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The Impact of Parental Psychological Control on Anxiety Among College Students

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Abstract

Recent surveys across several Chinese provinces show that between 16.36% and 26.60% of college students report significant anxiety symptoms. Even more worrying, longitudinal data indicate that these numbers have been climbing steadily over the past decade. Anxiety rarely appears alone—it usually brings along insomnia, low mood, and other emotional struggles, which make campus life even harder for young adults. At the same time, what happens at home matters a great deal. When parents frequently use psychological control—for instance, by meddling in their children's daily choices or dismissing their feelings—young people often grow up feeling that their inner world is ignored or invalidated. This kind of upbringing can seriously damage their ability to understand and express their own emotions. Such negative family interactions, driven by parental psychological control, become a major risk factor for mental health.

Keywords

Parental psychological control; rumination; college students' anxiety; mediating effect.

1. Introduction

In recent years, more and more college students have anxiety and depression. Surveys from different provinces in China show that 16.36% to 26.60% of students have anxiety symptoms. These symptoms are serious enough to need clinical help [1]. Over the past ten years, average anxiety scores have gone up [2]. One thing we should know is that anxiety seldom comes alone. It often brings sleep problems and low mood. All these issues make it harder for students to adjust to college life.

Now let's talk about the family. Parents sometimes use psychological control. For example, they may interfere with their children's decisions. They may withdraw love to punish. Or they may simply ignore what their children feel. When this happens, children grow up in an environment where their feelings are often dismissed. Over time, this kind of parenting hurts their emotional growth [3]. These negative interactions come from parental psychological control. They affect mental health. And the effects can last a long time.

Parental psychological control is not the same as setting clear rules. It works in more hidden ways. Parents may use guilt. They may withdraw affection. They may refuse to listen to the child's side. Because these tactics are so indirect, children often do not even realize they are being controlled. So they cannot fight back. As a result, these parenting behaviors leave lasting marks on children's thinking and emotions.

What is anxiety? It is a mix of tension, worry, and physical restlessness. These feelings come up when someone senses a threat. Among college students, anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems [4]. Many experts see it as a key challenge in young adulthood. Anxiety does not just affect the person. It also affects their relationships with family and friends.

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Some people get stuck when they face negative emotions. They keep thinking about their problems over and over. But they do not actually solve anything. This pattern is called rumination. And it tends to make emotional pain last longer and feel worse.

Most past studies on parental psychological control have focused on children and teenagers. They looked at how such control leads to depression or aggression [5]. These studies have given us a useful picture. But not many researchers have asked if parental psychological control also affects college students' anxiety. Instead, most studies on student anxiety have focused on outside stress. Things like heavy homework, COVID-19, or too much phone use. The long-term influence of family has gotten less attention [6]. So earlier studies gave us a good start. But something important is still missing. That is what our study tries to do.

Some earlier studies did look at rumination and anxiety in college students [7]. They helped us understand the cognitive side of anxiety. They also gave us a theoretical base. By adding parental psychological control into the same model, we hope to get a fuller picture. We also want our findings to help campus counseling centers design better programs.

2. Methods and Theory

2.1. Participants and Data Collection Procedure

We recruited participants through convenience sampling from five universities in Beijing. All respondents were sophomores or juniors at the time of the survey. Out of 500 questionnaires distributed, 480 were considered valid after we removed those with excessively short completion times or repetitive response patterns. The effective response rate was 96.0%. The final sample included 242 males and 238 females, with a fairly balanced gender distribution; 245 were sophomores and 235 were juniors. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant academic advisors. The first page of the online questionnaire presented an informed consent form, which clearly explained the study's purpose, the confidentiality of data, the exclusive academic use of responses, and the protection of personal privacy. Participants could proceed only after clicking "Agree and Start." We distributed the survey through class-based WeChat and QQ groups, as well as campus online forums. All procedures followed established ethical standards for psychological research 2.2 Research Tools

2.1.1. Parental Psychological Control Questionnaire

We assessed parental psychological control using the 18-item scale developed by Wang et al. (2007), which covers three dimensions: guilt induction, love withdrawal, and assertion of authority. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. In our sample, the Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.931, indicating high internal consistency.

