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## Conceptualizing Adolescents' Autonomy: Parental Support and Adolescent's Perception

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*This study explores a qualitative understanding regarding Vietnamese adolescents and parents' conception of autonomy and perception of parental autonomy support. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students at a middle school in Ho Chi Minh City and their parents respectively. The results indicate that Vietnamese adolescents and parents perceived autonomy as responsibility, self-expression, self-sufficient and decision making. Parental autonomy support implies control (in standards setting meaning), communication and support for decision making.*

**Keywords:** Parenting, autonomy, relatedness, parental autonomy support.

### 1. Introduction

The concept of autonomy is controversial. The conceptualization of autonomy varies according to different theoretical perspectives of psychology ranging from traditional psychoanalytic thinking to evolutionary psychology (Hill and Holmbeck, 1986; Kagitcibasi, 2005). In the first trend, researchers defined autonomy as “detachment from parents” and “independence from social influence”. They emphasized the process of separation and independence in the development of autonomy. However, conceptualization of autonomy as independence have been criticized by a number of researchers (Grotevant and Cooper, 1986; Hill and Holmbeck, 1986). These authors argued that autonomy needs positive connection with parents to be fostered and grown. This issue concerns the meaning of autonomy. The dictionary definition of autonomy refers to a Greek word “autonomia” – the power of one who is “autonomos”, who determines himself the law to what he obeyed. It refers to self-rule and volition. The philosopher Kant described autonomy as the independence of one's will from any desire and the ability of being self-governing and being the initiator of one's own actions. Kant's thought about autonomy as the ability to act in one's own norms/laws which have universal values. Thus, autonomy does not preclude all relatedness. Being concerned with cultural implication, researchers have questioned

the importance, even the existence, of autonomy in collectivistic cultures (Kagitçibasi, 1996; Markus et Kitayama, 1991; Chirkov et al., 2003). This is the key issue dealt with in this article. This article proposes to conceptualize autonomy, based on interdisciplinary approach, as a compromise between the opposing axes: individualization and collectivization, independence and dependence, attachment and detachment.

### **1.1. Conceptualizing Adolescent Autonomy: Interdisciplinary Approach**

#### *Autonomy as Balancing between Individualization and Collectivization*

For the sociologist, the conquest of autonomy is a slow and difficult path of development of oneself. Jean-Claude Deschamps (1999) proposed the way to conceive the Self in developing the relationship of the subject with himself, with his group of belonging and with the larger group that is human species. The Self composes of two sets of characteristics. One refers to social identity and the other mentions personal identity. Socialization is often defined as a process that gradually makes the child a social being by the internalization of values, norms, and multiples interaction systems. In the publication coordinated by Malewska-Peyre and Tap (1991), we find the Goslin's concept of transaction (1969) that the successful socialization has not been confused with the child's compliance with social norms, but rather the result of a constructive and reciprocal adaptation child- adult. Moreover, according to Malewska-Peyre and Tap (1991), the educational psychologists only consider socialization as successful when it is accompanied by a development of the personality. In the process of socialization, the individual always seeks to achieve as a person, because "the person is not a conditioned structure, submissive, passive and immobile; her essential characteristic is the engagement: she is action, realization" (Tap, 1991). Socialization requires then to be accompanied by personalization.

According to Pierre Tap, personalization consists of two modalities: self-control and invention. "Personalization by self-control is the process by which the subject coordinates and prioritizes its conducts according to the required action and the need of internal integration... It implies, in fact the effort of unification, control and self-defense, according to the requirements of the situation and relations systems" (1991, p. 59). Personalization by invention is then defined as "the process by which the person chooses and decides, gives meaning and value to life, objects, situations and relationships..." (p.59). This is akin to self-determination theory that highly autonomous or self-determined person is required to possess a sense of volition and choicefulness (Ryan, 1993; Ryan, LaGuardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov & Kim, 2005).

We see that socialization and personalization are accompanied and fit together to form the "Moi" - a sociological component and the "Je" - a more personal component (Deschamps, 1991). In a complexity of differences and similarities, Deschamps proposed the idea of identity in between similarity and difference: "There is as the premise of the need for regulation, a dosage, a balance between similarity and difference. We seek a balance between two opposed propensities, the tendency to assimilate - which corresponds to an easy assumption of gregariousness - and the tendency to diverge - which corresponds to an equally easy assumption of individualism" (1999,

p. 153). Autonomy thus acquired by the process of socialization and personalization involves the person in the relationship with other. How does individual identity balance between independence and dependence of social relations?

