A Research Study on Parental Psychological Control, Childhood Anxiety, and Self-Perception in Later Adulthood

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While previous literature reports an association between experiences of parental psychological control and childhood anxiety, there is some evidence that further research is required to establish the relationship of these two concepts on self-perception later, in adulthood. This qualitative study therefore focused on adult experiences only, by examining the relationship between a person's perceived experiences of parental psychological control in childhood, self-reported childhood anxiety, and self-perception later, in adulthood. Self-perception was explored through participant's descriptions of their self-esteem and self-worth, competence and coping style, and autonomy and independence. Data from semi-structured interviews amongst six participants (four female, and two male) was analysed by utilising an inductive thematic analysis. Results supported a relationship between a person's perceived experiences of parental psychological control, self-reported childhood anxiety, and current self-perception in adulthood. Limitations, implications, and recommendations for future studies were discussed.

Keywords: *parental psychological control, childhood anxiety, self-perception in adulthood, thematic analysis*

Introduction

There is considerable research in relation to controlling child-rearing styles, and their relationship to the psychological development of children. There is also empirical evidence to suggest that psychologically controlling parenting may create a psychological strain towards the healthy development and functioning of a child, particularly towards the child's cognitive state, and emotional well-being (Bilal, Sadiq, & Ali, 2013; Schleider, Vélez, Krause, & Gillham, 2013). Barber (1996) particularly claims that parental psychological control may be categorised as a separate dimension of child-rearing behaviours that involves a constriction, and a lack of encouragement of a child's psychological autonomy, as well as an invalidation and manipulation of a child's emotional experience (as cited in Wei & Kendall, 2014).

Research by Pereira, Canavarro, Cardoso, and Mendonça (2008) supports this, suggesting that high parental psychological control (in the context of a poor emotional climate), may be perceived by the child as an attempt by their parents to restrain personal autonomy, and to retain power within the parent-child relationship. The regulation of feelings, emotions, and opinions of the child is therefore a key characteristic of psychologically controlling parenting (Ozdemir, 2012; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Luyten, 2010). Scanlon and Epkins (2015) suggest that shaming, guilt induction and love withdrawal are all inclusive features of the covert form of control that psychologically controlling parents typically display towards their children. Consequently, psychological control has been associated with parental criticism, parental rejection, and a lack of emotional warmth (Settipani et al., 2013) (as cited in Scanlon & Epkins, 2015).

Literature Review

There is empirical support for a relationship between psychologically controlling parenting, and children's internalising symptomatology including anxiety symptoms (Scanlon & Epkins, 2015). According to Spielberger (2014), 'The term anxiety is used to describe an unpleasant emotional state that is characterised

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by subjective feelings of apprehension and worry, and is evoked whenever an individual perceives a stimulus or situation as harmful, dangerous, or threatening' (p. 482). It is important to highlight that childhood anxiety may present within the child in various forms, as a result of the child's psychologically controlling parenting experience. This includes social anxiety, which is supported within various research findings (Festa & Ginsburg, 2011; Segrin, Givertz, Swaitkowski, & Montgomery, 2015; Lewis-morrarty et al., 2012).

It has been evidenced that child-rearing styles that are marked by high psychological control, and are characterised by intrusive strategies in order to manipulate the child's thoughts, feelings and activities, are especially correlated to youth anxiety (Schleider et al., 2013). It is theorised that parental psychological control leads to childhood anxiety by reducing the child's experience of mastery towards the challenges presented within their environment (Niditch & Varela, 2012). To support this, research by Affrunti and Ginsburg (2011), demonstrated that parental controlling behaviours restrict a child's access to their environment, and they communicate to the child that there is an overbearing amount of threat that the child will not be able to cope with, or master on their own. This consequently reduces the opportunity for the child to develop competence and mastery and control within their environment, heightens their anxiety, and creates worry about their abilities, which may further facilitate negative self-schemas (Affrunti & Ginsburg, 2011; Ballash et al., 2006; Schleider et al., 2013). These negative child outcomes could result in low levels of parent–child closeness and self-worth, and high levels of depression and anxiety for the child (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Christensen, Evans, & Carroll, 2011) .

