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Parenting strategies: how they affect adolescents' degree of life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Background: According to Self Determination Theory (SDT) emotional self-regulation is a process of gradual acquisition of autonomous regulation capacity, which is influenced by both individual differences and social context in which the person is inserted (Ryan, Deci, 2017). SDT describes emotional dysregulation as a condition in which people are unable to manage their emotions (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, La Guardia, 2006).

Methods: The aim of this study was to investigate the possible relation between emotional dysregulation and different parenting strategies and how these variables affect adolescents' degree of life satisfaction in 60 adolescents between 13 and 18 years old. For each of the variables to be investigated, specific self-report scales were administered.

Results suggest that there was a positive correlation between parental psychological control and emotional dysregulation, while a negative relation was found between parental autonomy support and adolescents' emotional dysregulation. Furthermore, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, especially autonomy need, was related to life satisfaction in adolescents.

Conclusions: Further implications of these results for understanding the impact of parental strategies on adolescents' well-being are discussed in the conclusions section of this paper.

Keywords: SDT; Parenting Strategies; Adolescents; Emotional Dysregulation; Life Satisfaction

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Introduction

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a macro theory of motivation and human personality that affects the intrinsic growth trends of people and needs innate. The SDT focuses on the degree to which the behavior of an individual is self-motivated and self-determined. In 1970s research on SDT evolved from comparative studies on intrinsic and extrinsic reasons and on the growing understanding of the dominant role that extrinsic motivation played in an individual's behavior, but it wasn't until the mid-1980s when SDT was been formally introduced and accepted as a solid empirical theory. Ryan and Deci (2000) subsequently expanded the early works of differentiation between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and proposed three main intrinsic needs involved in determination. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), the three psychological needs motivate the self to initiate behavior and specify the essential nutrients for psychological health and individual's well-being. In addition, these needs are said universal, innate and include the need for competence, autonomy and relatedness. If these three needs are satisfied, they allow optimal growth. However, every need is not independent from the others, in fact autonomy consists in desire to be causal agents of one's life and to act in harmony with own integrated self. The use of the SDT, in different areas of social psychology, has increased considerably since the 2000s.

Within SDT the emotional self-regulation is considered as a developmental phenomenon ranging from regulation based on external sources, or control-related processes, to a growing capacity for autonomous regulation. This process is influenced by both individual differences and relational and social contexts within which the person is developing. Indeed, according to SDT, individuals have an innate tendency to operate on their inner and outer environments in attempt to master them (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT proposes three different emotional regulation styles: dysregulation, suppressive regulation, and emotional integration (Roth et al., 2019). *Emotional dysregulation* is a condition in which people feel unable to manage their emotions: they are able to experiencing emotions but not to regulate them (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Emotions are experienced as disorganizing, so they may interfere with effective functioning. Emotional dysregulated people can express their emotions in an impulsive way, or they may be with held. Emotion dysregulation is associated with subjective distress and also peer rejection (Shields et al., 1994). *Suppressive regulation* is a condition in which people tend to avoid or minimizing the experience of negative emotions. This concept is similar to that of emotion suppression (Gross & John, 2003), which has negative psychological, physiological and interpersonal consequences. Finally, *Emotional integration* is a condition in which individuals are able to differentiate one's emotional states and use this sensitivity to regulate behaviour choicefully (Brenning et al., 2015). Integration is essential

for optimal emotion regulation because it allows exploration and experience (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971).

Studies have found that controlling parenting that pressures children to ignore their negative feelings is associated with suppression and dysregulation of emotions (Grolnick et al., 1998; Nachmias et al., 1996). It could have a major impact on children's well-being, because it limits their experiences by causing negative feelings and moods. Instead, parents' autonomy support with regard to negative emotions would lead to an integrative style of regulating the emotions, mediated by a sense of choice. Autonomy support requires parents to take the children's perspective and legitimize their negative emotions (Gottman et al., 1997; Grolnick et al., 1996).

