



Autonomy supportive fathers beget system-supporting children: The role of autonomy support on protesting behavior



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examined the influence of father autonomy support on protesting behavior. Drawing from Relational Model Theory and Self-determination Theory, we hypothesized that individuals' perception and interactions with authority figures are shaped by their experiences with their fathers. When people experience their fathers as empathetic and caring, they are more likely to view other authority figures positively and make benevolent interpretations of their actions. We found support for our hypothesis in two studies conducted in Malaysia and Canada with self-reported engagement in political causes. As expected, perceived father autonomy support was related to positive perception of the government and less protesting against the government. Overall, the present paper provides evidence that children's internalized representations of their fathers are related to intentions and behaviors to change the social systems.

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1. Introduction

As long as governments have existed, it seems that people have found reasons to protest against the organized system. For instance, an artifact from the Antiquity (dated around 2350 BC) recorded a large-scale protest against the ruling government in Babylonia/Sumer for their heavy tax laws (Burg, 2004). More recently, there have been a series of well-publicized revolutions and demonstrations against governments such as the Arab Spring, which took place from 2010 to 2012 in various Arab nations as a result of dissatisfaction against the government. Whether the cause of dissatisfaction was due to corruption in the government or the government's failure to uphold human rights, ultimately the government lost the goodwill of the citizens because the citizens viewed the government as untrustworthy and therefore illegitimate. Yet, research has consistently shown that people are motivated to maintain the system (be it political, social or religious) by perceiving the system to be just and fair (Kay & Jost, 2014). This motive to justify the system fulfills both epistemic and existential motives and is associated with decreased willingness to protest against the system (Jost et al., 2012). Little research, however, has investigated the dispositional and developmental factors that lead people to justify systems. A recent study has shed light on one of such factor, showing that the more people perceived their fathers to be autonomy supportive, the more likely they were to justify the system (Chua & Philippe, 2015). The present paper further investigates parental influence on system

justification by examining the relationship between perceived father autonomy support, and support for the government and people's willingness to protest.

Relational Model Theory (RMT) posits that there are four fundamental relational models: communal sharing (CS), authority ranking (AR), equity matching (EM) and market pricing (MP) (Fiske, 2004). CS relationships are based on what people have in common, AR relationships are based on the hierarchy and ranking between individuals, EM relationships are based on additive differences and maintaining an equal balance, and MP relationships are based on proportionality and cost-benefit analysis. These models are schemas used to organize and structure the social world and they drive an individual's interpretation and responses to social interactions. These models are also used to make moral judgments and to determine what is right or wrong such that an action is perceived as immoral when it violates one of the models (Rai & Fiske, 2011). Of interest to this paper are the AR model and the associated moral action to respect and obedience to a superior. In these asymmetrical linear relationships, the subordinate has to depend and trust on the superior to care and protect him. His fate is, in many ways, determined by the good will (intentions, desires, and actions) of the superior (Houde, Sherman, White, & Sheppard, 2004). Just as it is a moral act to obey his superior, it is a moral act for the superior to protect him. As long as the superior maintains the appropriate role, people will view authority figures as legitimate and just, and will work to maintain and support the system (van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011).

To date, few studies have examined how childhood experiences influence one's motivation to legitimize authority and the government. Drawing on both RMT and Self-determination Theory (SDT), we suggest

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that people's schema of authority is shaped by how their parents treated them. The optimal type of support is one that fulfills an individual's fundamental psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT termed this type of support as autonomy support and it is characterized by empathy and support of the recipient's authentic being. There is a large body of evidence confirming that autonomy supportive parenting is associated with greater autonomous motivation (e.g. Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989), autonomous internalization of values (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003) and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). There is much less research on how parental autonomy support shapes people's broader views of society.

Some of the core aspects of relational models are innate and unlearned, and people automatically encode and retrieve social information based on these categories (Fiske, 1995). Despite cultural variations in the prevalence and content of these categories, all humans have the same relational models to organize sociality (Fiske, 2004). Nonetheless, children need to learn how to implement these models in culturally appropriate ways (Fiske, 1991) and the implementation is heavily influenced by their first relationships (Fiske, 1993). Early experiences with one's primary caregivers impact the way a person views, understands and interacts with the social world (e.g. Hart, 2014; Levy, Blatt, & Shaver, 1998). Thus even though all persons will naturally form some relationships in terms of hierarchy—distinguishing between superiors and inferiors—there are individual differences in the representations of authority figures. Some people may be more likely to perceive authority figures as controlling and interpret their actions as malevolent and ill-intentioned while others may perceive the same authority figures as supportive and their actions as well-intentioned and good. The individual's AR model guides the perception and interpretation of the superior's motives and behavior and subsequent responses to the respective authority figure. Therefore, one will view the system as stable and trustworthy just as one's parents were stable and trustworthy, or conversely one will view the system as untrustworthy if one's parents were untrustworthy.

