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Parent Psychological Control as a Mediator Between Parental Stress and  
Children's Rejection Sensitivity

Katherine Hewlett

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:  
Bachelor of Arts  
in  
Psychological Sciences

Thesis Committee:  
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## **Introduction**

The period of middle childhood brings a developmental shift in social cognition. As children strengthen their social relationships amongst peers, teachers, and parents (Austrian, 2008; Grusec, Rudy, & Martini, 1997; Papalia et al., 2012), they also develop a stronger sense of self and the ability to think autonomously (Austrian, 2008; Papalia et al., 2012). Some children are more susceptible to negative perceptions of their peers and adults than others; one form of negative social cognition that emerges in middle childhood is rejection sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity refers to the tendency to expect, predict, and overreact to possible social rejection in both overt and ambiguous situations, especially among peers (Beeson, Brittain, & Vaillancourt 2020). There are multiple contextual factors that impact a child's sensitivity to rejection, including peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, and parenting (Austrian, 2008; Papalia et al., 2012). The present study is designed to illuminate the role that parenting plays in the development of rejection sensitivity.

### **Rejection Sensitivity**

Rejection sensitivity refers to the tendency to expect, predict, and overreact to possible social rejection in both overt and ambiguous situations (Beeson et al., 2020). Rejection sensitivity concerns the fear of negative evaluation in social situations, including meeting unfamiliar people or attending school (Beeson et al, 2020; Rudolph & Zimmer 2014). Although it is not a DSM-5 disorder, rejection sensitivity has similar symptomology to social anxiety, defined in the DSM-5 as “marked fear or anxiety about one or more social

situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For those with high levels of rejection sensitivity, their internal working models – the cognitive framework individuals use to understand their world, their self, and others based on their relationships – make them over sensitive to possible rejection (Downey et al., 1998). As a result, rejection sensitivity can have adverse effects on peer and family relationships, the youth’s behavior, and the youth’s view of others (Coleman 2003; Downey et al., 1998).

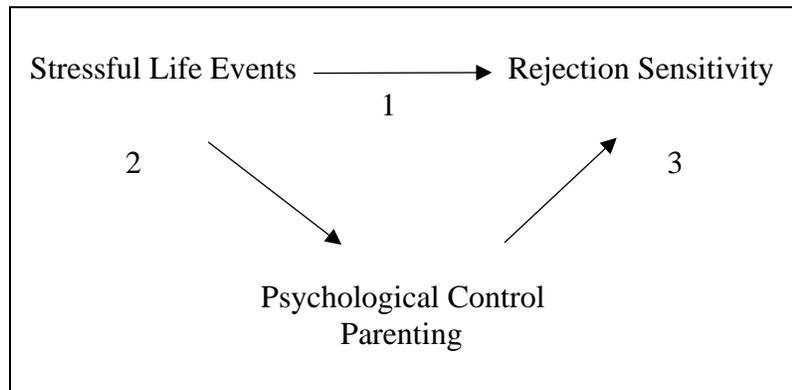
Rejection sensitivity has two forms – anxious and angry – providing different ways to protect oneself from possible rejection (Zimmer & Nesdale 2013). Anxious rejection sensitivity is characterized by the avoidance of situations where the possibility of rejection is present, the withdrawal from others to avoid rejection, and the rumination of thoughts around rejection (Croft & Zimmer-Gembeck 2014; Zimmer & Nesdale 2013). Angry rejection sensitivity is characterized by outbursts of anger, hostility, or aggressive behavior (Croft & Zimmer-Gembeck 2014; Zimmer & Nesdale 2013). Both forms of rejection sensitivity are associated with higher levels of externalizing and internalizing behaviors, respectively (Bondü & Krahe 2015; McDonald et al. 2010). Rejection sensitivity can cause a child to feel worse about themselves in social settings, increasing the risk for both depression and anxiety (Beeson et al. 2020; Coleman 2003; McDonald et al. 2010). Anxious rejection sensitivity, rather than angry rejection sensitivity, however, is associated with greater social anxiety and depression symptoms (McDonald et al. 2010).

***Belsky's Process of Parenting Model***

In order to conceptualize the potential role that parents may play in children's development of rejection sensitivity; I will draw from Belsky's (1984) process model of parenting. Belsky's model proposes that parenting is influenced by three primary factors: the parent themselves, their child, and their social context. The model assumes that parental functioning is "multiply determined," meaning that parenting is composed by many factors at once (Belsky 1984, p. 83). Thus, according to Belsky's model, parent exposure to stress is highly relevant to understanding parenting processes.

Drawing from Belsky's model, I will focus on two aspects of the parenting environment: stressful life events and parent psychological control. I will conduct a mediation model, illustrated in Figure 1. I will examine the associations between (1) stressful life events and children's rejection sensitivity, (2) stressful life events and parent psychological control, (3) parent psychological control and children's rejection sensitivity in children, and (4) whether parent psychological control mediates the association between stressful life events and rejection sensitivity.