Within the theoretical framework of SDT, it's important to regard three variables related to Emotional Regulation: Psychological Control, Basic Psychological Needs and Autonomy Support. *Psychological control* refers to a series of intrusive and manipulative techniques used by parents to get children to behave or feel in ways approved by them, such as guilt induction, shaming, disappointment (Barber, 1996). These strategies can lead adolescents vulnerable to ill-being. *Basic Psychological Needs* (autonomy, competence and relatedness) are described within SDT, as three universal psychological needs that must be satisfied for effective functioning and psychological health (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to SDT need supportive parental behaviours would facilitate satisfaction of basic psychological needs, while need thwarting parental behaviours would forestall satisfaction of needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Specifically, whereas psychologically controlling parental behaviours would represent need thwarting behaviours, autonomy supportive behaviours would represent need supportive behaviours (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Autonomy-supportive parenting is one important dimension of a need-supportive parenting style. Autonomy-supportive parents support their children's volitional functioning, for instance, taking the child's frame of reference, providing meaningful choices, encouraging initiative, and providing a relevant rationale when introducing rules (Grolnick et al., 1997). Adolescents, in fact, should develop their own opinion and try to get their ideas across, even when their parents disagree with them. Parental autonomy support refers to the active support of the child's capacity to be self-initiating and autonomous (Ryan et al., 2006). Although it's possible to understand the relationship between different parenting strategies, needs satisfaction and emotional regulation, these issues have still been deepened by few studies.

This paper presents three research contributions, which were conducted entirely by some psychology students. The first contribution of this paper investigates the possible correlation between parental psychological control and adolescents' emotional dysregulation. The second contribution investigates the possible correlation between autonomy support and emotional

dysregulation. The third contribution investigates the possible correlation between life satisfaction and basic psychological needs among adolescents.

Method

Participants

Sixty adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 years old ($M = 16$, $SD = 1.8$), of which 21 males and 39 females, took part to the research. Their parents were married and cohabitants: fathers' average age was 51.2 years old ($SD=6.1$), while mothers' average age was 48.6 years old ($SD=4.79$). Regarding parents' education, 27% of fathers had the middle school certification, 58% had a high school diploma, and 15% had a first level degree. Furthermore, 23% of mothers had the middle school certification, 47% had a high school diploma, and 30% had a first level degree.

Procedure

The subjects were recruited among friends and acquaintances of psychology students. Before filling out the questionnaires, both parents of adolescents signed the informed consent and participants were reassured of the anonymity of their responses. The protocol took about 30 minutes to be completed. Once the entire sample of data was collected, each group of psychology students worked on specific objectives, giving rise to the three contributions set out below. The data were then analysed using IBM SPSS.

Measures

Psychological Control Scale (PCS; Barber, 1996) was used to assess parental psychological control. It is an eight-item scale (e.g. "My parents try to change my way of thinking") on a 7-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (It is not so) to 7 (It is mostly so) used to estimate perception of parental psychological control. In this study the alpha value is .77.

Perceptions of Parenting Scale (POPS; Robbins, 1994) allows to have an overall score of parental autonomy support. It is a six-item scale (e.g. "When possible, My parents let me make the decisions independently") using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very true). In this study, the internal consistency is satisfactory ($\alpha = .86$).

Emotion Regulation Scale (ERS; Roth et al., 2009): it consists of 20 items on a 4-point Likert response scale that allows to have an overall score of emotional regulation. In this study only the subscale Emotional dysregulation (six items) was used (e.g. "When I am stressed or anxious, I usually feel that I have little control over my behavior"). In this study, the internal consistency of this scale is satisfactory ($\alpha = .76$).

Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (PBNSF; Chen, et al., 2015) was used to evaluate the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs (Autonomy, Relatedness and

Competence). This scale is made up of 24 items on a 5-point Likert response scale (1 = Not at all agree; 5 = Strongly agree). Some examples of items are: autonomy ("I feel that my choices express who I really am"), competence ("I feel capable in what I do") and relatedness ("I feel that people I care about, really care about me "). In the present study Cronbach's alphas is good for all the subscales (Autonomy: .75; Relatedness: .82; Competence: .70).

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLS; Diener et al., 1985) was used to assess the perception of life satisfaction. It consists of five items on a 4-point Likert response scale (1 = Complete disagreement; 4 = Complete agreement). Some example of items is: "In many ways my life is close to my ideal". In the present study Cronbach's alphas is .75.

Contribution 1: The relationship between parental psychological control and emotional dysregulation.

Parental psychological control concerns the attempt to control the child through psychological tactics that damage child's consciousness and neutralize individuality (Barber, 1996). Emotional dysregulation concerns the disruption of the internal stability of the mental processes which are connected to emotional states (Ryan et al., 2006). Even if the connection between controlling practices and emotional dysregulation in adolescents seems clear, still few studies have analyzed these relationships from an SDT perspective. In the present research we investigate the possible correlation between parental psychological control and emotional dysregulation in adolescents.