Research by Kincaid et al. (2011), further supports the relationship between parental psychological control, childhood anxiety, and its negative impacts towards the emotional well-being of the child. These researchers establish that for youth with higher levels of internalizing problems, the intrusive and critical style of psychologically controlling parenting may deprecate the child's self-worth, leading to the development of negative self-schemas such and feeling unworthy and unlovable (Pettit et al. 2001), and increases in worry, guilt, and withdrawal. Prior findings further suggest that parental failure to promote autonomy to the child, may also increase the chances of internalising problems for the child by undermining the child's development of independence, and competence (Kunz & Grych, 2013).

Other researchers (Verhoeven, Bogels, & Bruggen, 2012; Kunz & Grych, 2013; Stone et al., 2013; Laurin, Joussemet, Tremblay, & Boivin, 2015; Affrunti & Woodruff-borden, 2015; Borelli, Margolin, & Rasmussen, 2015) have moreover revealed that psychologically controlling parenting behaviours display a significant role for the development of childhood anxiety symptoms. The research by Stone et al. (2013), only investigates a sample of children ranging from ages 4 to 8 years however, implying that results cannot be generalised to other age cohorts. Laurin et al. (2015) utilise a distinct set of terminology in their study when referring to controlling parenting, such as the term 'over-protective parenting', as opposed to 'psychologically controlling parenting'. This heightens the likelihood for ambiguous research findings, because it becomes difficult to clarify any differences between the variant set of terms that are used to describe parenting styles that are characterised by parental control. Furthermore, the rare longitudinal study by Borelli et al. (2015), could not implicate direct causality within its findings. These inconsistencies present as shortcomings towards the prior literature.

Although the widespread findings discussed above share strong commonality, there still remain gaps amongst various cohorts that are presented within the existing literature. It appears that there may be some study design limitations within prior research relevant to this topic. For example, some studies appear to be limited to particular age cohorts, or appear to lack the inclusion of cultural diversity. This makes it difficult to generalise the research findings, and to clearly determine whether psychological controlling parenting uniquely affects children of various ages, and cultures. Single-informant studies are overused within this research field, which creates difficulties in inferring cause-and-effect relationships due to the lack of longitudinal approaches. Additionally, the topic would be increasingly understood through the utilisation of more qualitative study designs. The reason for this is because it is important to derive more meaningful information on people's lived experience, perceptions, or interpretations of these childhood experiences, rather than merely focusing upon cause-and-effect relationships.

Mechanisms of transmission within these studies are also often poorly understood which may create additional inconsistency within the presented research. Further research regarding the joint effects of the various variables presented in the literature therefore need to be better examined. The diversity and complexity of the conceptualisation of relevant terms for 'controlling parenting' moreover create uncertainty, and ambiguity within prior findings. Lastly, there is a need for developed understanding regarding how childhood experiences of parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety, relate to a child's later life outcomes in adulthood, including self-perception styles. It is therefore important to note that this study will only examine adult experiences that are relevant to the research topic.

Parental psychological control within childhood has been associated with psychological vulnerability later, in adult life, with increased levels of dependency, lower self-esteem, and lower coping abilities (Bilal et al., 2013). Although there is substantial empirical support demonstrating the relationship between parenting behaviours and a child's internalising symptomatology, it remains unclear whether the child's emerging self-schemas that are driven by parental psychological control (such as low self-esteem), and childhood anxiety symptoms, are carried through to their later, adult life. Gaps particularly remain within the literature regarding the relationship between the child's perceived experience of parental psychological control, childhood anxiety, and their self-perception later, in adulthood (Scanlon & Epkins, 2015). This validates the motivation to explore these associations, because it contributes valuable information towards counsellor understanding and awareness of how parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety symptoms relate to later adult functioning, and adult life outcomes.

This research study therefore aims to identify the relationship between parental psychological control, childhood anxiety and self-perception later, in adulthood. The study relies on participants' perceived experiences of parental psychological control, and anxiety symptoms within childhood. Self-perception in adulthood is explored through participants' self-described self-esteem, competence and coping styles, and autonomy and independence.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was utilised in this

research study to explore how people make sense of, or perceive their childhood, and later life experiences relevant to psychological controlling parenting, and childhood anxiety symptoms. Interviews were conducted and analysed using thematic analysis to gain a heightened understanding of participants' subjective experiences of reality, meaning making, and lived experience, as opposed to cause-and-effect relationships (Charmaz, 2006).

