Reclaiming the Control Component of Authoritative Parenting

Baumrind’s authoritative parenting is widely accepted as the most beneficial parenting for American children, but the authoritative construct has been compromised by what Baumrind (elsewhere) has referred to as ‘definitional drift.’ Baumrind’s [2012] latest essay takes a critical step toward reclaiming the control component of this construct. To facilitate this reclamation, I pose three questions to the developmental community.

1) Is (Well-Reasoned) Permissive the New Authoritative?

Baumrind defines authoritative parenting as the balanced synthesis of responsiveness and demandingness. If we were to plot responsiveness on a vertical axis and demandingness on a horizontal axis, the authoritative quadrant would be the one in which parents are high on both dimensions. A review of contemporary definitions of authoritative parenting suggests that a reconceptualization has occurred such that Baumrind’s three main styles now occupy distinct positions along the control continuum. Permissive parents anchor the low end of the continuum; authoritarian parents anchor the high end. Somewhere in the middle are authoritative parents who (through primarily nonovert methods) attempt more control than permissive parents but exercise less control than authoritarian parents.

Evidence of this reconceptualization can be found in textbook definitions and measurement scales. One popular developmental textbook teaches that authoritative parents ‘consider themselves guides, not authorities’ [Berger, 2012, p. 299]. The authoritative subscale of the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire [Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995] credits parents for attempting to redirect children’s behavior via reasoning and induction but does not include any items assessing actual control or even explicit attempts at it. Induction works well for some children, but what is to be done with those who can’t or won’t be reasoned into healthy levels of compliance? What happens when one child’s level of noncompliance compromises the functionality of the family system? Divested of power assertion that is forceful when necessary,
authoritative parenting becomes the purview of high IQ parents with psychologically healthy, easy temperament, high IQ children. As such, it retains little to theoretically distinguish it from permissive parenting, except its more adroit attempts at induction.

(2) What Guidance Can We Give Parents about How to Spank?

The most concrete manifestation of the erosion of control from the authoritative construct is the excising of power-assertive discipline, particularly physical discipline. Although Darling and Steinberg [1993] have cautioned against conflating parenting style (a measure of emotional climate) with specific parenting practices, some textbooks present physical discipline as a shibboleth. Berger [2012] contrasted ‘usually forgiving (not punishing)’ authoritative parents with authoritarian parents from whom ‘misconduct brings strict punishment (usually physical).’ Lahey [2008, p. 351] wrote that ‘authoritative parents emphasize reinforcement of appropriate behavior and affectionate warmth over punishment; indeed they often do not use any physical punishment at all.’

Those who claim that authoritative parents eschew physical discipline misrepresent many authoritative parents. In doing so, they reinforce a popular notion that those of us in the ivory tower have little to offer parents in the trenches. Baumrind has consistently asserted that ‘authoritative parents endorse the judicious use of aversive consequences, which may include spanking, but in the context of a warm, engaged parent-child relationship’ [1996, p. 412]. Authoritative parents in her 1960s sample demonstrated an ‘average’ rate of spanking [Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010] and my own research [Gunnoe, 2011] has documented the use of age-delimited physical discipline by contemporary authoritative parents. In the present essay, Baumrind [2012, p. 42] re-establishes power assertion as foundational to the authoritative construct and nonabusive spanking as a normative expression of this power assertion. Because most authoritative parents do employ age-delimited spanking, physical discipline researchers should devote greater attention to delineating the conditions under which spanking is most likely to be beneficial versus detrimental so that parents who choose to spank can do so safely and effectively.

(3) Are Baumrind’s Typologies Still Useful?

An objection I have heard leveled against the parenting style approach is that it has outlived its usefulness as a research construct. Although there has been a good deal of microlevel socialization research that is not explicitly reckoned in parenting typologies, the results from these studies have not yet produced an organizing framework compelling enough to replace the typological approach standard to most developmental textbooks. Because parenting styles still serve as one of the most common paradigms for introducing students to the study of children’s socialization, it is critical that descriptions of the styles be based on the best conceptualization of
their central dimensions and accurate with respect to specifics. To this end, it is important to point out that several researchers specifically examining parental control in contemporary samples (e.g., Brian Barber, Robert Larzelere, Jelani Mandara, Nadia Sorkabi) find that authoritative parents still practice confrontive power assertion and that youth still benefit from it.

