

The Relationship between Parental Styles, Anger Management, and Cognitive-Emotional Coping Mechanisms in Adolescents

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Abstract

Introduction: Adolescents experience stronger and more frequent emotional states than people of other ages, with anger reflecting both the struggle for independence and a need for improving emotion regulation abilities, in order to achieve personal purposes and to adapt to the social context. In this respect, cognitive-emotional coping strategies such as acceptance, positive reappraisal, refocus on planning, or positive refocusing play a significant role. On the other hand, negative parenting, that includes strong psychological control, seems to negatively affect emotion regulation in children and adolescents. Baumrind's parental styles typology (1966, apud Hedstrom, 2016) identifies the following parental styles: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative, which seem to be relevant to the way adolescents manage their emotional and social life (Stănciulescu, 2002).

Objectives: a) to identify the relationship between parental styles, anger expression and internal and external anger control in adolescents; b) to highlight associations between parenting styles and cognitive-emotional coping strategies used by adolescents; c) to analyze the correlations between these coping mechanisms and the management of anger as discrete emotion.

Methods: The considered sample consisted in 85 adolescents aged 16 to 17 years (71.3% girls, 28.7% boys). The following instruments were used: State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI 2), Perceived Parental Style Questionnaire, and Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ).

Results: The elevated scores obtained for the authoritarian parenting style are associated with high scores for the STAXI 2 scale, measuring internal anger expression, while authoritative and permissive styles are related to high levels of internal and external anger control. The authoritarian parenting style significantly correlates with maladaptive coping mechanisms: self-blame, rumination, catastrophizing, and other-blame. The permissive style is positively associated with acceptance and catastrophizing, while the authoritative style correlated with acceptance, refocus on planning, positive reevaluation, putting into perspective, and catastrophizing.

Conclusions: Perceived parental style is relevant for the way adolescents handle their anger. If parents use an authoritative parenting style by showing attention and support for the adolescent's emotional state, it is more likely for their teenagers to be able to regulate the felt anger. By the contrary, it seems that an authoritarian parenting style, characterized by lack of care for the child's affective life, is associated with irritable adolescents who feel anger, but don't express it, and who tend to use maladaptive emotion regulation strategies. Thus, it is recommended that the parents adopt an authoritative style so that the children and adolescents could have more chances to adequately manage their anger.

Keywords: anger expression and control, coping, authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative parenting styles

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I. Introduction

Anger is a normal human emotion that appears as a reaction to frustration, interrupted or blocked goals, broken personal or social norms, or abuse. During adolescence, when boys and girls strive for their independence and self-assertion, anger represents an emotional experience associated to unwanted/unexpected behaviors seen as obstacles. Thus, when facing their parents' authority and values, they experience great tension as an expression of their inner conflict and struggle. In this age period, individuals feel the strongest and more frequent emotions, which should be integrated into their adjustment process. But, in addition to this constructive kind of anger, people of all ages face mental health issues associated to this kind of feelings: hopelessness, dissociation, suicidal ideation, interpersonal issues, and sexual abuse. Those with poor coping abilities, when confronted with negative life events, respond with anger, become depressed, or commit suicide. The more numerous these painful experiences are, the stronger the anger the adolescent feels (Puskar et al., 2008). This emotion diminishes the person's ability to control her/ his behavior. The self-regulation skills are considered to be rooted in the early experiences. For example, the failure in developing a secure attachment leads, in time, to a greater tendency towards aggressiveness (Pickover, 2010).

Pitaru, Iliescu & Spielberger (2015, p. 45) cite a series of papers on anger expression that promote the idea of people driven by 'intrinsic anger' (anger-in: they suppress their anger or direct it towards themselves, a fact that generates high blood pressure) or 'extrinsic anger' (anger-out: the anger is verbally or physically directed towards external persons and objects). From the psychoanalytical point of view, suppressed anger frequently leads to feelings of guilt and depression. Thoughts and memories that feed anger may be suppressed and even the internalized feelings of anger may not be directly experienced. The strategies of inwardly or outwardly directing anger seem not to be very coherent and stable, being influenced by situational factors.

External anger control means spending lots of energy in order to impede anger expression towards exterior objects and persons. Even though it's in principle a good thing because it prevents hurting others, too much of it generates passivity, depression, and withdrawal. Internal anger control means spending lots of energy in order to reduce as quickly as possible the anger and acquire the desired internal calm. When used too much, it could lead to reduced assertiveness. With respect to anger control, there was a reverse tendency

identified in the Romanian sample, in comparison to the American sample: women tend to express to a higher degree irritability and nervousness, while men more frequently use calming and relaxation strategies (Pitaru, Iliescu & Spielberger, 2015, p. 74).

