YOUNG SOUTH AFRICAN ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL AND ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR

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We extended prior research by investigating perceptions of parental psychological control as a contributor to young adults' antisocial behavior in a sample of 382 South African university students aged between 18 and 25 years. Barber's (1996) measure of parental psychological control and the Youth Self-Report (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987) questionnaires were administered for data collection. A positive relationship was found between parental psychological control and the antisocial behavior of young adults. Additionally, the results of the hierarchical regression analysis suggest that maternal psychological control, compared to paternal psychological control, was a stronger predictor of antisocial behavior.

Keywords: young adults, psychological control, parenting, antisocial behavior.

It is an almost "normal" assumption that when young people leave the phase of adolescence they will "settle down" and become adults. However, according to Arnett (2000), adulthood does not automatically start after adolescence. He suggests that there is another phase before adulthood, which he conceptualized as emerging adulthood or young adulthood. In terms of societal perceptual assumptions, there is an acceptance that young adults have left the phase of "storm and stress" and experimental behavior, which often includes antisocial behavior, to become focused on decisions about the future (Arnett, 2007). *Antisocial behavior* is defined as *external behavioral traits with regard to not obeying rules and laws* (Baumrind, 2005). However, Arnett (2000, 2001, 2007)

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stated that young people between the ages of 18 and 25 years prolong the transition into adulthood and, therefore, the process of serious decision making regarding their lives in the future. Furthermore, young adults often continue to live with their parents and depend on them for financial and emotional support. Parents find themselves supporting young adults for a longer period of time than occurred in previous generations. Hence, as a result of financial constraints, young adults may continue to live in the parental home, instead of living on their own (Arnett, 2007).

The focus during the period of young adulthood is on the self, with young adults having to think about decisions regarding their futures (Arnett, 2009). In order to make their own decisions, young adults need to acquire a sense of independence. This sense of independence is acquired developmentally over a period of time, but becomes more prevalent during adolescence. An overview of adolescence reveals that during this stage of development young people are "in an active, purposeful 'flight' away from attachment relationships with parents" (Allen & Land, 1999, p. 319). These attachment bonds are viewed as a restraint from which young people want to break away in order to gain the freedom to develop autonomy and a sense of self-reliance (Allen & Land, 1999). During their children's adolescence, parents move from being solely controlling to allowing for transformation; an alteration of authority from parents holding all the power, to developing a relationship of equality with their children (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). This change suggests less control from parental figures, allowing emerging adults to gain decision-making skills, individuality, and, thus, growth in association with adult responsibilities. If parental control is not diminished it results in increased conflict between adolescents and parents (Allen & Land, 1999), such as the breaking of rules and antisocial behavior.

Thus, the role of the parent should be that of supporter rather than principal decision maker, based on the assumption that sound relationships exist between the young adults and their parents (Chipman, Frost Olsen, Klein, Hart, & Robinson, 2000; Lamborn & Groh, 2009). While young adults may need support from their parents, parents themselves may feel that they should be making the decisions for their children, especially if their children continue to live in the parental home. In South Africa, the majority of young adults live in the parental home, as they are often studying and/or need financial support, as in the situation with the sample of students participating in this study. The result is that young adults delay moving away either to be on their own, or to marry. Parents may maintain the decision-making role that their young adults should be taking on, and thus may be considered psychologically controlling.

The manner in which parents interact and socialize with their children is a crucial factor in the children's healthy adjustment to adulthood and the subsequent independence required (Chipman et al., 2000; Lamborn & Groh,

2009). *Psychological control* is described as *the excessive enforcement of power used to control thinking and feeling processes which, in turn, impedes the person's emotional and psychological development* (Barber, 1996). In attempting to control their children psychologically, parents use guilt induction and love withdrawal and control their children through anxiety-provoking tactics and verbally constraining interactions (Barber, 1996, 2002). An example of a psychologically controlling parenting would be a parent stating frequently, "I sacrificed everything for you so that you can have a good education". This form of parenting interferes with a young person's psychosocial development and the process of becoming independent and developing a healthy personality and sense of self (Barber & Harmon, 2002). High levels of psychological control have typically been linked to internalization and expression of anxiety, depression, loneliness, emotional dysfunction, and confusion (Barber, 1996; Bean, Bush, McKenry, & Wilson, 2003; Manzeske & Stright, 2009; Silk, Morris, Kanaya, & Steinberg, 2003; Van Steenkiste et al., 2005). Psychological control has been linked to identity development (Luyckx, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Berzonsky, 2007), emotion regulation (Manzeske & Stright, 2009), and externalization of problems such as drug abuse, truancy, and antisocial behavior (Amoateng, Barber, & Erickson, 2006; Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005; O'Connor & Scott, 2007; Pettit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001). Psychologically controlling parents cause the young adult to feel worthless, anxious, and depressed rather than rebellious or antisocial (Barber, 2002).

