

Family Functioning and Maladaptive Schemas:

The Moderating Effects of Optimism

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Authoritarian parenting is often shown to be associated with negative outcomes for children, including the development of maladaptive schemas. However, this is not the case for all children who experience Authoritarian parenting. Optimism is examined as a moderator in the relationship between Authoritarian parenting and maladaptive schemas that may account for those individuals who experience Authoritarian parenting but do not develop strong maladaptive schemas. Findings are discussed as they relate to community implications and interventions.

For over a century, psychologists have argued that numerous parental behaviors have wide-ranging and significant influences on the thoughts, behaviors, and emotions of children (Maccoby, 1992, 2007). It is believed that these influences can be beneficial or costly for the children and can widen or constrict the possibilities for children's futures

The order of the authors' names is fortuitous. This research was supported by University of St. Thomas Young Scholar's Research Grant, 2007. Paper presented at the 116th Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston, August, 2008. Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Amy Gunty (gunty004@umn.edu OR 952-913-1776) or John Buri (University of St. Thomas [Mail JRC LL56], 2115 Summit Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55105 OR jrburi@stthomas.edu OR 651-962-5032).

(Bugental & Grusec, 2006). While the theories explaining this relationship have shifted historically with the psychological paradigm of the time, the conviction has remained that parenting behaviors influence many aspects of children's internal and external lives.

Within this context, Piaget (1954) and Bowlby (1969, 1980) posited that parental practices contribute to the early development of internal working models of reality (i.e., schemas). These schemas serve as an organizational framework for the way people make sense of their lives (Leahy, Beck, & Beck, 2005). The schemas also act as lenses in a person's life, influencing the way one selects, interprets, organizes, and evaluates experiences (e.g., Beck, 1995; Persons, 1989).

Numerous studies have revealed the link between negative parental practices and patterns of maladaptive development (e.g., Bugental & Grusec, 2006; Masten, Burt, & Coatsworth, 2006). One area of focus of such research has emphasized the role of unhealthy parenting in the development of maladaptive schemas (e.g., Beck, Freeman, & Davis, 2004; Persons, 1989; Young, 1999). These schemas are associated with a great range of mental health problems, such as depression (Calvete, Estévez, López de Arroyabe, & Ruiz, 2005), eating disorders (Cooper, 1997), substance use disorders (Ball & Cecero, 2001), and anxiety (Stopa, Thorne, Waters, & Preston, 2001).

One parenting practice that has a particularly strong relationship to maladaptive outcomes in children is Authoritarian parenting, in which parents exercise rigid control combined with little use of reasoning in parent-child conflicts. For example, Authoritarian parenting has been found to relate to lower grades (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, & Roberts, 1987), lower self-esteem (Buri, 1988), greater extrinsic

motivation and amotivation (Leung & Kwan, 1998), higher levels of depression (Simons & Conger, 2007), and other unhealthy development (e.g., Butler, Skinner, Gelfand, Berg, & Wiebe, 2007). This relationship also extends to the schema theory mentioned above, as Authoritarian parenting has also been shown to be strongly predictive of maladaptive schemas (Gunty & Buri, 2008a).

And yet, not all individuals who experience unhealthy Authoritarian parenting within the family of origin follow an unhealthy path of development that results in the presence of maladaptive schemas. Thus, within those people who experience high levels of parental Authoritarianism, it seems there ought to be variables that will account for the differences between people develop maladaptive schemas and those who do not. These variables would give a greater understanding to the nature of resilience in the context of family-of-origin difficulties. Indeed, there are some recent research efforts that have begun to explore factors that may serve as a buffer between family background and maladaptive psychological development (e.g., Robitschek & Kashubeck, 1999; Walsh, 2006).