According to Wolf and Foshee (2003), anger expression style might be constructive, directly destructive, or indirectly destructive. The adolescents perceiving to receive less support from their families and teachers are generally more prone to show anger, with peer support not having a diminishing role in this regard (Puskar, Ren, Bernardo, Haley & Stark, 2008). The emotional climate in the family, and particularly the level of parents' expressed anger, moderates adolescents' anger expression (Jackson, Kuppens, Sheeber & Allen, 2011). Parental anger is, as already mentioned, associated with the child internalizing symptomatology, and the innate reactivity (difficult temperament) often moderates the influence of parenting practices on behavioral difficulties (Razza, Martin & Brooks-Gunn, 2012).

There is a natural tendency that parents and adolescents reciprocally mirror their emotions during a conflict. Though, this process is different for depressed vs. non-depressed adolescents. Wenzel, Gunthert, Forand & Laurenceau (2009) highlight that depression is associated with intense feelings of anger and these are especially expressed within the family, where adolescents feel safer and have a greater chance of conflict resolution. Teenagers suffering from depressive symptoms exhibit higher levels of anger in families where the parents show less anger. Sadness regulation skills protect adolescents against relational aggressivity. Cui, Morris, Criss, Houlberg & Silk (2014) note that anger regulation abilities promote resilience when faced with physical aggression, especially among youth having difficulties with emotion communication. Anger difficulties were reported by 61% of patients meeting the criteria for bipolar II disorder and 36% of patients meeting the criteria for major depressive disorder (Benazzi, 2003).

The affective life of children and adolescents is linked to strategies their parents use to raise and educate them. According to the axes authority – permissiveness (the limits imposed to the children, the way parents exert control upon their activity and following of the rules) and attachment – hostility/ rejection (the parental involvement in children's activity, the time spent together, the attention towards children's physical and emotional needs), the following parental styles are identified:

- Authoritarian style: the parent does not prove much preoccupation with the child's affective life, who, as a result, becomes either shy, submissive, or rebellious, nervous, rigid, less able and creative when confronted with life obstacles, and tends to seldom adopt healthy mechanisms in changing situations. Psychologically controlling parents make their children feel pressure to conform to parental authority, which results in emotional insecurity (Cui, Morris, Criss, Houlberg & Silk, 2014).

- Permissive style: the parents exert low control and establish few rules. They are preoccupied with the child's feelings and rather provide him/ her with plenty of resources than trying to influence the child's behavior. As a result, rules are broken, and there is a higher probability that the child becomes emotionally unstable, with low self-control, and may exhibit violence. The child is prone to adjustment difficulties because his/ her personality does not have enough strength.

- Authoritative style: the parents use sustained control and offer emotional support. They explain the rules and often negotiate them, while being interested in how the child feels. The parents offer emotional security and understanding (Baumrind, 1966, apud Hedstrom, 2016; Stănculescu, 2002).

Gafor & Kurukkan (2014) note that even though Baumrind originally proposed the three above-mentioned parenting styles, she added in 1971 a fourth way of raising a child, namely the negligent parenting style. This is thought to be low both in responsiveness and control (inattentive behavior, neglecting the child, little interaction with the child).

Parental styles correlate with the way adolescents manage their emotional and social life (Otterpohl & Wild, 2015; Stănculescu, 2002). Self-regulation is a process of acquiring the needed skills in order to change your own behavior and become an independent problem-solver and controller of your own destiny (Cui, Morris, Criss, Houlberg & Silk, 2014). Emotion regulation consists in a series of processes that allow modulating emotions in an effortless or conscious way, in order to modify the occurrence, intensity, duration, or expression of the emotion so as to adequately respond to the environmental demands. Reappraisal and acceptance are more efficient emotional regulation methods than rumination and suppression, with the last having counterproductive effects, that increase the physiological activation and the negative emotional consequences (Szasz, Szentagotai & Hofmann, 2011). The family context is related to adjustment, with family processes influencing

children's ability to regulate their emotions. Nevertheless, it is also true that emotion regulation skills protect children from negative parenting and parental psychopathology.