There is initial evidence that fathers play a particularly influential role in shaping the child's view of authority. The more people perceived their fathers to be autonomy supportive, the more they saw the government as just and fair and the less willing they were to change the political system (Chua & Philippe, 2015). Mother autonomy support was not associated with system justification. This might be due to the role of fathers in the family, as fathers tend to play the role of the authority figure in the home and are the symbolic representation of authority in society. Even within the egalitarian 21st century family unit, fathers continue to be perceived as the authority figure in the household (Paquette, 2004) and hold the role of reinforcing the rules of the household and implementing the consequences of rule breaking (Lamb, 2000). The development of the "egalitarian but traditional" framework in the 90s has maintained this role differentiation and fathers continue to have greater power and prestige in the family unit than do mothers (Carrasco & Rohner, 2013; Cotter, Joan, & Reeve, 2011). Within the larger societal context, men continue to dominate high-level positions in organizations and government and women are systematically assigned to positions of lower authority (Alkadry & Tower, 2011). Therefore, we expected that the relational schema of fathers would be strongly associated to other authority figures in society, such that experiences with one's father will influence the development of AR models and the individual's view of the government.

We posit that children who experience their fathers (as compared with mothers) as understanding, empathetic, and supportive will develop a positive schema of authority figures and hold a positive attitude towards authority. Specifically, we expected that father autonomy support would be positively associated with positive perceptions of the government and with attitudes towards maintaining the system. We tested our hypothesis in Malaysia concerning protests for clean elections and in Quebec, Canada concerning protests for accessible education following a planned raise in tuition fees.

2. Study 1

Several unprecedented mass rallies were recently held in Malaysia for free and clean elections. All rallies were regarded as illegal by the government and the government responded by arresting individuals who were involved and by using tear gas and chemical-laced water cannons on the protestors.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants, measures and procedure

Advertisements were posted on various online forums and on university campuses to participate on a study on participation in the rally. One hundred and sixty-three people participated in the online survey (102 females, 61 males; $M(\text{age}) = 23.68$ years, $SD(\text{age}) = 7.89$, five missing values). In all analyses, we controlled for the Big Five personality traits (Ten Item Personality Inventory; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), Satisfaction with Life Scale specific to life in the country (e.g. "The conditions of my life in this country are excellent."; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), intentions to settle down in the country ("I intend to settle down in this country"), religiosity, and the extent to which participants identified with the country and their ethnic group, gender, and age. We wanted to investigate if father autonomy support influenced willingness to change the system above and beyond these covariates (personality traits and ideological beliefs) which have been shown to contribute to system justification beliefs (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).

Participants were asked to complete measures of parental support and attitude towards the government and towards the movement. The 9-item autonomy support measure was taken from the 21-item Perception of Parents College Student Scale (Robbins, 1994) and corresponded to the autonomy support subscale of that measure. Participants rated the extent to which they perceived their parents to be autonomy supportive on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale. Father and mother autonomy supports were rated separately. Sample items included "My mother seems to know how I feel about things" and "My mother spends a lot of time with me". The Cronbach alphas for perceived mother autonomy support were .86 and for perceived father autonomy support .88.

In addition, participants completed a 3-item measure of their view of the government's response to the movement ("The government really tries to help the people.", "The government presented an acceptable offer to the people." and "The government listened to the people and was open to them."). The Cronbach alpha was .89. They also completed a 5-item measure looking at whether people should be allowed to protest for free elections (e.g. "I believe that the people have a right to express their views", "I believe that the people should stop demanding for free elections (R)"). The Cronbach alpha was .83. Finally, participants rated the extent to which they intended to attend the next rally.

2.1.2. Results and discussion

Means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 1. Perceived parent autonomy support was highly correlated and surprisingly unrelated to the outcome measures. However, the

Table 1
Means, standard deviations and correlations for Study 1.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Mother autonomy support	4.76	1.18	–				
2. Father autonomy support	4.23	1.29	.41**	–			
3. Perceptions of government	2.48	1.21	–.10	.08	–		
4. Agreement with rally	6.14	.91	.01	–.07	–.66**	–	
5. Intention to rally	4.45	2.21	.03	.01	–.39*	.52**	–

Note.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

results from the hierarchical linear regressions suggest a likely suppression effect between autonomy support and the outcome measures.