**Figure 1: Mediation Model Examining Stressful Life Events, Parent Psychological Control, and Rejection Sensitivity in Children**



### **Stressful Life Events in Parenting**

Parenting practices can be influenced by parents' exposure to stress. Stressful life events refer to the parent's adverse or stressful experiences, which may interfere with their ability to engage in sensitive parenting. For instance, when a parent is very stressed, they are less likely to be involved in their children's activities (Elam et al., 2017; Spinelli et al., 2020;). One study found that heightened parenting stress predicts lower child perceptions of parental acceptance (Putnick et al. 2008). Therefore, it is evident that parental stress can impact both parenting behaviors and the child's reaction to those parenting behaviors.

What types of stress do parents experience? The most common sources of parenting stress include the marital relationship, social networks, and employment (Belsky, 1984). Thus, in this study, I will be looking closely at stressors regarding a parent's financial situation, marital and social relationships, and exposure to potentially traumatic events.

*Economic Stress*

Parents who experience economic stress are more likely to also experience negative life experiences and increased parenting stress (Ponnet et al., 2016; Puff & Renk, 2014). Conger and colleagues proposed that parents who are under economic pressure are likely to be preoccupied and less involved in the parenting role (Conger & Conger 2002; 2008). Conger & Conger (2008) emphasize that economic resources determine the amount of support parents can provide for their children. Through their family stress model, Conger and colleagues predict that financial stress influences the development of children through the financial experiences of parents (Conger et al., 2010). Income is not the only financial stressor. Financial cutbacks, financial concerns, and negative economic events are also related significantly and positively to parenting stress (Cassells & Evans, 2017; Puff & Renk, 2014).

Research indicates that economic hardships, such as difficulty paying bills, is significantly associated not only with parental stress, but also with negative parenting behaviors (Cassells & Evans, 2017; Puff & Renk, 2014; Williams et al., 2015). One study found that a higher income is associated with greater parental investment in their children and better marital relationships (Raver et al. 2007). Further research has indicated that as financial stress increases, positive parenting behaviors decrease, especially in the realm of parental support (Cassells & Evans, 2017; Nelson et al. 2009; Puff & Renk, 2014). Puff and Renk (2014) found that while parenting financial stress was positively related to autonomy granting, it was negatively related to parental

support, limit setting, parental satisfaction, and communication. Thus, economic stress greatly impacts negative parenting behaviors.

### *Social Stress*

Social relationships can also directly impact parent stress. Social supports can be increasingly helpful for autonomy-supportive, rather than controlling, parenting. Autonomy support refers to “interactions in which children can express their views and opinions and in which their plans and problem-solving skills are supported” (Costa et al., 2019, p.128). Social supports can be helpful because they allow the parent to have help when needed; the parent is not acting alone when raising their child. Researchers Cochran and Brassard (1979) hypothesized that the social support can improve a parent’s self-esteem, which in turn increases patience and sensitivity (Belsky, 1984).

One hypothesis is that positive social relationships, including a positive marriage, may decrease the likelihood of negative parenting, whereas marital stress may increase the likelihood of negative parenting. Research indicates that marital stress may affect parenting by leaving parents emotionally exhausted; therefore, they are unable to invest themselves in autonomy-supportive parenting (Belsky, 1984; Bhavnagri & Parke, 1991). Marital stress has been found to predict lower parental consistency, and lower parental support (Elam et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2011). Researchers have theorized that the negative emotions that result from marital stress (e.g., anger, anxiety, distress) may elicit poor parent–child interactions (Cummings et al., 2005; Elam et al., 2017; Erel & Burman, 1995). Marital satisfaction may impact controlling parenting as well. Research illustrates

that parents who experience marital dissatisfaction are more likely to overreact, and to use controlling parenting strategies (Cui & Conger, 2008; Cummings et al., 2005). Parents who are in satisfying marital relationships, on the other hand, respond more positively to their children's actions (Elam et al., 2017; Erel & Burman, 1995). From these findings, there is compelling evidence that stress relating to social circumstances and relationships impact parenting behaviors.

### ***Traumatic Stress***

The last type of stress the present study will examine is traumatic stress. Traumatic events have been linked to controlling parenting behaviors. Research indicates that parents with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) are more avoidant, hostile, controlling, and less sensitive and responsive to their children (van Ee et al., 2015; Chemtob & Carlson, 2004; Jordan et al., 1992; Lauterback et al. 2007). LeenFelder and colleagues (2011) found that in parents who have experienced a wide range of trauma, those with PTSD were significantly more likely to endorse aggressive parenting practices than parents without PTSD (LeenFeldner et al., 2011). Parental PTSD has also been associated with increased levels of parenting stress and poorer parent-child relationships. (Christie et al. 2019; Lauterback et al. 2007; LeenFeldner et al., 2011; Samuelson et al. 2017). Furthermore, parenting stress has been found to be a mediator between parental trauma exposure and children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. (Owen et al., 2006; Samuelson et al. 2017; Whitson et al., 2015). Therefore, the emotional and behavioral adjustment problems that children experience can be the indirect result of the heightened stress that parents with PTSD endure.

Historically, research on parenting stress has been focused on a child's mother. Research regarding parental PTSD has been continuously linked to mothers', but not to a fathers', trauma history (Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Appel & Holden, 1998; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Owen, Thompson & Kaslow, 2006). Some research indicates an association between PTSD and parenting trauma as well, such as trauma at birth (Davies et al., 2008; Holditch-Davis et al. 2009; Tomassetti-Long et al., 2015). Thus, there is compelling evidence that traumatic events impact one's parenting behaviors.