Coping, another psychological concept close to the idea of emotion regulation, refers to "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/ or internal demands, that are appraised as toxic or exceeding a person's resources" (Martin & Dahlen, 2005). The emotion focused coping is understood as changing the meaning of stressful events. In the mentioned study, when controlling for gender, positive reappraisal was found to inversely relate to both external and internal anger expression, positive refocus inversely correlated to external anger expression, while self-blame, blaming others, rumination, catastrophizing, and acceptance were related to internal anger expression. "Catastrophizing was involved [also] in aggressive anger expression, while blaming others, rumination, acceptance and reduced positive reappraisal were involved in maladaptive anger suppression" (Martin & Dahlen, 2005).

Bardina & Wilson (1997) suggest that specific parenting styles intensify anger by influencing the child's perception of the hostile intention. Thus, the aggressive behavior can be altered by adopting a non-authoritarian parenting style. In addition to this, Tani, Pascuzzi & Raffagnino (2017) consider that emotional regulation in children and adolescents is favored by a parental style characterized by warmth and affection. The perceived maternal care was identified as negatively correlating with the use of maladaptive emotional regulation strategies and the absence of emotional awareness in children and adolescents. In addition to this, parental anger is associated with higher child internalizing symptomatology. Despite these contributions, the consulted literature provides insufficient information concerning the regulation strategies of discrete emotions (e.g. anger) and their relations with parenting styles. We didn't find in the literature a study that brings together all three categories of variables the present paper considers: anger expression/ control, parenting style, and emotion regulation strategies.

The present study investigates the relationships between parenting styles, anger expression/ control, and cognitive-emotional coping strategies in adolescence. A better understanding of these strategies is useful in conducting psychological interventions for emotional optimization and aggressive behavior reduction.

II. Objectives

- to identify the relationship between parental styles, anger expression and internal and external anger control in adolescence;
- to highlight associations between parenting styles and cognitive-emotional coping strategies used by adolescents;
- to analyze the correlations between these coping mechanisms and the management of anger as discrete emotion.

III. Hypotheses

1. A high score obtained for the authoritarian parenting style is associated with an elevated score for the internal anger expression scale.
2. Elevated scores for the permissive and authoritative parenting styles significantly correlate with the identified high levels for internal and external anger control.
3. The high scores obtained for the authoritarian parenting style are associated with high scores on the maladaptive coping mechanisms scales.
4. The identified increased scores for the authoritative parental style correspond with high scores on the adaptive coping scales.

IV. Methods

Participants

The study included 85 adolescents aged 16 to 17 years (71.3% girls, 28.7% boys). All of them were students of a technological high-school in Timișoara.

Measures

The study used the following questionnaires in order to measure the considered variables:

- *State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory* (STAXI 2; author: C. D. Spielberger, adapted and standardized on Romanian population by H. Pitaru & D. Iliescu, 2015): it comprises 57 items, grouped in 12 subscales, such as external anger expression (AX-O), internal anger expression (AX-I), external anger control (AC-O), internal anger control (AC-I). Cronbach's alpha coefficient across scales: .80 – .85.

- *Perceived Parental Style Questionnaire*: it measures the parental authority or the disciplinary practices from the child's point of view, of any age. The questionnaire (Buri, 1991) includes three subscales: permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative/ flexible parenting styles. Cronbach's alpha coefficient across scales: .78 – .81.

- *Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (CERQ; authors: N. Garnefski, V. K. and P. Spinhoven, adapted and standardized on Romanian population by A. Pețe, ed., 2010): it represents a multidimensional self-assessment tool that aims at identifying the cognitive-emotional coping strategies a person uses after experiencing negative events or situations. It comprises 36 items grouped in 9 scales: self-blame, acceptance, rumination, positive refocusing, refocus on planning, positive reappraisal, putting into perspective, catastrophizing, and other-blame. Cronbach's alpha coefficient across scales: .81 – .86.

Procedure

The present study is quantitative, transversal, and correlational. The data collected following the administration of questionnaires were introduced and processed in the IBM SPSS Statistics 20 program.

V. Results

The essential descriptive data that were obtained for the variable of interest on the considered sample are synthetized in the following table:

Table 1: Descriptive data for the total sample

Variable	Total sample size N=85	
	M	SD
Permissive parental style	28.40	5.54
Authoritarian parental style	27.67	6.27
Authoritative parental style	34.57	5.85
External anger expression (AX Out)	16.47	4.66
Internal anger expression (AX In)	17.03	4.58
External anger control (AC Out)	18.40	4.50
Internal anger control (AC In)	20.07	4.77
Self-blame	9.80	3.00
Blaming others	8.57	3.12
Rumination	11.28	2.97
Positive refocusing	11.91	3.44
Refocusing on planning	13.47	3.65
Positive reappraisal	12.93	3.43
Catastrophizing	9.17	3.09

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients obtained when testing the first two hypotheses. The significant values refer to the relationships between the

authoritarian parental style and internal anger expression, permissive parental style and both internal and external anger control, and authoritative parental style and the two mentioned anger management options (expression and control).

