PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, (ISSN: 2537-950X), 1988, *2*(1), 1–6
©1988 Scientific Journal Publishers Limited. All Rights Reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.2224/phd.6388

THE AUTONOMY-CONTROL SCALE

ANTON F. DE MAN
Bishop's University

I developed a new measure of perceived parental control, named the Autonomy-Control Scale (ACS), and examined its psychometric properties and correlations with selected personality measures. The results suggest that the ACS is a reliable instrument that is useful for quantifying perceived parental control.

Keywords: autonomy control, scale development, perceived parental control, parent–child relationships, personality, children, family.

At the sociopsychological level, children are exposed to a variety of interpersonal contacts, usually beginning with parents and direct family, and gradually extending to others. Interactions with the family, and particularly with parents, must be regarded as crucial developmental influences, as these are the first—and, during the early years, often the only—contacts they have on a continuing basis.

Parent–child interaction is a complex process with many variables. Nevertheless, Becker (1964) found that parents differ from one another primarily in terms of two dimensions of child-rearing practices: *parental control*, which reflects variations in restrictions placed by parents on the behavior of their children, and *parental warmth*, which refers to the affectional aspect of parent–child relationships.

Variations in parental control and warmth create different child-rearing environments. Assuming that the nature of the encounters between parents and children significantly influences children's development, there may be a relationship between the child-rearing regimes people have been exposed to during their formative years and aspects of their adult personality.

Anton F. de Man, Department of Psychology, Bishop's University.
The content and formatting of this article were edited and updated in 2016, with efforts made to preserve the original meaning.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anton F. de Man, Department of Psychology, Bishop's University, Lennoxville, Quebec JIM 1Z7, Canada.

An analysis of the empirical relationship between child-rearing and personality variables in adults should preferably be initiated by observing entire families interacting during infancy, childhood, and adolescence. This would yield comprehensive and objective data with respect to the presumed antecedent variables of control and warmth. Years later, selected aspects of the personalities of those exposed to various levels of control and warmth could be assessed, and analysis could take place.

However, for organizational, economic, and temporal reasons, such a longitudinal approach often is not feasible and researchers must rely on retrospective accounts of parent–child interactions provided by parents or their adult children. The accounts of the former may be difficult or even impossible to obtain when parents live far away or are deceased. Moreover, Robbins (1963) found that parental recall often is inaccurate. In many situations, this leaves the adult child as the only available source of information.

The present report concerns a measure designed to obtain some of this information. Because parental control and warmth are orthogonal dimensions (Becker, 1964), their assessment requires separate instruments. I restricted this study to the development of one of these, by focusing on constructing a self-report scale to assess the level of parental control as experienced by the respondent.

Method

Development of Scale

Five senior psychology students familiar with the literature on child-rearing patterns were given copies of existing scales (Itkin, 1952; Koch, Dentler, Dysart, & Streit, 1934; Stott, 1940) and asked to select those items that best represent the child-rearing practices that are subject to autonomy-control variation. Because the control dimension is not a stable one, in that the degree of control parents exercise tends to change as the child grows older (Bayley & Schaefer, 1960), the judges were asked to select items pertaining to childhood and adolescence, respectively.

Upon receipt of the individual selections, the judges met to discuss the items and arrive at a consensus. They agreed on 40 items: 20 applicable to childhood and 20 to adolescence, which were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *control* to 5 = *autonomy*). To improve the scale's homogeneity, item analysis was performed with a sample of 73 (49 men, 24 women) university student participants. Correlations between individual items and the respective total childhood and adolescence scores were calculated, and items with correlations that were significant at $p < .001$ were retained. Of the 30 items that met this criterion, 14 were applicable to childhood and 16 to adolescence, and these items constituted the final Autonomy-Control

Scale (ACS). Total scores for this scale range from 30 (*extreme control*) to 150 (*extreme autonomy*).

The items, of course, represent only a fraction of the many child-rearing areas that are subject to autonomy-control variation. However, Becker (1964) noted that, even though individual parents may be more restrictive or permissive in some areas than in others, there is statistical evidence that parents who are controlling in one area of child-rearing tend to be so in others. Thus, an adequate impression of parental control may be obtained by sampling a limited number of child-rearing situations, and I concluded that a more inclusive scale was not required.

Results

Psychometric Characteristics

I investigated the test–retest reliability of the ACS with a sample of 41 students (22 men, 19 women) of psychology. The 8-week retest produced a coefficient of stability of .91 ($p < .001$).