In sum, parental stress appears to impact one's parenting style, especially in a negative way. Thus, I hypothesize that higher exposure to stress will predict higher negative parenting.

### **Parent Psychological Control**

To understand the effects of parent stress on negative parenting, I will focus on the parenting dimension of psychological control. Parent psychological control refers to parent efforts to control their child's emotional state, activities, and/or beliefs as a discipline strategy (Barber, 1996; Costa et al., 2019; Manzeske & Stright, 2009; Smetana & Daddis, 2002). Examples of psychological control include assertion of authority (e.g., "My parents will not let me do things with them if I do something they do not like"), guilt induction (e.g., "My parents tell me that I should feel guilty when I do not meet their expectations") and invalidating their child's feelings (e.g., "My parents answer my arguments by saying things like, 'You'll know better when you're older'") (Barber, 1996; Costa et al., 2019; Smetana & Daddis, 2002; Wang et al., 2007). Research indicates that

higher levels of psychological control are associated with higher levels of internalizing problems, including anxiety, depression, and loneliness, as well as higher levels of externalizing problems (Barber, 1996; Pettit et al., 2001; Rowe et al., 2015). Psychological control is also associated with lower levels of self-esteem, diminished social skills, and an increased likelihood of risk behaviors during adolescence, such as substance use and risky sexual behavior (Faherty et al., 2020; Putnick et al. 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Thus, there is ample evidence that parent psychological control has negative implications for children' adjustment.

The construct of psychological control parenting takes root in self-determination theory (SDT). SDT uses the concept of innate, universal, psychological needs to understand human motivation (Costa et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017). There are three needs of SDT: autonomy (i.e., the sense of volition and self-control over everyday activities), competence (i.e., feelings of effectiveness and productivity), and relatedness (i.e., feelings of being loved and cared for by others, and the ability to provide affection to others; Costa et al., 2019; Grolnick et al., 1997). SDT emphasizes that the social context can either be helpful or detrimental to a child's intrinsic motivation; parents can either support or thwart their child's psychological needs (Barber, 1996; Costa et al., 2019; Joussemet et al., 2008).

Similarly, parents may use attribution theory to defend their parenting styles. Attribution theory is similar to the self-determination theory in that it also examines the intrinsic and external motivators of behavior. Attribution theory suggests "that people look for reasons or explanations for their own behavior and

that of others” (Grusec et al., 1997, p. 260). Parents may believe that a child’s actions are caused by the child themselves, and thus “hold their children accountable and attribute the behavior to their children’s character (i.e., make a dispositional or internal attribution)” (Grusec et al., p. 261). This is problematic because the parent is requiring their child to act in a way that suits their wishes, rather than adjusting their own parenting behavior to support the child. These parents lack a child-centered approach, which is consistent with psychological control parenting; psychological control represents the opposite of autonomy support by decreasing a child’s sense of autonomy through intrusion and pressure (Barber, 1996).

I hypothesize that parent psychological control will predict higher levels of rejection sensitivity in children. Although no prior research has examined this association directly, there is evidence that parenting behavior relates to children’s social functioning. According to Ladd and Pettit (2002), parental influences on children’s and adolescents’ social–emotional development can be distinguished in terms of parental style (i.e., the general quality of the parent–child relationship) and in terms of deliberate parenting practices (i.e., specific behaviors related to discipline, structure, etc., Ladd & Pettit, 2002). Prosocial advice, a positive parenting practice, is associated with children’s social competence and behavior with their peers (McDowell et al., 2003, Mize & Pettit, 1997, Poulin et al., 2012). In contrast, research indicates that negative parenting behaviors (e.g., shaming, love withdrawal, lack of support, etc.) directly impact feelings of rejection sensitivity, sadness, and withdrawal (Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Thus,

ample research indicates that psychological control parenting increases risk for internalizing and externalizing problems in children.

### **Importance of Middle Childhood**

The target population for this study is youth in middle childhood (ages 8-10). In these years, children begin to think more autonomously and assert their independence (Austrian, 2008; Papalia et al., 2012). Social relationships, especially with parents and teachers, influence their cognition and behavior as well (Austrian, 2008; Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997; Papalia et al., 2012). Research has found that positive relationships with adults and peers are strongly associated with resilience, well-being, and good health in middle childhood; peer victimization and social exclusion, however, are strongly associated with poor physical and mental health in this age group (Guhn et al. 2013; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005).

Additionally, middle childhood is a period of coregulation, which refers to warm and responsible interactions that allow children to understand and express their emotions and behaviors (Papalia et al., 2012); thus, youth in middle childhood learn to be more independent while still receiving support from their parents. Psychological control parenting, however, disrupts this process. In using psychological control parenting, parents do not allow their children to strengthen their independence, nor their autonomous thinking. Thus, these children may be more reliant on their parents and thus show higher levels of rejection sensitivity.

The development of moral judgement may also explain why psychological control might predict heightened rejection sensitivity in middle childhood.