The first hypothesis was confirmed, and thus, it offers an argument that sustains the idea that authoritarian parents, who do not show interest in the adolescent's affective life, raise boys and girls who suffer on the inside, repressing the wrecking feelings rather than verbally or physically expressing them, but being hostile, judgmental, irritated, and manifesting withdrawal. The second hypothesis was also confirmed, offering support for the idea that permissive and authoritative parenting styles significantly correlate with the identified high levels for internal and external anger control. When parents show preoccupation for the child's inner life, she or he might have a right model of emotion regulation and an appropriate context of learning the necessary skills to adjust to emotional and social provocations.

Girls are significantly more prone to this kind of behavior than boys: when testing the mean differences between groups for the variable internal anger expression, the obtained value was $t(45.81) = -2.28, p < .05$. The boys included in the study presented a more pronounced tendency towards internal anger control. That means they invest more energy in calming and reducing anger: $t(83) = 2.018, p < .05$. This observation on the investigated adolescents is consistent with the general tendency in the Romanian sample presented in the STAXI 2 manual.

Table 2: Values of the correlation coefficients between parental styles and anger management strategies

Variables	Pearson's correlation coefficient r	Significance level p
Authoritarian parental style – internal anger expression	.220	$p < .05$
Permissive parental style – internal anger control	.309	$p < .01$
Permissive parental style – external anger control	.234	$p < .05$
Authoritative parental style – internal anger control	.233	$p < .05$
Authoritative parental style – external anger control	.322	$p < .01$

Table 3: Values of the correlation coefficients between parental styles and coping mechanisms

Variables	Pearson's correlation coefficient r	Significance level p
Authoritarian parental style – self-blame	.299	$p < .01$
Authoritarian parental style – blaming others	.308	$p < .01$
Authoritarian parental style – rumination	.258	$p < .05$
Authoritarian parental style – catastrophizing	.240	$p < .05$
Authoritative parental style – acceptance	.319	$p < .01$
Authoritative parental style – positive reappraisal	.301	$p < .01$
Authoritative parental style – refocus on planning	.277	$p = .01$
Authoritative parental style – putting into perspective	.311	$p < .01$

When testing the third and fourth hypotheses, concerning the relationships between parental styles and coping mechanisms, we obtained the results presented in Table 3. The values of the significance level p suggest the rejection of the null hypothesis and offer arguments that sustain the two alternative hypotheses. A complementary effect was observed: the authoritarian parental style correlates with the maladaptive coping strategies (self-blame, blaming others, rumination, catastrophizing), while the authoritative style tends to be associated with the adaptive coping mechanisms (acceptance, positive reappraisal, refocus on planning, putting into perspective). As the adolescents' perception on a cold and controlling parental attitude intensifies, they tend to blame others or themselves, to persistently think about negative events or interpret them as overwhelming and catastrophic. If adolescents feel instead that their parents offer them emotional security and predictable rules, they more frequently tend to have a constructive interpretation to distressing events, to put these into the larger context where also more difficult situations exist, to stay focused on problem-solving process, or to simply accept what happened.

Table 4 presents the correlations between anger expression/ control and coping mechanisms. The nucleus of the cognitive-emotional coping mechanisms associated to both internal and external anger expression

is represented by rumination, catastrophizing, and blaming others. The nucleus of the cognitive-emotional coping mechanisms, associated to both internal and external anger control, is represented by refocus on planning, positive reappraisal, and acceptance. We obtained no mediating effect of the relationship between the authoritarian/ authoritative parental styles and anger expression/ control by the cognitive-emotional coping strategies associated to them.

Table 4: Values of the correlation coefficients between anger expression/ control and coping mechanisms

Variables		Pearson's correlation coefficient r	Significance level p
Internal anger expression	acceptance	.309	p<.001
	rumination	.403	p<.001
	catastrophizing	.350	p<.001
	blaming others	.256	p<.05
External anger expression	rumination	.288	p<.05
	positive refocusing	.227	p<.05
	catastrophizing	.281	p<.01
	blaming others	.217	p<.05
Internal anger control	self-blame	.221	p<.05
	acceptance	.216	p<.05
	rumination	.224	p<.05
	refocus on planning	.273	p<.05
	positive reappraisal	.261	p<.05
External anger control	acceptance	.226	p<.05
	refocus on planning	.288	p<.01
	positive reappraisal	.235	p<.05