Because the ACS comprises separate sets of items for childhood and adolescence, I was able to obtain an index of relationship between the total scores for childhood and adolescence. An analysis with 95 university students (55 men, 40 women) yielded a coefficient of .77 ($p < .001$).

Undergraduate participants ($N = 203$; 107 women, 96 men) ranging in age from 19 to 29 years ($M = 22$, $SD = 4.16$) were recruited to test the factorial structure of the ACS. Item scores were first subjected to a correlational analysis that yielded interitem correlations ranging from .01 to .81, with a mean correlation of .29. Next, the correlation matrix was submitted to an initial principal components analysis (PCA), and seven principal components with eigenvalues greater than 1 emerged that accounted for 63.65% of the variance. The first unrotated factor accounted for 31.79% of the common variance, and its loadings exceeded .40 for all but two items. The variances accounted for by the remaining components varied from 3.49%–9.42%.

Inspection of the data revealed a precipitous decline in the percentage of variance as well as eigenvalues after the first three factors; thus, a three-factor solution was best interpretable. PCA with varimax rotation was then performed, with the interpretation of factors after rotation guided by two criteria. First, a loading of .45 was required for inclusion of a variable in definition of a factor (Comrey, 1973). Second, because factors defined by fewer than three variables are potentially unreliable (Mulaik, 1972), the minimum number of items to a factor was set at three. Table 1 shows the sorted rotated factor matrix.

Factor I had loadings higher than .45 on 11 of the 30 items. The items that most heavily contributed to this factor reflected freedom of personal

choice and responsibility. Factor II had loadings in excess of .45 on 10 items. This factor is best described as reflecting the presence of family rules. Factor III had acceptable loadings on five items. Its nature could be described as freedom to assert the self vis à vis the parents.

Table 1. *Sorted Rotated Factor Matrix*

Item		Factor I	Factor II	Factor III
16.	Responsibility	.73		
17.	Decision taking	.72		
24.	Permission to go out	.69		
26.	Social activities	.69		
23.	Recreation	.68		
27.	Stay out late	.64		
15.	Important decisions	.62		
25.	Tell where going (adolescent)	.60		
30.	Grooming	.53		
22.	Movie selection	.52		
21.	Selecting friends	.51		
13.	Clean room (child)		.74	
14.	Clean up after self		.73	
28.	Clean room (adolescent)		.70	
29.	Chores		.59	
5.	Tell where going (child)		.57	
9.	Obedience		.57	
19.	Immediate action		.54	
6.	Bedtime		.53	
8.	Family rules		.53	
11.	Selection of food		.46	
3.	Doing things parents' way (child)			.64
4.	Conflict of needs			.62
12.	Select clothing			.62
18.	Doing things parents' way (adolescent)			.60
10.	Disagree with parents			.59

Note. Items 1 (Do as pleased), 2 (Force against will), 7 (Choose television/radio programs), and 20 (Contradict parents) did not meet the .45 criterion. If a .30 level were accepted, these four items would have highest values under factor III (31, .42, .36, and .40, respectively).

Normative Data

In recent decades, there has been a shift from control to increased autonomy in the child-rearing practices of North American families. Thirty years ago, Wolfenstein (1951) noted that contemporary recommendations for raising children reflected a different spirit compared to those advocated earlier in the century, namely, a challenging of the authoritarian parent. More recently, Rule and Comer (1981) presented support for this view from a long-term memory perspective, after asking their participants about the degree of parental control they experienced during childhood. Ratings for both mothers and fathers were found to be related to age of respondents, with younger participants reporting that their parents were more permissive.

These results suggest that mean control ratings on the ACS may vary with the age level of respondents. Control scores were calculated for three different groups of participants. Group I comprised 76 high school students (38 boys, 38 girls), ranging in age from 15 to 18 years (M_{age} = 16.32, *SD* = .73). Control scores ranged from 61 to 119 (*M* = 92.11, *SD* = 12.67). Group II consisted of the 203 men and women who participated in the principal components analysis (M_{age} = 22, *SD* = 2.04). Their scores varied from 47 to 133 (*M* = 91.14, *SD* = 17.29). Group III consisted of 62 women from the general population, with ages ranging from 15 to 79 years (*M* = 35.52, *SD* = 16.16). Their control scores varied from 47 to 140 (*M* = 83.74, *SD* = 19.36). The distribution of means suggests that the Group III participants tended to report greater parental control. Because the latter group consisted of women only, a meaningful statistical comparison with the two mixed groups could not be made. However, because Group III had a wide age range, I examined the association between age and control score, and found a coefficient of -.51 ($p < .001$), whereby older (vs. younger) women tended to report higher levels of parental control.