We conducted hierarchical linear regression on perception of government, support for the protests, and intentions to attend the rally (see Table 2). Interestingly, perceived mother autonomy support was negatively related to perception of government. In contrast perceived father autonomy support was positively related to perception of government. Such that, the more participants experienced their mother as autonomy supportive, the more they viewed the government as responding negatively to the protestors. However, the more participants experienced their fathers as autonomy supportive, the more they viewed the government as responding positively to the protestors. The high correlation between perceived mother and father autonomy supports as well as the significant association between perceived parent autonomy support and the outcome measure when both independent variables are included in the same equation suggest that the null zero-order correlations are due to a suppression effect (Mackinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000).

With regard to support for protesting for clean elections, perceived father autonomy support, but not perceived mother autonomy support, was negatively related to support for the protests. Likewise, perceived father autonomy support and not perceived mother autonomy support were negatively related to intentions. We conducted exploratory analyses examining if gender of the child moderated the relationship between autonomy support and the dependent variables. The interaction terms were not significant for any of the dependent variables.

The results from Study 1 revealed that perceived father autonomy support is positively related to perceiving the government, and negatively related to protesting for clean elections, and intentions to participate in the next rally. Perceived mother autonomy support was related to a more negative perception of the government but it was unrelated to support for the movement and intentions to participate in the next rally.

3. Study 2

In the next study, we sought to replicate this finding in Quebec, Canada and to look at actual behaviors against the status quo. It is possible that in a relatively hierarchical low-freedom country such as Malaysia, people are more willing to support the government and to justify the system in order to avoid harsh consequences such as fines or imprisonment (Cichočka & Jost, 2014). We expected that regardless of structure of society, receiving father autonomy support should facilitate the acceptance of the system, even when the system allows for

opposition and that opposition to the system is commonplace. Given the findings of Study 1, we expected that fathers would have a greater influence relative to mothers on children's attitude towards the government.

From February to September 2012, there were a series of student demonstrations against a governmental proposal to increase tuition fees. At its peak, 185,000 Quebec students went on strike, blocking college and university entrances every day and engaging in various other acts of protests, ranging from large-scale petitions, street demonstrations, and sabotage. In response to the protests, the National Assembly of Quebec passed Bill 78 to ensure that no student is denied the right to receive education and restrictions were also imposed on protests near university grounds and protests involving 50 or more people.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants, measures and procedure

Students from two large universities in Montreal, Quebec were contacted to participate in a study on the current student strike. An email invitation was sent to a random number of full time students from the two universities. Participants completed an online survey and were given an opportunity to enter into a draw to win one of three prizes worth \$125. A total of 529 students who were enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate level program responded to the survey. There were 408 females and 121 males, $M(\text{age}) = 25.32$, $SD(\text{age}) = 6.33$.

In this study, our covariates were basic demographic data (age, gender, income, and GPA), the Big Five personality traits (Ten Item Personality Inventory; Gosling et al., 2003), academic satisfaction scale and intentions to complete their studies. The academic satisfaction scale (e.g. "The conditions of my life at school are excellent.") was adapted from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). The Cronbach alpha was .88. The intentions to complete the program (e.g. "I am determined to complete my program of studies that I am enrolled in.") was measured with a 7-item Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The Cronbach alpha was .76.

As in Study 1, participants completed measures of perceived maternal and father autonomy supports, and perception of the government's response to the strike (e.g., "The government presented an acceptable offer to students"). The reliabilities of these scales were .89, .90 and .93 respectively. To measure their attitude towards the strike, participants rated the extent to which they agreed on 7-item Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) with the following three items: "With regard to the current student strike, I...", "With regard to the increase in tuition

Table 2
Hierarchical regression analyses of perception of government, agreement with rally, intention to rally in Study 1.