VI. Discussion

The present study investigated the relationship between parenting styles, ways of managing anger, and cognitive-emotional coping mechanisms used by adolescents. It was highlighted that the authoritarian parental style, depicted by reduced affection expression and increased control, is associated with the adolescent's tendency not to express anger. This style also correlates with the use of maladaptive coping strategies: blaming others, self-blame, rumination, and

catastrophizing. The above presented results are to be understood in connection to the theoretical elements mentioned by Bardina & Wierson (1997) and Bi et al. (2018), according to whom strict, authoritarian discipline, characterized by high pressure on the child and expressed aggression and rejection, generates anger, resentment, and rebellion in the child/ adolescent. These feelings determine social rejection or marginalization, that further amplifies the anger.

In addition to this, the authoritarian style may induce depressed mood in adolescents and difficulties of emotion regulation that also predict depression (Monzon, 2016). Not expressing anger and depression represent, in essence, the same psychological reality that could be based on inadequate mechanisms of managing emotions. Theoretically, a large array of dysfunctional emotions can be generated through the same maladaptive coping mechanisms. In our study, with regard to the relations between the intensity of anger as trait and state and specific coping mechanisms, we have only obtained significant correlations between blaming others and anger as trait ($r=.266, p<.05$), respectively between blaming others and the tendency of verbally expressing anger as state ($r=.223, p<.05$).

Moghaddam, Asli, Rakhshani & Taravatmanesh (2016) have also highlighted a significant direct correlation between the despotic parenting and anger, while they found a significant inverse connection between the authoritative style and anger. Physical comfort and parental acceptance are key elements of the parental support that allow the child to feel valued and loved, a fact that will be further reflected in a positive emotional trajectory (Barry, Frick & Grafeman, 2008).

In their paper, Rivers et al. (2007) show that positive reappraisal (a strategy focused on antecedent by giving another meaning to the event and that appeared in our study as associated to the authoritative parental style) is more efficient in reducing the emotional experience of the felt anger and its corresponding physiological response than the inhibition of the emotional expression (a strategy focused directly on the emotional response). Furthermore, the authors note the existence of gender differences in regulating discrete emotions, such as anger and sadness. It seems that, in the mentioned study, girls used more efficient methods so as to regulate anger, while boys applied more successful strategies in managing sadness. It appears that the efforts for emotion regulation are oriented towards avoiding an inadequate gender behavior. According to stereotypes, sadness is seen as a feminine

emotion, while anger tends to be considered a masculine emotion.

Pickover (2010) considers that a person's ability to control the experienced emotions is linked with early experiences and an insecure attachment may later be associated with an aggressive behavior. The fear of being abandoned by significant persons may conduct to a biased understanding of other's intentions, and, as a result, to anger and destruction.

When modelling children's and adolescents' cognitions, relevant for emotion regulation, it is useful to address the attribution of the controllable (intentional) or uncontrollable character of the other person's action, because this feature determines the nature of the experienced emotion. An action perceived as internal and controllable leads to anger (Bardina & Wilson, 1997). The authoritative parental style tends to prevent the intentional bias. Because this parenting style is associated with a series of adaptive cognitive-emotional coping mechanisms, it should be prevalently used. Specifically, this is also relevant for internal and external anger control.

Limits of the study and further directions:

- the reduced number of subjects, a fact that could justify the lack of evidence for any mediation effect;
- the cognitive-emotional coping mechanisms used by the parents were not considered; should we further include them in a study of a larger sample, we could better explain the transgenerational way of perpetuating different strategies in coping with stressful situations;
- differentiating between clinical vs. nonclinical situations when analyzing the considered correlations could improve the counselling process;
- the experimental study of specific emotion regulation and considering the awareness accuracy (the degree to which a person can distinguish among emotions), the moment when regulation strategies are used, their efficiency, and the influence of the maternal vs. paternal parenting style would represent other research directions on the current topic.

VII. Conclusion

The perceived parental style is relevant for the way adolescents manage their anger. If parents combine sustained control with emotional support and consider both affection and discipline, they help children learn how to regulate their angry feelings and lead a satisfying emotional and social life, by being able to express less verbal and physical anger. A parent who does not demonstrate care for his/ her child's affective life will

raise a nervous adolescent who feels anger, but does not express it, and who tends to use maladaptive coping strategies. During the educational and counseling process, the parents should be oriented towards adopting an authoritative style, that allow children and adolescents gain self-soothing skills, adequate behavior management, and assertive expression of negative emotions.

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