Relationships Among Conceptions of Control and Autonomy and Other Personality Variables: A Developmental Approach

Louis Oppenheimer
Adri Stet
Eddie Versteeg

Universiteit van Amsterdam, Nederland

In total 131 children from fourth- and sixth-grades (mean ages 9.10 and 11.9 years) participated in this study with as its purpose to explore the relationships among conceptions of control and autonomy and various personality characteristics. To achieve this aim, the children were presented with questionnaires indexing their conceptions of control (CCQ), conceptions of autonomy (CAQ) and two diagnostic instruments: 1) the Amsterdam Biographical Questionnaire for Children (ABV-k) and 2) the Achievement Motivation Test for Children (PMTK). The results reveal complex patterns of interrelated variables, indicating among others that children's conceived ability to cope with problems in the social environment does not relate to children's understanding of the variables affecting the outcomes of their behavior.

In a recent article, Weisz & Stipek (1982) level criticism to the view that perceptions of control increase with age (cf. Nowicki & Strickland, 1973; Nowicki & Duke, 1974). According to Weisz and Stipek empirical data suggesting a shift from externally to internally oriented perceptions of control are artifacts of scale characteristics. In addition, they argue that if a developmental shift should be present, such a shift should occur from internally to externally oriented perceptions of control. They ground this assumption on Piaget's (1930) interpretation of egocentric thought with young children. Because egocentric thought is characterized by children's beliefs that what they want also others want, what they like also others like, etc., they have difficulties in recognizing the «inherent uncontrollability of noncontingent (e.g. chance) events, and that identification of such events as beyond personal control increases with development» (Weisz & Stipek, 1982, p. 252).

The scale characteristic which may be the cause for the found discrepancies in developmental interpretations of the data is the failure to distinguish between the dimensions of «perceived contingency of outcomes» and «perceived competence

The present study is based on the M. A. Theses of the second and third authors. Parts of this paper were presented at the 7. Tagung Entwicklungspsychologie 1985, Trier, B. R. D. Thanks are due to David Magnusson and M. Huteau for their comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.
of self.» Perceived contingency of outcomes refers to the notion «that internal perception of control implies a perceived contingency between something about oneself (including but not restricted to one’s behavior) and a particular outcome» (Connell, 1985, p. 1019). Perceived competence of self involves «judgments about the actor’s capacity to produce the sufficient cause» (p. 1019). Scales indexing children’s «perceptions» of control may emphasize either or both dimensions resulting in considerably diverging findings.

Grounded on these problems scales were developed to index children’s conceptions of control (Oppenheimer & Stet, 1984; based on the Tel-Aviv LOC-scale: Milgram & Milgram, 1975) and autonomy (Oppenheimer & Versteeg, 1984; based on the Autonomy Multiple Choice - 3 measure: Shouval, Zakay & Halfon, 1977). Conceptions of control and autonomy not only refer to children’s ideas of what variables controlled the outcome of their behavior (i.e., past events; cf. DeCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975) and to what extent they consider themselves to be able to handle problems or obstacles in their environment, respectively, but also with the reasons why they think so. The additional «why»-question providing more elaborate responses enabled a more shaded scoring for the either internally or externally perceived causes for the outcome of behaviour and the children’s ideas about their (in)dependence from others in coping with obstacles or problems.

The pencil and paper presentation of these scales to 151 second- and fifth-grade children (i.e., mean ages 7.3 and 11.5 years) demonstrated a developmental shift from externally to internally oriented conceptions of control. However, internally oriented conceptions of control represented not the final level of conceptual development. Following these internal conceptions, conceptions were present showing non-integrated internal and external components of control and conceptions evidencing integrated internal and external variables of control. These results indicate that children’s understanding of causes which affect the outcome of their behavior shift from being predominantly external (i.e., uncontrollable), by way of being predominantly internal (i.e., controllable), to reflecting an additive or integrated interaction between external and internal causes. The latter finding demonstrates the children’s understanding and acceptance of uncontrollable chance events (Weisz & Stipek, 1982), in addition to the awareness that they themselves are at least in part responsible for the outcomes of their behavior. Hence, the Conceptions of Control Questionnaire (henceforth, CCQ) indexes children’s understanding of causal effects on the outcomes of behavior.

With autonomy (i.e., the Conceptions of Autonomy Questionnaire; henceforth, CAQ) a similar find was observed. Also conceptions of autonomy are age-related, that is, the older children conceived themselves to be more independent from others in coping with obstacles or problems in their social environment than the younger children. No gender-differences were found for either conceptual development.

Very little theoretical reflection and empirical work is available dealing with the relation between developing conceptions of control and autonomy. While it may be argued that an autonomy-attitude is required for autonomous actions (Oppenheimer, 1979, in press), internally oriented conceptions of control may be necessary to enable conceptions of autonomy to develop (cf. Bettelheim, 1967; Bowlby, 1953; Piaget, 1923, 1981). However, because the CCQ may be restricted to causal understanding only and the CAQ to children’s ideas about their (in)dependence from others, both measures may tap different conceptual constructs. The first purpose of the present study is to explore whether any interdependent relationship between conceptions of control and autonomy is presented by presenting both scales to 9- and 11-year-olds.

During the last decade, perceptions of control, albeit from varying theoretical perspectives, have been related to almost any conceivable personality variable (cf. Lefcourt, 1976). Stipek & Weisz (1981) review numerous studies relating perceptions of control with, for instance, academical achievement motivation. Despite the large