

BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL AUTONOMY IN ADOLESCENCE

DIFFERENT MEANINGS AS A FUNCTION
OF GENDER AND AGE

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INTRODUCTION

Autonomy is an integral element of adolescent identity, and may be seen as an indicator of psychological maturity in this period that leads a person to decide how to think, to feel, and to act.

Different authors distinguish three changing dimensions to its development.

– cognitive: decreases the influence of important others and of support of the criterion used to resolve moral, political, or social problems (Douvan and Adelson, 1966; Devereux, 1970; Kohlberg, 1973).

– affective: redefinition and progressive reduction of paternal links (Elder, 1998; Ana Freud, 1958; Kandel and Lesser, 1972) and development of infantile relations (Douvan and Adelson, 1966).

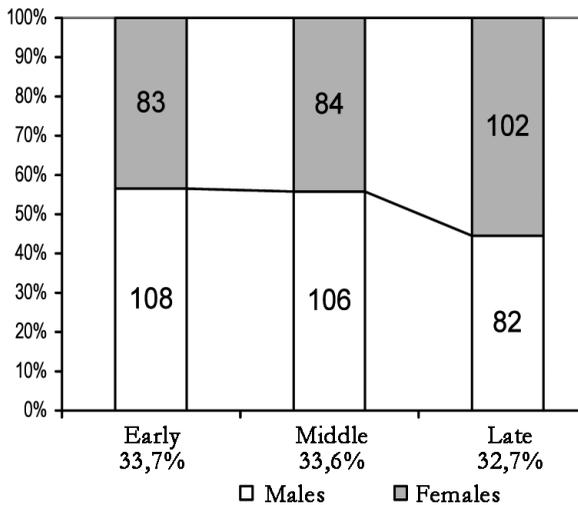
– behavioral: autonomous decision-making, the result of self-confidence, with the latter being its observable aspect

(Greene, 1992; Feldman, 1990; Newman 1983; Rosenthal, 1995).

During the 1980s, a controversy arose in regard to the usefulness of the concept of emotional autonomy during adolescence. Steinberg (1986) argued that unlinking from parents was an integral part of maturity, while Ryan and Lynch (1989), said that it reflected a misplaced attachment. With self-esteem being an indicator of long-term adjustment (Offer, 1998), its correlation with autonomy may aid in clarifying its developmental meaning.

The purpose of the present study was to analyze the different meanings of behavioral and emotional autonomy in adolescence, as a function of gender and age, as well as their implications for education. We utilized a random sample with unknown probability, based on gender (two levels) and on age (3 levels), applied to a general population of school attending adolescents in Valencia. The definitive sample is composed of 567 adolescents (figure and Table 1).

Figure and Table 1: Sample distribution by phase of adolescence and gender



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Phase	Years	Females	Males	%
Early	(12-13)	83	108	33,7
Middle	(14-15)	82	106	33,6
Late	(16-18)	102	82	32,7
Total 567	(12-18)	271	296	100

The scales used were :

- Behavioral Autonomy PADM (Bosma, 1996)
- Emotional Autonomy (Steinberg, 1986)
- Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1963)

O U T C O M E S

1. Behavioral autonomy

**Table 2. Mean and typical variation of the PADM SCALE
(Jackson and Bosma, 1996)**

ITEM RESPONSES SCALE : FROM 1 (PARENTS DECIDE) TO 5 (CHILDREN DECIDE)	MEDIA	D TÍPICA
1. Help doing domestic chores (for example , make the bed, wash dishes).	2,46	1,11
2. Bed time	3,11	1,36
3. Table manners	2,71	1,26
4. Language use	2,86	1,33
5. Frequency of visits with extended family members ; “Visits”.	2,85	1,24
6. Privacy	3,98	1,29
7. Smoking or not smoking	3,40	1,53
8. Quantity of alcohol consumption; “Alcohol”	3,11	1,58
9. Quantity of sweets consumed; “Sweets”.	3,85	1,27
10. Frequency of baths or showers “Hygiene”.	4,25	1,11
11. Clothes worn, “Clothes”.	4,32	,98
12. What look to have, in terms of hair style and general appearance; “Appearance”.	4,34	,97
13. How allowance is spent	3,82	1,24
14. Sports practiced. “Sports”	4,44	,93
15. What interests or hobbies to follow; “Interests”.	4,44	,92

16. Where to go when going out , “Going out”	4,05	1,10
17. Time returning home at night , “Return time ”.	2,26	1,17
18. People to spend time with; “Friends”.	4,06	1,10
19. How to behave in terms of sexuality “Sexuality”.	3,61	1,39
20. Participate or not in religious activities, “Church”.	3,81	1,34
21. How much time dedicated to homework, “Homework”.	3,70	1,30
GENERAL BEHAVIORAL AUTONOMY	3,59	.63

As seen in Table 2, the adolescents believe that they are most independent in the behavior “Sports” (with this also being the item that presents the least variation) and that they are least autonomous in “Return Time”.