Step	Variables	Perception of government			Agreement with rally			Intention to rally		
		β	Block F	ΔR^2	β	Block F	ΔR^2	β	Block F	ΔR^2
1	Age	-.26*	1.85	.17	.25**	2.27**	.20	.19	2.46*	.21*
	Gender	.18			.10			.06		
	Religiosity	.06			-.06			.02		
	National identity	-.20			.21†			.12		
	Ethnic identity	-.10			-.04			-.06		
	Neuroticism	-.10			-.06			-.21*		
	Extraversion	-.04			.04			.01		
	Conscientiousness	.05			.04			.06		
	Agreeableness	.13			-.02			-.20*		
	Openness	-.15			.21†			.17		
2	Future intentions	.07	1.58	.01	-.05	2.26*	.04	-.03	2.12*	.01
	Country satisfaction	.11			-.18			-.09		
3	Mother autonomy support	-.31**	2.31**	.10	.12	2.58**	.06	.08	2.23*	.04
	Father autonomy support	.30**			-.29**			-.24*		

Note.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

fees, I..." (reverse-scored), and "With regard to the freeze in tuition fees, I...". The Cronbach alpha was .88. Finally, participants rated the frequency (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Once*, 3 = *Sometimes*, 4 = *At several occasions*, 5 = *Regularly*, 6 = *Very regularly*) in which they engaged in activities related to the strike: Wearing a red square as a symbol of protest, marching, signing petitions, protesting Bill 78, and disobeying the police to stop marching. Overall, 68% of the participants reported engaging in at least one of these behaviors at least once. More than half of the participants reported wearing a symbolic red square, signing a petition, and marching at least once (a score of 2 and above) and about 25% reported having disobeyed the police at least once. An index was created by averaging the scores on all of these behaviors. Cronbach alpha was .88. This index was log-transformed as the scores were positively skewed.

3.2. Results and discussion

Means, standard deviations and correlations are reported in Table 3. The correlations revealed that perceived mother autonomy support was unrelated to the dependent variables, but perceived father autonomy support was related to a more positive view of the government's response, greater disagreement with the strike, and less behavioral engagement in the strike.

Next, we conducted hierarchical linear regressions on perceptions of the government, agreement with the strike and behavioral engagement in the strike with father and mother autonomy supports and all our control measures. The results are reported in Table 4. As hypothesized, perceived father autonomy support was significantly related to a positive view of the government's response, and negatively related to agreement with the strike and to participation in the strike. Perceived mother autonomy support was unrelated to the dependent variables.

We conducted exploratory analyses to investigate if gender moderated the relationship between perceived father autonomy support and the dependent variables. As in Study 1, gender did not moderate the results, indicating that both males and females responded in a similar fashion to perceived father autonomy support. Thus, perceived father autonomy support was associated with a more positive view of the government and a lower likelihood of participation in the student strike.

4. General discussion

People naturally gravitate towards organizing some relationships in terms of rank and hierarchy (Fiske, 1993). People also tend to see obedience and deference to superiors as moral and good (Rai & Fiske, 2012). In the current paper, we tested our hypothesis in two very different cultures with different real-life causes. In both studies, we found that perceived father autonomy support was associated with a positive view of the government's response, a negative view of the cause and a decreased willingness to participate in movements intended to change the status quo.

One of the strengths of this paper is that the hypothesis was tested in two different cultures, which revealed unexpected but interesting differences. First, perceived mother autonomy support was associated with a negative view of the government's response in the Asian sample

but not in the Western sample. This may be due to Malaysia being a more conservative culture where husband–wife relationships are usually hierarchical and roles are clearly distinguished and enforced. Thus when a child experiences the lower powered spouse as autonomy supportive, the child might be more sympathetic towards other low powered individuals and more likely to side with the underdog. Second, even though we found support for our hypothesis in both cultures, the effect sizes were larger in Malaysia than in Canada. This might reflect the close family structure in a collectivistic culture such as Malaysia, whereby the child is more influenced by significant others. This might also be due to Canada having greater political freedom as compared with Malaysia, such that attitudes and actions towards the government are less influenced by significant others and more influenced by personal choices.¹

This paper also contributes to the current understanding of people's need to maintain a sense of psychological security (Hart, 2014). To this end, humans have evolved a security system that increases felt security and decreases anxiety. The three components of this system are attachment, self-esteem, and cultural worldviews, and all three components are interrelated. For instance, threats to personal relationships can activate an individual's worldview defenses (e.g. system justification, just world beliefs) and conversely threats to the system lead to individuals' drawing closer to their loved ones (Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg, 2005). Our results provide further nuance to the theory by suggesting that individuals who are securely attached to autonomy supportive fathers may also be more likely to defend the system because they genuinely believe the system to be good, as their fathers were good. These individuals may not be reacting against threats due to insecurity, but rather because they are securely attached and maintain their benevolent interpretations of the actions of authority figures. As in romantic relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), these individuals view the system through rose-colored lenses and interpret the actions of the authority figure more positively, enabling them to maintain a secure attachment to the father figure and by extension to the system. There is indirect support for our hypothesis in the attachment and system justification literature such that individuals who have a sense of secure base are also more likely to view God, the ultimate authority figure, as loving and caring, as opposed to distant (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Secure attachment is also related to increased religiosity (Kirkpatrick, 1998), which is in turn associated with greater system justification (Jost et al., 2014).