Correlations with Personality Variables

With scales of this nature, participants may tend to provide stereotypical responses that reflect what is socially acceptable or valued, rather than individual differences in the construct in question. Therefore, I examined the relationship between control scores and social desirability. Sixty university students completed the ACS and the Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlow, 1964); the resulting means were 91.8 (*SD* = 15.99) and 17.07 (*SD* = 5.70), and the bivariate correlation was .04 (*ns*).

de Man (1982a) found that young adults from a controlling family background reported lower self-esteem compared to those from more permissive families. In a later study of the relationship between control and alienation, de Man (1982b) found that participants from autonomous and intermediate families tended to be less alienated. Furthermore, participants encouraged to display autonomy tended to report lower levels of anomie (de Man, 1982c). A positive relationship between parental control and conservatism was found in a sample of young adult women (de Man, 1985). Finally, an investigation of the relationship between parental control and trait anxiety revealed a moderate association between the two variables. Separate analyses for men and women yielded a significant correlation for women but not for men (de Man, 1986).

Discussion

In this study, the design of a new instrument to assess perceived parental control, the ACS, was described. The reliability of the instrument was

found to be quite acceptable. Results of a PCA suggested that the scale reflects three dimensions of the parent–child relationship: personal responsibility, family rules, and self-assertion. The scale did not appear to be biased by social desirability.

The observed correlations with personality measures contribute to our understanding of the association between parental control and aspects of adult personality. Although my results are limited, they do suggest that the ACS may be a useful instrument in quantifying perceived parental control.

References

Bayley, N., & Schaefer, E. S. (1960). Maternal behavior and personality development: Data from the Berkeley growth study. *Psychiatric Research Reports, 13*, 155–181.

Becker, W. C. (1964). Consequences of different kinds of parental discipline. In L. M. Hoffman & M. L. Hoffman (Eds.), *Review of child development research* (Vol 1, pp. 169–208). New York, NY: Sage.

Comrey, A. L., & Lee, H. B. (1973). *A first course in factor analysis*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Crowne, D. P., & Marlow, D. (1964). *The approval motive: Studies in evaluative dependence*. New York, NY: Wiley.

de Man, A. F. (1982a). Autonomy-control variation and self-esteem: Additional findings. *The Journal of Psychology, 111*, 9–13. **http://doi.org/ffrwns**

de Man, A. F. (1982b). Autonomy-control variation in child-rearing and level of alienation in young adults. *The Journal of Psychology, 112*, 71–78. **http://doi.org/fkgqhh**

de Man, A. F. (1982c). Autonomy-control variation in child-rearing and anomie in young adults. *Psychological Reports, 51*, 7–10. **http://doi.org/c9r33v**

de Man, A. F. (1985). Parental control in childrearing and conservatism in young adult women. *Psychological Reports, 56*, 145–146. **http://doi.org/bn45dz**

de Man, A. F. (1986). Parental control in child-rearing and trait anxiety in young adults. *Psychological Reports, 59*, 477–478. **http://doi.org/d6c95d**

Itkin, W. (1952). Some relationships between intra-family attitudes and pre-parental attitudes toward children. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 80*, 221–252. **http://doi.org/bqjs**

Koch, H. L., Dentler, M., Dysart, B., & Streit, H. (1934). A scale for measuring attitudes toward the question of children's freedom. *Child Development, 5*, 253–266. **http://doi.org/d69xx6**

Mulaik, S. A. (1972). *The foundation of factor analysis*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Robbins, L. C. (1963). The accuracy of parental recall of aspects of child development and of child-rearing practices. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 66*, 261–270. **http://doi.org/bxjzss**

Rule, W. R., & Comer, A. T. (1981). Parental strictness-permissiveness and long-term memory. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 52*, 574–577.

Stott, L. H. (1940). Parental attitudes of farm, town, and city parents in relation to certain personality adjustments in their children. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 11*, 325–339. **http://doi.org/dn35h6**

Wolfenstein, M. (1951). The emergence of fun morality. *Journal of Social Issues, 7*, 15–25. **http://doi.org/bk6tbq**