One variable that may play the role of such a buffer is optimism. Optimism has been shown to be a buffer between other negative life circumstances and negative outcomes. Typically, optimism is defined as the perception that good outcomes ought to be expected, and is related to lower depression, better performance at work, and better physical health (Seligman,2002). Optimism is related to more positive coping mechanisms (e.g., Carver, Scheier, & Weintrub, 1989; Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). Due in part to its relationship with positive coping strategies, optimism has been demonstrated to act as a buffer in people who experience major life transitions

(Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992), diabetes (Yi, Vitaliano, Smith, Yi, & Weinger, 2008), postpartum depression (Grote & Bledsoe, 2007), trauma (Joseph & Linley, 2008), discrimination (Little, 2007), and other stressful life events (e.g., Scheier et al., 1989, Litt, Tennen, Affleck, & Klock, 1992).

Thus, we hypothesize that in the present study, the protective, buffering aspect of optimism will be shown to extend to the realm of parenting practices, thus moderating the relationship between Authoritarian parenting and maladaptive schemas.

Method

Participants

Participants were 79 university students recruited through various classes. (Some received credit or extra credit in a psychology class for participation.) Data for seven participants were discarded due to incomplete questionnaires. For the remaining participants, 17 were from non-intact families and 55 were from intact families. Only the 55 individuals from intact families were included in analyses, as the structures of these types of families are distinct, leading to qualitatively different experiences for the children (Marquardt, 2005). Of these 55 individuals, 19 were male and 36 were female. The mean age was 22.53 years.

Materials

Parental Authority. The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis, & Mueller, 1988) was used to measure Parental Authority. This scale consists of 30 statements to which participants were asked to respond on a Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These statements evaluate the type of authority exercised by the parents. There are three categories of

parental authority measured in this questionnaire: permissiveness (low control), Authoritarianism (rigid control with little reasoning), and authoritativeness (flexible control with a good amount of reasoning). One statement measuring parental permissiveness is, “As I was growing up, my mother allowed me to decide most things for myself without a lot of direction from her.” An example of a statement measuring parental Authoritarianism is, “As I was growing up, my mother let me know what behaviors she expected of me, and if I didn’t meet those expectations, she punished me.” One of the statements measuring parental authoritativeness is, “As the children in my family were growing up, my mother consistently gave us direction and guidance in rational and objective ways.”

Participants completed two versions of this scale, one evaluating the parental style of the participant’s mother, and the other evaluating the parenting style of the participant’s father.

Optimism. The Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) was used to measure optimism. This scale contains six statements, three of which relate to a person’s optimism, such as, “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best” and three of which relate to a person’s pessimism, such as, “If something can go wrong for me, it will.” Participants respond to these statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In addition to the optimism and pessimism scores, a composite optimism score is computed by adding the answers on the optimism subscale to the reverse of the answers on the pessimism subscale.

Early Maladaptive Schemas. This variable was measured by the Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ-L3, Young, 1999) which consists of 232 items to which participants

respond on a scale ranging from 1 (completely untrue of me) to 6 (describes me perfectly). This questionnaire is used in order to measure the extent to which participants possess each of 18 Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs). (For examples of the statements for each schema, please see Appendix A.)

Demographic Information. Participants also provided information about their age, gender, and parents' marital status.

Procedure

Participants were given a packet containing all of the questionnaires, which had been counterbalanced, and asked to complete the packet and return it to the researcher within a week. Participants were instructed to complete all questionnaires with their first response. They were told that their data were anonymous and they were asked to answer all questions honestly. Participants were reminded that it was important to complete every questionnaire and not to spend too much time on any one item.

Results

Initial analyses revealed that, as expected, parents' Authoritarianism was positively correlated with the Total EMS scores ($r = +.310$, $p < .03$, for mothers; $r = +.434$, $p < .001$, for fathers; $r = +.445$, $p < .001$, for mothers and fathers combined). Further analyses were then completed to investigate the possible buffering effect of Optimism on the deleterious consequences of Authoritarianism as exhibited in the EMS scores.