Materials and Method

Participants

Individuals aged over 25 years and who identified as experiencing childhood anxiety and psychologically controlling parenting were invited via recruitment advertisements distributed through various Australian College of Applied Psychology (ACAP) Facebook groups, the ACAP student lounge, and on the volunteering section of the website, Gumtree Australia. These advertisements invited the respondents to contact the researcher for further information about the study. Six respondents agreed to be interviewed about their experiences, and interview times were arranged.

The six participants (4 female, and 2 male), were aged between 25 and 52 years. All participants lived within Australia, with the following countries of origin: Australia, Chile, Scotland, and Vietnam.

Procedure

The Navitas Professional Institute Human Research and Ethics Committee (HREC) approved the research study, which permitted the researcher to advertise, and recruit participants for the study. Interested respondents were directed to a Participant Information Sheet to ensure that the respondent had read, understood the conditions of the study, and the consent process. Informed consent was then obtained by proceeding respondents, which involved signing a consent form electronically, and directing it back to the researcher. The researcher shortly after organised a suitable time and date to conduct either a Skype, or face-to-face semi-structured recorded interview with the participant.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted in confidential counselling rooms, at the ACAP Melbourne campus. Prior to the interview, each participant was provided a brief overview of the interview schedule by the researcher, and the interview was conducted shortly afterwards. Skype was the preferred method of interviewing, Amolto call recorder for Skype software was used to record the interviews, and most interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes, to 1 hour. All recorded interviews were safely stored onto a USB, and were contained within a secure folder on the researchers' personal computer. Interview transcripts were stored in the same manner.

Materials

Semi-structured interviews were used in this research study. This method of interviewing allowed for a holistic approach, and was able to elicit data that was grounded in the experience of the participant (Galletta, 2012). The semi-structured interviewing technique also allowed the opportunity for participants to respond in a deep and coherent manner, whilst having the latitude to be explorative (and unrestricted) during the interview process (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

There were a total of six questions within the interview schedule, which consisted of both open and closed ended questions. The first set of questions commenced with participant demographics, and asked participants to describe some events that incorporated experiences of perceived parental psychological control within their childhood. This followed by whether participants could elaborate on how childhood anxiety, may have contributed to these described childhood experiences. It should be noted that definitions of the key concepts 'parental psychological control' and 'anxiety' were provided to participants prior to being asked to respond to the first set of questions, to avoid any misinterpretations of common terminology.

The second half of the interview asked questions relating to self-perception styles in the participant's current adulthood, as a result of these perceived childhood experiences. Participants were invited to talk about these current self-perception styles relevant to their self-described self-esteem and self-worth, competence and coping styles, and autonomy and independence. Please refer to Appendix B for a detailed copy of the interview schedule that was used in the recorded interviews.

Data analysis

The research study used an inductive thematic analysis in order to develop appropriate codes and locate meaning in the data, thereby allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the concepts of interest (Boyatzis, 1998). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were used; namely, the familiarisation and transcription of the verbal data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report.

When all participant interviews were finalised, the verbal data from the audio recordings was transcribed. This process incorporated frequent audio recording pauses by the researcher in order to develop a deep, and concise understanding of the spoken content before commencing the coding process. Familiarisation with the transcribed data was then ensured, and this involved multiple and repeated transcript reading attempts, and sufficient note-taking of any common, or interesting concepts. Through the close examination of the transcribed data, the researcher then utilised open-coding techniques to generate an emergent set of categories, otherwise referred to as initial codes (Ezzy, 2002). The data analysis' coding process required meaning-making, and in order to eliminate any preconceived biases and to increase clarity during the interpretation of the data, bracketing interviews were held between the researcher, and their research associate (Tufford & Newman, 2010; Rolls & Relf, 2006). These bracketing interviews focused on regular discussions about the researcher's impressions of the data with their research associate, whilst being open to new suggestions, or to any alternate interpretations. This ensured the validity and reliability of the data analysis.

Themes and sub-themes were later developed from these emergent categories, which were assigned names and definitions (informed from the data).