According to Kohlberg's development of morality, children "do not really understand or uphold conventional or societal rules and expectations" before age 10 (Austrian, 2008, p. 108). Once children transition into conventional morality, at age 10, they begin to understand that rewards or punishments may result from their thoughts or actions (Austrian, 2008). Thus, children conceptualize morality in black and white rather than in gray. When their parent yells at them or uses controlling parenting, the child may think, "I'm a bad kid," and be unable to recognize the nuances of the situation. In turn, this may translate to situations with their peers. Since the child already thinks, "I am a bad kid," that internal attribution may turn into "I expect my peers to reject me." Parental psychological control, which includes inducing guilt as a discipline strategy, may cause children to blame themselves for their parents being upset. In thinking they are a bad kid, and possibly unworthy of love, they may experience greater rejection sensitivity in response to their peers.

### **Hypotheses**

In sum, I hypothesize that (1) when parents are stressed, they are less likely to use child-centered thinking, and thus more likely to use psychological control, (2) parent psychological control will predict higher levels of rejection sensitivity (3) parent psychological control will mediate the association between parent stress and rejection sensitivity.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

This research used data collected from the Family Development Lab's Parents and Peers Project, which received approval from UVM'S Institutional Research Board (IRB). A sample of 65 children (29 girls, 8-10-years old;  $M$  age = 9.06,  $SD$  = 0.81; 93.8% White) and their parents ( $M$  age = 43,  $SD$  = 5.52; 90,8% White) participated in the study. Most parent participants were the biological mothers of the child participants (93.8% biological mothers, 3.1% adoptive mothers, 3.1% biological fathers).

### **Procedures**

Each family was invited into the Family Development lab to complete a series of tasks. Before commencing, consent was provided from each parent participant for themselves and their child. After engaging in a series of parent-child interaction tasks, both parents and children responded to a series of questionnaires in separate rooms. Parent participants completed questionnaires alone, while a research assistant read the questions aloud to the child participants. The research assistant answered any questions the child had and defined anything the child did not understand. Parents received monetary compensation, and children received a small prize (e.g., a craft kit or Lego set).

### **Measures**

#### ***Stressful life events***

Parents reported on their stressful live events using the Life Events Questionnaire (LEQ; Sarason et al., 1978). The LEQ is a checklist in which the participant indicates whether an event happened to them in the past year, rates the effect of the event (*Good* or *Bad*), and rates the impact of the effect on a 3-point

scale (0=*no effect*, 3=*great effect*). The present research focused on the economic (9 items, e.g., “difficulty finding a job”), social and romantic (14 items, e.g., “divorce”), and traumatic (7 items, i.e., “death of spouse or partner”) components of the questionnaire<sup>1</sup>. For each scale, the impact ratings for the events that participants indicated as having a “Bad” effect were summed.

### ***Psychological Control***

Parenting behavior was reported via the Psychological Control Questionnaire (Wang et al., 2007), an 18-item measure which assesses a child’s perception of their parent’s efforts to exercise psychological control. Examples of psychological control include assertion of authority (e.g., “My parents will not let me do things with them if I do something they do not like”), guilt induction (e.g., “My parents tell me that I should feel guilty when I do not meet their expectations”) and invalidating their child’s feelings (e.g., “My parents answer my arguments by saying, ‘You’ll know better when you’re older’”)<sup>2</sup>. Children indicated how much their parent currently engaged in each behavior on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all true*, 5 = *very true*). The Psychological Questionnaire was found to have excellent reliability (18 items:  $\alpha = .86$ ).

### ***Rejection Sensitivity***

Children completed Downey and colleagues’ (1998) Children’s Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire. Each child participant read a series of six scenarios illustrating potential rejection (e.g., “Imagine you’re back in your classroom, and

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a complete list of examined parental stressors, per the Life Events Questionnaire.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B for a complete list of examined questions, per the Psychological Control Questionnaire

everyone is splitting up into groups to work on a special project together. You sit there and watch lots of other kids getting picked. As you wait, you wonder if the kids will want you for their group.”<sup>3</sup>). To measure anxious rejection sensitivity, children rated how nervous they would feel in each scenario on a 6-point scale (1=*Not nervous*, 6=*Very, very nervous*). To measure angry rejection sensitivity, children rated how mad they would feel in each scenario on a 6-point scale (1=*Not mad*, 6=*Very, very mad*). Both the anxious and angry rejection sensitivity subscales were calculated as means of the items and demonstrated good reliability (6 items:  $\alpha = .76$ ; 6 items:  $\alpha = .85$ , respectively).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

Descriptive statistics among the study variables appear in Table 1. In general, participants reported low levels of stress, psychological control, and rejection sensitivity. Results indicate that for some participants, experiencing economic and/or traumatic stress produced a severity rating of 0, meaning that the event did not affect them. All stress variables had low severity ratings.

Intercorrelations among the study variables appear in Table 2. Social stress was positively associated with economic stress. Traumatic stress severity was positively associated with parental age. Psychological control was positively associated with angry rejection sensitivity and negatively associated with parent age. Angry rejection sensitivity and anxious rejection sensitivity were moderately, positively correlated, consistent with prior research. All other correlations were

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix C for a complete list of examined questions, per the Children’s Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire

not significant. In addition, child sex, child age, and family income were not associated with any study variables.

