

Issues and Challenges in Studying Parental Control: Toward a New Conceptualization

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ABSTRACT—Although investigators have long considered parents' exertion of control over children as a central part of the socialization process, the study of control has been marked by conceptual and empirical confusion. This article outlines some of the history of the construct of control in the context of parenting, delineating the development of the contemporary approach that distinguishes among multiple forms of control. It proposes a refinement of this approach such that only parenting characterized by pressure, intrusion, and domination should be considered control, whereas parenting frequently labeled control but characterized mainly by guidance should be considered structure. This article highlights the benefits of distinguishing between these two dimensions of parenting rather than multiple forms of control.

KEYWORDS—parenting; control; structure

For as long as scholars have studied parenting, they have considered parents' exertion of control over children to be a central dimension of parenting (for reviews, see Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg, 1990). It is thus not surprising that more than a

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thousand scholarly works have been written on the topic.¹ The proliferation of theory and research on parental control has yielded a myriad of conceptualizations and operationalizations. Rollins and Thomas (1979) identified over 15 labels used to describe parental control in more than 220 studies. Although the most common label was the simple one of *control* sometimes accompanied by the term *hostile*, also common were *authoritarian*, *discipline*, *demanding*, *dominance*, *protective*, *punishment*, and *restrictive*. Other terms included *authoritative*, *coercion*, *power assertion*, *possessiveness*, *pressure*, and *strictness*. Notably, the list did not even include some labels that frequently appear in contemporary work, such as *behavioral control* (e.g., Barber, 1996; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989), *psychological control* (e.g., Barber, 1996; Steinberg et al., 1989), *firm versus lax control* (e.g., Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Rowe, 1981), *intrusiveness* (e.g., Ispa et al., 2004; Martin, Maccoby, & Jacklin, 1981), and *forceful control* (e.g., Kochanska, Aksan, Knaack, & Rhines, 2004). The plethora of terms has created confusion in the conclusions one can draw about the role of parental control in children's development.

THE MULTIPLE-FORMS APPROACH TO CONTROL

Scholars have always deemed control to be fundamental in the parenting context, but its characterization has changed over time. Early scholars defined control in terms of pressure, intrusiveness, and domination, viewing it as detrimental to children. At the same time, however, they acknowledged that it was also maladaptive for parents to allow children free rein, as children require some guidance (e.g., Baldwin, 1955; Symonds, 1939). In contrast, contemporary work has focused on multiple forms of control (e.g., Barber, 1996; Steinberg et al., 1989), some of which are characterized not by pressure, intrusiveness, or domination, but rather by guidance as well

¹Based on a literature search using PsycINFO in July 2008. In addition to the term *parent*, we used the terms that Rollins and Thomas (1979) used to identify relevant work.

as other characteristics. We refer to this framework as the multiple-forms approach.

Schaefer (1965a, 1965b) was one of the first to identify more than one form of parental control. His circumplex model included psychological control versus autonomy as well as what he labeled *firm versus lax control*. He defined a continuum of psychological control versus autonomy; psychological control included the presence of parental dominance, aggression, rejection, and capricious discipline, whereas autonomy was defined as the absence of such characteristics. Firm versus lax control included the absence versus presence of permitting extreme independence (e.g., allowing children to go anywhere they like without asking) and lax discipline (e.g., letting children get away without doing the work they have been told to do). Although the dimension of firm versus lax control may have appeared to be new, it was present in earlier depictions of parenting, albeit not as a distinct dimension of control. For example, Symonds (1939) advocated that parents avoid being excessively submissive to children, and Baldwin (1955) argued that a key aspect of the democratic parenting style was providing children with rules and regulations for their protection.