Results

Three primary themes, each containing three sub-themes, were identified in this thematic analysis. Sub-themes were accompanied by transcript quotes (refer to Appendix A for additional quotes). Themes and sub-themes were labelled as follows:

Theme 1: Parental psychological control aspects;
(a) Dismissal and rejection
(b) Controlled emotional state
(c) Lack of validation.
Theme 2: Anxiety in childhood;
(a) Physical sickness
(b) Withdrawal and social avoidance
(c) Internal pressure.
Theme 3: Self-perception in adulthood;
(a) Self-esteem and self-worth
(b) Coping, control and competence
(c) Autonomy and independence.

Participants were de-identified by allocating a number to the prefix RP (Research Participant). Labels ranged from RP1 to RP6.

Theme 1: Parental psychological control aspects

Participants commonly agreed that psychologically controlling parenting towards them as children, could be typically characterised as dismissive, invalidating, manipulative and controlling of their emotional experience.

1.1 Dismissal and rejection. Participants' comments coded to this sub-theme highlighted a perceived lack of emotional warmth from psychologically controlling parents towards their children. This was evident in experiences of parental avoidance, dismissal and rejection, and coldness towards the child's thoughts and emotions. RP1 and RP2 described their parent's instant rejecting or dismissive attitude towards their thoughts and emotions as children. RP3 felt that her parents avoided and dismissed expressions of her thoughts and emotions because they considered this to be a disrespectful and offensive act, as the following quotes demonstrate:

Anytime I wanted to talk about something, they'd try to avoid it and they told me another thing (RP3. 100), and I expressed my feelings but they saw that as something against them and offensive (RP3. 129 - 130).

1.2 Controlled emotional state. A controlled emotional state for some of the participants was typically characterised by a restriction of freedom towards the child's self-exploration of their thoughts and emotions. Participant RP1 mentioned having no input within parental discussions regarding her life and believed that she was not allowed to feel emotional due to her father's rejecting demeanour, while RP3 felt that she was not allowed to explore her feelings with her parents and that fights would escalate if she did. RP5 stated that his parents controlled his emotions by telling him to stop feeling a certain way, inducing self-guilt and a lack of freedom to self-explore his thoughts and emotions, as shown in the following quote:

There was never any consideration from either side that they might be wrong, it was 100% you're wrong, so being able to try to resolve that in my own mind was awful (RP5. 144 - 146).

1.3 Lack of validation. Participants perceived parental invalidation tendencies, when their parents criticised, denied, ignored or ridiculed their feelings or perspectives, as children. RP1 mentioned that whenever she confided her feelings as a child, her father would reiterate that she was being irrational. RP2, RP3 and RP5 all described parental tendencies to deny whatever they would express by denigrating their thoughts and emotions. For example, RP2 spoke about her mother as follows:

Her way of dealing with that was to basically deny everything, so to say that I was a liar, and that none of those things ever happened (RP2. 38 - 39).

RP3, RP4, RP5 and RP6 perceived a minimal effort from their parents to understand their emotions as children, and RP3 and RP6 described their parents' tendency to shame, ridicule, or belittled them as a child, as RP6 states the following:

There was no-one to kind of explain it to me, it was just a whole attitude of 'Don't be so bloody ridiculous' (RP6. 60 - 61).

Theme 2: Anxiety in childhood

Anxiety symptoms due to the parental psychological control, were characterised by physical sickness, social avoidance and internal pressure within the participants, as children.

2.1 Physical sickness. Participant RP1 remembered physical anxiety symptoms such as feeling 'knots in her stomach' as a child, while RP2 described wanting to throw-up when verbally describing her emotions as a child:

The thought of discussing emotions or feelings would basically just make me want to throw-up (RP2. 189 - 190).

2.2 Withdrawal and social avoidance. Participants RP2 and RP5 described their childhood anxiety symptoms as creating withdrawal and social avoidance strategies. For RP5, feelings of physical sickness became an excuse to avoid uncomfortable situations. Anxiety symptoms led to a lack of social relationships, not belonging or feeling uncomfortable in groups, and the inability to relate well to others, as RP5 explained:

Mum tried to get me involved in activities and stuff like that when I was a kid, but I felt very uncomfortable and self-conscious, like you go to one session and then you just stand in the corner feeling different (RP5. 207 - 210).