There are differences between maternal and paternal parenting (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). For example, mothers are more likely than fathers to engage with their children, assume responsibility for their children, and care for and discipline their children (Collins & Russell, 1991; Hart, DeWolf, Wozniak, & Burts, 1992; Stolz et al., 2005). Moreover, mother-child relationships are often portrayed as warm and responsive, while father-child relationships are characterized by firmness and restrictiveness (Collins & Russell, 1991; Hart et al., 1992). Mothers are more likely than are fathers to control their children psychologically (Boyes & Allen, 1993; Dobkin, Tremblay, & Sacchitelle, 1997), resulting in the children having higher levels of depression (Bendikas, 2010).

Studies regarding psychologically controlling parenting have mainly been focused on children and adolescents (Amoateng et al., 2006; Barber, 1996; Barber & Harmon, 2002; Pettit et al., 2001; Soenens, 2006). In comparison, studies focused on the effects of parenting and, specifically, psychologically controlling parenting on young adults, are limited (Hoeve et al., 2009; Manzeske & Stright, 2009; Ryff & Seltzer, 1996; Schwartz et al., 2009; Stolz et al., 2005). More recently, Urry, Nelson, and Padilla-Walker (2011) found a negative association between psychological control and child disclosure during young adulthood.

They emphasized that further research is needed regarding parenting during young adulthood, as young adults are considered to have more independence from parents than are children and adolescents.

Although in previous studies psychologically controlling parenting has been linked to various externalized behaviors in children and adolescents (Grolnick, 2003; Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003; Latouf, 2008; Milevsky, Schlechter, Netter, & Keehn, 2007; Rudy & Grusec, 2006; Soenens et al., 2007), in the present study we examined the nature of the relationship between psychologically controlling parenting and the antisocial behavior of young adults. Studies in which the focus was on the behavioral effects of parenting during young adulthood have been conducted mainly in developed countries (Barber, 1996; Soenens et al., 2007). In this study, we provide the first known information regarding parenting with young adults in a developing country such as South Africa, where young people are often exposed to environmental stressors (Brook, Morojele, Pahl, & Brook, 2006).

Using a sample of South African university students, we aimed to determine: (a) the relationship between psychologically controlling parenting practices and the antisocial behavior of young adults, and (b) whether or not maternal or paternal psychologically controlling parenting predicts the antisocial behavior of young adults.

Method

Participants

Participants were 382 undergraduate students registered at a university in South Africa. Only students who were considered young adults, that is, aged between 18 and 25 ($M = 20.8$, $SD = 1.94$) years, participated in the study. The participants comprised 83 (22%) males and 299 (78%) females. The participants were living in the following situations: with both their parents (44%), with their mothers only (31%), with their fathers only (4%), with extended family members (11%), or with people who were not considered to be family (10%).

Procedure

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape. All participants signed consent forms in which they acknowledged that they had been informed verbally and in writing about the aims and objectives of this study and that they understood what was involved, that confidentiality would be preserved, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussion. The questionnaires were self-administered and were completed before or after class.

Measures

Barber's (1996) 8-item scale of parental psychological control, a revised version of the Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI; Schaefer, 1965), was used in this study. Participants were asked to describe their mothers and fathers on a 3-point Likert scale with response options of *not like her/him* = 1, *somewhat like her/him* = 2, and *a lot like her/him* = 3. The total possible score is 24, with higher scores indicating stronger perceptions of parental controlling behavior. Examples of items included are: "My mother/father is a person who is always trying to change how I feel or think about things" and "My mother/father is a person who changes the subject whenever I have something to say". The alpha reliability for the current study was 0.84 for mothers and 0.82 for fathers.

The Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987) is used to examine externalizing and internalizing problems of youths. In this study, we used the 9-item delinquent subscale to measure antisocial behavior, with responses given on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *untrue* to 3 = *true*. Sample items included: "I steal things from home and other places", "I lie or cheat"; and "I use alcohol or drugs for nonmedical purposes". The total possible score is 27, with higher scores indicating that the young adults engage in more antisocial behaviors. The alpha reliability in the current study was 0.78.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze data in this study. Correlations between the variables were determined using Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient. Differences between groups were determined with a *t* test. Hierarchical regression analysis was performed to establish whether predictor variables significantly predicted antisocial behavior, and the extent to which predictor variables dominated each other. Thus, paternal psychological control was added first and maternal psychological control shortly afterwards.

Results

In Table 1 it can be seen that mothers were perceived to be more psychologically controlling than were fathers. We examined this result further using a *t* test, which indicated the difference to be significant with mothers being more psychologically controlling than fathers The mean scores were low for both maternal and paternal psychological control, as the minimum mean score for the scale was 8. Furthermore, the participants' score for antisocial behavior was low, as the minimum mean score for the scale was 9.

Table 1. *Group Differences in Parental Psychological Control and Antisocial Behavior of Young Adults*

Variables	*M* (*SD*)	*t*	*p*	Antisocial behavior of participants
Maternal psychological control	11.66 (4.27)	-0.89	0.38	0.33**
Paternal psychological control	10.03 (6.02)	2.10	0.04	0.24**
Antisocial behavior	12.28 (3.00)	2.12	0.01	-

Notes: $N = 382$. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed). Psychological control: minimum score = 8; maximum score = 24. Antisocial behavior: minimum score = 9; maximum score = 27.

Table 1 also contains the Pearson product moment correlations between maternal and paternal psychological control and the antisocial behavior of young adults. The results show a significant positive correlation between maternal psychological control and antisocial behavior for the total group of young adults. Similarly, a significant positive relationship was found for paternal psychological control and the antisocial behavior of the young adults.

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to predict antisocial behavior of the young adults. In step one of the regression analysis, with antisocial behavior as the dependent variable (Table 2), paternal psychological control was entered and found to be a significant positive predictor of antisocial behavior. When maternal psychological control was entered in step 2, paternal psychological control remained a positive predictor of the antisocial behavior of the young adults. Maternal psychological control proved to be a stronger predictor of antisocial behavior than did paternal psychological control. The final model accounted for 15% of the variance of the antisocial behavior of the young adults who took part in our study.

Table 2. *Standardized Beta Coefficients of Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Antisocial Behavior Correlates on the Basis of Maternal and Paternal Psychologically Controlling Parenting Practices*

b	*SE b*	β	
Step 1			
Constant	11.09	0.29	
Paternal psychological control	0.12	0.03	0.24*
Step 2			
Constant	8.9	0.45	
Paternal psychological control	0.09	0.02	0.19*
Maternal psychological control	0.21	0.03	0.30*

Notes: $R^2 = 0.06$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.15$ for Step 2 ($p < .001$). * $p < .01$ (total sample).

Discussion

In this study, we sought to establish the relationship between parental psychologically controlling practices and the antisocial behavior of young adults in a sample of South African university students. Our results contribute to the very limited literature regarding parenting in the phase of young adulthood in South Africa.

Psychological control places limitations on the individual's ability to gain autonomy and to develop decision-making skills (Barber, 2002). Although the results show low scores for psychologically controlling parenting, when comparing mothers and fathers the results of this study suggest that mothers are perceived as significantly more psychologically controlling than fathers. Furthermore, although both maternal and paternal psychological control predicted antisocial behavior, maternal psychological control was the stronger predictor. This result extends previous research (Barber, 1996, 2001; Bendikas, 2010; Scharf & Mayseless, 2008; Smetana et al., 2006) and provides a starting point for re-examining and improving parenting young adults in South Africa. A possible explanation for this finding could be that mothers and fathers have distinct interactive relationships with their children and are, therefore, perceived differently. Often, mothers are the ones who discipline and make decisions for children in the home (Collins & Russell, 1991; Hart et al., 1992). The fact that the majority of the participants lived with their parents, possibly in the parental home, could create an environment where young adults are still perceived to be the "children" and not adults in the home (Arnett, 2009). In this context, it is likely that parents still make decisions about and for their young adult sons and daughters because they offer financial and emotional support to their young adult children (Arnett, 2000). Parents could also be pressured into making decisions for their young adult children because the latter may appear to be indecisive about their future. Another possible explanation could be the large percentage of participants still living with mothers, or in households with absent fathers. In such scenarios, mothers are often the sole providers in the family and could believe that they should be continuing to care for, provide for, and protect their children, even as adults. In this situation, mothers could be perceived as controlling.

