The bidirectional relation between parental controlling behavior and child anxiety
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1 General introduction

Anxiety disorders are one of the most, perhaps the most prevalent mental disorders in pre-adolescent children (Cartwright-Hatton, McNicol, & Doubleday, 2006). International prevalence rates range from 2.6% to 41.2%. An anxiety disorder can have negative consequences for academic, interpersonal, and family functioning, and seems an important risk factor for the development of psychopathology in adulthood, including an anxiety disorder and depression (Goodwin, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2004; Last, Perrin, Hersen, & Kazdin, 1996; Reinherz, Paradis, Giaconia, Stashwick, & Fitzmaurice, 2003; Strauss, Frame, & Forehand, 1987; Woodward & Fergusson, 2001).

Taken together, these facts emphasize the importance of understanding the influence of factors and processes on the etiology and maintenance of childhood anxiety. Theoretic models on the etiology of anxiety disorders have emphasized the influence of parenting, especially parental control (e.g., Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007). In this thesis, the main theme is the bidirectional relation between parental control and child anxiety (§1.1). Moreover, two subthemes are discussed in relation to the main theme: the role of parent anxiety (§1.2), and the influence of parent gender (§1.3).

1.1 Main theme: Bidirectionality of parental control and child anxiety

As explained above, there is a growing interest in the role of parenting behaviors in the etiology and maintenance of child anxiety (e.g., Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; McLeod et al., 2007). Of Maccoby and Martin’s (1983) parenting continuums of control and support, the first continuum of parental control is considered most central to the development of anxiety in children. In this thesis I consider parental control as the pressure parents put on their children to think, feel or behave in desired ways. The idea is that parental control may lead to an increase in the children’s perception of threat and to a
reduction of children’s perceived control over threat. This pattern may enhance child anxiety by increasing children’s avoidance of challenging events, as children will not develop new skills to cope with these situations (Barlow, 2002; Rapee, 2001).

Researchers have discussed the transactional nature of parent-child interactions and the effects of child anxiety on parenting. Children do not passively undergo parental influences, but actively contribute to the interaction with their parents (e.g., Chess & Thomas, 1984). Anxious children may be harder to parent (Chess & Thomas, 1984). That is, these children may elicit more negative parenting due to difficulties comforting (Rubin & Mills, 1991). In anticipation of their children’s anxiety related distress, parents may feel the need to minimize children’s emotional expressions, and may have less confidence in their children’s autonomy. As a result parents may become more controlling (Hudson & Rapee, 2004; Rubin & Mills, 1991). However, in the long run, parental autonomy granting is thought to be a more adequate strategy helping children to cope with stressors (e.g., Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006).

1.2 Subtheme 1: Influence of parent anxiety

Child anxiety alone may not be a sufficient explanation for the degree of control parents display. In particular, parents’ own anxiety level has been proposed to influence parental control (e.g., Adam, Gunnar, & Tanaka, 2004; Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; Ginsburg, Grover, & Ialongo, 2004; Turner, Beidel, Roberson-Nay, & Tervo, 2003). Highly anxious parents tend to perceive challenging new situations for their children as threatening. They therefore may execute increased parental control to avoid threatening situations and to avoid feeling anxious. These parents control their children’s behaviors and emotions by preventing them from facing new challenging situations (Wood, 2006; Woodruff-Borden, Morrow, Bourland, & Cambron, 2002). In this thesis, the role of parents’ own anxiety in relation to parental control is studied.
1.3 Subtheme 2: Role of parent gender

Studies of the relations between child anxiety and parenting predominantly examined mothers. There are no a-priori reasons, however, to assume that fathers would be less important (Bögels & Phares, 2008; Phares & Compas, 1992), as there is an accumulation of empirical evidence showing that parenting behaviors differ between fathers and mothers (Bögels & Phares, 2008; Grossmann, Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, Kindler, Schreuer-Englisch, & Zimmerman, 2002; Paquette, 2004). A complementary balance of roles may exist for mothers and fathers, with each role serving a distinctive and quite separate function: mothers to soothe and fathers to stimulate (Bögels & Perotti, 2009). Mothers tend to be more focused on care in interaction with their children and calming them when they show a high degree of emotionality or anxiety. Fathers’ role can be characterized by stimulating children’s independence and empowering them in opening their world outside the family. In this thesis, the role of parent gender is an important focus.

1.4 Exploration of research designs and methods

Most previous research on the relation between child anxiety and parental control cannot provide evidence supporting theoretical models explaining the bidirectionality between child anxiety and parental control. Studies examining the relation between child anxiety and parental control were mainly cross-sectional in nature. This makes it impossible to examine the directionality of the relation. That is, whether parental control increases anxiety in children and/or the reverse, the influence of child anxiety in eliciting parental control. In this thesis, I explore the use of different types of research designs and methods in order to examine the bidirectional relation of child anxiety and parenting behaviors.