2.3 Internal pressure. Participants RP2 and RP5 shared the commonality of facing the internal pressure of performance anxiety and adhering to high parental expectations in childhood, with RP2 describing this as:

I carried a lot of the not feeling good enough thing so that made me really anxious, so particularly through school, the thought of not getting straight A's was terrifying (RP2. 158 - 160).

RP3 alternatively described the internal pressure of feeling 'hated' due to her parent's demeanour towards her as a child, including the fear and threat of physical punishment. Internal pressure was similarly described by RP4, where physical punishment was inflicted upon him by his parents through a behaviourally controlled manner. RP6 lastly described the internal pressure of feeling terrified as a child due to the lack of parental emotional warmth and security.

Theme 3: Self-perception in adulthood

Self-perception in participants was explored through self-described self-esteem, coping, control, competence, autonomy and independence styles, as adults. Comments generally indicated lower self-esteem, coping and competencies at some point within their later, adult lives.

3.1 Self-esteem and self-worth. All participants perceived low self-esteem at some point of their adult lives, largely described as insecurity, self-consciousness, and a lack of confidence. Other descriptors included fear of failure (RP2, RP5 and RP6), and feelings of inadequacy, not being good enough or at the right level, fear of judgement, and approval seeking (RP1, RP2, RP5 and RP6) in later adulthood. RP6 described these doubts:

What I found I'd do a lot of times when I hated it, is you know if you cook someone a meal you'd be like 'Oh my God, was it okay? Was it good enough?' (RP6. 143 - 145).

3.2 Coping, control and competence. Avoidance, delay, or withdrawal of life tasks was evident amongst RP1, RP2, RP5 and RP6, and described as a coping, control and competence strategy:

I probably have a withdrawal style and if things become really rough, my first instinct is always to withdraw and kind of pull back away from it (RP1. 228 - 230).

Participant RP3 explained that she lacked competence towards emotional expression particularly in adult relationships, while RP2 and RP6 demonstrated a lack of control within adult relationships. RP2 and RP6 utilised motivation strategies in order to cope with daily life, and RP4's coping skills developed through the practice of optimism and through resilience levels in adult life. RP5 emphasised a lack of control, or direction within his environment.

3.3 Autonomy and independence. The majority of participants offered feelings of autonomy and independence towards daily life. RP1, RP4 and RP6 related independence to living alone, as RP4 explained:

I guess I'm quite independent, I live out of home and I get by (RP4. 174 - 175).

Participants RP2, RP3, and RP6 stated their adaptation to managing life tasks independently. RP5 alternatively commented on his reliance on others and on his reluctance towards declining tasks that disinterest him:

If there's something that someone wants doing, then I feel very uncomfortable saying no, even if it's something I'm not particularly interested in (RP5. 495 - 497).

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the relationship between parental psychological control, childhood anxiety and self-perception later, in adulthood. Self-perception in adulthood was explored through participant's self-described self-esteem and self-worth, competence and coping styles, and autonomy and independence. Results supported a relationship between a person's perceived experiences of parental psychological control, childhood anxiety, and their self-perception later, in adulthood. This research study also supported prior research by demonstrating similarity and consistency within the two common concepts of this study known as parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety. It particularly supported prior literature regarding the negative impacts of psychologically controlling parenting towards a child, and the relationship between parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety.

As similarly stated by Ozdemir (2012) and Soenens et. al. (2010), results in this study supported findings that the regulation of feelings, emotions, and opinions of the child is a key characteristic of psychologically controlling parenting, and is thus restrictive of a child's psychological autonomy (Wei & Kendall, 2014; Pereira et. al., 2008). Similar to the research findings of Wei and Kendall (2014) and Scanlon and Epkins (2015), the results of this study demonstrated that psychologically controlling parenting may be perceived as a form of parenting that is dismissive, invalidating (including shaming and guilt-inducing tendencies), manipulative, and controlling of a child's opinions, and emotional experience.

