

Refining our understanding of parental conditional regard

Summary of the cumulative dissertation by

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Parental conditional regard (PCR) is a parenting strategy where children perceive that parental approval and affection are contingent upon meeting parental expectations, behaving well, and succeeding (Assor et al., 2004). The concept has been of interest to psychologists and psychotherapists since the early 20th century, with the most explicit and influential contribution coming from Carl Rogers (e.g., 1957, 1983). Since the late 1990s, PCR has been further developed within the framework of self-determination theory, an organismic theory of motivation, personality development and well-being (Assor et al., 2004; Deci & Ryan, 2000). This dissertation extends and refines the understanding of PCR within this context.

From a behavioristic perspective, PCR can be seen as a form of operant conditioning, where desired behaviors are reinforced and undesired behaviors are punished. Research shows that PCR indeed effectively modifies children's behavior (Assor et al., 2004; Gewirtz & Pelaez-Nogueras, 1991). However, critics argue that PCR imposes severe psychological costs on children (Assor et al., 2004; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2023). Self-determination theory suggests that PCR forces children into a conflict between their basic psychological needs: they must either suppress their need for autonomy by complying to parental expectations or risk their need for relatedness by acting in a self-determined manner, which may lead to unmet demands and potential rejection. As such, PCR is considered a prototype of need-frustrating parenting. Within SDT, the concept was advanced in two important ways. First, PCR is now understood to be domain-specific, meaning that parents may apply it in one area of a child's life (e.g., academics) but not in others. This dissertation focuses on PCR in the academic domain. Second, PCR can manifest in two distinct forms: positive PCR (increased affection after success) and negative PCR (withdrawal of affection after failure). Empirical findings underscore that both facets of PCR have unfavorable but different effects on children's experiences and behavior, with different underlying mechanisms at play.

This dissertation seeks to advance the understanding of PCR by addressing three key questions. First, despite extensive research on the two facets of positive and negative PCR, previous studies have predominantly used variable-oriented approaches, leaving the real-life implications of this theoretical distinction underexplored. This dissertation aims to determine whether PCR is a general parenting approach—where parents employ both facets or neither—or if parents use positive and negative PCR as distinct, independent strategies. If PCR facets are indeed distinct, this would highlight the significance of their separation at the variable level and provide insight into their independent effects. This leads to the second question: Whether the two facets are harmful on their own, particularly addressing the possibility that positive PCR might be less harmful or even beneficial when not accompanied by the fear of negative PCR. The third question examines whether PCR is primarily a proactive socialization strategy, as often portrayed in the literature, or if it also involves reactive elements that do not involve deliberate parental socialization intentions. Addressing these questions is crucial for refining the definition, measurement, and intervention strategies related to PCR.

Two studies were conducted to address these questions. The first study employed latent profile analysis, a person-oriented approach, to examine within-person combinations of perceived positive and negative PCR across three distinct populations: adolescents, university freshmen, and parents of schoolchildren. This study explored how these profiles relate to key outcomes such as basic need satisfaction, academic motivation, self-esteem, academic self-concept, test anxiety, and depressive symptoms. The second study investigated parent-child dyads, focusing on parents' emotional reactions to their children's failures and how these reactions are perceived by children as negative PCR. This study used structural equation modeling, a variable-oriented approach, to analyze these dynamics.

The first main finding (Study 1) of this dissertation is that positive and negative PCR are not simply two sides of the same coin; about one-third of individuals perceive positive PCR without experiencing negative PCR. This suggests that PCR is not a general parenting attitude but that at least positive PCR is a distinct strategy with unique mechanisms and antecedents. The substantial number of individuals experiencing only positive PCR underscores its importance on a societal level.

The second main finding (Study 1) is that positive PCR, even without the harsh component of love withdrawal evident in negative PCR, is still psychologically controlling. While perceptions of negative PCR relate to highly maladaptive outcomes, perceiving positive PCR only is a double-edged sword. Individuals who experience only positive PCR report heightened contingent self-esteem. While this may foster engagement, it also creates a hidden vulnerability. This finding demonstrates that affection contingent upon success is not a beneficial socialization strategy and highlights the importance of contingent self-esteem as a key outcome variable.

The third main finding (Study 2) is that negative PCR may not always be an intentional parenting strategy but can occur impulsively when parents hinge their self-esteem on their child's achievements (child-invested contingent self-esteem). Parents with this tendency experience heightened anger in response to their child's poor grades. When they express this anger impulsively and in a dysregulated manner, children perceive it as a withdrawal of regard (negative PCR). This challenges the idea that PCR is always used proactively involving explicit socialization intentions and suggests it may also stem from impulsive, emotionally dysregulated reactions.

Overall, these findings provide a foundation for refining the definition and measurement of parental conditional regard. They emphasize the importance of differentiating between the distinct facets of PCR and their within-person combinations, as well as differentiating between proactive PCR, driven by socialization intentions, and reactive PCR, stemming from parental emotional dysregulation. The dissertation also highlights practical implications, particularly the need to address the hidden vulnerabilities associated with positive PCR in psychoeducation, given the significant number of individuals affected. Additionally, it underscores the importance of supporting parents in emotion and self-esteem regulation to prevent the reactive use of negative PCR. These findings are discussed in the context of current research, with a focus on practical implications and future directions for the study of parental conditional regard.

Related publications:

Study 1: Steffgen, S. T., Soenens, B., Otterpohl, N., Stiensmeier-Pelster, J., & Schwinger, M. (2022). Latent profiles of parental academic conditional positive and negative regard. *Parenting*, 22(4), 347–381.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2021.2010501>

Study 2: Steffgen, S. T., Otterpohl, N., Wessing, F., Schwinger, M., Assor, A., Kanat-Maymon, Y., Gueta, B. E., & Stiensmeier-Pelster, J. (2022). The process linking child-invested contingent self-esteem and conditional regard: The roles of maternal anger and its regulation. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 31, 2412–2423.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-022-02316-y>