Finally, differences in the conceptualization of power assertion should not be taken to mean that other leading theorists see no place for it. In the Misleading Conceptualizations section of her essay, Baumrind [2012] implicates Martin Hoffman as one of the theorists responsible for the presumed incompatibility of power assertion and induction. But in a book that Baumrind did not review for this essay, Hoffman has articulated a position that is quite compatible with Baumrind’s. Like Baumrind, Hoffman [2000] promoted induction as parents’ primary discipline technique but clarifies that when the child is ‘acting in a particularly obnoxious or openly defiant manner … unqualified power assertion may be the best way at times for parents who usually use induction to communicate, loud and clear, their strong positive values on considering others and their particularly intense feelings about certain harmful acts’ [p. 148–149]. Thus, both of these esteemed scholars recognize the utility of early confrontive power assertion in fostering future competence, but Baumrind is outstanding in her sustained and concerted efforts to retain and reclaim parental power assertion as a critical contributor to children’s competence. For this, she is to be lauded.

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References


Variations in Parental Power Assertion: The Difference between the Effects of Confrontive and Coercive Control

Beginning in 1967, Diana Baumrind’s longitudinal program of research has provided the basis for much research on parenting. Baumrind’s data collection methods featured naturalistic observations in the home, parent interviews, and adolescent interviews. Beginning with her preschool sample, it is important to note that Baumrind [1967] identified eight parenting styles which included the authoritarian, directive, authoritative, democratic, good-enough, permissive, neglecting-rejecting (i.e., unengaged), and harmonious, not just the three types that are much studied and discussed in the literature (i.e., authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive). Also, the discovery of the neglecting-rejecting parenting style is often erroneously attributed (in textbooks and even in parenting and child development handbooks) to Maccoby and Martin [1983] as the fourth possible type of parenting style. It is not surprising then that some confusion and disagreement exists about the effects associated with variations in parental control when researchers have yet to note the eight parenting types that Baumrind identified.

Baumrind’s [2012] article in Human Development, as well as the accompanying commentaries by Joan Grusec and Wendy Grolnick, underscore that parental control has been conceptually defined and empirically operationalized in multiple ways by different researchers using different methods to gather data (i.e., largely varieties of surveys/questionnaires and to a lesser extent observation and interview), which makes it difficult to draw conclusions from the parenting literature about the beneficial and deleterious aspects of parental control during different
developmental periods. Furthermore, in some research based on Baumrind’s work, especially questionnaire research, parenting styles have been defined and operationalized in ways that are incongruent with the ways Baumrind conceptually and operationally defined each type. Therefore, I laud Baumrind’s much-needed recent endeavor to distinguish qualitative variations in the ways parents exercise control.

As Baumrind [2012] indicates and Grusec concurs, parental control even during adolescence is essential to the socialization process, therefore, to question the necessity of parental control in the socialization process is to suggest, as Judith Rich Harris [1998] did, that parents have little or no effect. Baumrind’s research aim was to show that normative variations in the ways parents exercise control, not just in the ways they are responsive, are related to variations in developmental outcomes. Therefore, even when parents are functioning within the normative range and cannot be categorized as abusive or neglectful, their actions are related to real differences in how well prepared their children are to meet societal standards for adulthood. Baumrind’s work is especially important, because some laypeople and researchers think relativistically that one way of parenting is as good as another way of parenting. Baumrind has shown that ‘normal’ variations are related to significant differences in outcomes for children and adolescents.

Baumrind [2012] noted that in the literature on parenting the link between parental responsiveness (i.e., autonomy granting, warmth, praise, and acknowledgment of achievement) and positive developmental outcomes has been emphasized without equal consideration of the role of the demandingness/control dimension. For example, Baumrind indicated that authoritative parenting has been reduced to the responsive and autonomy granting dimension without an accommodation of her definition of authoritative demandingness, which, in addition to the use of reason and explanation, included exercise of firm control, clear and nonnegotiable rules, enforcement of rules and limits, and designation and implementation of consequences for noncompliance.