It was evident in this study that psychologically controlling parenting behaviours also related to childhood anxiety symptoms for the child, and these results replicated the findings of previous researchers (Affrunti & Woodruff-borden, 2015; Borelli et al., 2015; Kunz & Grych, 2013; Laurin et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2013; Verhoeven et al., 2012). Results in this study supported prior research findings relating to the relationship of parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety, within the domain of social anxiety. It was demonstrated that higher levels of parental psychological control, related to increased levels of social anxiety symptoms in children (Festa & Ginsburg, 2011; Lewis-morrarty et al., 2012; Segrin et al., 2015), including withdrawal, and social avoidance tendencies.

Participants in this study also perceived the experience of their childhood anxiety as associated to physical sickness, and to internal pressure. Internal pressure was related to performance anxiety for a few participants, and this was associated to fears of failure or not adhering to parental expectations, and to perfectionism in childhood. This is supported by findings from Elliot and Thrash (2004) and Soenens et al. (2005), who also found linkages between psychological control, fear of failure, and maladaptive perfectionism (as cited in Luyckx et al., 2007).

Although prior research found consistency and similarity regarding the relationship between parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety symptoms, these findings were limited to the relationship that these two concepts have within childhood. However, the findings did not clearly address how the experience of these two concepts within childhood, relate to the child's later life outcomes. For this reason, this study addressed this inconsistency and therefore explored the relationship between parental psychological control, childhood anxiety, and self-perception later, in adulthood. This relationship was supported in this research study.

Psychologically controlling parenting behaviours that were perceived as dismissive, rejecting, controlling and invalidating, and associated feelings of childhood anxiety involving physical sickness, social withdrawal and internal pressure, were associated with lower perceptions of self-described self-esteem, competence, and coping style, in later adulthood. Results from this study therefore suggested that typical self-schemas that a child experienced as a result of parental psychological control within childhood such as low self-esteem, and low coping abilities generally persevered later, in the child's adulthood. For example, for some of the participants, withdrawal tendencies persisted later, in adulthood. This is relevant to the research of Kincaid et al. (2011), who suggest that withdrawal tendencies may become prevalent within early-onset childhood, as a result of the child's experience of parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety.

Participant perceptions of lower self-esteem, competence, and coping styles later, in adulthood, was an interesting finding. It appeared that their perceptions of their competence, and coping styles, were significantly influenced by their perceived levels of self-esteem. For example, some participants stated knowing that they were competent through being able to manage life tasks, though convinced themselves otherwise, as a result of their low self-esteem levels. However, results did suggest that participant self-perceptions of low self-esteem, and low competence and coping styles, had potential for development or improvement through factors such as lived experience, resilience, optimism, and intrinsic motivation levels later, in adulthood. The self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) may explain these findings, since it proposes that inherent human growth tendencies, and the innate psychological needs

for human competence, relatedness, and autonomy, are the basis for the self-motivation to foster constructive social development, and personal well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Unlike their perceptions on self-esteem, and competence and coping styles, most of the participants unexpectedly perceived their autonomy and independence levels ranking rather higher as opposed to lower, in adulthood. Since the restriction of personal autonomy is a central characteristic towards the relationship between parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety (Barber, 1996) (Wei & Kendall, 2014), participants were expected to perceive their autonomy and independence styles as lower, in later adulthood. This is because the findings suggested that childhood self-schemas persist later, in adulthood. It is therefore unclear whether participants may have misconceived, or misinterpreted these two concepts, since there are various meanings or conceptions that could be attributed to the constructs of autonomy and independence. Since participants appeared to limit their conceptions of independence to either life adaptation, or to living alone, this may have also contributed to the unexpected results. Participants may have also perceived the construct of autonomy as being similar to the construct of independence, which may have created further ambiguity within results.

Limitations

This research study presented with considerable limitations that may have created ambiguity, or inconsistency within the findings. It should be restated that this study relied on participants' perceptions regarding their experiences of parental psychological control, childhood anxiety, and self- perception later, in adulthood. This suggests that the accuracy of these subjective childhood experiences, cannot be determined. There may have also been misconceptions relating to the definitions of the self-perception constructs, and therefore may have been interpreted in unique, or individual manners for some of the participants. This may explain the unexpected results from one participant who uniquely perceived his autonomy and independence levels as being lower, compared to the other participants.