2.1.2. Rumination Scale

Rumination was measured with the Ruminative Responses Scale (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), using the Chinese version revised by Han and Yang (2009). It consists of 22 items and is scored on a 4-point scale. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient for this scale was 0.93.

2.1.3. College Student Anxiety Scale

For state anxiety, we used the abbreviated State Anxiety Inventory (SSAI) developed by Tian Yanying and colleagues (2018). This tool has six items on a four-point response scale. In our sample, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for its two dimensions were 0.79 and 0.83, respectively.

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3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Variables

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were conducted on the three core variables; the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Matrix for Each Variable

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
Parental Psychological Control	2.85	0.72	1		
Rumination	2.54	0.67	0.48***	1	
College Student Anxiety	2.91	0.76	0.43***	0.52***	1
(Note: * indicates $p < 0.001$)					

As we can see from the table, parental psychological control was positively correlated with college student anxiety ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$). It was also positively correlated with rumination ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, rumination showed a positive correlation with anxiety ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). These correlations gave us the green light to move forward with the mediation analysis. 3.2 Testing the Mediating Effect of Rumination

The PROCESS macro (Model 4) was used to test the mediating effect; the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Bootstrap Test Results for the Mediating Effect

Effect Type	Effect Value	Boot Standard Error	95% Confidence Interval	Proportion of Effect
	(Effect)	(SE)	LLCI	ULCI
Total Effect	0.465	0.048	0.372	0.559
Direct effect	0.246	0.049	0.150	0.343
Indirect Effect	0.219	0.032	0.158	0.285

The total effect of parental psychological control on anxiety was 0.465, and the direct effect was 0.246. Both were significant. The indirect effect through rumination was 0.219, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.158, 0.285]. Since this interval does not contain zero, the mediating effect is statistically significant. In fact, rumination accounted for 47.1% of the total effect, which suggests that it partially mediates the relationship between parental psychological control and anxiety among college students.

4. Discussion

Our data answered the initial question we posed: parental psychological control does not just push up anxiety levels directly—it also works through the cognitive pathway of rumination. We break down the findings below.

To begin with, higher levels of parental psychological control were clearly linked to more anxiety among the students we surveyed. This pattern matches what earlier researchers have

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reported. When young people do not get enough autonomy support at home, they tend to develop a sense of helplessness and feel insecure about their surroundings. Over time, this can trigger or intensify anxious moods. One interesting observation is that even though these students are already in college—technically adults—their parents' controlling behaviors still pack a considerable psychological punch. So the influence does not simply fade away as children grow older.

Another point worth raising is the role of rumination. Our statistical tests showed that parental psychological control affects anxiety through two channels: a direct one and an indirect one via rumination. In other words, rumination is a partial mediator. What exactly is rumination? It is a passive, repetitive way of coping with negative feelings. People stuck in rumination keep turning their problems over and over in their heads without actually solving anything. Students who grow up under strong parental psychological control often get used to suppressing their own needs and passively accepting whatever comes their way. When they run into setbacks later, they tend to blame themselves and replay negative experiences repeatedly. This mental habit piles on extra psychological pressure, which eventually fuels more severe anxiety.

Finally, what do these findings mean for practice? We think they offer some concrete guidance for mental health services on campus. First, counseling centers should consider adding family background assessments to their routine intake process, paying special attention to students who report high levels of parental psychological control. Second, interventions like cognitive-behavioral therapy could be particularly helpful here. Teaching students how to break out of the repetitive loop of rumination and adopt healthier emotion-regulation strategies may effectively lower their vulnerability to anxiety.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, we got several clear findings from our data. We found that parental psychological control was linked to higher anxiety. In simple terms, more parental control meant more anxiety. We also found that parental psychological control was linked to rumination. Students who felt more controlled were more likely to dwell on negative thoughts. And rumination itself was linked to anxiety. Students who ruminated more had stronger anxiety symptoms.

Then we tested if rumination played a mediating role. Our results said yes. Rumination partially explained how parental psychological control leads to anxiety. So there are two pathways. One is direct. The other is indirect—through rumination.

What does this mean for schools? We think universities should look at students' family backgrounds when giving mental health support. Reducing rumination could help lower anxiety. If schools teach students better ways to think and manage emotions, students may become stronger over time.

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