

PARENTAL CONDITIONAL REGARD

AVI ASSOR
BEN GURION UNIVERSITY
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"He (Baba) lit a match and said, casually: 'I think maybe you'll win the tournament this year. What do you think? I didn't know what to think... Was that what it would take? ... Baba was used to winning... Didn't he have a right to expect the same from his son? And just imagine. If I did win? I was going to win. There was no other viable option.... I was going to win... Show him once and for all that his son was worthy"

Khaled Hosseini: *The Kite Runner* (p. 56)

The experience described in the above quote, told from the viewpoint of an Afghan child, appears to touch a chord common to people in many cultures; namely, children's feeling that their parents esteem and affection depends on them fulfilling their parents' expectations. Following Rogers' and later work by Assor, Roth and their colleagues, we refer to this experience as perceived parental conditional regard (i.e., PCR). In this experience, children perceive their parents as using *a socializing practice* in which parents' affection and appreciation as depending on the attainment of parentally valued outcomes or the enactment of valued behaviors. For example, the child in Hosseini's book appears to have felt that his father's esteem (and attention) depended on him excelling in tournaments and acting in a tough manly tough way. Assor, Roth and their colleagues further distinguished between two types of parental conditional regard: Positive and negative. In the case of parental conditional *positive* regard, parents are perceived to provide more affection and esteem than usual when the child meets parents' expectations; In the case of parental conditional *negative* regard, parents are perceived to provide less affection and esteem than usual when the child does not meet parents' expectations.

The difference between conditional regard and other socializing practices

Conditional positive regard is not identical with positive feedback or praise. Thus, children may report that their parents praise them, and still do not feel conditionally regarded

because they do not experience the praise as implying that their value as a person or their parents' love depends on them meeting specific expectations. It is also important to note that although the concept of PCR is close to the widely examined construct of psychological control, there are some important differences. First, psychological control, unlike PCR, only refers to contingent negative regard. In addition, psychological control differs from PCR in that it includes components of intrusiveness and blame which children cannot affect by their behavior.

The emotional and relational costs of conditional parental regard

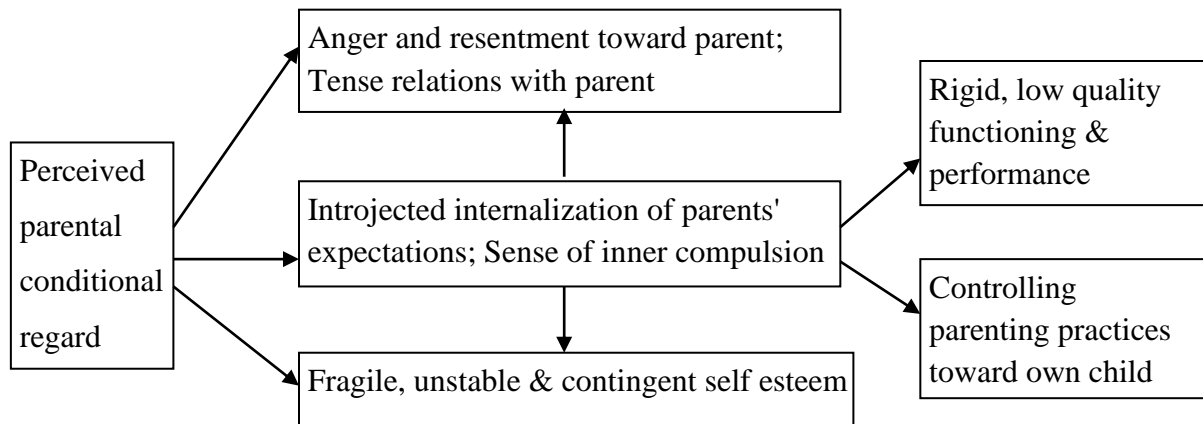
From a behaviorist perspective, conditional regard might represent the contingent administration of rewards and punishments, which are expected to improve discrimination between desired and undesired behaviors and to increase the likelihood of desired behaviors that are emitted.

However, other psychological theorists have presented a quite different view of conditional regard. Rogers proposed that parents' conditional regard undermines children's self-esteem and interferes with personal exploration. Object relations theorists have suggested that children, when they learn they are loved conditionally, behave in ways they imagine will yield the desired love. The instrumental behaviors thus persist, but the satisfaction the children experience when they successfully execute the behaviors is fleeting because the behaviors never yield the unconditional regard the children truly desire.

The most extensive research on the phenomenon of perceived conditional parental regard was conducted in the last decade, by Assor, Roth and their colleagues, based mostly on Deci and Ryan's self determination theory. Results of this research suggest that PCR has considerable emotional and relational costs for children and to some extent also for parents. These costs are depicted in Figure 1.

The following sections present the main ideas and findings pertaining to the costs of PCR as summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Emotional and relational costs of perceived parents' use of conditional regard to promote child internalization of parents' expectations and values



Introjected internalization of parents' expectations.