Sixty adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 took part to the study. They responded to some questionnaires: *Psychological Control Scale* (PCS; Barber, 1996) to assess parental psychological control; and *Emotional Regulation Scale* (ERS; Roth, et al., 2009) to assess emotional dysregulation (table 1).

Gender		Psychological control	Dysregulation
Male	M	2.41	1.75
	SD	.98	.41
Female	M	2.96	2.20
	SD	1.11	.86

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Significant differences between males and females in the parental psychological control perceived were not found [$t(58) = 1.9$; $p = .06$]. From the comparison of the averages emerges that females report higher scores in emotional dysregulation than males [$t(58) = 2.29$; $p = .03$]. The correlation analysis showed that emotional dysregulation increases in males as psychological control increases [$\chi^2(80) = .40$; $p < .001$]. Also in females there is a positive correlation [$\chi^2(100) = .45$; $p < .001$].

This study shows that there is a positive correlation between parental psychological control and emotional dysregulation. In the literature taken into consideration (He et al., 2019) it is clear how the two variables influence the development of children. In fact, parental psychological control sometimes has a negative impact on growth because it limits the child in his life experience by causing negative moods such as anger or sadness. Aware of how emotional dysregulation in adolescents often correlates with maladaptive outcomes and problematic behaviors (De Berardis et al., 2020), future studies are necessary to prevent the emergence of these problems and to deepen the results obtained.

Contribution 2: Autonomy support and emotional dysregulation among adolescents

According to recent studies (Connel & Francis, 2014) some parenting practices, such as autonomy support, correlate with a greater life satisfaction of children. Autonomy-supportive parents, in fact, support their children's volitional functioning, for instance, taking the child's frame of reference, providing meaningful choices, encouraging initiative, and providing a relevant rationale when introducing rules (Grolnick et al., 1997). Consequently, it seems that this supportive parenting practices could favor the emergence of emotional regulation capacity in children, but literature is still lacking in this area. Our research is aimed to identify the relationship between the parents' autonomy support and emotional dysregulation in adolescents.

Sixty teenagers aged between 13 and 18 ($M = 16$, $SD = 1.8$), of which 21 males and 39 females, with married and cohabitants parents compiled the questionnaires. Specifically, *Perceptions of Parenting Scale* (POPS; Robbins, 1994) in order to assess parental autonomy support, and *Emotional regulation scale* (ERS; Roth et al., 2009), in order to evaluate the emotional dysregulation, were administered.

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics of dysregulation and autonomy support for males and females. Differential analyzes have highlighted that there are significant differences between males and females.

Gender		Dysregulation	Autonomy support
Male	M	1.85	5.43
	SD	.74	.94
Female	M	2.10	5.41
	SD	.77	.98

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Specifically, females refer higher levels of emotional dysregulation [$t(58) = -2.29$; $p = .03$]; while males higher autonomy support [$t(58) = 2.27$; $p = .03$]. Furthermore, with increasing support for autonomy, emotional dysregulation decreases both in males and females [$\chi^2(60) = -.264$; $p = .04$].

Our results confirm the hypotheses: the perception of greater autonomy support by parents favors the emergence of better emotional regulation in adolescents. These results are in line with the reference literature which emphasizes how parenting plays an important role in the development of emotional regulation of children (Morris et al., 2017). Furthermore, the gender differences found in this study confirm the literature, which has pointed out that girls experience higher levels of emotional dysregulation (Brindle et al., 2019). Certainly from an applicative point of view, helping parents become more supportive of autonomy could favor the emergence of a better emotional regulation in adolescents and therefore prevent forms of maladjustment, taking into account gender differences. Subsequent research will have to shed new light on these elements, analyzing the impact of different parenting practices on the emotional development of children with longitudinal studies.

Contribution 3: Psychological well-being in adolescents: interaction between basic psychological needs and life satisfaction.

Life satisfaction is related to health and generally refers to the well-being (emotional, social and physical) of an individual and his ability to fulfill the tasks of daily life satisfactorily (Chen et al., 2019). According SDT, the well-being of an individual is the result of satisfying three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy means the ability to feel, think and make decisions alone; competence refers to the desire to feel effective and able in activities; the relatedness represents the desire to feel connected to others, through love and care (Costa et al., 2016).

