relate to higher levels of, respectively, provided autonomy support and psychological control to the other relational partner (e.g., Stebbings, Taylor, Spray, & Ntoumanis, 2012; Van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2015). However, no study thus far examined these links within friendships.

Within the current study, we propose that ECP relates to provided autonomy support and psychological control through processes of need satisfaction and need frustration. Up to our knowledge, only one study thus far directly examined the relation between ECP and the psychological needs. That is, Boone et al. (2014) found that ECP related to increases in need frustration (but was unrelated to need satisfaction) which, in turn, predicted increases in binge eating symptoms. Indirectly, previous studies have indicated that ECP relates to experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness frustration. For example, parental criticism was found to relate to lower levels of need satisfaction and increased need frustration (Brenning, Mabbe, Vansteenkiste, & Soenens, submitted for publication). Evaluative concerns perfectionists have also been found to display more pressured functioning, which is characterized by a lack of felt autonomy (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). Additionally, ECP has been shown to relate to feelings of incompetence concerning a puzzle-task (Van der Kaap-Deeder, Soenens et al., 2016). Finally, ECP has been found to relate to higher levels of interpersonal distance (Habke & Flynn, 2002), indicating relatedness frustration.

1.4. The present study

The overall goal of this study was to examine the role of ECP and need-based experiences in provided psychological control and autonomy support towards friends. Specifically, we expected that ECP would relate to more provided psychological control via an increased level of need frustration and (to a lesser degree) a reduced level of need satisfaction, whereas an opposite pattern of relations was expected with respect to provided autonomy support. Recent empirical findings and theorizing (for an overview see Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013) suggest that whereas need satisfaction and autonomy support are particularly related to positive indicators of psychological functioning (i.e., 'bright pathway'), need frustration and psychological control are particularly related to maladjustment and psychopathology (i.e., 'dark pathway'). Therefore, we expected the path from ECP to provided psychological control via need frustration to be the most pronounced. As previous research found ECP to be significantly and positively related to perfectionistic strivings (e.g., Dunkley, Blankstein, Zuroff, Lecce, & Hui, 2006), we controlled for this construct in our analyses.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 108 young adults ($M_{age} = 23.18$; $SD = 2.26$; range: 18–30 years). There were slightly more women (66.7%) than men. The highest level of education obtained was for 38.0% high school and for 62.1% higher education. Participants were recruited through social media, where a link to an online questionnaire was included. The questionnaires concerning friendship were filled out with respect to the participant's best same-sex friend, who was not their romantic