The implications for young adults could be that they become challenged in making their own decisions and becoming independent. Subsequently, they could end up relying heavily on their parents and becoming frustrated because of this. Parents could become frustrated with the fact that their children are not leaving home and, therefore, remain a financial burden. Thus, the result could be a vicious cycle of disharmony or conflict between parent and child.

Results gained in this study support previous findings that psychologically controlling parenting and antisocial behavior are significantly and positively

correlated. These results corroborate previous reports that psychological control may be a significant predictor of youth problem behavior (Barber, 1996; Barber et al., 2005; Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994; Loeber & Dishion, 1983; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). The expectation is that young adults will be independent from their parents and living on their own, but students in this particular sample lived at home and may have perceived their parents as inhibitive and intrusive (Barber, 1996), which could ultimately result in maladjustment (Baumrind, 2005). Maladjustment occurs when psychologically controlling parents are invasive of privacy, overprotective, domineering, and controlling through guilt induction (Schaefer, 1965). Psychological control is also associated with manipulative parenting techniques such as guilt induction, shaming, and love withdrawal (Barber, 1996). Hence, the association between psychological control and antisocial behavior is based on parents who try to mold and manage young adults still living at home, especially with regard to decisions encompassing their daily schedules, eating habits, financial practices, and sexuality. The aforementioned are all recognized strands of parent-child social interactions that stimulate disagreements and arguments between young adults and their parents (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2004). Thus, continuous and growing conflict between parent and child could result in unwanted behavioral outcomes such as rebelliousness and antisocial behavior in young adults. The tendency to behave antisocially could be an outlet for restricted freedom of choice and individuality imposed by psychologically controlling parents (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2004).

The results of this study could provide important information for therapists and counselors. Specifically for this sample of young adults, if they are engaging in antisocial behavior, both young adults and their parents should receive assistance through intervention. This intervention could include programs designed to assist parents to let go of their adult children emotionally so that they are independent even though they may continue to live in the parental home. This letting go would entail teaching parents to be supportive rather than controlling. Young adults could be assisted to gain skills to manage their interactions with their parents, their frustration, and their anger. Additionally, young adults could be encouraged to develop skills that could channel their antisocial behavior into more positive avenues of behavior, thus contributing to society. Ultimately, when children become adults, the assumption is that they do not drain the family resources but are able to provide for themselves. As children become older, parents are financially preparing for their old age and should not have an additional drain on their often limited resources. The design of these interventions should be directed towards problem-solving skills within the family.

Some limitations emerged in this study. Participants were restricted to a sample of university students, which means that the results may not be generalizable to other populations. The cross-sectional design of this study provides a certain

perspective of the relationships between parental psychological control and the antisocial behavior of young adults. Further research could be focused on longitudinal designs or repeated measures of these variables. In this study we used only parental psychological control as an effect on the antisocial behavior of young adults. Analysis of the effects of other parenting dimensions and demographic variables such as maternal and paternal age, marital status, and socioeconomic status, on the antisocial behavior of young adults would bolster the results of the current study. In this study we relied heavily on the self-reports of young adults in determining the relationships between adult sons and daughters and parents. Ideally, further work should be conducted which includes both parent and young adult reports of parenting practices in the family, and the different types of authority controls which parents use with their adult sons and daughters. Another vista for further research in this field would be to establish, through qualitative methodological designs, whether living with, or away from, parents has any impact on the social behavior of young adults. A further important limitation is the relatively small percentage of male participants in the study. A better balanced sample of participants could reveal significant similarities and differences between the gender groups.

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