#### *Autonomy as Balancing between Dependence and Independence*

From an individualistic perspective, several researchers view adolescents' development of autonomy as a process of independent functioning in the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional domains (Collins, Gleason, & Sesma, 1997; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). How does this independence be understood in collectivistic perspective? Can adolescents be totally independent from their parents or their peers? Hoffmans-Gosset (2000) proposed a concept of interdependence. This is not an alternation of being dependent or independent, but rather both dependence and independence at the same time. "Interdependence is the overcoming of dependence and independence in the recognition of others, the Other as a Person, a subject of exchanges and relations" (p.36). Autonomy is to know and recognize themselves; it is also to recognize the other, to respect differences. Autonomy allows an equal relationship where everyone would be a unique and authentic person.

Make contact and mutual exchange, the child takes place and adopts a status in family and society. He must be accepted, recognized by others. This acceptance appears as a condition of a development of autonomy. So for a child to become autonomous, he must be able to express himself, his opinion must be heard. The fact that adult accepts his words, understands his ideas, encourages him to express himself allows him to build self-esteem (Hoffmans-Gosset, 2000). According to this view, autonomy implies the responsibility and respect for others. In the same line of self-determination theory, the opposite of autonomy is not dependence but heteronomy, that is, acting in accordance with one own desires or influenced by external forces (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). Autonomy is self-governance, in terms of using the power of one's will and making choices. Autonomy is thus not independence and separation. Research showed that emotional separation process had consistent relations with negative adolescent functioning (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Beyers and Goossens, 1999), and with greater feelings of insecurity towards parents (Ryan & Lynch, 1989).

Does adolescents' autonomy need separation and distance in the relation with parents? Does Vietnamese culture valorize autonomy as separation and independence?

#### *Autonomy as Balancing between Attachment and Detachment*

Lamborn and Steinberg (1993) mentioned two opposite trends among psychologists. On the one hand, psychoanalysts view adolescent's development of autonomy as a process of separation-individuation (Blos, 1979; Bloom, 1980; Hoffmans, 1984; Levy-Warren, 1999). According to this view, autonomy development entails a double movement in which adolescents not only physically but emotionally distance themselves from their parents and increasingly reduce omnipotent parental protection. On the other hand, Grotevant and Cooper (1986) argued that

optimal development toward autonomy will only take place within a supportive parent–child relationship. Similarly, Hill and Holmbeck (1986) recognize that positive autonomy development needs to be defined in terms of a process of self-governance that does not preclude close and supportive relationships with parents. The second point of view brings us back to the attachment theory of Bowlby (1969). According to Bowlby (1969), the crucial function of attachment is to provide a sense of security. Family must provide children with emotional security, since it will allow them access to autonomy. In the development toward autonomy, the child must be protected against anxiety and mental disturbances that can be caused by lack of affection. Several studies found that parental attachment is related to emotional and social competence, friendship and peer relations (Allen et al., 1994; Rice et al., 1997; Laible et al., 2004; Laible, 2007). These findings showed that attachment security fosters appropriate social behavior by promoting high levels of emotional awareness, empathy, positive expressiveness, and low levels of negative dominant expressiveness. Researchers also suggest that attachment provides a sense of security even in adolescence and later on. Laible (2007) found that attachment security with both parents and peers was significantly related to aspects emotional and social competence in late adolescence. Another finding was the significant correlation showing that the older the sample is when assessed for attachment security, the stronger the effect sizes linking attachment and peer relations (Schneider, Atkinson and Tardif, 2001). In cultural perspective, research with ethnic minorities in Germany and Netherlands (Phalet & Schonpflug, 2001; Dekovic et al., 2006) showed that parental autonomy goals for adolescent do not imply separateness and strong parental control can coexist with warmth (relatedness). These results confirm the idea that autonomy is not situated at one or other pole of these axes. In this process, the child develops his social identity and his personal identity in the egalitarian and supportive social relationships. Emotional attachment security and support from parents encourage adolescents in their way towards autonomy.

### **1.2. Parental Autonomy Encouragement**

According to the conceptualization presented in this study, autonomy is defined as self- control, self-expression and responsibility towards oneself and others, so that adolescents act upon their will on the basis of well-internalized values and relationship of others. In line with this idea, parental autonomy support entails enhancement of social and emotional competence of adolescents which is defined as understanding, managing, expressing themselves, acknowledgement of the other's perceptions, acceptance of the other's feelings and emotions. Parents supporting autonomy facilitate their offspring's initiative, encourage them to assume responsibilities and make choices. These parents are attuned, responsive, empathy with their children's views and opinions. This way of autonomy support does not imply independence or separateness, nor dependence in relations with significant others. Studies have shown how supportive relationships facilitate autonomy (Ryan, 1995). This positive attachment to parents has been defined as a general feeling of trust, an adequate level of communication and an absence of alienation (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987)

These parental characteristics are akin to authoritative style of parenting. Research conducted in Anglo-Saxon contexts had always identified positive association between authoritative parenting style and optimum outcomes of adolescents (e.g. Baumrind, 1967, 1971; Lamborn et al., 1991; Steinberg et al., 1994).