Continuing the trend of distinguishing among multiple forms of control, Baumrind (1966, 1971) delineated a variety of forms of control (see also Baumrind & Black, 1967). Echoing Schaefer's psychological control versus autonomy, Baumrind characterized authoritarianism as including, among other things, parents not sharing decision-making power with children, assuming a stance of personal infallibility, and becoming inaccessible when displeased. Similar to Schaefer's firm versus lax control, firm enforcement involved such practices as requiring children to pay attention, not being coerced by children, and enforcing compliance after initial noncompliance. Baumrind also focused on parents' encouragement of independence and individuality. Her work suggested that authoritative parenting, characterized by high firm enforcement, high encouragement of independence and individuality, and low hostility, was beneficial for children. In contrast, authoritarian (high firm enforcement, low encouragement of independence and individuality, and high hostility) and permissive (low firm enforcement, high encouragement of independence and individuality, and low hostility) parenting appeared to be detrimental.

In more contemporary work, Steinberg and colleagues (e.g., Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Steinberg, 1990) used the term *psychological autonomy granting* to denote the extent to which parents employ noncoercive democratic discipline and encourage children to express their individuality—akin to Baumrind's encouragement of independence and individuality. Drawing from this work as well as Schaefer's, Barber (1996; see also Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994) defined psychological control as parents' "attempts to intrude on the psychological and emotional development of the child (e.g., thinking processes, self-expression, and attachment to the parent)" (p. 3296). Scholars frequently define such control as parents' love withdrawal and guilt induction

when children disobey. Psychological control predicts heightened internalizing symptoms and other psychological problems among children (e.g., Barber, 1996; Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Wang, Pomerantz, & Chen, 2007).

In their work on parenting, Steinberg and colleagues (e.g., Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991) described another form of control that included monitoring of and setting limits on children's behavior, which these investigators termed *strictness-supervision*. Barber (1996; see also Barber et al., 1994) labeled such parenting *behavioral control*, which he described as parents' "attempt to manage or control children's behavior" (p. 3296). Barber, as well as others (e.g., Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2004; Gray & Steinberg, 1999), operationalized behavioral control as parents' monitoring of children's behavior outside of the home (e.g., how much parents try to know where their children are after school); scholars have also operationalized such control as parents' involvement in making decisions for children (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2004; Steinberg et al., 1989).² Behavioral control predicts decreased externalizing symptoms and increased achievement among children (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2004; Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Wang et al., 2007).

EVALUATING THE MULTIPLE-FORMS APPROACH TO CONTROL

The multiple-forms approach used in contemporary theory and research on parental control has some important strengths. Most notably, it captures the complexity of parents' role in socializing children. On the one hand, it is necessary for children to form their own interests, skills, and identities. The multiple-forms approach acknowledges that parental pressure, intrusiveness, and domination assault children's individuality; there is thus a strong rationale for believing that when parents are coercive, they undermine children's psychological development. On the other hand, as developing members of society, children also need to acquire behaviors that are appropriate and acceptable in their cultural contexts, and they require guidance toward such ends. Because parenting that includes firm enforcement, supervision, and behavioral control is likely to provide children with guidance, it is important to children's development. The multiple-forms approach makes explicit what was implicit in early writings: *Parents cannot allow children to go unrestricted, even while fostering their initiation and considering their input.*

Clearly, distinguishing between these two dimensions of parenting is imperative. However, the current manner of doing so has several significant drawbacks. First, because scholars apply the label of *parental control* to such a wide variety of parenting, the multiple-forms approach creates ambiguity in terms of the conclusions drawn. In fact, some investigators have described

²Much research operationalizes parents' behavioral control as parents' knowledge of children's lives (e.g., Barber, 1996; Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993). However, such knowledge is not actually driven by parents' control but rather by children's disclosure (Kerr & Stattin, 2000).

the body of research on parental control as yielding inconsistent findings (e.g., Chao, 2001; Ispa et al., 2004) when this is not the case. Second, the multiple-forms approach conflates dimensions of parenting with the target (e.g., children's thoughts vs. behavior) of parenting. When parenting dimensions have nonequivalent targets, important realms of children's experience at which parenting is directed are excluded. In addition, examining different dimensions with regard to different targets makes it difficult to examine interactions between dimensions. Third, because it is not tied to broader theories of development, the multiple-forms approach lacks a link to the basic mechanisms by which parents shape children's development. Because of these drawbacks, although much is known about the effects of parents' control on children, little is known about the processes that underlie such effects or how children may contribute to them.