In her commentary, Grolnick [2012] indicated that she does not advocate permissive parenting as she correctly says is evident in her formulation of the constructs of parental autonomy support, structure, and involvement. Her definitions are consistent with important features of authoritative parenting. Grolnick defined autonomy support as supporting child initiative, empathically taking child perspective, engaging in joint problem solving, and providing choice. These are all critical aspects of authoritative parenting. Grolnick defined structure as the provision of rules, expectations, and consequences that are also important defining features of authoritative parenting. However, I believe that Grolnick’s definition of structure and Baumrind’s definition of control diverge in that Grolnick does not include what parents do or ought to do to enforce the
structure they have jointly set up with the child. When the parent has set up the environment properly and has jointly established rules but the child or adolescent still does not comply, what should a parent do, or more importantly, how do parents vary in what they actually do, and how are these variations related to different child outcomes? With some children, as Baumrind found in harmonious families, it is sufficient for parents to convey structure without taking any additional steps to ensure that their children comply with their rules and expectations. Thus, it may be that Grolnick’s constructs are consistent with Baumrind’s discovery of harmonious parents who have control (i.e., child complies with rules and expectations) without having to overtly exercise control, and thus, are highly autonomy supportive.

However, as personal experience and research have shown, many children require additional measures in order to comply with developmentally appropriate structure, to understand the necessary reality that choice cannot always be offered, and that some actions have consequences that cannot be redressed (e.g., harming others physically or psychologically). Such messages about the unconditional or fixed nature of certain actions and consequences need not be conveyed harshly or without empathy. However, to not convey such a message would mislead children and even adolescents about short- and long-term consequences, which is precisely what permissive parents do – mislead children about consequences and constraints that attend action. Ultimately, control has to be applied at some point to ensure that structure retains integrity. However, structure cannot be retained and will be defied without autonomy support and recognition of children’s positive initiative, which is precisely what authoritarian parents fail to do – leave children confused about the nature of rules and standards for achievement. By misleading and confusing children about the reality that governs the link between actions and consequences, authoritarian and permissive parents fail to function as developmental facilitators (the prime function of a parent) and instead act as developmental obstructors and impeders.

What parents do when children do not comply with rules and expectations is what distinguishes parents who, in Baumrind’s [2012] terms, are confrontive from those who are not confrontive. That is, a parent’s willingness to exert effort to enforce rules and expectations is what distinguishes the permissive and unengaged parent from the democratic, good-enough, authoritative, directive, and authoritarian parent. As Baumrind indicated, permissive and unengaged parents are unwilling or unable to exercise control, confront, or follow up to ensure that their children meet parental and societal rules and expectations. All other types of parents are willing to follow up, exercise control, and, if necessary, confront their children to make certain that rules and expectations (structure) are followed. Following up and ensuring that children are functioning within the parameters of the jointly constructed structure is to some extent consistent
with Grolnick’s construct of parental involvement (i.e., sharing resources such as parents’ time, availability, interest in and knowledge of child activities).

The ways parents control or follow up brings us to Baumrind’s next distinction. Authoritarian parents enforce rules and expectations by way of coercion, whereas directive, authoritative, democratic, and good-enough parents do not. For example, in my research [Sorkhabi & Middaugh, 2011], we have found that authoritarian parents employ such coercive parenting practices as yelling, interrogating, demanding without use of reason, threatening negative consequences, using shame and guilt, teasing, ridiculing, calling adolescent names, taking physical measures (e.g., shutting down the computer, taking away objects), and physically supervising adolescent activity (e.g., sitting with adolescent to do homework). These are coercive means of ensuring that adolescents do what is expected of them, which we found in cluster analyses to be highly characteristic of authoritarian mothers and fathers. We found that authoritarian parents had the highest levels of conflict with adolescents and the lowest levels of knowledge about adolescent activities, and were least likely to have adolescents who disclose their activities to them. Directive, authoritative, and democratic parents, on the other hand, did enforce rules, which in Baumrind’s terms means that they were confrontive (to varying degrees), but in rational and reasoned ways. These parents were highly likely to employ rational-demanding practices, such as reminding an adolescent and expecting compliance, using reason and explanation, demanding after explanation, admonishing with concern or worry, pointing out negative natural consequences, requiring an adolescent to correct/redress a negative outcome, and monitoring (e.g., talking to adolescent about his/her activities). Such practices, compared to those practiced by authoritarian parents, were related to lower parent-adolescent conflict, greater parental knowledge of adolescent activities, and greater adolescent disclosure of activities. Conflicts with these parents were also more likely to be resolved by mutual compromise than to remain unresolved. Again, it is important to emphasize that the difference between authoritarian and authoritative parents is not just in how responsive each is but also the quality or type of control practices each employs.