Table 3 shows that, in terms of age, children feel progressively more autonomous as their adolescence progresses, while in terms of gender, the differences are not significant along the lines of Zani (1993). The second order affect (the interaction of gender/age) is not statistically significant.

Table 3 Development through time of adolescent behavioral autonomy (ANOVA)

Mean group 1 12-13 years	Mean group 2 14-15 years	Mean group 3 16-18 years	F (age) F (gender)	Tukey comparison for age groups
3.25	3.52	3.88	<u>47.87***</u>	3>2>1
3.35	3.66	3.91	3.25(n.s)	
3.30	3.59	3.90		

Note: (n.s): p0.05; ***: p<0.001. The (age*gender) interaction is not statistically significant. Comparisons for the three age groups have a meaningful probability of at least p0.05.

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Table 4. Development through time of adolescent behavioral autonomy

	Decision area	Age		Mean group 1 12-13 years	Mean group 2 14-15 years	Mean group 3 16-18 years	F(age) F(gender)	Comparison Males/ Females	Tukey for age groups
		Total	Gender						
■	Domestic chores	Total		2.50	2.32	2.58	2.60(n.s)		-
		Males		2.55	2.22	2.53	.52(n.s)		
		Females		2.43	2.44	2.62			
●	Homework	Total		3.51	3.81	3.79	3.84(n.s)	M>V	
		Males		3.33	3.65	3.56	21.91***		
		Females		3.77	4.02	3.98			
	Privacy	Total		3.68	4.05	4.25	13.66***		2>1
		Males		2.64	4.05	4.23	.14(n.s)		
		Females		3.73	4.03	4.27			
●	Sweets	Total		3.6	4.01	4.25	35.27***		
		Males		3.31	3.95	4.33	.30(n.s)		
		Females		3.45	4.10	4.18			
	Hygiene	Total		3.82	4.37	4.56	22.39***	M>V	
		Males		3.61	4.17	4.39	23.31***		
		Females		4.11	4.64	4.70			
	Interests	Total		4.26	4.50	4.62	5.67**		
		Males		4.24	4.42	4.62	.01(n.s)		
		Females		4.28	4.47	4.61			
■	Appearance	Total		4.13	4.35	4.53	5.87**	M>V	
		Males		4.00	4.24	4.44	7.22**		
		Females		4.30	4.46	4.61			
	Return time	Total		2.10	2.26	2.48	7.16**	V>M	
		Males		2.16	2.38	2.66	8.66*		
		Females		2.01	2.10	2.32			
	Visits	Total		2.66	2.86	3.05	6.40*		3>1
		Males		2.69	2.75	2.95	1.95(n.s)		
		Females		2.61	3.01	3.13			
▲	Going out	Total		3.81	4.05	4.32	10.91***		
		Males		3.74	4.05	4.39	.01(n.s)		
		Females		3.91	4.03	4.27			
	Friends	Total		3.87	4.07	4.32	7.84**		
		Males		3.76	3.97	4.41	1.63(n.s)		
		Females		4.04	4.21	4.23			
●	Sports	Total		4.26	4.45	4.64	6.42***		
		Males		4.23	4.56	4.66	.77(n.s)		
		Females		4.29	4.30	4.63			
▲	Sexuality	Total		3.28	3.53	4.08	29.11***		3>2
		Males		3.32	3.36	4.16	.23(n.s)		
		Females		3.23	3.73	4.02			
	Church	Total		3.57	3.65	4.26	23.03***		
		Males		3.59	3.57	4.06	4.01(n.s)		
		Females		3.54	3.77	4.43			
●	Clothes	Total		4.12	4.28	4.54	6.53**	M>V	
		Males		3.99	4.21	4.48	8.95**		
		Females		4.30	4.48	4.59			
	Bed time	Total		2.56	3.14	3.67	49.69***	M>V	
		Males		2.44	2.99	3.48	14.88**		
		Females		2.73	3.31	3.84			
■	Manners	Total		2.52	2.64	3.02	10.96**	M>V	
		Males		2.54	2.45	2.89	7.16*		
		Females		2.47	2.89	3.17			
	Language	Total		2.63	2.78	3.21	15.15***		3>2>1
		Males		2.51	2.83	2.24	.14(n.s)		
		Females		2.78	2.72	3.18			
▲	Smoking	Total		3.95	3.38	3.92	37.12***		
		Males		2.75	3.33	3.96	4.21(n.s)		
		Females		3.25	3.44	3.89			
	Alcohol	Total		2.52	3.16	3.70	58.66***		
		Males		2.40	3.18	3.82	.00(n.s)		
		Females		2.69	3.13	3.60			
●	Money	Total		3.47	3.84	4.18	21.85***		
		Males		3.46	3.88	4.30	1.14(n.s)		
		Females		3.49	3.60	4.07			