REFINING THE MULTIPLE-FORMS APPROACH TO CONTROL: TOWARD A NEW GENERATION OF THEORY AND RESEARCH

Given these issues, it is necessary to refine the multiple-forms approach to parental control. To this end, we suggest conceptualizing parental control as only those kinds of parenting characterized by parents' pressure, intrusiveness, and dominance. Thus, parental control involves attempts at forcing children to meet demands, solving problems for children, and taking a parental rather than child perspective (e.g., Grolnick, 2003; Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). In contrast, parents can support children's autonomy by encouraging them to take initiative, allowing them to solve problems on their own, and taking the child's perspective. With such a conceptualization, parenting labeled *psychological control* and *authoritarianism* as well as other types of intrusive parenting—whether it be styles or practices—such as power assertive discipline (Hoffman, 1960) would continue to fall under the rubric of control, whereas parenting labeled *psychological autonomy* and *encouragement of independence* would fall at the other end of the dimension under the rubric of autonomy support. In this conceptualization, parental control is a broader and more inclusive dimension of parenting than has been permitted by considering such forms as psychological control because it includes parents' pressure, intrusiveness, and dominance in relation to children's feelings and thoughts as well as their behavior.

We suggest considering other forms of what is currently considered parental control as a relatively orthogonal dimension of parenting: structure. In the context of self-determination theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985), Grolnick et al. (e.g., 1997) defined structure in the parenting context as parents' organization of children's environment to facilitate children's competence. When parents are structuring, they highlight the relations between actions and outcomes through clear and consistent guidelines, expectations, and rules for children; they also provide children with predictable consequences for and clear feedback about

their actions (Farkas & Grolnick, 2008). In contrast to creating a structured environment, parents can create a chaotic one in which they fail to provide children with such organization (Skinner, Johnson, & Snyder, 2005). Conceptualized as such, parental structure includes parenting styles and practices labeled *behavioral control*, *firm enforcement*, *firm* (vs. lax) *control*, and *strictness-supervision*. Indeed, Rothbaum and Weisz (1994) used a definition of guidance that was similar to our definition of structure, identifying several such forms of parenting as reflecting guidance. Notably, structure can be targeted at not only children's behavior but also their thoughts and feelings, given that parents may use structure to facilitate children's internalization of key values. The structure construct intersects with theory and research on parental discipline that focuses on parents' responses to children's transgressions. Most notably, in Grusec and Goodnow's (1994) model of discipline, the clear and consistent messages and rules predicted to facilitate internalization fall under the rubric of structure.

The distinction between parental control and structure addresses the three drawbacks of the multiple-forms approach we outlined earlier by (a) facilitating clear conclusions about the effects of parental control, as well as other forms of parenting such as structure; (b) separating dimensions of parenting from targets of parenting; and (c) linking parenting dimensions to basic mechanisms of children's development, thereby more fully elucidating the process by which socialization occurs. As a consequence, the approach we have proposed has the potential to move the field forward so that it can take into account multiple characteristics of the socialization process—an endeavor Grusec and Goodnow (1994) argued is important in their landmark analysis of parental discipline.

Clear Conclusions About Parenting

Perhaps most basically, the refinement we have suggested reduces the ambiguity in the conclusions drawn about the effects of parental control. For example, on the basis of their assessment of parental control as the extent to which key decisions were made by children themselves versus their parents, Fletcher et al. (2004) concluded that "parental control and monitoring are . . . effective deterrents against adolescent misbehavior" (p. 795). One might take away the incorrect message that parental control in general, including forms characterized by pressure, intrusion, and dominance, is good for children, but these investigators did not examine such forms of control. The use of the term *structure*, rather than *control*, would clearly convey the nature of the findings without creating confusion. This is important given that, as we noted earlier, some investigators have incorrectly described the body of research on parental control as yielding inconsistent findings.