### **Mediation Analyses**

Mediation analyses were conducted using Hayes's PROCESS add-on to SPSS (Model 4, basic mediation; Hayes, 2013). For each of the three types of parent stress (economic, social, and traumatic), two models were run, one predicting anxious rejection sensitivity and one predicting angry rejection sensitivity, resulting in a total of six mediation models. Preliminary analysis indicated that child sex, child age, and family income did not predict parent psychological control or rejection sensitivity, nor did their inclusion as covariates alter the results. Therefore, to preserve statistical power, the only covariate included in the final mediation analyses was parent age.

#### ***Anxious Rejection Sensitivity***

Results of the mediation models predicting anxious rejection sensitivity appear in Table 3. Parental age predicted lower levels of psychological control in all three models; however, parental age did not predict anxious rejection sensitivity. Contrary to hypotheses, neither social, economic, nor traumatic stress predicted psychological control or anxious rejection sensitivity, and psychological control did not predict anxious rejection sensitivity. Contrary to hypotheses, the indirect effects of social stress (.00 [-.02, .02]) economic stress (.00 [-.02, .02]) and traumatic stress (.00 [-.03, .03]) on anxious rejection sensitivity through parent psychological control were not significant.

#### ***Angry Rejection Sensitivity***

Results of the mediation models predicting angry rejection sensitivity appear in Table 4. Parental age predicted lower levels of psychological control, and higher levels of angry rejection sensitivity, across in all three models. Neither social, economic, nor traumatic stress predicted psychological control or angry rejection sensitivity. Contrary to hypotheses, the indirect effects of social stress (-.01 [-.06, .06]) economic stress (-.01 [-.06, .03]) and traumatic stress (.01 [-.04, .11]) on angry rejection sensitivity through parent psychological control were not significant.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to assess the role of psychological control parenting as a mediator between parental stress and children's rejection sensitivity. Results indicated that, contrary to my hypotheses, psychological control parenting did not serve as a mediator of the relationship between parental stress and children's rejection sensitivity. However, in partial support of my predictions, psychological control parenting was associated with higher levels of angry rejection sensitivity in children. This study contributes to our understanding of the impact of parental stress and parenting behavior on children's rejection sensitivity, shedding light on the potential impact of children's perceptions of parenting behavior on their social adjustment.

### **Parental Stress**

Contrary to hypotheses, stress did not predict psychological control parenting or either form of rejection sensitivity (anxious or angry). One potential reason why parental stress was not associated with psychological control

parenting or rejection sensitivity may be because parents in this sample reported low levels of overall stress. Perhaps more importantly, parents reported low levels of stress severity; thus, when events did occur, parents tended to report that they had a small impact on their life. In this sample, parents may not have been stressed enough to show behaviors consistent with psychological control. Delayed effects of stress on parenting are also possible. Because parental stress and psychological control parenting were analyzed at the same time point, we were not able to examine whether stress predicted change in parenting over time. It may be that the effects of stress had not yet accumulated or had not affected the participants' parenting yet.

Another reason for a lack of findings linking stress and psychological control may be that parent participants are successful at hiding their stress from their children. Stress may lead parents to feel vulnerable in their parent-child relationship, and they may not want their child to see them in such a vulnerable state. Parents may also want to protect their children from their stress and prevent them from worrying about adult-related issues; parents may even feel as though it is part of their job, as a parent, to protect their kids from their stress. However, some literature disagrees with this theory. Negative emotion suppression, which refers to the action of parents inhibiting their outward expression of negative emotions, has been linked to greater dismissive parenting and other negative outcomes (Gross & John, 2003; Hughes & Gullone, 2010; Karnilowicz et al., 2019). One study by Le and Impett (2016) found that parents were more likely to regulate, or suppress, their emotions when caregiving was "challenging to

provide,” and that suppression had negative effects, regardless of their child’s mood (Le & Impett, 2016, p. 332). Thus, even if parents were hiding their stress, hiding it would not necessarily decrease the likelihood of engaging in psychological control parenting; rather, it may increase that likelihood. Alternatively, parents may be simply effective at coping with their stress, since overall stress levels were relatively low, and effective coping with stress may prevent stress from affecting one’s parenting style.

### **Parental Age**

One unexpected finding was that older parents were less likely to use psychological control parenting than younger parents. The research of Ragozin and colleagues (1982) indicated that maternal age directly impacts parenting attitudes and behaviors. Observational research indicates that older parents show greater sensitivity and structure to infants than younger parents (Bornstein, Putnick, Suwalsky, & Gini, 2006). It is possible that older parents enjoy the process of parenting more than younger parents, as younger parents report spending more social time away from their child, less caregiver responsibilities, and less satisfaction of parenting (Ragozin et al. 1982).

Older parents may be less likely to engage in psychological control parenting because of the maternal maturity hypothesis (Hofferth, 1987), which emphasizes older mothers have accrued life experiences, wisdom, financial and social resources, and a more varied coping repertoire that promotes a more responsive family environment (Bornstein et al., 2006). Because older parents have the stability and required resources, they are more able to provide for their

children. Younger parents, on the other hand, are less likely to be financially stable, nor likely to be satisfied with their place of employment (Berryman & Windridge, 1997; Robinson et al., 1987). Further, older parents are more likely to be resilient and less dependent on others (Robinson et al., 1987). Therefore, they can focus more on the needs of their children. In focusing on their children's needs, rather than their own, older parents may be more susceptible to how their child reacts and interprets their parenting style, thus choosing to adopt an autonomous parenting strategy.

