



Let Us Not Throw Out the Baby With the Bathwater: Applying the Principle of Universalism Without Uniformity to Autonomy-Supportive and Controlling Parenting

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ABSTRACT—*Socialization scholars differ in how they view parenting processes: On one hand, scholars working from the perspective of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) underscore the universally growth-promoting role of parenting that is perceived to support autonomy and the universal costs associated with parenting that is perceived as controlling. On the other hand, scholars adopting a more relativistic perspective focus on moderating factors (e.g., personality, culture) that may reduce or even cancel out the benefits of parents' support of autonomy and the costs of controlling parenting. In this article, we apply the principle of universalism without uniformity to this literature and review evidence for this principle. Specifically, we maintain that room for individual differences exists within SDT in children's appraisal of potentially autonomy-supportive and controlling parenting practices, and in the way they cope with controlling parenting. This perspective emphasizes children's active contribution in shaping the socialization process.*

KEYWORDS—parenting; autonomy support; control; self-determination; personality; culture

Inspired by Self-Determination Theory (SDT; 1), research on parenting and child development increasingly considers the role of parental support of autonomy, a parenting dimension that

contrasts with controlling parenting. Parenting that supports autonomy is defined as parental support for children's volitional functioning and involves practices such as providing choices and giving a rationale when introducing rules (2). According to SDT, autonomy-supportive parenting benefits children's psychosocial development because it satisfies their basic and universal psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (2). These claims about the universally adaptive role of parental support for autonomy may seem strong and controversial when considered from more relativistic perspectives on parenting, which maintain that the effects of parenting depend on many moderating variables, such as culture and personality.

Indeed, socialization scholars differ in the extent to which they adopt a more universal or a more relativistic view. In principle, both views can take extreme forms. An extreme universal view would hold that key ingredients of optimal parenting can be identified that produce the same effects for all children. In this view, parenting that supports autonomy would benefit all children equally. An extreme relativistic view would hold that many moderating variables may alter the effects of parenting, so the nature of optimal parenting cannot be defined. In this view, support for autonomy could not be considered an ingredient of good parenting because its effects would be qualified by numerous variables. Fortunately, few scholars, if any, actually advocate either of these two extreme positions. Yet scholars do vary in their positions on the continuum between these two extremes.

Researchers should be aware of their position on this continuum because pitfalls are associated with both extremes. An extreme universal position leaves no room for important individual differences in parenting processes. This view denies the role of powerful sources of influence in dynamics of parenting such as personality and culture. An extreme relativistic position risks concluding that no recommendations can be made regarding beneficial or detrimental parenting practices. Such a position might

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even lead scholars to ignore systematic evidence for effects of parenting practices (including parental support for autonomy) on children's development. To avoid throwing out the baby with the bathwater (by leaning toward one of either extreme positions), we apply the principle of universalism without uniformity to research on parental support for autonomy. In the first two sections of this article, we discuss the SDT perspective and more relativistic perspectives on autonomy-supportive and controlling parenting, respectively. In the third and fourth sections, we apply the principle of universalism without uniformity, thereby discussing individual differences in children's appraisals of parents' behavior and in their coping responses to parents' behavior.

AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE AND CONTROLLING PARENTING WITHIN SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Autonomy-supportive parenting has been studied in both classic (3) and contemporary (4) developmental research. In SDT, this dimension takes a central place and is defined in a specific fashion: as characteristic of parents who support their children's volitional functioning, for instance, by acknowledging the child's perspective, providing meaningful choices, and communicating a relevant rationale when introducing rules (2, 5). Autonomy-supportive parenting contrasts with controlling parenting, which is characteristic of parents who pressure children to think, act, or feel in particular ways. One frequently examined manifestation of controlling parenting is psychological control, which involves intrusive behaviors such as inducing guilt and withdrawing love (6).

Many studies have documented the benefits of parenting that is perceived as supporting autonomy (including high-quality motivation, well-being, and performance) and the detriments of parenting that is perceived as controlling (including difficulties regulating emotions and a range of problem behaviors). These outcomes have been examined in diverse life domains, age periods, and cultures (7–9).

According to SDT, parenting that is perceived as supporting autonomy is beneficial because it satisfies basic psychological needs that are critical for children's optimal development—autonomy (i.e., experiencing a sense of volition and psychological freedom), competence (i.e., feeling efficacious), and relatedness (i.e., feeling connected and loved by important others; 1). Parenting that is perceived as supporting autonomy is said to nurture these psychological needs, whereas parenting that is perceived as controlling is said to thwart them (9). Because the needs are universal, the dynamics of perceived autonomy-supportive and controlling parenting are thought to apply universally.

AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE AND CONTROLLING PARENTING FROM A RELATIVISTIC PERSPECTIVE

At the surface, the SDT-based claims about the universal dynamics involved in autonomy-supportive and controlling

parenting are apparently at odds with models that emphasize a more relativistic approach to parenting. These more relativistic models pay attention to moderating factors such as children's ages and personalities, families' socioeconomic status, cultural climate, and the domain of socialization involved (10). Culture and children's personality have received attention as moderators of the effects of parenting. While most of the debate has been framed around the effects of controlling socialization, effects of autonomy support (and providing choice, in particular) have recently been called into question (11).

With regard to culture, some scholars argue that controlling parenting is less detrimental (or even not detrimental at all) in interdependent and collectivistic cultures (12). With regard to personality, many developmental models emphasize that the effects of parenting in general, and controlling parenting in particular, are conditional upon individual differences in children's temperament and personality (13). For instance, the detrimental effects of controlling parenting are less pronounced or even absent among children and adolescents who are temperamentally agreeable (14).

Although the universal and relativistic perspectives on parenting seem diametrically opposed, we argue for a position that leaves room for individual differences within the universalistic perspective. This position is inspired by Schweder and Sullivan's (15) principle of universalism without uniformity. The principle, which entails the view that most important psychological processes have both universal and context-specific features, has been used to explain findings regarding cross-cultural effects of parenting (16). We aim to identify more specifically which processes in the sequence leading from parents' behavior to developmental outcomes can be moderated by individual differences in culture and personality.

We argue that although perceived autonomy-supportive (and controlling) parenting is universally beneficial (respectively detrimental) to children's development, children may differ in their appraisal of potentially autonomy-supportive and controlling behaviors, as well as in the way they cope with controlling parental behavior. We must study these individual differences because they highlight children's agency and active contribution to the parenting process (17). Culture and personality may play a substantial role in children's appraisal of potentially autonomy-supportive and controlling parental behaviors (i.e., behaviors that are intended to be autonomy-supportive or controlling or that can be classified theoretically as autonomy-supportive or controlling), and in the way they cope with controlling parenting in particular (see Figure 1).

DISTINGUISHING PARENTS' ACTUAL BEHAVIOR FROM CHILDREN'S APPRAISALS

Parents' actual behaviors are distinct from children's appraisal of these behaviors, which involves perceiving and attributing meaning to parents' behavior (see Figure 1). Although parents'

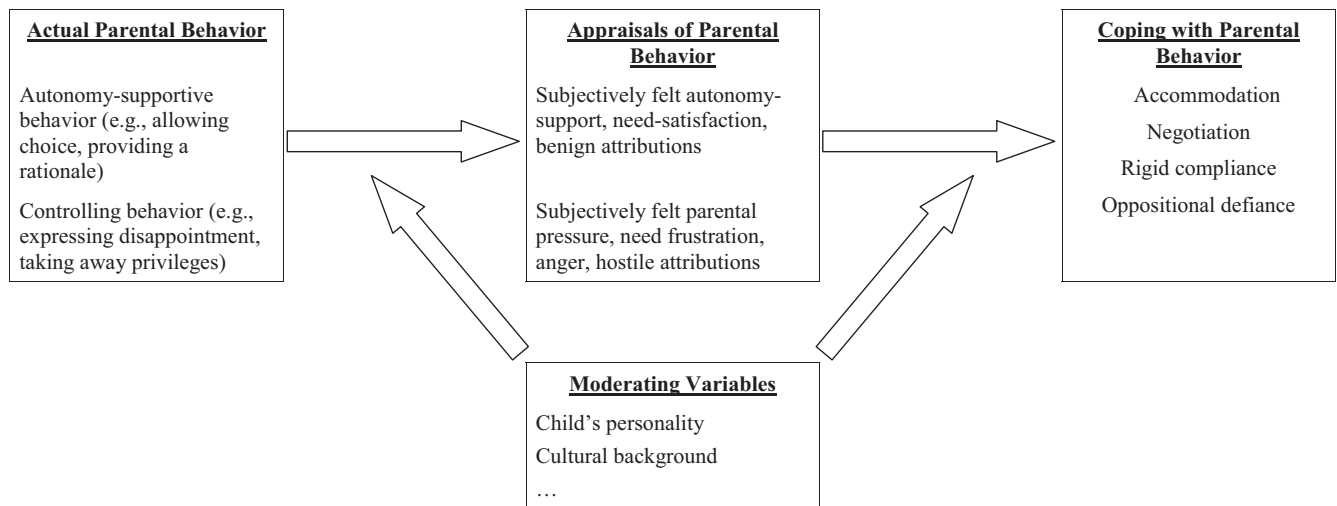


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Moderating Role of Culture and Personality in children's perceptions of and coping with parental behavior.