## **2. Methodology**

A qualitative approach has been used to explore parents and adolescents' opinions about autonomy and parental support to facilitate adolescent's autonomy. Parents and their children who enroll in 7th and 8th grades of a secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City were involved in this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students and their parents. Students and parents were asked about their conception of autonomy. Parents were asked to share their view on how an adolescent should be autonomous and how parents should do and behave to support the growing of autonomy. Adolescents shared opinion on their autonomy and their perception of parental support for granting autonomy.

## **3. Data Analysis**

Data collected from interviews was analyzed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014), which considered the participants' perception about autonomy and parental support. The data was investigated to identify the emerging themes, and then cluster them with descriptive labels.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Congruence between Parents and Adolescents on Autonomy's Conceptualization**

Three themes on conceptualizing autonomy generated from parents and adolescents' interviews: responsibility, self-expression and making choices.

#### **Responsibility**

Parents described characteristics of autonomous adolescents as a person who take initiative, assume responsibility, especially for their study. Like almost of Vietnamese parents, the most of their preoccupation is children's school achievement. So parents emphasized on the ability to organize and accomplish their school's tasks by themselves. Adolescents showed similar preoccupation with autonomy in school's aspect. One adolescent said that:

“Autonomy is ability to work on his/her own, to do homework by himself and capacity of self-study, do not rely on others.” In addition, parents also mentioned that adolescents seen as autonomous with ability to fend for themselves, to help with the housework. One father shared: “He participates in household duties, particularly, he assume all tasks related to his own.”

Adolescents also want to take responsibility, they learn to do housework, learn cooking and they are proud of themselves. “When mom is away, she let me stay at home alone, and says that I can cook for myself. I’m very happy when mom encourages me to be independent.”

### **Self-expression and Making choices**

While encouraging adolescents to take responsibility for study’s tasks and to fend for themselves, parents didn’t support adolescents’ independence in making decisions. They preferred communication and making decision together. Parents took on the advisory role for their young.

One father suggested that adolescents have been internalized values and good routines since they were young, and they can be able to act upon their own willingness on the basis of family values. He said: “My daughter have to form her own ideas and opinions, to behave upon her own willingness, but she relies always on the framework setting in our family.” These parents encouraged adolescents to set goals and plans for achieving these goals. They listened to children, considered their adolescent’s opinions, gave advice and respected their wishes. “My son can freely express his opinion, after that I give my point of view. He thinks about it, and makes smart choices.”

*Adolescents reported similar ideas about autonomy.*

“For all matters related to my study, I like to consult my parents’ opinions, especially my father, because he had a good education and has got success at work. I admire my father and totally trust him. For other things, I have my own opinion. But I like to have advice from my parents before I make choices. It’s difficult to make choices.”

### **4.2. Adolescents’ Perception of Parental Autonomy Support**

Adolescents were asked how their parents support the development of autonomy. The adolescents in this study consistently perceived that their parents were open enough, listened to them. They communicated quite well with them [parents]: “My mom let me express my ideas. She listens to me and shares with me.” One 14-year-old girl said:

“I can tell my interests, my choice of high school first, and then he gives me advice. But he let me decide.”

Another 15-year-old girl related similar experiences:

“My father let me decide and I am responsible for my decision. He [father] only gives me some ideas.” Adolescents also perceived that their parents had high expectations for academic performance, but they [parents] didn’t force them [adolescents] to study hard. For example:

“My parents make me see that learning is their own responsibility, not obligations. They help me enjoy learning, I don’t feel forced to study.”

*Another girl perceived her father's attitude as supportive:*

“One day, I was not sober, and had bad point. My father didn't care about bad point; he encouraged me to be better next times.” Parents were also perceived to be democratic and authoritative. Adolescents described that their parents were not autocratic, but “he [father] is not permissive”, reported 15- year-old boy. Another 14-year-old girl shared, “My dad is relatively strict, but democratic”.

Parenting practices were perceived as supportive and granting confidence, autonomy and facilitating well-being. Adolescents felt happy with their parental encouragement, one girl said, “I agree with my parents' support, and feel really glad”. Another 13-year-old girl shared, “With parents' support, I feel more confident to make effort”. However, in one hand, adolescents like to be independent, in the other hand, they always seek parents' warmth and close relation. One 13- year- old girl said: “I'm very happy when my parents encourage me to be autonomous. They trust me and let me travel alone with friends. I don't like to be autocratic controlled, but if they give me too more freedom, I feel abandoned.”