For these analyses, those participants with (a) the highest Authoritarian Total (both mother and father combined) and (b) those with the lowest Authoritarian Total were selected. These participants represented the top 30% and bottom 30% of all

participants respectively. Participants in each of these groups were then divided into those subjects with (a) high levels of Optimism (i.e., score in the top third of all participants), (b) medium levels of Optimism (i.e., score in the middle third of all participants), and (c) low levels of Optimism (i.e., score in the bottom third of all participants). A comparison of the group means of the Total EMS score revealed that for those participants who had experienced high levels of parental Authoritarianism, EMS scores decreased progressively as Optimism increased: 676.27 for the low Optimism group, 563.14 for the participants with medium Optimism, and 412.30 for the high Optimism group. For the low Authoritarian participants, however, the moderating influence of Optimism was considerably less pronounced. The means for each of these groups of subjects has been presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Group Means for Total Early Maladaptive Schema Scores

	Optimism		
	Low	Medium	High
High Authoritarianism	676.27	563.14	412.30
Low Authoritarianism	527.83	457.54	417.50

A 2 x 3 ANOVA was completed. The summary of this ANOVA has been presented in

Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of ANOVA

Source	SS	df	MS	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Optimism (OPT)	308339.173	2	154169.586	13.35	.0001
Authoritarianism (TAR)	89564.575	1	89564.574	7.75	.008
OPT x TAR	57086.815	2	28543.407	2.47	.09
Error	565995.2	49	11550.922		
Total	15234147.0	55			

A graph of these findings has been presented in Figure 1.

