

CONTRIBUTIONS OF ATTENTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REGULATION TO  
SOCIOEMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT AND EARLY ACADEMIC SUCCESS  
AMONG HEAD START GRADUATES

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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The multiple pathways linking 4-year-olds' self-regulation to their adjustment (defined as teacher-reported socioemotional functioning and academic achievement) among a sample of children from ethnically and geographically diverse low-income families (Time 1  $N = 163$ ) were examined at two time points over the transition from preschool to first grade. Self-regulation was defined in terms of attentional and behavioral regulation and inhibitory control. Three research questions were investigated in separate papers. In all analyses, demographic factors such as maternal age, education, workforce entry, family income category, and child age were statistically controlled.

In the first paper, I investigated whether self-regulation mediates the relationship between caregivers' limit-setting practices and children's adjustment. Findings indicate that the extent to which children were able to engage in attentional and behavioral forms of regulation fully explained the relations between limit-setting practices and early reading achievement in first grade. Contrary to hypotheses, attention and behavior regulation did not mediate the effect of limit-setting on children's socially competent, externalizing, and internalizing behaviors.

In the second paper, I tried to explicate the known relations between inhibitory control and adjustment by examining the mediating role of behavior regulation measured longitudinally at Time 1 and concurrently at Time 2. Support was found for

the mediating role of behavior regulation in the relations between inhibitory control and children's reading and writing achievement. Comparable support was not found for children's socioemotional outcomes. Limited support was detected for the indirect effect of inhibitory control through behavior regulation on social competence, but only for children from married families at Time 1.

In the third paper, I examined whether negative emotionality (defined as anger/frustration) moderated the relationship between self-regulation and child adjustment. Results suggest that negative emotionality moderated the relationship between attention regulation and children's reading grades: Children with fewer attention regulation skills and higher levels of frustration received lower reading grades compared with peers who also displayed few attention regulation skills but were low in frustration at Time 1. Contrary to predictions, the paths from behavioral regulation to achievement did not vary as a function of child frustration. For all three papers, policy implications are discussed.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Lyscha Marcynyszyn, a native of Seattle, Washington, graduated in May of 1998 from Whitman College with Honors in Psychology and Distinction on her comprehensive oral examination. At Whitman, Lyscha received the “Order of Waiilatpu” (Mortar Board) for excellence in scholarship, leadership, and service to her liberal arts college.

While still an undergraduate, Lyscha spent the summer of 1997 as a research assistant to Elizabeth Loftus, a cognitive psychologist at the University of Washington. Shaped by her experiences with Beth Loftus and Dr. Jack Metzger, her mentor at Whitman, Lyscha completed an Honor’s Thesis, which examined the effects of picture drawing on children’s memory performance for a novel event with a sample of preschoolers from one bi-lingual, Head Start program that was distributed across several classrooms.

Since the age of 14, Lyscha has worked with high-risk children and adolescents as a camp counselor in the San Juan Islands, a paid intern for Child Protective Services, a behavioral therapist for autistic children, and as a paid intern at Seattle Mental Health’s Olive Street Children’s Center, and more recently at Children’s Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle. From June 1998 until July 1999, Lyscha worked as a Pediatric Mental Health Specialist on the Inpatient Psychiatric Unit at Children’s Hospital. During this time she also engaged in child clinical research at the University of Washington with Drs. Geri Dawson and Lili Lengua.

Lyscha entered the graduate program in Human Development at Cornell University in Fall Semester 1999. From August 1999 to June 2002, she worked at the Family Life Development Center as a Graduate Research Assistant to her advisor,

John J. Eckenrode. She received her Master's Degree in 2001. During the 2002-2003 academic year, the Cornell College of Human Ecology awarded her with a Flora Rose Fellowship in recognition of her demonstrated potential to contribute to college research.

The following summer she received a Graduate Urban Scholars Fellowship in Children, Family, and Community Development Policy from Cornell University to conduct collaborative research using archival data from 16 different welfare-to-work programs at MDRC in New York City. With supervision from Pamela Morris, she examined whether the effects of the welfare-to-work programs on children's socioemotional adjustment varied as a function of maternal depression, a potential barrier to employment, at the study's outset, when mothers were randomly assigned to either experimental or existing welfare programs.

Following the completion of her Graduate Urban Scholars fellowship, she continued at MDRC as a Research Analyst through January 2004 under the supervision of Pamela Morris. Over the course of these five months, she gained valuable experience working as a paid writer on others' grants for US foundations and the federal government. During this period, Lyscha received a Predoctoral Kirschstein-National Research Service Award (NRSA), from the National Institute of Mental Health, to study "Self-Regulation and Adjustment Among Low-Income Children." Starting in February 2004, she worked as a Graduate Research Assistant to Liz Gershoff and Larry Aber at the National Center for Children in Poverty, which is located within the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.