Secondly, it is important to present cultural aspects as another limitation towards this study. There was a lack of cultural diversity, meaning that results cannot be generalised. It is worthwhile to also note that there may have been cultural discrepancy regarding the interpretation of the concept 'psychological control', versus the concept of 'behavioural control'. This misconception became evident in areas where some participants talked about physical punishment, suggesting that they may have confused this parental act as a form of psychological control.

Furthermore, it was unclear whether parental psychological control was also seen as a positive form of parental guidance and discipline as opposed to only being viewed negatively, when comparing different cultures. Age, and gender variations were not measured or accounted for, and the research study may have presented with an over-representation of female participants. Prior counselling experience, mental health conditions, and substance dependence were moreover not controlled, as well as other life influences that may have contributed towards self-perception in adulthood, other than parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety.

Implications and future recommendations

Despite the shortcomings in this research study, the findings have posited advantageous implications for both the counselling field, and to the development of future research. Firstly, the study informs new knowledge for current researchers regarding how childhood experiences shape, and impact a person later, in adulthood. Secondly, the study informs developed counselling understanding regarding the relationship between parental psychological control, and childhood anxiety later, in adulthood, which may increase counsellor awareness of what factors, or life influences relate to self-perception styles in adulthood. This may inform developed counsellor understanding towards a client's presenting issues in adulthood, and may further inform the various ways that a counsellor could beneficially work with clients of this nature. It is important to furthermore mention that findings within this research imply that life factors such as resilience and optimism levels, have the capacity to foster positive change towards negative self-perceptions styles later, in adulthood (in respect of the self-determination theory).

Future recommendations for this study would suggest that the limitations that have been described above be controlled for, in any attempts to replicate this study. It would firstly be important to measure, and regulate any other life factors that could be contributing to self-perception styles in adulthood, other than the childhood experiences that were explored in this study. In order to develop the understanding of, or compare cultural, gender, and age variations within this research topic, it is particularly important to consider the possibility of controlling for these cohorts in future research. Cognitive abilities, or the presence of mental health illnesses should be controlled for, as these factors may largely influence or distort participant cognition styles. External influences such as substance dependence should also be controlled for, for the same reason. Lastly, it remains unclear whether any prior adult counselling experiences may have advantaged some participants, compared to others who had never sought adult counselling services. This should therefore be another consideration for future research.

The contribution of its research findings, and importance of this research study towards the counselling field, should be restated. This research study has contributed to the field by helping to develop an increased counsellor understanding of how childhood experiences may determine, or influence the human experience later, in adulthood; particularly, how childhood influences may have contributed to a person's self-schemas later, in adulthood, including their beliefs and generalisations about the self, and their psycho-social experiences. The findings of this research study aim to encourage counsellors to enhance their awareness of human development, by reflecting on other potential life factors that may influence self-perception levels in later adulthood. For example, counsellors could enhance their understanding regarding how optimism, resilience, and motivation levels relate to, or influence self-perception in later adulthood.