According to Self Determination Theory, in introjected internalization, behaviors and goals that are valued by parents are "taken in" without the child accepting them as truly valuable. Rather, the reason those behaviors and goals are internalized is that they prevent loss of parental regard or enhance parental affection and appreciation. As a result, behavior is controlled by the desire to avoid feeling unworthy or ashamed, and/or by the striving to feel is love-worthy and esteem-worthy. The pressure of avoiding loss of self-regard or gaining more self-regard causes the behaviors and goals adopted via introjected internalization to feel controlling and not autonomous. Furthermore, when people think about these behaviors and goals or engage in them they feel a sense of internal compulsion and pressure, which is the psychological mark of the introjected motivation. That is, one feels that there is something within oneself that forces one to do something she/he do not fully want to do.

Empirical research by Assor, Roth, Soenens, and Vansteenkiste and their colleagues has provided considerable support for the link between perceived PCR and introjected, highly stressful internalization of the parental expectations promoted by PCR. Importantly, this link

was detected not only in cultural contexts endorsing the value of autonomy, but also in cultures valuing deference and obedience to parental authority (e.g., Bedouins in Israel). For example, it was found that students who perceived their parents as hinging their regard on academic success, achievement in sport, pro-social behavior or suppression of negative emotions reported feeling internally compelled to act in ways that would attain those parentally valued attributes. A similar pattern was identified in the domain of religious socialization.

Rigid and Shallow enactment of the behaviors promoted by parental conditional regard

If a parental value is internalized, one would expect some degree of subsequent enactment of behavior reflecting that value. However, the feelings of pressure, anxiety and ambivalence accompanying the introjected value are likely to result in a constricted, shallow, rigid and uncreative enactment of the parentally valued behaviors. Thus, the anxiety children experience may cause them to stick to known routes rather than taking a chance on creative methods. In addition, the ambivalence experienced with regard to the introjected parental value may, subconsciously, undermine the motivation for high quality performance. In line with this view, it was found that parents' use of conditional regard to promote children's studying hard at school was associated with children's inclination to focus only on getting satisfactory grades, and was negatively related to children's 'exploration and interest in subjects that go beyond test requirements. Similarly, parents' use of conditional regard to promote helping was associated with an insensitive type of helping.

Poor Well-Being and Fluctuations in Self-esteem

The experience of PCR is likely to cause children's self-esteem to depend on fulfillment of parental expectations, which then leads to unstable self-esteem. Thus, it was found that students who reported being exposed to PCR experienced a strong sense shame and unworthiness following failure and a strong sense of grandiosity and superiority following

success. PCR was also found to be associated with anxiety and depressive feelings.

Anger and resentment toward parents

Parents' use of conditional regard to pressure children to behave in specific ways can arouse strong negative feelings in relation to parents. Specifically, such pressure was found to be associated with anger and resentment toward parents, apparently because it undermines children's sense of autonomy and because it indicates that the parents do not trust their children that they will behave in desirable ways out of their own choice.

Controlling parenting practices toward own child.

Children who remember their parents as employing conditional regard as major socializing practice were found to recreate this practice and other controlling practices in their own relations with their children. Thus, the harmful effects of conditional regard appear to pass from generation to generation.

Personality dispositions promoting the use of parental conditional regard.

There is some research indicating the parents suffering from contingent self esteem tend to use PCR to pressure their children to perform in ways that would enhance parents' self esteem. The term contingent self esteem refers to the feeling that one's self esteem is unstable, and depends strongly on one's achievements, appearance and acceptance by others.

The harmful nature of the seemingly benign practice of conditional *positive* regard

As already noted, PCR is comprised of both conditional positive and negative regard. While conditional negative regard is viewed by most experts as undesirable, there is less agreement concerning conditional positive regard because this practice appears to involve the provision more regard when children comply. However, research suggests that conditional positive regard is also harmful, despite its seemingly benign nature. Thus, in a number of studies it was found to be associated with the stressful, introjected type of internalization of parents'

expectations, and with rigid, overly driven, investment in the behaviors parents' value.

Vicarious and implicit conditional regard

Most CPR studies assume that the children experience CPR because of the way their parents respond to them following compliance or breach of parents' expectations. However, the perception of parental regard as conditional on enactment of specific child behaviors can develop also via an indirect social (vicarious) learning process. In this vicarious process, children perceive the increased esteem given to others who perform in ways esteemed by parents as implying that their parents would also value them more if they too would perform in a similar way. And, indeed recent research suggests that perceiving one's mother as valuing siblings or others because of their high achievements was associated with introjected academic motivation and the experience of conditional parental regard. These findings suggest that the adverse effects of PCR are quite widespread because they operate both directly and indirectly through social learning.

Limitations

Most of the findings reported in this entry assessed PCR using offspring's reports in cross-sectional studies. Present longitudinal research using observational and experimental methods is likely to shed more light on the phenomenon and dynamics of PCR.

Conclusion

The findings from the various studies presented in this chapter suggest that while the use of conditional regard as a socializing practice might sometimes promote the expected child behaviors, this practice has great psychological costs for both children and parents. Advocates of the use of conditional regard might argue that these costs disappear as children grow older. However, the current evidence does not support this position. In summary, present research on PCR suggests that although the use of conditional regard may be a relatively convenient socialization practice, the negative psychological and relational costs associated with it argue for the use of less controlling and more autonomy-supportive methods.

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