Some limitations need to be underscored regarding the present research. First, the samples consisted of mainly students and may not be representative of the general population. However, as the second study directly examined an issue that was pertinent to students, it is reasonable to use a student sample. In addition, other studies using community samples have found that father autonomy support is related to higher levels of system justification (Chua & Philippe, 2015). Second, the two studies had cross-sectional designs. Therefore, the relationship between father autonomy support and willingness to protest remains unclear. While the alternative explanation (willingness to protest leading to lower perceptions of father autonomy support) seems theoretically unlikely and not the most parsimonious explanation, there may be a third unmeasured variable accounting for this relationship. Experimental studies that prime autonomy vs. controlling father support and examine its relationship on willingness to protest and perceptions of social inequality are required to confirm the actual role of perceptions of father autonomy support as dispositional developmental factors influencing system justification and willingness to protest. Third, it is still unknown whether actual father autonomy support or just perceptions from the child drive the effect. Some studies found that objective environmental autonomy-supporting aspects do correlate with people's perceptions of autonomy support (e.g. Philippe & Vallerand, 2008). Obtaining fathers' reports as well as children's perceptions of parental

Table 3
Means, standard deviations and correlations in Study 2.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Mother autonomy support	5.12	1.24	–				
2. Father autonomy support	4.42	1.43	.31*	–			
3. Perception of government	2.24	1.49	.08	.13**	–		
4. Agreement of strike	5.03	1.72	–.05	–.15**	–.72**	–	
5. Strike behaviors ^a	1.80	0.90	–.02	–.11*	–.54*	.69**	–

Note.

^a Untransformed means are reported.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

¹ We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this effect.

Table 4
Hierarchical regression analyses of perception of government, agreement with strike and strike behaviors in Study 2.

Step	Variables	Perception of government			Agreement with strike			Strike behaviors		
		β	Block F	ΔR^2	β	Block F	ΔR^2	β	Block F	ΔR^2
1	Age	.04	3.76**	.065	.02	5.00**	.084	.01	8.70**	.139
	Gender	.06			-.08			.02		
	Income	.11*			-.16**			-.16**		
	GPA	-.03			.05			.11*		
	Neuroticism	-.06			-.02			-.08		
	Extraversion	-.03			.00			.08		
	Conscientiousness	.08			-.17**			-.22**		
	Agreeableness	.04			-.02			-.16**		
	Openness	-.14**			.12*			.17**		
	2	Future intentions	.07	3.43**	.007	-.09	4.56**	.009	-.09*	7.75**
Academic satisfaction		-.08			.08			.10		
3	Mother autonomy support	.04	3.51**	.014	.02	4.85**	.022	.02	7.28**	.014
	Father autonomy support	.11*			-.16**			-.13**		

Note.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

autonomy support could be a way to shed more light on this issue. It is also possible that individuals who have positive attitudes towards the government just have unrealistically positive views about their fathers. Collecting fathers' reports of their parenting styles will allow us to tease apart perception from reality. Regardless of whether individuals have overly positive or overly negative views of their fathers, we believe that it is precisely this perception of the father figure that colors one's experiences with other authority figures. Indeed past studies have found that a person's perceptions of autonomy are a better predictor of psychological adjustment than the actual reality (O'Connor & Vallerand, 1994).

Our findings also suggests that there might be a silver lining to receiving paternal controlling support, which is usually associated with ill-being (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011). Yet, in light of the fact that system change occurs when the system is viewed as unjust and unfair (Martorana, Galinsky, & Rao, 2005), it is possible that individuals who have received controlling support are quicker to perceive the system as unjust and thus act to change the system. Future research could measure both controlling and autonomy support separately and examine the differential effects of the two types of support from a just or an unjust authority figure.² Another interesting avenue for future research is the investigation of the role of emotions in this relationship. For instance, past research has shown that controlling support leads to greater anger (Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005) and that anger mediates the relationship between system justification and willingness to change the system (Jost et al., 2012). Receiving controlling support may be a double edged sword such that the recipient may be the rebel without a cause, but also the provocateur of important system change.

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Declaration of conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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² We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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