Notes: (n.s): p>0.05; *: p<0.05; **: p<0.01; ***: p<0.001. No (age * gender) interaction is statistically significant. Comparisons for the three age groups have a meaningful probability of at least p<0.05.

Table 4 shows that although the factor analysis did not identify significant independent factors, a detailed analysis of each area of behavioral autonomy reveals suggestive differences.

In order to carry out this analysis, a code was given to each behavior:

- ▲ = Moral: Questions related to human dignity
- = Conventional: subjects that aid family and social interaction
- = Personal: subjects of individual transcendence

Outcomes were organized according to the phase in which adolescence demonstrated the greatest autonomy, being organized in the following manner:

- **As a function of age:**

Believe that their autonomy for behaviors: Household chores and homework DOES NOT vary during adolescence.

3>2>1 However, for: Manners, Language, Smoking, Alcohol, Bedtime, and Money they feel gradually more autonomous during adolescence.

2>1 In the intermediary phase, adolescents are more autonomous than in the early phase for: Privacy, Sweets, Hygiene, Interests

3>2 While for : Church, Sexuality, and Clothes they feel more autonomous in the late phase of adolescence than in the intermediary phase.

3>1 For behaviors : Visits-Go Out -Friends, Appearance-Return Time and Sports they are more autonomous in late adolescence than in early adolescence.

- **In terms of gender:**

M>V Girls feel more autonomous than boys in: Clothes, Manners, Appearance, Bedtime, and Hygiene.

V>M Boys feel more autonomous than girls in Return Time and Homework.

2. Emotional Autonomy

Table 5. Description of emotional autonomy scale items, listed in accordance with their mean values

Indicators	Response scale: from 1 (don't agree) to 4 (agree)	D Typical	Mean	Order
+I	My parents would be shocked to learn of my tastes when I'm not with them.	,95	2,12	
-N	When things don't go well for me, I depend on my parents to resolve the problems	,85	2,30	Less Greater Autonomy ↓
-I	My parents know everything about me.	,98	2,32	
-D	I try to have the same opinions as my parents.	,88	2,50	
-D	I agree with my parents about everything.	,93	2,52	
-N	Before trying to resolve problems by myself, I ask my parents for help.	,93	2,52	
+N	In some things, it is better to ask the advice of friends rather than of parents	,99	2,61	
-N	If I had problems with my friends, I would talk to my parents before deciding what to do.	,93	2,62	
-D	My parents are almost never wrong	,80	2,63	
-D	Whenever I argue with my parents, I discover that they are right.	,89	2,73	
-D	When I'm a parent, I will treat my children exactly as my parents treated me.	,98	2,74	
+I	There are intimate things about me that my parents don't know.	,97	2,84	
+I	When I'm a parent, there are things that I will do differently from my parents.	,85	2,87	
+I	I would like my parents to understand what I'm really like.	,94	2,87	
TOTAL SCALE		,58	2,51	

In Table 5, we have marked with an initial the indicator to which each item belongs, assessing whether adolescents consider themselves to be more autonomous on the individuation indicators

(I), followed by Disidealization (D) and by non-dependence (D), shown in the table by dotted lines. This purely qualitative assessment shows us the sequence of subjects in regard to which adolescents consider themselves to be *progressively* more autonomous.

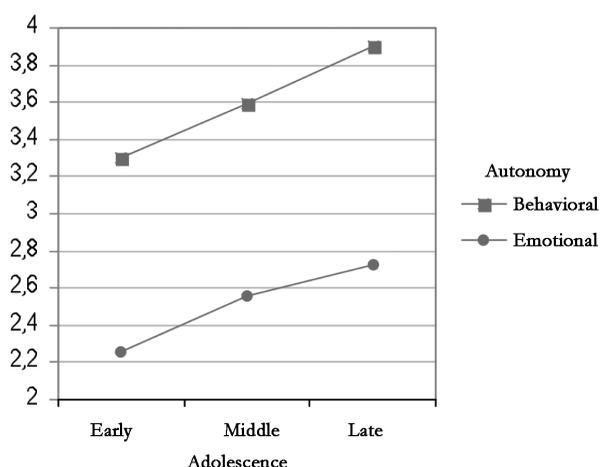
In general, the adolescents believe that their emotional autonomy is middle to high, with the mean values varying between 2.12 and 2.87, on a response scale of 1 to 4.