Additionally, parental age was positively associated with traumatic stress. It is likely that parents who are older have had more time to experience the possibility of a traumatic event, as opposed to a younger parent. Furthermore, as a result of dissociation, people who have experienced trauma may not begin to process the trauma until years later (Herman 1992-1997; Suleiman 2008). In cases of childhood sexual abuse, for example, victims may not remember being abused, in any capacity, until they enter therapy as an adult (Suleiman 2008, p. 276). Similarly, according to research conducted with veterans, those with delayed-onset PTSD are most likely to show symptoms two years after the traumatic event (Ulzon-Frank et al. 2014). Therefore, trauma processing and realization may be delayed in adult participants, resulting in older parents to report traumatic events, as opposed to younger parents.

### **Psychological Control Parenting**

Partially consistent with previous findings on the connection between psychological control and children's social adjustment, psychological control

predicted angry rejection sensitivity but not anxious rejection sensitivity.

Therefore, children who perceive their parents as more psychologically controlling are more likely to be angry, rather than nervous, when confronted with possible rejection. Angry rejection sensitivity specifically includes outbursts of anger, hostility, or aggression in face of rejection from teachers and peers. In her research of parent-child relations, Dr. Isabela Granic proposed a theoretical model for why anxiety triggers aggressive behavior:

For those children who are comorbid for anxiety and aggression problems, aggression in real time may emerge in response to triggers of anxiety present since early parent-child interactions. This anxiety may be about anticipating hostile retaliation from the parent when they have been “bad.” However, children’s anxiety is also about the difficulty of predicting how the parent will react in the first place (Granic 2014, p. 4).

Children may also be using anger to control their situation, in reaction to their parents’ psychological control. Because anger toward their parents can be too consequential (i.e., further psychological control parenting), children may instead take their anger out on their peers. Aggression may be the behavioral result of anxiety around nonautonomous parenting, illustrating why psychological control was associated with angry rejection sensitivity alone. Other research corroborated this idea, theorizing that anxious children demonstrate anxiety through anger (Cassello-Robbins & Barlow, 2016).

This theory may also help to explain why, contrary to hypotheses, psychological control was not associated with anxious rejection sensitivity.

Anxious rejection sensitivity includes the avoidance of situations where the possibility of rejection is present, the withdrawal from others to avoid rejection, and the rumination of thoughts around rejection (Croft & Zimmer-Gembeck 2014; Zimmer & Nesdale 2013). Based on Granic's research, we might see this difference, i.e., psychological control only associating with angry rejection sensitivity, because of the close interconnections between the emotions of anxiety and anger.

Another potential explanation for the lack of findings relating to psychological control may be that child participants misreported psychological control behavior. Further, the wording of the psychological control questionnaire may not have been conducive to middle childhood cognitive skills. Research indicates that children are more easily able to report overt behaviors rather than emotions (Eddy et al., 2011). The questions (i.e., "My parents act cold and unfriendly if I do something they do not like) are worded in a way that requires the child to have a fairly deep understanding of their parent's point of view, as it relates to their behavior. The child needs to understand that (1) they did something wrong, (2) it was something their parents did not like and (3) their parents are choosing to act unfriendly as a result. This may be hard for children in this sample, given the mean age of 9 and their stage in cognitive development; children do not understand the concept of rewards or punishments resulting from actions until age 10 (Austrian 2008). Research further indicates that children 8- and 9-years old tend to use extreme response styles on questionnaires (e.g., "never" or "always," Conijn et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2007). Children also tend to

base their response on a single example (Davis et al., 2007). Since psychological control parenting is a repeated behavior, children may not recognize its repetition when completing the questionnaire. Therefore, it is possible that children misreported parent psychological control.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Some limitations of the current study should be addressed in future research. First, the sample consisted of just 65 child-parent pairs. It is possible that a larger sample would allow us to capture a wider range of parent stress, psychological control, and rejection sensitivity, as well as provide better statistical power to detect smaller effects. Second, the sample was also limited in terms of racial diversity. It is possible that recruiting more participants of color would produce alternative results, as race could impact parenting behaviors. Racial-related stress could be particularly impactful, as BIPOC parents may be more stressed, overall, than white parents. Research indicates that BIPOC parents experience more parenting stress than White parents due to fewer economic resources, differing maternal characteristics, and exposure to discrimination (McLoyd et al. 2000, Nam, Wikoff & Sherraden, 2015). In a 2015 study, researchers found that White parents experience the least amount of parenting stress, followed by Native parents, Black parents, and Hispanic parents, respectively (Nam, Wikoff & Sherraden, 2015). Third, this study consisted of middle class, high functioning parents. Testing in a sample with a wider range of stressful experiences would provide a more robust test of the effects of stress on parenting and children's social adjustment. Fourth, this study was cross-sectional

in nature, limiting data to a single time point. Future research should utilize a longitudinal design, so that responses can be examined over time and direction of effect can be established. With this approach, the cumulative effects of parent stress may be more apparent.