This study aims to investigate whether there are gender differences between life satisfaction and basic psychological needs, and whether there is a correlation between life satisfaction and basic psychological needs in a sample of adolescents.

Sixty adolescents took part in the research, 21 of whom were males and 39 females between 13 and 18 years old (with an average age of 16). All participants compiled The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (PBNSF; Chen et al., 2015) to evaluate the satisfaction and frustration of the three basic psychological needs (Autonomy, Relatedness and Competence), and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLS; Diener et al., 1985) to assess life satisfaction.

Table 3 describes means and standard deviations for males and females in all the variables considered.

Differential analyses did not reveal significant differences between males and females on life satisfaction [$t(58)=.59$; $p =.56$] and in basic psychological needs: autonomy [$t(58)=.69$; $p = .49$], relatedness [$t(58)=1.28$; $p =.21$] and competence [$t(58)=.34$; $p=.73$].

Gender		Life satisfaction	Autonomy	Relatedness	Competence
Male	M	2.72	3.20	3.14	3.09
	SD	.48	.33	.52	.39
Female	M	2.63	3.12	2.96	3.05
	SD	.60	.47	.49	.41

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

There is a positive correlation between the need for autonomy and life satisfaction [$\chi^2(59) = .53$; $p < .001$]. Furthermore, a positive correlation between the need for relatedness and life satisfaction is found [$\chi^2(59) = .43$; $p < .01$] (Table 4).

	Life satisfaction
Autonomy	.531**
Relatedness	.433**
Competence	.142

Table 4. Correlational analyses. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

According to reference literature, any gender difference in life satisfaction was found (Chen et al., 2019; Piko & Hamvai, 2010). Furthermore, significant and positive correlations between two of the basic psychological needs, namely perception of autonomy and relatedness, with life satisfaction were found. The more adolescents will have a satisfaction of the basic psychological needs, the more they will be satisfied in life. These results are not only in line with the SDT perspective which identifies how the well-being and life satisfaction of adolescents is related to the perception of their basic psychological needs satisfied, but also underlines how adolescents perceive, above all, the need for autonomy and relatedness as fundamental to experience satisfaction (Liga et al., 2020). These findings have important application implications, in terms of prevention of adolescent and juvenile distress: to the extent that the educational programs focus on basic psychological needs, it is possible to promote better emotional regulation and more positive developmental outcomes.

Conclusion

In this paper, through three contributions, the possible relation between emotional regulation styles and different parenting strategies and how these variables affect adolescents' degree of life satisfaction have been investigated. Results showed that there is a positive correlation between parental psychological control and emotional dysregulation. Parental psychological control, in fact, invading the psychological world of the child, through a continuous invalidation of his thoughts and emotions does not favor a healthy emotional development and this can therefore result in higher levels of emotional dysregulation in the children (Costa et al., 2019). On the contrary, autonomy

support, which instead tends to encourage the spontaneous expression of children, has been found negatively related to the emotional dysregulation in adolescents and this could suggest that it can act as a protective factor (Morris et al., 2017). These results are in line with the hypothesis of the Self Determination Theory, which argues that controlling or supportive social contexts have negative or positive effects on adolescent development (Costa et al., 2016). On the other hand, always in line with SDT, and considering how it has been amply demonstrated how controlling and supportive parenting strategies respectively frustrate and satisfy basic psychological needs (Costa et al., 2019), the third objective of this research was to investigate the relationship between perceptions of basic psychological needs and life satisfaction. Results showed a positive correlation between autonomy and relatedness with life satisfaction. Once again it emerges how the perception linked to the autonomy need of adolescents is fundamental in this delicate evolutionary phase and how, consequently, parents, like other educational contexts, must try to favor a volitional functioning in their children in order to aim to healthy and integrated growth (Costa et al., 2019). These results must be included within the limits of this study. First of all, the sample is very small and coming entirely from southern Italy: subsequent studies must aim to verify these relationships in larger samples of adolescents. Furthermore, the use of self reports and the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow us to understand the direction of the relationships found: it will be necessary to deepen these results in longitudinal studies and with cross informant ratings. Furthermore, it was not possible to control in this study some variables that could intervene, such as adolescents and parents' personal characteristics and other contextual factors.

In light of all these substantial limitations, the results of this research only want to be a first starting point for larger studies aimed at deepening the relationship between parenting strategies, basic psychological needs and emotional regulation in adolescents, aware that a good psycho-education conducted on both adolescents and parents can contribute to the prevention of adolescent distress.

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