Another 15-year-old boy also expressed the need to rely on parents for important decision, he said, “I like to have my parents' opinions for decision. Because it's difficult [to make decision], if you make mistakes, sometimes you can't correct it.” Another 14-year-old girl shared similar experience: “My mom encourages me to be independent, it's good because I have grown. Besides, she helps me in something.”

#### **4. Discussion**

This qualitative study aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of parents and adolescents' perceptions of autonomy and parental autonomy support. The findings show that parents and adolescents defined autonomy as assuming responsibilities, taking initiatives, self-expression and decision making. The second set of results indicates adolescents' perception of parent's warmth and support for autonomy. The findings are akin with self-determination theory, that prone to self- organize and take their actions in accordance with their values and interests (Deci and Ryan, 1985). This is also in line with the relational conceptualization on independent – interdependent self of Markus and Kitayama (1991) that includes agency and interpersonal distance dimensions. The authors state that “independent construal that involves a conception of the self as an autonomous, independent person” (p.226), and they add cultural perspective that emphasizes, “the interdependent model is not become separate and autonomous from others but to fit-in with others” (Markus and Kitayama, 1994, p.97). Whereas independent perspective defines autonomy as not relying on others, this study showed that Vietnamese adolescents and their parents highly appreciated their close relationship. Adolescents trusted in parents, they willingly rely on parents for guidance and support to make good decisions. Research also found that adolescent can maintain a secure attachment to their parents without feeling controlled in one's actions (Ryan and Lynch, 1989). Lin and Fu (1990) compared Chinese parents in Taiwan, immigrant Chinese parents in the United States, and Anglo- American parents. This result found Chinese parents to

be high on both control (standards setting) and encouragement of autonomy and achievement (Lin and Fu, 1990). Similar findings have been reported in the research of Cha (1994). The author showed that Korean parents granted autonomy to their offspring and also valued obligations and responsibilities within the group (Cha, 1994). According to Kagitcibasi (1990, 1996b), the conception of autonomous-related self emerged within the family in changing societies characterized by collectivistic cultures of relatedness. The process of urbanization and socioeconomic development entails the greater prevalence of schooling, highly skilled requirements in the workplace and international integration. Volition, self expression, capacity of decision making emerged as a new asset. During mid-adolescence, performance in school and school activities are becoming of great importance, especially for Asian parents, in the light of influencing career future. The results indicated the consensus in parents and adolescents' opinions about self-regulation in this domain. High parental expectations about academic achievement were mentioned by participants, but adolescents did not feel forced to study hard. Appropriate parental expectations and encouragement have been found to be positive to intrinsic motivation. Similarly, in the self-determination theory, Ryan and Solky (1996) characterized autonomy-supportive parents as displaying an authentic interest in their children's needs and avoiding to manipulate the bond with their children for their own good. Research showed that self-determination in scholastic activities is associated with feelings of academic competence, better learning strategies, and with higher school grades (Black and Deci, 2000; Grolnick et al., 1991; Yamauchi et al., 1999).

Beside, parents come to value autonomy, while do not reject the close relationship in family (Phalet & Schonpflug, 2001). In this study, Vietnamese parents also encouraged their children to express their own opinion, facilitated and supported them to make decision. Nevertheless, parents and adolescents did not appreciate separation and emotional independence. Kagitcibasi (2005) argued that intergenerational material interdependencies being weakened allowed autonomy to be valued in child rearing. However, the connectedness of the growing child is always desired. Therefore, together with autonomy, parents continue to control rather than permissiveness, and parental control is also changed, it is no longer authoritarian. With the child's autonomy being valued, the control becomes "framework setting" rather than "dominating" (Lau, Lew, Hau, Cheung, & Berndt, 1990). Unlike the common authoritarian figure of traditional Asiatic fathers (Shek, 2006), Vietnamese adolescents also perceived their fathers as supportive, authoritative and easy to communicate with. They felt confident in decision making and scholastic competences with parental autonomy support. Thus, promoting effective parental autonomy support and parent-child communication by engaging children in the process of decision making and providing rationales to children should enhance adolescents' psychosocial health (Kim et al., 2009; Yuwen and Chen, 2013).

## **5. Conclusion**

The present research demonstrates that Vietnamese parents and adolescents determine the conception of autonomy as responsibility, self-expression, responsibility and decision making.

Adolescents also perceive their parents warm, democratic and supportive for autonomy. Thus, the findings confirm research results of the compatibility of autonomy and relatedness in family model of psychological interdependence in the collectivistic culture.

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