Introducing psychological control in the context of teaching style: Its costs for learning and well-being

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Introduction: Psychological control by teachers refers to the use of insidious, manipulative, and often subtle pressuring tactics. Psychologically controlling teachers regulate the learners' behavior towards strict standards by means of guilt-induction, conditional regard, and the communication of disappointment. Substantial research has documented the negative costs of psychologically controlling parenting for children's and adolescents' functioning (Barber & Harmon, 2002). However, substantially less research has addressed the significance of psychological control in the context of teaching style (e.g., Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens, & Matos, 2005). In this study, we hypothesize that psychologically controlling teaching relates negatively to learners' well-being and adaptive learning strategies because it undermines learners' autonomous motivation for studying.

Present study: The specific aims of this study were (a) to develop a measure tapping psychologically controlling teaching, (b) to determine the contribution of psychologically controlling teaching in predicting learning outcomes beyond well-established teaching style dimensions (involvement and structure), and (c) to assess the mediating role of learners' relative autonomy for studying in relations between perceived teacher psychological control and the outcome variables.

Participants: 533 (60% females) Belgian middle adolescents (*M* = 17.3 years, *SD* = 1.22 years)

Results: (a) Based on Barber's (1996) Psychological Control Scale – Youth Self-Report (PCS-YSR), we developed a 7-item psychologically controlling teaching scale. Cronbach's alpha was .80. A principal components analysis indicated a one-factor solution explaining 46% of the variance. Factor loadings ranged from .59 to .74.

(b) In order to determine the contribution of psychological control in predicting maladaptive coping, meta-motivational skills, test anxiety, and depression, controlling for sex of the students and the teaching style dimensions structure and involvement, multiple regression analyses were performed. Psychological control significantly predicted maladaptive coping (β = .26, p < .001), meta-motivational skills (β = -.19, p < .001), test anxiety (β = .14, p < .01), and depression (β = .20, p < .001) beyond the other teaching dimensions.

(c) We performed mediational analyses to examine the role of relative autonomy of students as an intervening variable in associations between psychological control and maladaptive coping, meta-motivational skills, test anxiety, and depression (see Figure 1). Students' gender was controlled for in all regression analyses.

Conclusion: Our findings show (a) that psychological control had a unique contribution to the prediction of maladaptive coping, meta-motivational skills, test anxiety, and depression in comparison to the other teaching style dimensions and (b) that the relative autonomy of students act as a partial mediator between psychological control and maladaptive coping, meta-motivational skills, test anxiety, and depression.

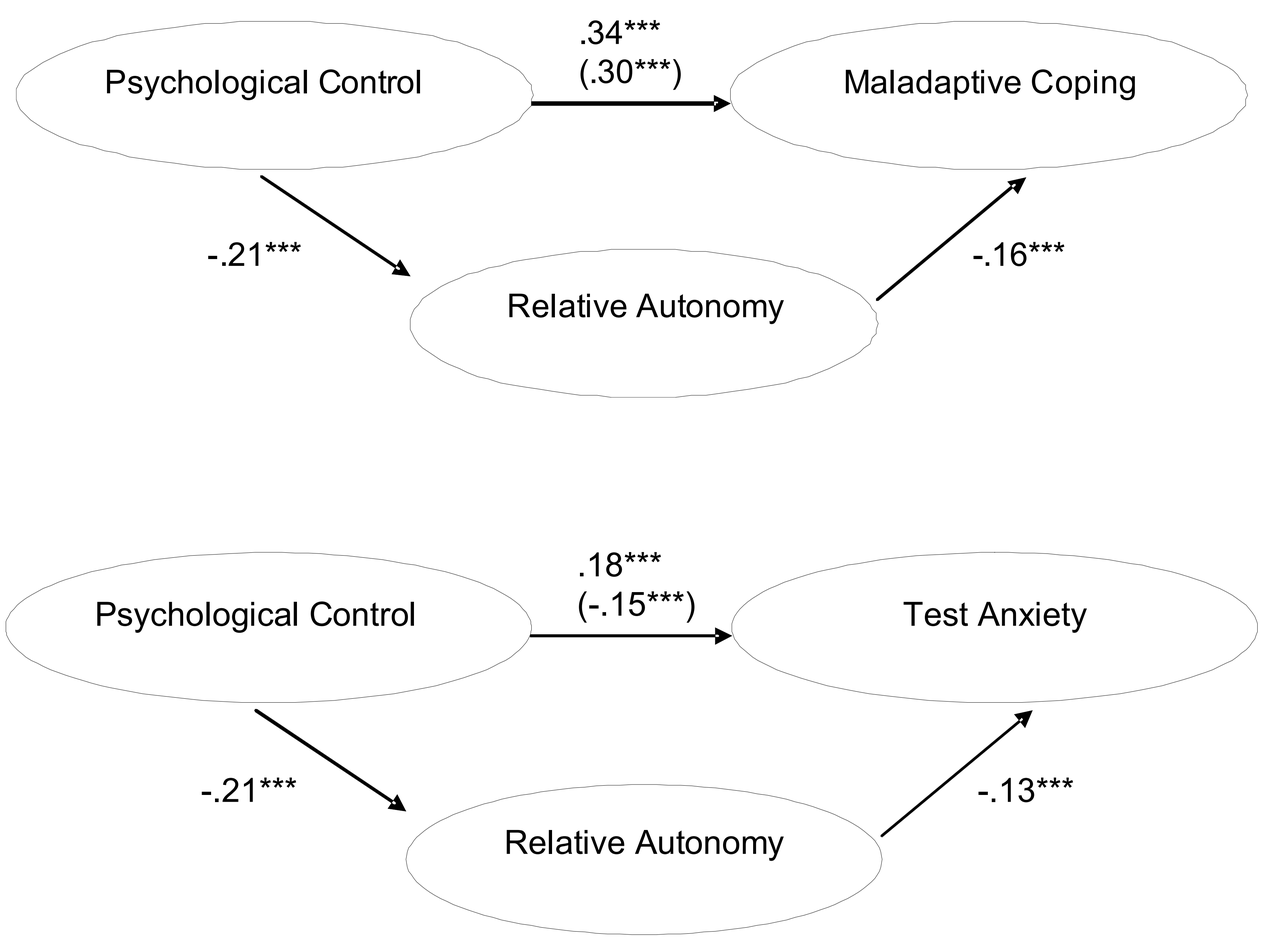


Figure 1.

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