actual behavior is associated with the way the behavior is appraised, this link is not perfect; that is, different children perceive and interpret the same parental behavior differently, and these differential appraisals may be shaped by the factors highlighted in relativistic accounts of parenting. This variation refers to the notion of *functional significance* highlighted in SDT. According to Deci and Ryan, functional significance.

refers to the motivationally relevant psychological meaning that events or contexts are afforded or imbued with. This means that a person's perception of an event is an active construction influenced by all the kinds of factors herein discussed. And it is the person's own perception (i.e., construction) of the event to which he or she responds. (18, p. 1033)

The functional significance of events may depend to some extent on contextual and individual factors. However, what ultimately (and universally) matters for children's adjustment is the extent to which events are experienced (either consciously or unconsciously) as supporting autonomy or being controlling.

Behaviors that have been classified theoretically as autonomy-supportive or controlling can be appraised differently depending on a child's cultural background. Parental provision of choice is an interesting case because, although choice typically promotes motivation, effort, and performance, its effects are complex and qualified by many factors, including culture (19). For instance, choices made by elementary-school children, relative to choices made by their mothers, enhanced interest and performance among Caucasian American children but not among Asian American children (20). For children from countries with a more collectivist orientation, the absence of choice when their mother decides may not result in a lack of subjective feelings of autonomy and volition to the same degree as in individuals from more individualistic cultures. However, other studies using more naturalistic designs have not replicated these findings (21). Also,

when strangers made the choices, all children displayed decreased interest and performance, possibly because they felt the stranger-determined choice suppressed autonomy (20). Although the degree to which the actual provision of choice translates into subjective feelings of volition may vary individually, children who experience a sense of volition and who perceive their parents as supporting autonomy have more optimal well-being, learning, and motivation, effects that are largely unaffected by culture (22, 23).

In another study showing cultural variation in children's appraisal of parents' behavior, children in Ghana interpreted autonomy-supporting behaviors (e.g., "allowing me to do things my own way") as neglectful rather than supporting autonomy (24). However, other behaviors, including exchanges of opinion and acknowledging the child's perspective, were interpreted as supporting autonomy and were associated positively with children's motivation and adjustment. These findings underscore the point that, within the same culture or context, parental behaviors traditionally viewed as not supporting autonomy may have no effects or no negative effects, while those experienced as supporting autonomy may have positive effects.

Along similar lines, potentially controlling parenting practices can be appraised differently depending on children's cultural background. In one study, Asian immigrant adolescents were less likely than European American adolescents to report anger when confronted with statements that were classified theoretically as psychologically controlling (25). In another study, which used structured interviews, Chinese children displayed more positive evaluations and benign attributions of potentially psychologically controlling practices, including withdrawal of love and shaming, than Canadian children (26). For instance, Chinese children (in particular those living in more traditional, rural areas) were less likely to anticipate psychological harm following parents' use of potentially controlling strategies. Despite the

finding that cultural orientation can modify children's interpretation of potentially controlling parental behaviors, child-perceived controlling parenting is related to ill being and maladjustment across cultures (27, 28). For instance, although the study that compared Asian immigrant adolescents to European American adolescents (25) documented between-culture differences in appraisals of anger associated with potentially psychologically controlling practices, the relation between perceived psychologically controlling parenting and internalizing problems was similar across cultural groups.

The findings discussed so far suggest that relativistic and universalistic viewpoints on the role of parents' support for autonomy and control are not necessarily contradictory. Individual differences can exist in the way parents' behavior is appraised, but children's interpretation of external events is constrained. That is, not every parental behavior can be interpreted and experienced in every way (18). For this reason, we refute a position of extreme relativism because, according to such a view, what parents actually do would be unrelated to how their actions are perceived by their children. To illustrate, when a parent makes a statement that induces guilt, children may vary in the extent to which they perceive the statement as controlling. Yet, it is unlikely that some children come to perceive the statement as fully supporting autonomy. The experimental induction of autonomy-supportive and controlling events affects children's perceptions and experiences (29, 30), suggesting that children's appraisals are linked to parents' behaviors.