I propose that a new study should be conducted, with a larger sample, analyzing what protective factors are used when parents are stressed. It may be useful to analyze whether parents are consciously protecting their children from their stress, and to analyze whether parents direct their stress to alternative places (e.g., work environments, their partners, etc.). Both kids and parents should use the LEQ to report on stressful experiences. In recruiting participants, it will be important to recruit participants with a wider range of incomes and life experiences than the current study. The study should be longitudinal in nature, so that researchers are able to look at effects of stress and parenting over time. A second study would be useful in understanding how parents react in times of vulnerability and the work they do to protect their children from psychological harm.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the goal of this study was to assess the role of psychological control parenting as a mediator between parental stress and children's rejection sensitivity. Children are influenced by their environment, which includes parenting behavior. This study contributed to our understanding of child mental health by learning that children's perception of parenting behavior is important regarding social adjustment. This study contributed to our understanding of

parental mental health by finding that parents may hide, or cope with their stress in ways that limit the chances of nonautonomous parenting.

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**Table 1.**  
*Descriptive Statistics among the Study Variables*

Variable	M(SD)	Min	Max	Skewness
Social Severity for Bad Events	3.13 (2.51)	1.00	9.00	1.43
Economic Severity for Bad Events	1.22 (2.37)	0.00	12.00	2.75
Traumatic Severity for Bad Events	0.74 (1.22)	0.00	5.00	1.92
Psychological Control	1.86 (0.62)	1.00	3.61	0.80
Child Anxious Anticipation RS	3.45 (0.91)	1.50	5.83	0.12
Child Angry Anticipation RS	2.35 (0.98)	1.00	5.00	0.38

Note. RS = rejection sensitivity.

**Table 2.**  
*Intercorrelations among the Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Social Severity for Bad Events	1.0	0.44*	-0.07	-0.17	-0.28	-0.04	-0.13
2. Economic Severity for Bad Events		1.0	0.13	-0.07	-0.11	0.00	-0.03
3. Traumatic Severity for Bad Events			1.0	-0.08	-0.04	-0.00	0.28*
4. Psychological Control				1.0	0.06	0.40**	-0.29*
5. Child Anxious Anticipation RS					1.0	0.40**	0.12
6. Child Angry Anticipation RS						1.0	-0.07
7. Parent Age							1.0

Note. RS = rejection sensitivity. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 3.**  
*PROCESS Models Predicting Anxious Rejection Sensitivity*

Predictors	Psychological Control			Anxious Rejection Sensitivity		
	b [95% CI]	<i>p</i>	R <sup>2</sup>	b [95% CI]	<i>p</i>	R <sup>2</sup>
Model 1		.06	.09		.37	.05
Parent Age	-.03 [-.06, -.01]	.02		-.02 [-.06, 0.02]	.36	
Parent Social Stress	-.01 [-.10, .07]	.75		-.10 [-.23, 0.03]	.13	
Psychological Control	--	--		-.06 [-.47, .34]	.76	
Model 2		.06	.09		.67	.03
Parent Age	-.03 [-.06, -.01]	.02		-.02 [-.07, .02]	.34	
Parent Economic Stress	.67 [-.07, .05]	.67		-.04 [-.14, .06]	.41	
Psychological Control	--	--		-.06 [-.47, .35]	.77	
Model 3		.06	.09		.84	.01
Parent Age	-.03 [-.06, -.01]	.02		-.02 [-.07, .03]	.37	
Parent Traumatic Stress	0.02 [-.10, .15]	.75		.01 [-.19, .21]	.93	
Psychological Control	--	--		-.05 [-.46, .36]	.81	

**Table 4.**  
*PROCESS Models Predicting Angry Rejection Sensitivity*

Predictors	Psychological Control			Angry Rejection Sensitivity		
	b [95% CI]	<i>p</i>	R <sup>2</sup>	b [95% CI]	<i>p</i>	R <sup>2</sup>
Model 1		.06	.30		.04	.13
Parent Age	-.03 [-.06, -.01]	.02		.01 [-.04, .05]	.72	
Parent Social Stress	-.01 [-.10, .07]	.75		-.00 [-.13, .13]	1.0	
Psychological Control	--	--		.61 [.19, 1.02]	.00	
Model 2		.06	.09		.03	.13
Parent Age	-.03 [-.06, -.01]	.02		.01 [-.04, .05]	.72	
Parent Economic Stress	-.01 [-.07, .05]	.67		.01 [-.08, .11]	.78	
Psychological Control	--	--		.61 [.20, 1.03]	.00	
Model 3		.06	.09		.04	.13
Parent Age	-.03 [-.06, -.01]	.02		.01 [-.05, .05]	.77	
Parent Traumatic Stress	.02 [-.11, .15]	.75		.02 [-.18, .22]	.87	
Psychological Control	--	--		.61 [.20, 1.02]	.00	