A distinction between control and structure would also be useful in clarifying theory and research concerned with more specific issues regarding the effects of parental control. For example, several investigators have concluded that parental

control is beneficial to children in dangerous environments (e.g., Coley & Hoffman, 1996). These investigators often cite a study by Baldwin, Baldwin, and Cole (1990) in which parents' restrictiveness (i.e., how numerous and circumscribed the rules are) was associated with positive psychological functioning among children at high risk but not at low risk. However, parents' democracy (i.e., children have a say in the rules vs. rules are imposed on children) was associated with positive psychological functioning regardless of children's risk. Baldwin and colleagues concluded that "restrictive authoritarian" family patterns are successful in high-risk situations. This conclusion is misleading because although the number of rules had more positive effects when risk was high, the extent to which these rules were characterized by parents' domination of children (the opposite of democracy) had negative effects regardless of risk. In fact, a close examination reveals that much of the research leading investigators to conclude that the effects of parental control are moderated by children's neighborhoods has focused on parenting that is structuring rather than controlling (e.g., Coley & Hoffman, 1996; McCarthy, Lord, & Eccles, 1993).

Separating Dimensions of Parenting From Targets of Parenting

The distinction between parental control and structure has the potential to facilitate appropriate empirical evaluation of the full range of children's experience at which parenting is directed. The multiple-forms approach often conflates dimensions of parenting with the target of parenting. For example, psychological control involves the pressuring, intrusive, and dominating dimension of parenting in regard to what children *think and feel*, whereas behavioral control involves the guiding dimension—what we have described as structure—of parenting in regard to children's *activities*. Such a framework does not allow researchers to examine parental control in terms of children's behavior or parental guidance (i.e., structure) in terms of children's thoughts and feelings. In contrast, as we noted earlier, the distinction between control and structure is not tied to the target of parenting, thereby making it possible to examine the full range of children's experience with respect to both dimensions of parenting. For example, investigators can measure structure as the extent to which parents enforce rules and control as the extent to which rules are enforced in a parent-oriented manner (e.g., parents do not consider children's input).

In addition to dealing with the exclusion of key areas of children's experience, differentiating control and structure facilitates the examination of the idea that several investigators have put forth (e.g., Gray & Steinberg, 1999) that there are interactive effects of different dimensions of parenting. Despite the viability of such effects, there is little empirical evidence for them. Although this may be due in part to the compounded unreliability of interactions between continuous measures (see Bussemeyer & Jones, 1983), it may also be due to a focus on different dimensions of parenting in regard to different targets—for example,

how parents' control of children's thoughts and feeling interacts with their structuring of children's behavior as manifest in parents' monitoring of children's after-school activities. As a consequence of such a focus, research may not capture the interaction of different dimensions of parenting in parents' interactions with children. Separating parenting dimensions from their targets as we have done in distinguishing parental control and structure makes this possible. For example, investigators can examine whether the effects of parents' monitoring of children's after-school activities depend on whether such structure is controlling, as manifest in parents' use of threats of love withdrawal to obtain information from children.

Situating Parenting in the Broader Context of Child Development

Distinguishing between control and structure, rather than different forms of control, has a third benefit: It moves toward the creation of a model of parenting that is linked to broader theories of children's development. In doing so, it leads to a more integrative understanding of children's development, allowing for the identification of the mechanisms by which parenting shapes children. In the context of self-determination theory, Grolnick et al. (e.g., 1997) made the case that control and structure are two important dimensions of parenting because they tie into two basic human needs whose fulfillment is essential for children's positive psychological functioning. Although the multiple-forms approach was not originally based on such a framework, investigators have begun to focus on how different forms of what has been considered control may "meet the basic requirements for healthy development" (Barber & Olsen, 1997, p. 288). In this vein, similar to investigators working in the framework of self-determination theory, Barber and colleagues (e.g., Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005; see also Eccles, Early, Frasier, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997) argued that children require, among other things, psychological autonomy, the need for which is met when children are permitted to experience, value, and express their own thoughts and emotions.