There are cases in which the behaviors over which the adolescents feel they have greater autonomy belong to the individuation indicator (marked in bold type in the table).

The greatest variability in responses occurs with the behavior “In some things, it is better to ask the advice of friends rather than of parents” (N), while the greatest consensus was for “My parents are almost never wrong” (D).

The ANOVA of the emotional and behavioral dimensions of autonomy controlled by age revealed that the adolescents were more autonomous in the late phase than in the middle phase, and more autonomous in the middle phase than in the early phase. One notes a growing developmental trend, as can be seen in Figure 2. -

Figure 2. Development through time of adolescent emotional and behavioral autonomy



After having analyzed adolescent autonomy, its association with self-esteem can contribute to an understanding of the same.

3. Self-esteem

Table 6 contains descriptive statistics of the Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1963), arranged according to their mean value. In the upper part of the table are the negative items, with the positive items in the lower part.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the self-esteem scale, arranged by mean value

RESPONSE SCALE: FROM 1 (DISAGREE) TO 4 (AGREE)	MEAN	D TYPICAL
I tend to think that, in general, I'm a failure.	1,82	,79
There's not much about me of which I can feel proud.	2,11	,88
Sometimes I think that I'm not good for anything.	2,12	,98
At times I really feel useless.	2,28	,96
I would like to like myself more.	2,72	,98
I have a positive attitude about myself	3,11	,76
In general, I'm satisfied with myself.	3,14	,76
I think that I have a number of good qualities.	3,26	,62
I can do things just as well as everyone else.	3,26	,71
I think that I'm as good as any other person	3,31	,71
GENERAL SELF-ESTEEM	3,00	,54

This variable indicates the degree of personal satisfaction. According to Coleman (1994), one notes that adolescents have a positive view of as being of the same level as others, and that they feel themselves to be quite competent.

One should note that the adolescents show the greatest self-esteem in the statement: "I think that I'm as good as any

other person” and the least variability on “I think that I have a number of good qualities.” (shown in bold type in the table).

4. Correlation between autonomy and self-esteem

Table 7. Analysis to determine if there is a correlation between self-esteem and emotional autonomy (AE) and behavioral autonomy (AC) – according to gender and age.

Table 7

	Early Adolescence				Middle Adolescence				Late Adolescence			
	Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys	
	AC	AE	AC	AE	AC	AE	AC	AE	AC	AE	AC	AE
Self-esteem		-.46***		-.38***		-.30***				-.33**		
Emotional Autonomy	-		.29***		.47**		.26**		.2*		.23**	

→ The correlation between emotional and behavioral autonomy shows that:

- for girls, the two facets of autonomy develop together during the middle phase, and with incidence in the late phase.
- for boys, the strong association between the two facets are maintained throughout adolescence .

→ The correlation between emotional autonomy and self-esteem shows that:

- During adolescence, the more emotionally autonomous girls have less self-esteem, while for the boys, this association is only seen in the early phase.

→ The correlation between behavioral autonomy and self-esteem shows that:

- The degree of behavioral autonomy is not associated with the level of self-esteem of the adolescent

DISCUSSION

– The developmental path of autonomy shows that, for girls, the two dimensions – emotional and behavioral – develop together during middle adolescence and with less incidence in the late phase, while for boys, the link is maintained throughout adolescence, although diminishing slightly.

– The analysis of behavioral areas revealed that girls see themselves as significantly more autonomous than do boys in questions related to aesthetics, while boys see themselves as more autonomous than to girls in terms of returning home at night, as establishing correlations between autonomy and self-esteem, we proved the lack of association between behavioral autonomy and self-esteem. While emotional autonomy is associated in girls to low self-esteem during the three phases of adolescence, for boys, this link is only present in the early phase. These outcomes are in harmony with those found by Beyers (1999) and Chen (1998), that associate emotional autonomy to low self-esteem in adolescence. In the present study, being not closely linked to parents always has a negative meaning for girls, while for boys, this negative connotation disappears in middle adolescence.