## Appendix A

### Sources of Parental Stress per the Life Events Questionnaire

#### Social Stress

1. Girlfriend or boyfriend problems
2. Breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend or breaking an engagement
3. Getting married (or beginning to live with someone)
4. Infidelity
5. Trouble with in-laws
6. Separation from spouse or partner due to conflict
7. Separation from spouse or partner due to work, travel, etc.
8. Divorce
9. Child or family member leaving home (due to marriage, to attend college, or for some other reason)
10. Conflicts with spouse or partner about parenting
11. Conflicts with child's grandparents (or other important person) about parenting
12. Taking on full responsibility for parenting as a single person
13. Custody battles with former spouse or partner
14. Broke up with a friend

#### Economic Stress

1. Difficulty finding a job
2. Being laid off or fired from work
3. Change in your spouse or partner's work outside the home (beginning work, ceasing work, changing jobs, retirement, etc.)
4. Loss or damage to personal property
5. Major changes in finances (increased or decreased income)
6. Took on a moderate purchase, such as TV, car, freezer, etc.
7. Took on a major purchase or a mortgage loan, such as a home, business property, etc.
8. Experienced a foreclosure on a mortgage or loan
9. Credit rating difficulties

#### Traumatic Stress

1. Major personal illness or injury
2. Major change in health or behavior of a family member or close friend (illness, accidents, drug or disciplinary problems, etc.)
3. Death of spouse or partner
4. Death of a child
5. Death of family member or close friend
6. Being a victim of a violent act (rape, assault, etc.)
7. Involved in an accident

**Appendix B**

## Examples of Parenting Behavior per the Psychological Control Questionnaire

1. My parents tell me about all the things they have done for me
2. My parents say, if I really cared for them, I would not do things that cause them to worry
3. My parents tell me how disappointed they are in me when I do not do things their way
4. My parents are less friendly with me if I do not see things their way
5. My parents will not let me do things with them if I do something they do not like.
6. My parents bring up my past mistakes when they criticize me.
7. My parents tell me of all the sacrifices they have made for me.
8. My parents tell me that I should feel guilty when I do not meet their expectations.
9. My parents tell me that I am not a good member of the family when I do something that is against their wishes.
10. My parents avoid looking at me when I have disappointed them
11. My parents tell me that I should feel ashamed when I do not behave as they wish.
12. My parents act cold and unfriendly if I do something they do not like.
13. If I have hurt their feelings, my parents stop talking to me until I please them again.
14. My parents say, if I really loved them, I would do my best for the sake of the family.
15. My parents tell me that I am not as good as other kids my age when I fall short of their expectations
16. My parents tell me that what they want me to do is the best for me and I should not question it
17. My parents say, when I grow up, I will appreciate all the decisions they make for me.
18. My parents answer my arguments by saying things like, "You'll know better when you're older".

### Appendix C

#### Examples of Rejection Sensitivity per the Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire

1. Imagine you had a really bad fight the other day with a friend. Now you have a serious problem and you wish you had your friend to talk to. You decide to wait for your friend after class to talk with him/her. You wonder if your friend will want to talk to you.
  - a. How nervous would you feel, right then, about whether or not your friend will want to talk to you and listen to your problem?
  - b. How mad would you feel, right then, about whether or not your friend will want to listen to your problem?
  - c. Do you think he/she will want to talk to you and listen to your problem?
2. Imagine that a famous person is coming to visit your school. Your teacher is going to pick five kids to meet this person. You wonder if she will choose you.
  - a. How nervous would you feel, right then, about whether or not the teacher will choose you?
  - b. How mad would you feel, right then, about whether or not the teacher will choose you?
  - c. Do you think the teacher will choose you to meet the special guest?
3. Now imagine you're back in class. Your teacher asks for a volunteer to help plan a party for your class. Lots of kids raise their hands so you wonder if the teacher will choose you.
  - a. How nervous would you feel, right then, about whether or not the teacher will choose you?
  - b. How mad would you feel, right then, about whether or not the teacher will choose you?
  - c. Do you think the teacher will choose you?
4. Imagine it's Saturday and you're carrying groceries home for your family. It is raining hard, and you want to get home fast. Suddenly, the paper bag you are carrying rips. All your food tumbles to the ground. You look up and see a couple of kids from your class walking quickly. You wonder if they will stop and help you.
  - a. How nervous would you feel, right then, about whether or not those kids will want to stop and help you?
  - b. How mad you would feel, right then, about whether or not those kids will want to stop and help you?
  - c. Do you think they will offer to help you?
5. Pretend you have moved, and you are going to a different school. In this school, the teacher lets the kids in the class take home a video game to play with on the weekend. Every week so far, you have watched someone else take it home. You decided to ask the teacher if you can take home the video game this time. You wonder if she will let you have it.

- a. How nervous would you feel, right then, about whether or not the teacher will let you take the video game home this time?
  - b. How mad would you feel, right then, about whether or not the teacher will let you take the video game home this time?
  - c. Do you think the teacher is going to let you take home the video game this time?
6. Imagine you're back in your classroom, and everyone is splitting up into groups to work on a special project together. You sit there and watch lots of other kids getting picked. As you wait, you wonder if the kids will want you for their group.
- a. How nervous would you feel, right then, about whether or not they will choose you?
  - b. How mad would you feel, right then, about whether or not they will choose you?
  - c. Do you think the kids in your class will choose you for their group?