Barber and colleagues also stress that children require regulation, which parents provide by setting consistent limits on children's behavior. This suggests that children have a need to be "controlled," which at least appears at odds with the generally recognized need for autonomy. An alternative manner of thinking about this issue is that children have a need not for regulation but for competence, which is critical to their healthy psychological development as postulated in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) as well as other theories (Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002; White, 1959). Competence is "a pattern of effective performance in the environment" (Masten et al., 1995, p. 2) as well as the abilities that provide the potential for such a pattern (e.g., Elliot et al., 2002; White, 1959). Parental structure facilitates the development of competence among children as it not only conveys to children the standards for competence but provides them with feedback about their progress in meeting such standards; in contrast, when parents create a chaotic

environment, they undermine children's competence by failing to provide such support (Skinner et al., 2005).

Situating parenting in a broader theory of children's development is critical to moving the understanding of the role of parents in children's psychological functioning forward along two lines. First, it has the potential to identify the mechanisms by which parenting shapes children's development, an issue that investigators studying discipline have addressed (see Grusec & Goodnow, 1994) but that has received less attention (see Steinberg, 1990) from investigators studying other realms of parenting outside the context of self-determination theory. To the extent that controlling parenting hinders healthy psychological development in children, it should do so in part by disrupting feelings of autonomy. Evidence from initial investigations of the mechanisms underlying the role of controlling parenting in children's psychological functioning is consistent with this notion (e.g., Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991; Kenney-Benson & Pomerantz, 2005). Children's development of competence may underlie the effects of parental structure. Indeed, parental structure is associated with children's actual, as well as perceived, competence in the academic domain (e.g., Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Skinner et al., 2005), which may be why it has positive effects on children's development. Of course, parental control may also undermine the development of children's competence—for example, by not providing them with the opportunity to solve problems on their own (see Pomerantz, Wang, & Ng, 2005). Our argument is not that parental structure (vs. control) uniquely affects children's competence but that this is one mechanism by which it does so.

Second, understanding the underlying mechanisms provides a useful framework for elucidating how children contribute to the socialization process. In this vein, Pomerantz et al. (2005) have argued that for a variety of reasons, children come to their interactions with parents varying in the extent to which they experience themselves as competent (e.g., as possessing the ability to do well in school). The less children experience themselves as competent, according to these investigators, the more they may need their parents to provide such experiences (such as by providing structured assistance with homework). Consequently, parenting matters more for such children because parenting that may undermine children's competence has heightened negative effects on them, whereas parenting that may facilitate it has heightened positive effects (for a review, see Pomerantz et al., 2005). Just as parental control and structure may be key dimensions of parenting that shape children through their provision of autonomy and competence, children's autonomy and competence may be key characteristics that contribute to the socialization process by shaping the effects of such dimensions of parenting on children's subsequent psychological development.

CONCLUSIONS

The delineation of different forms of control has been an important advance in theory and research on parenting. At the same

time, however, distinguishing among multiple forms of control has its drawbacks. The distinction we have introduced between parental control and structure is one way to move the field forward to more advanced theory and research that can potentially yield a clearer set of conclusions to not only investigators but also the public. This is a particularly important endeavor as scholars attempt to understand the role of parents in the socialization process among families of diverse cultural backgrounds for whom parenting may not only take different forms than among families of European backgrounds but also be experienced differently by children. The aim of this article is to encourage construction of a parsimonious approach to conceptualizing and operationalizing parenting along the two dimensions at the article's center. Such innovation will serve to significantly organize the field, thereby setting important directions for future theory and research and allowing sound applications of the findings.

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