During her graduate career Lyscha maintained her primary interest in at-risk child development through collaborative empirical work on the Elmira Nurse-Family Partnership study (PIs: John J. Eckenrode and David L. Olds), the 100 Families Growing Up in Rural Poverty study (PI: Gary W. Evans), the Cornell Early Social

Development study (PI: C. Cybele Raver), the Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program Evaluation (PI: J. Lawrence Aber), and the Next Generation, welfare reform studies (PI: Virginia Knox).

Lyscha defended her dissertation on October 25, 2005. It was accepted without revision on the day of her defense and she received her Ph.D. in 2006.

I dedicate this dissertation to the most influential person in my life, my aunt,

*Taisa Djakow*



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I am grateful to the Family Life Development Center for providing me with the office space and resources I needed to conduct research throughout my time in Ithaca. Here in New York City, I am especially grateful to MDRC and the National Center for Children in Poverty for allowing me to use the office space in which much of this dissertation research was done. Work space arrangements were offered in conjunction with research assistantships made possible by directors and associates at each center, most notably John Eckenrode, Pamela Morris, Liz Gershoff, Larry Aber, and Jane Knitzer.

I gratefully acknowledge the members of my Special Committee who made tremendous contributions to this project with their time, effort, and counsel: Rachel Dunifon, Gary Evans, and John Eckenrode.

As a committee member, Rachel Dunifon made many contributions to the dissertation over a relatively short period of time. While I lived away from Ithaca, during the last year of my graduate study, she graciously agreed to have dissertation phone calls twice a month. During these calls and through her careful reading of my dissertation papers, she ensured that I clearly articulated the theoretical rationale for each study and her comments had direct and substantive implications for my dissertation sample, the constructs used (particularly the limit-setting variable), the coding of academic grades, and the statistical models. Notably, Rachel is directly responsible for leading me to a place from which I could defend my dissertation during October 2005. The impact of her simple question, “So when are you going to defend?” is immeasurable to me. I truly appreciate her persistence on my behalf.

Gary Evans, whom I met in April 2000 and who joined my thesis committee in the spring of 2001, deserves special mention for his extraordinary contributions as a mentor and collaborator. I don’t think there is anyone at Cornell who is more enthusiastic and passionate about research than Gary. Two of my three empirical publications have been with Gary and there is no doubt that my next published empirical paper will also be in joint authorship with him. Professionally, Gary has been an incredible source of inspiration and support and for this I am thankful. I am taken aback by the level of care Gary took in providing feedback and suggestions on my dissertation papers, even before they were in final form. When I acknowledged Gary’s abundant feedback, he responded by saying that he was “really interested in the topic.” I think this is true. I also think Gary is a teacher in the true liberal arts meaning of the word. I can think of no higher compliment than this.

For the past six years, John Eckenrode, Gary Evans, and Cybele Raver not only supported my research but also graciously arranged funding for it. As the formal and informal co-sponsors of my dissertation research, John Eckenrode and Cybele Raver helped craft this research through multiple grant proposals and, sometimes, endless meetings. Cybele's high standards and extraordinary people skills served as an inspiration to me even before I entered graduate school at Cornell. By allowing me to use the two-year follow-up data from the Early Social Development Study, she laid the groundwork from which I could grow as a researcher and an academic.

My research program was also shaped through discussions with Henry Ricciuti and Jim Garbarino. Through a directed readings course, office appointments, and impromptu conversations in the "Old Mann" Library Building, Henry worked tirelessly to ensure that I understood the role of mediators and (especially) moderators of risk as they relate to subsequent child adjustment. Likewise, Jim was instrumental in helping me flesh out problematic aspects of what it means *and* now takes to be considered "resilient."

I can say with the greatest sincerity that the smartest decision I made in Graduate School was asking John Eckenrode to be my advisor. He served as the chair of my special committee for my entire graduate career, a grand total of six years and three months. My work with John became the number one reason I persisted in pursuing my Ph.D. More than anyone, John provided the academic training and professional wherewithal I needed to approach the dissertation papers, grant proposals, and conference submissions effectively. I want to thank John for his thorough and critical reading of the dissertation papers and for countless hours of invaluable feedback and discussion. My regards go to my advisor for his solid judgment, mentorship in professional matters, and wisdom.

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My uncle is responsible for engendering my love of writing. In his appointed role of book report critic, he reviewed countless book reports, which over the years grew into essays and later into papers. After reviewing one such book report early on, my uncle told me that one of my paragraphs was “superfluous,” to which I quickly rejoined, “Uncle Mikey, I don’t even know what ‘superfluous’ means!” For this foundation I am indebted.

I have relied on my aunt’s strength and resolve throughout my life, although perhaps most noticeably during my time as a graduate student. It is my deepest wish to live as she does, guided by the most generous of spirits. To my aunt: Thank you for

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