As Baumrind [2012] and Grusec [2012] concurred, it is important that parental power be asserted overtly and directly as opposed to covertly and manipulatively. Parents’ attempts to divert their children’s attention from the reality that they are exerting control will eventually be perceived by children and adolescents who observe their parents’ behavior and think about what their parents are doing and what their parents’ motives are. Smetana’s [1995] research has shown that children think about the actions of authority figures, such as parents, and coordinate these actions with the domain of interaction to judge the legitimacy of parental authority. Therefore, it is unlikely that parental manipulation or covert control will remain unnoticed by children and adolescents. In fact, such covert control, once identified, may engender resentment on the part of children and
undermine children’s trust in their parents. Furthermore, covert manipulation may also introduce ambiguity and confusion, because the logic that necessitates certain rules and limits are not explained (e.g., family rituals, rules necessary for order and efficiency).

In sum, authoritative parents, in ways consistent with self-determination theory, grant autonomy so that children feel volitional and agentic, which may also be related to feelings of competence and effectiveness. I would add that feelings of effectiveness and competence are not just subjective evaluations based on personal standards, but are related to actual achievement based on external standards. Goal achievement requires discipline, which is acquired over the span of childhood and adolescence through sustained effort. Some children and adolescents may not be intrinsically motivated to exert sustained effort and need external constraints to develop self-discipline. To help children feel competent, it is not enough to lavish empty praise (e.g., good try) on children when they have failed or have yet to achieve. Such empty praise is not only superfluous but also confusing to children and patronizing to adolescents who have difficulty reconciling the positive feedback they receive, often from a permissive parent, with the negative or substandard outcome they can plainly observe. Similarly, children and adolescents find it enigmatic to reconcile the cold indifference or negative feedback of the authoritarian parent who ignores or diminishes true excellence and achievement. Therefore, parental authoritative control is necessary for children to develop self-discipline needed to achieve goals in order to feel competent. As Baumrind [2012] indicated, authoritative parents are distinct because they respond logically and contingently, not arbitrarily (as do permissive and authoritarian parents), to the outcomes of the child’s actions.

As Smetana [1995] found and Grusec [2012] concurred, the domain in which power is asserted is a significant aspect of evaluating the legitimacy and effects of parental power assertion. Authoritative parents are more likely than permissive or authoritarian parents to make proper domain distinctions, to grant autonomy in the personal domain, and to regulate the moral, conventional, and prudential domains. However, it is also important to emphasize that the ways parents assert power and the kinds of control practices they employ in the domains where they have legitimate authority and jurisdiction (i.e., moral, conventional, personal, and prudential) also affect outcomes. Parental authority can be undermined not only when parents attempt to control the personal domain where, according to adolescents, they have no authority, but also by the ways parents assert control in the moral, conventional, and prudential domains, where according to adolescents, they do have authority.

In conclusion, future directions for research can include an examination of the joint effects of domains in which power is asserted, as well as the ways in which power is asserted. Given the
present debate and Baumrind’s distinction between coercive and confrontive control and her differentiation of eight parenting types, future research would benefit from employing operational definitions and data collection methods (e.g., observation, interview) that enable us to more easily apply conclusions from the literature about parental control to real-world parent-child interactions.

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References


