

Ethnic Group Differences in Perceived Psychological Control During Emerging Adulthood



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Introduction

Emerging adulthood is the developmental period where individuals (ages 18 and 25 years) develop their identity and gain greater autonomy (Arnett, 2000). Parental psychological control, which is the use of intrusive parenting practices that induce child compliance through psychological and emotional manipulation, may undermine emerging adults' autonomy development (Barber, 1996). Two types of psychological control have been identified: (1) dependency-oriented (DPC) which refers to the use of psychological control as a means to keep children physically and emotionally close; and (2) achievement-oriented (APC) which refers to the use of psychological control as a means to ensure that children adhere to parental standards for achievement (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Luyten, 2010). However, there is limited knowledge regarding how these specific types of parental psychological control contributes to the functioning of emerging adults of various ethnic groups in the U.S.

Thus, the present study compared parental psychological control (DPC and APC) among African American, Asian American, European American emerging adults. In addition, the moderating role of ethnicity in the relation between parental psychological control and depressive symptoms were assessed.

Method

Participants

Participants included European American ($n = 251$, $M_{age} = 20.37$, $SD = 1.68$), Asian American ($n = 155$, $M_{age} = 20.08$, $SD = 1.62$), and African American ($n = 98$, $M_{age} = 20.36$, $SD = 1.58$) students attending a mid-Atlantic University.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from various courses, and incentives included extra course credit or eligibility for a cash prize drawing. Informed consent was obtained, and participants completed with a 45-minute online survey.

Measures:

- Parental Psychological Control (DPC and APC):** The Dependency-oriented and Achievement-oriented Psychological Control Scale (Soenens et al., 2010)
- Emerging adults' Depressive Symptoms:** The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977)

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Results

- No significant group differences were found in emerging adults' depressive symptoms, $F(2, 499) = 2.04$, $p = .132$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$.
- There were significant group differences in DPC, $F(2, 499) = 10.29$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Asian Americans ($M = 26.70$) were found to score higher on DPC than European Americans ($M = 21.98$).
- There were significant group differences on APC, $F(2, 499) = 13.32$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. Asian Americans ($M = 27.39$) scored significantly higher on APC than both African Americans ($M = 23.83$) and European Americans ($M = 22.28$).
- DPC significantly predicted depressive symptoms, $b = 0.39$, $t = 8.15$, $p < .001$. However, ethnicity did not moderate the association between DPC and depressive symptoms, $F(7, 496) = 10.74$, $p < .001$.
- APC significantly predicted depressive symptoms, $b = 0.36$, $t = 7.44$, $p < .001$. Moreover, ethnicity moderated the association between APC and depressive symptoms, $F(7, 496) = 9.54$, $p < .001$.
 - The association between APC and depressive symptoms was stronger for Asian Americans ($b = .52$) than European Americans ($b = .27$).

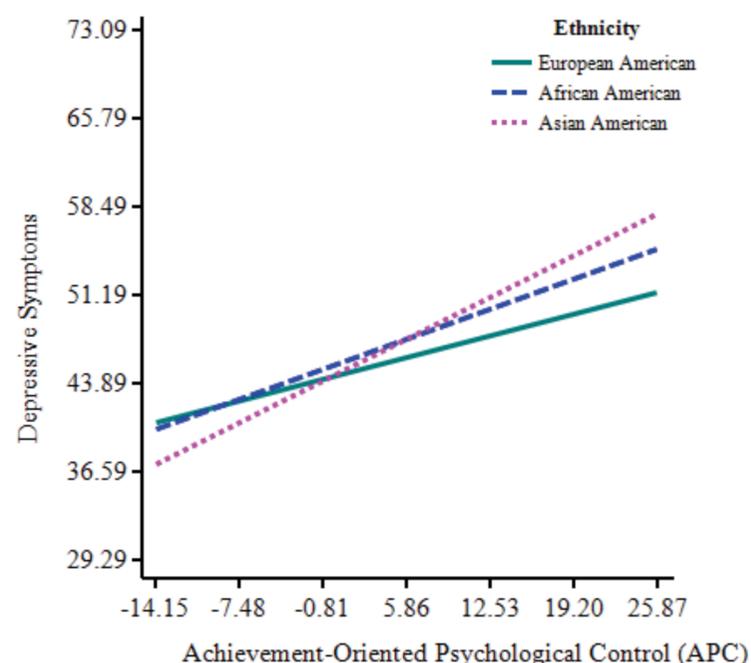


Figure 1. Interaction Between Ethnicity and APC in Predicting Depressive Symptoms

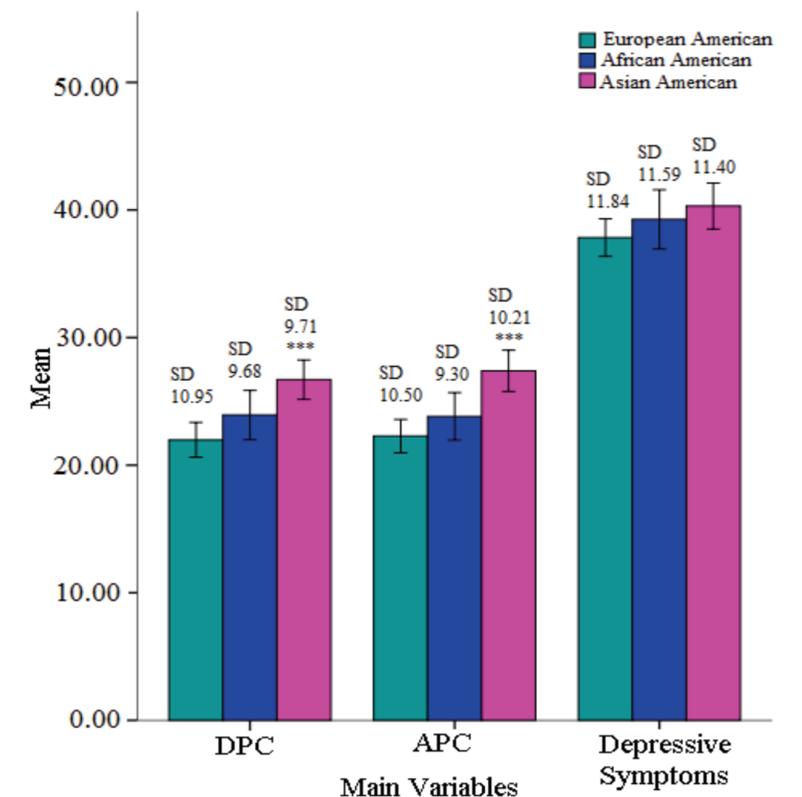


Figure 2. Descriptive Statistics for Main Variables. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Asian American mothers were perceived to engage in higher levels of DPC than their European American counterparts, and higher levels of APC than their European American and African American counterparts. This supports previous findings that the use of parental psychological control may be emphasized in interdependent cultures (Chao & Aque, 2009). Importantly, both DPC and APC were associated with greater depressive symptoms across all ethnicities, indicating that such forms of parental control violate the shared need for autonomy during emerging adulthood (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, Asian American emerging adults appeared to be more negatively impacted by APC, which contradicts some previous theoretical conjectures that psychological control would be less detrimental due to its greater normativity in Asian cultures. Due to the already high parental expectations, the use of APC may lead to even greater self-criticism and social comparison among Asian American emerging adults, leading to further internalizing difficulties. These findings demonstrate both similarities and differences in the role of parental psychological control during emerging adulthood.