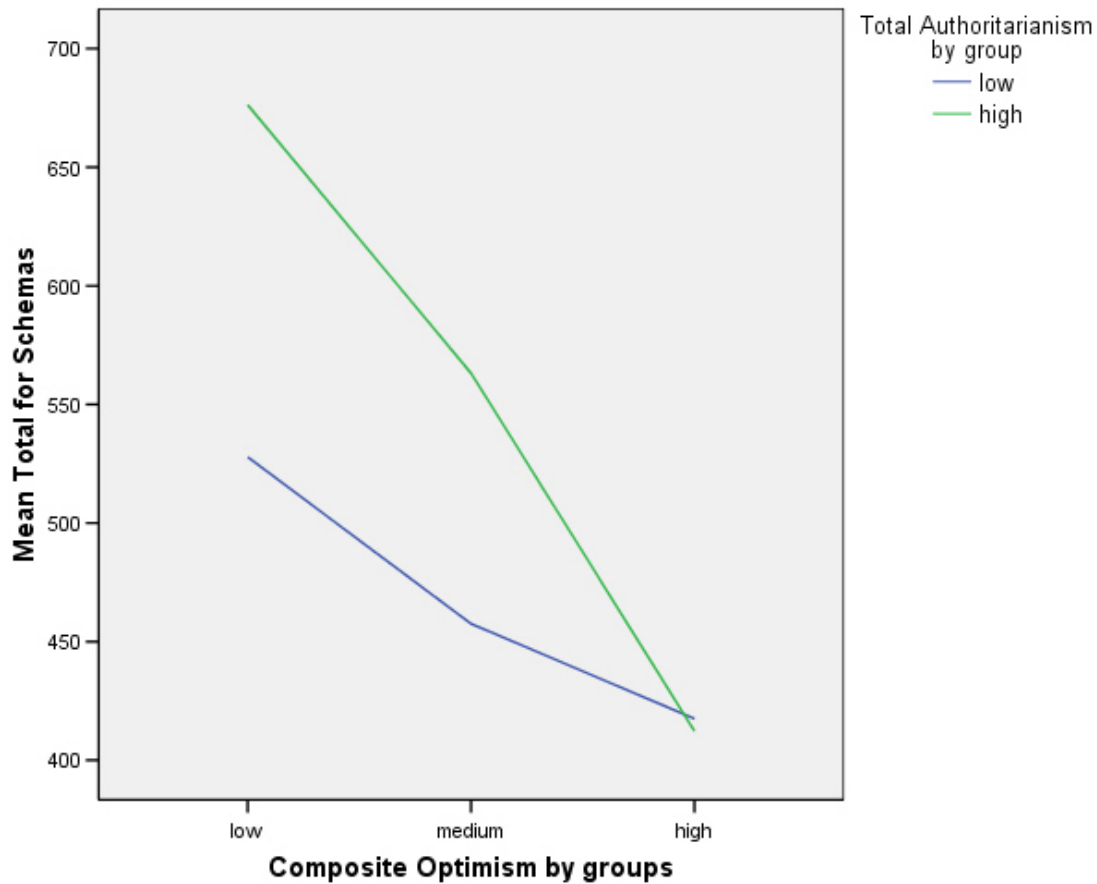


Figure 1. Maladaptive schema total scores as a function of parental Authoritarianism and participants' optimism.

Discussion

As the results demonstrate, the hypothesis was supported. The effect of Authoritarianism depends upon the level of an individual's optimism. For those individuals who are lowest in optimism and highest in parental Authoritarianism, there is a great difference between the EMS group means. However, the EMS group means for those individuals who are highest in optimism are comparable across the two Authoritarian groups. Thus, when examining people with the highest levels of optimism, the main effect of Authoritarianism is virtually erased.

Optimism is a positive schema that is able to broaden the set of actions and thoughts a person sees as possible in situations, and it also serves to build internal personal resources (Fredrickson, 1998). This function of broadening and building may be one of the mechanisms by which optimism acts as a buffer between Authoritarian parenting and the development of maladaptive schemas. Further research is needed to determine if this is indeed the case, and what other mechanisms might underlie the moderating role of optimism in this relationship.

In the promissory note to his book *The Optimistic Child*, Martin Seligman elucidates the potential, and need, for “psychological immunization” for children (1995). To Seligman, a piece of this immunization is optimism training for children. The findings presented in this paper demonstrate the need for such actions to be carried out throughout the community. Since optimism can buffer against unhealthy parenting, it is imperative that people other than parents work to teach children how to develop and use optimism. This is especially true since the same unhealthy parenting behaviors against which optimism acts as a buffer are negatively associated with optimism itself (Gunty & Buri, 2008b).

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Appendix A

Examples of Items from the Young Schema Questionnaire

“People have not been there to meet my emotional needs,” was a statement used to measure the Emotional Deprivation schema. The Abandonment schema was measured by statements such as, “In the end, I will be alone.” Statements like, “I am quite suspicious of other people’s motives,” were used to measure the Mistrust/Abuse schema. “I’m fundamentally different from other people,” is an example of a statement measuring the Social Isolation schema. The measurement of the Defectiveness/Shame schema included statements such as, “I’m unworthy of love, attention, and respect of others.” The Failure schema measurement included the statement, “I’m incompetent when it comes to achievement.” “I don’t feel confident about my ability to solve everyday problems that come up,” was included in the measurement of the Dependence/Incompetence schema. The Vulnerability to Harm schema was measured by statements including, “I can’t seem to escape the feeling that something bad is about to happen.” The Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self schema was composed of statements such as, “It is very difficult for me to maintain any distance from the people I am intimate with; I have trouble keeping any separate sense of self.” Characteristic of the measurement for the Subjugation schema was, “I worry a lot about pleasing other people, so they won’t reject me.” The Self-Sacrifice schema measurement included items such as, “If I do what I want, I feel very uncomfortable.” “I find it embarrassing to express my feelings to others,” was one of the statements included in measuring the Emotional Inhibition schema. The Unrelenting Standards schema was measured with items such as, “Almost nothing I do is quite good enough; I can always do better.” An example of a statement

measuring the Entitlement schema is, “I feel that I shouldn’t have to follow the normal rules and conventions other people do.” The Insufficient Self-Control schema was measured with statements such as, “I often do things impulsively that I later regret.” “Lots of praise and compliments make me feel like a worthwhile person,” is an example of a statement measuring the Approval/Recognition Seeking schema. “You can’t be too careful; something will almost always go wrong,” is an example of a statement measuring the Negativity/Pessimism schema. The Punitiveness schema was measured with statements including, “I ‘beat up’ on myself a lot for things I screw up.”