Researchers also need to examine the role of children's personality in appraising autonomy-supportive and controlling parental behaviors. For instance, compared with children with a more resilient personality, children with more impulsive and undercontrolled personality profiles might interpret more easily a parent's request as an intrusive attempt to pressure them. Still, subjective experiences of parental autonomy-support and control are likely to relate to (mal)adjustment similarly across individual differences in personality. In fact, the moderating role of personality in associations between parenting that is perceived as controlling and children's problem behaviors is limited (14). To the best of our knowledge, no research has examined systematically the role of personality in associations between parenting that is perceived as supporting autonomy and outcomes.

CHILDREN'S ACTIVE COPING WITH AUTONOMY-SUPPRESSING PARENTAL BEHAVIOR

Children may differ not only in their appraisal of parents' behavior but also in how they cope with parents' behavior and with parenting that suppresses autonomy (i.e., that is controlling) in particular. Skinner and colleagues (31, 32) identified four strategies to cope with events that may thwart children's need for autonomy (such as when parents engage in controlling parenting strategies). Two of these strategies involve less than optimal ways of coping. *Rigid compliance* occurs when children submit

to parents' requests and rules because they feel pressured to do so. Although this response is likely to result in obedience, children suppress their personal opinions and preferences, resulting in internalizing distress. *Oppositional defiance* occurs when children bluntly reject parents' authority and are inclined to do exactly the opposite of what is expected. This response is likely to give rise to an escalating pattern of coercion in parent-child relationships and, in the long run, to externalizing problems.

Skinner and Edge (31) formulated two more adaptive coping strategies. With *accommodation*, children reappraise parents' requests so they may come to understand the personal relevance of the requests. The other, *negotiation*, refers to an open and flexible attempt to align one's own goals more closely with the parent's goals. Negotiation differs from oppositional defiance because it entails neither a battle of wills nor global rejection of parents' authority. Instead, it focuses on a specific parental request and a constructive attempt to bridge the parent's and the child's preferences.

We know relatively little about children's use of these coping strategies. Oppositional defiance has been studied the most; perceived controlling parenting elicits more oppositional defiance across time (33) and oppositional defiance accounts for the association between perceived controlling parenting and externalizing problems (34). However, children also may react to controlling parenting through different coping responses. For instance, because of their cultural background or personality structure, some children might engage in alternative strategies, such as rigid compliance. This coping response might be more common in cultures that emphasize interdependence, obedience, and loyalty. With regard to personality, children with an overcontrolled personality profile (i.e., a profile characterized by neuroticism and introversion) may be most likely to respond with rigid compliance, whereas children with an undercontrolled profile (i.e., a profile characterized mainly by low conscientiousness and low agreeableness) would respond with oppositional defiance.

In summary, we suggest that children differ in the ways they cope with parenting that is perceived as controlling, with different strategies affecting children's development differentially. For instance, whereas oppositional defiance is more likely to lead to externalizing problems, rigid compliance might lead more often to internalizing distress. As such, examining the different strategies of coping may help explain why controlling parenting manifests in different developmental problems in different children. This question deals with the issue of multifinality in the development of psychopathology, which suggests that one cause (i.e., controlling parenting) can lead to many outcomes (i.e., internalizing or externalizing problems; 35). To understand why some children are less susceptible to the generally detrimental effects of parenting that is perceived as controlling, research needs to study the role of more adaptive coping strategies such as accommodation and negotiation. These coping strategies may serve as resilience factors, preventing the development of a cascade of negative parent-child interactions (36).

CONCLUSION

Consistent with SDT, we advocate that, at a deep level, subjective experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are universally essential for children's growth. Yet, individual differences exist in how actual parental behavior translates into such subjective experiences. Research tapping into the microprocesses involved in this translation process would emphasize the active role of children in constructing, appraising, and coping with parents' behavior. Consistent with transactional and dynamic models of socialization (17, 37), it would underscore children's agency in and active contribution to the parenting process. Such research likely will show that the assumption of universal processes behind effects of parenting does not exclude the possibility of individual differences, thereby underscoring the utility of the principle of universalism without uniformity in research on parenting.

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