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Appendix A

Themes and sub-themes	Transcript Codes
Theme 1: Parental psychological control aspects	
1a. Dismissal and rejection	*Whenever I would have a discussion with my dad, at any time I would get emotional about anything, it would be shut down straight away and it's like 'Well I can't talk to you if you're being emotional like this' (RP1. 45 - 48)*
1b. Controlled emotional state	*They always did not allow me to express my feelings… or when I expressed my feelings I would get very upset, and I then would become angry so we would sort of start to fight and always yell (RP3. 104 - 106)*
1c. Lack of validation	*That was something that she did quite often, if I said that she was quite dismissing of my feelings or my thoughts in general (if they were negative towards her), or if I said that I felt upset by something she had said, she'd say 'Well that's not right', and kind of just move on (RP2. 54 - 57)*
Theme 2: Anxiety in childhood	
2a. Physical sickness	*I can remember always having knots in my stomach all the time when I was little. I remember my mum would always rub my belly because I always thought I had a bad stomach. I look back now and I realise that it was actually anxiety and nervousness (RP1. 108 - 112)*
2b. Withdrawal and social avoidance	*As a child, as I reached mid to late teens, I felt more of the social anxiety starting to come out, like really not liking any kind of groups, or only being able to handle say like maximum 2 or 3 people in a group setting at a time (RP2. 173 - 176)* *I think that I had extremely bad social anxiety and stuff like that as a kid, which caused me to probably take a lot of time off school and say I was sick or had a headache, when I didn't necessarily have that much of a headache (RP5. 203 - 206)*
2c. Internal pressure	*I was very anxious about doing or performing in front of other people… like I really liked drawing but I never drawed in front of other people because if I put a line in the wrong place, it wasn't perfect. I'd never write any creative pieces in class and I'd just leave a blank page because if I wrote something embarrassing or not perfect, I would feel like I failed or very humiliated (RP5. 224 - 230)* *Anxiety and fear was 100%, I often cried and panicked and stuff like that. I didn't handle those things well. Yeah um, I was always afraid of the punishment, or the screaming or whatever (RP4. 78 - 80)*
Theme 3: Self-perception in adulthood	
3a. Self-esteem and self-worth	*I probably shy away from maybe a few things that I wish you know, I probably would have liked to have done but I've never kind of felt that I could aspire to do that because you know, for whatever reason I don't have the ability, or led to believe I don't have the intelligence (RP6. 191 - 194)* *There is just that part in my head that tells me 'No, it's not quite enough' (RP1. 157 - 158)* *It feels interesting because really, I do quite well in university and work and that kind of thing, but I am constantly feeling that really tight chested anxious, like genuinely anxious feeling of this isn't going to be good enough, they're gonna fire me or just something stupid like that (RP2. 248 - 251)*
3b. Coping, control and competence	*Even for me to go to Bali on my own, that was huge… absolutely huge! Before I felt like I always needed someone to hold my hand to go to places to do something, whereas now I don't… and I do think it's made me a lot stronger overall (RP6. 198 - 201)* *I dropped out of school even though I was the top of my class all the time, but now*

	I'm back at school so I've managed to sort of overcome it, but it's definitely taken a few years away from me having to cope with that. I look at it it now sometimes and think that I could have done this already 5 years ago (RP1. 135 - 140) *I'm just only now completing a Bachelor's degree having attempted to do one 3 times in the past and not being able to continue it because I couldn't get a whiff of my need to be perfect (RP5. 382 - 384)*
3c. Autonomy and independence	*I'm very independent because my parents allowed me to learn and they forced me to do things on my own growing up (RP3. 300 - 302)* *I feel quite independent because I feel like I transitioned into doing a lot of things by myself (RP2. 391 - 392)* *I think I'm quite reliant on others, yeah I don't feel independent, I don't feel financially independent (RP5. 474 - 475).*

Appendix B

Interview schedule

1. Please provide your age, gender and country of origin.

2. Key features of parental psychological control include intrusive parenting, rejection and a lack of emotional warmth from a parent towards their child.
   Psychologically controlling parents particularly control a child's emotional state of beliefs and internally pressure the child's feelings, which restrict freedom for the child to explore things on their own. Parental psychological control is also widely based upon the child's perception of control.
   (Nb. This statement will be read out to participants first making sure that they understand it, and then the following open-ended question will be asked).
   I'd like you to think about any specific parenting behaviours and events in your childhood where you feel this definition of parental psychological control could apply, and describe them to me. For example, events and instances where you felt powerless, felt self-doubt or shame and/or lacked freedom to explore the world on your own?
3. Anxiety is described as an internal feeling of worry, nervousness or unease relating to a threatening event.
   You've just described some examples of parental psychological control from your childhood. Now I'd like you to think about whether these examples could be related to feelings associated with anxiety in your childhood. Please describe this.
4. There is some evidence that psychologically controlling behaviours reduce the opportunity for a child to develop competence, and mastery and control within their environment, which heightens their anxiety and creates worry about their abilities.
   Please briefly share how you personally relate to this statement in your current adult life.
5. Please now rate the difficulty level towards mastering adult life on your own as a result of your experience of parental psychological control as a child, on a scale from 1 to 10 where (1 = not difficult at all, 5 = mildly difficult and 10 = very difficult).
6. The child's heightened insecurity and worry may further facilitate negative world views about the self.
   a) Please describe how you currently perceive your self-esteem/self-worth as an adult.
   b) Please describe how you currently perceive your competence and in-dependency as an adult.
   c) Please describe how you currently perceive your coping style and your current thoughts on your autonomy (freedom) style as an adult.