Moreover, many previous studies assessed parental control by means of questionnaires, but not with observational methods. Studies rely on parents’ and/or children’s report of children’s anxiety and parental control, which may lead to over inflation of the association due to shared method variance (Ge, Conger, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994). Furthermore, children and parents often perceive parental control quite differently (Bögels & Van Melick, 2004).
Bidirectionality between parental control and child anxiety

Moreover, it should be noted that the association between questionnaire-measured and observed parenting tends to be weak (e.g., Dishion, Li, Spracklen, Brown, & Haas, 1998). It seems that parental control measured by questionnaires and observed parental control constitute different constructs. Both of which may be valuable, as reported parental control reflects the reporter’s perspective, the history of interactions and the emotional meaning attached to them (Sheeber, Hops, & Davis, 2001). In contrast, data from observational studies can help elucidate what actually occurs during parent-child interactions. Furthermore, observed parental control lends to the development of intervention strategies to reduce actual parental control. In this thesis, in most chapters the role of observed parenting was examined.

The exploration of the use of different research designs and methods resulted in five studies derived from independent data collections, each applying different research designs and methods. A first step before examining the bidirectionality of child anxiety and parental control is to provide a clear answer to whether child anxiety is related to parental control. A meta-analytic design was used to examine the relation between parental control observed during parent-child interactions and child anxiety.

In order to examine the bidirectionality between parental control and child anxiety different research designs were applied. To provide more insight in the bidirectional process during parent-child interactions, the relation between actual parents’ controlling behaviors and children’s anxiety behaviors, both measured during the same parent-child interaction, was examined. Using a longitudinal design it was studied whether negative emotionality- considered as a precursor of child anxiety- would predict later parental control. In a clinical experiment, in which child anxiety was manipulated, the influence of child anxiety on parental control was studied. In the reverse direction, I examined whether parental control would influence children’s approach behaviors. Lastly, in a clinical longitudinal intervention study, I studied whether a parent training, focused on changing parental control, would decrease children’s clinical anxiety.
1.5 Outline of the thesis

In this thesis, five studies from independent data collections are presented. In the next chapters, these five studies are presented separately.

Chapter 2 describes a meta-analytic review on the relation of child anxiety and observed parental control and parent anxiety and observed parental control. Moreover, factors were identified that may function as moderators of these relations, such as research design, parent gender, child gender, child age, and type of interaction task.

Chapter 3 presents a cross-sectional study examining the relative contribution of self-reported child and parent trait anxiety on paternal and maternal controlling behavior. Non-clinical children, aged 7-12 years, completed two difficult Tangram puzzles, once with their father and once with their mother. Differences in the relation between anxiety and parental control for boys and girls were examined. Chapter 3 describes a first attempt to provide some insight in whether children’s actual anxiety behaviors guide parents’ controlling behavior.

In Chapter 4, in a longitudinal study, observed parenting behaviors, related to the parenting continuums of control (psychological control and autonomy granting) and support (rejection and emotional warmth), are examined as mediators of the relation between perceived children’s negative emotionality at 3.5 years of age and depression and anxiety problems at 4.5 years. Negative emotionality -considered as the tendency to react to stressors with high degrees of emotionality- is indicated to be a precursor of child anxiety. Non-clinical children were observed during unstructured parent-child interactions, once with their father and once with their mother. The focus of bidirectionality between child anxiety and parental control was addressed by examining if children’s negative emotionality would predict later parental control.

Chapter 5 reports on an experimental study examining maternal controlling and autonomy granting behaviors as mediators of the relation between children’s anxiety and children’s approach behavior in spider anxious girls, aged 8-12 years, during a spider exposure task in the presence of their mother. Moreover, the relation between mothers’ anxiety and their controlling and autonomy granting behaviors was studied. An attempt was made to clarify the bidirectionality of the relation between parental control and child anxiety by examining the influence of children’s anxiety during the exposure on mothers’ controlling and autonomy
granting behaviors. In the reverse direction, I studied whether mothers’ controlling and autonomy granting behaviors would influence children’s approach behaviors of these spiders.

Chapter 6 describes differential effectiveness between fathers and mothers helping their children overcome anxiety disorders by means of Cognitive Behavioral Parent Training (CBPT). The father or mother of the children, aged 7-12 years, was randomly assigned to CBPT. Difference between father CBPT versus mother CBPT in improvement in child anxiety, parental control and autonomy granting, and parents’ own anxiety (6 weeks) after CBPT are investigated. Apart from teaching parents to act as lay cognitive-behavioral therapists for their children, another goal of the training was teaching parents to be less controlling, but stimulate their children’s autonomy in order to help their children overcome severe anxiety. The issue of bidirectionality between parental control and child anxiety was addressed by examining whether a parent training focused on changing parental control would help their children overcome anxiety disorders.

In Chapter 7, the results of the Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are integrated and discussed further with respect to the main theme of the thesis: The bidirectional relation between parental control and child anxiety. The results of the Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 6 are discussed in light of the influence of parent anxiety on parental control (subtheme 1). The findings of Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 6 are discussed with respect to the role of parent gender (subtheme 2). Moreover, Chapter 7 discusses the value of the different research designs used in this thesis. Lastly, clinical implications and ideas for future research are presented.