For this reason, the most relevant point of contrast between genders can be found in the association, more persistent in girls than in boys, between high emotional autonomy and low self-esteem throughout adolescence. The interpretations that different authors have suggested to explain this difference may be placed into two groups:

The first explanation, of a social nature, states that it is from this age that cultural stereotypes that attribute to males greater initiative and independence, and to females greater concern for relations are interiorized (Oliva, 2001).

The second explanation, with a more anthropological slant, states that this association is among the manifestations of *different ways of being a person* for women and men (Gilligan, 1982). The experience that contact with adolescents has provide, the verification of permanent divergence between men and women, leads me to prefer this second explanation.

CONCLUSIONS

1. It has been seen that the emotional and behavioral spheres of autonomy are differentiated, although referring to the same set of self-regulating psychological processes. Adolescents progress in autonomy throughout this period; however, the emotional facet shows a more marked presence during early adolescence, while the behavioral facet shows an progressive increase throughout the three phases.
2. Excessive emotional autonomy in the first phases of adolescence appears to be synonymous to “insecure attachment”, while during middle adolescence it has a more flexible meaning.
3. Although autonomy develops in a progressive fashion in girls and in boys, one notes differences in terms of gender in it’s internal process and meaning.

In girls, the two facets of autonomy develop together in middle adolescence, and with less intensity in the late phase. For them, to be emotionally detached from their parents is related to a decrease in their self-esteem, with a negative meaning throughout all of adolescence.

In boys, simultaneous development of the two facets continues throughout adolescence, but with this association gradually decreasing in intensity as adolescence continues. For them, the negative association between emotional autonomy and low self-esteem is only found in early adolescence.

4. Teaching that seeks to individualize education could derive practical consequences from the differences found herein, in order to adapt itself appropriately to *feminine and masculine personas*.

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INDEX: SCALES UTILIZED

Self-esteem (items 1-10) / Emotional Autonomy (items 11-24)

Read each sentence and circle around what best expresses how you think and feel IN GENERAL, most of the time. The possible responses are:

	1	2	3	4
	Completely disagree	Don't agree	Agree	Completely agree
1. I think that I'm as good as any other person	1	2	3	4
2. I think that I have a number of good qualities.	1	2	3	4
3. I tend to think that, in general, I'm a failure.	1	2	3	4
4. I can do things just as well as everyone else.	1	2	3	4
5. There's not much about me of which I can feel proud.	1	2	3	4
6. I have a positive attitude about myself	1	2	3	4
7. In general, I'm satisfied with myself.	1	2	3	4
8. I would like to like myself more.	1	2	3	4
9. At times I really feel useless.	1	2	3	4
10. Sometimes I think that I'm not good for anything.	1	2	3	4
11. I agree with my parents about everything	1	2	3	4
12. Before trying to resolve problems by myself, I ask my parents for help.	1	2	3	4
13. Whenever I argue with my parents, I discover that they are right.	1	2	3	4
14. In some things, it is better to ask the advice of friends rather than of parents	1	2	3	4
15. When things don't go well for me, I depend on my parents to resolve the problems	1	2	3	4
16. There are intimate things about me that my parents don't know.	1	2	3	4
17. My parents know everything about me.	1	2	3	4
18. I try to have the same opinions as my parents.	1	2	3	4
19. If I had problems with my friends, I would talk to my parents before deciding what to do.	1	2	3	4
20. My parents would be shocked to learn of my tastes when I'm not with them.	1	2	3	4

21. When I'm a parent, I will treat my children exactly as my parents treated me.	1	2	3	4
22. When I'm a parent, there are things that I will do differently from my parents.	1	2	3	4
23. My parents are almost never wrong	1	2	3	4
24. I would like my parents to understand what I'm really like.	1	2	3	4

BEHAVIORAL AUTONOMY

We list below a series of subjects about which children and parents tend to have different opinions. Indicate in each case up to what point it is you or your parents who decide about these things. The positive responses are:

1	2	3	4	5
My parents have the last word about this subject	My parents opinion has more weight in decisions about this subject	Parents and child/have similar weight in decisions about this subject	I have more weight in decisions than my parents about this subject	I'm the one who decides alone about this subject

1. Help doing domestic chores (for example , make the bed, wash dishes).	1	2	3	4	5
2. Bed time	1	2	3	4	5
3. Table manners	1	2	3	4	5
4. Language use	1	2	3	4	5
5. Frequency of visits with extended family members	1	2	3	4	5
6. Privacy	1	2	3	4	5
7. Smoking or not smoking	1	2	3	4	5
8. Quantity of alcohol consumption	1	2	3	4	5
9. Quantity of sweets consumed	1	2	3	4	5
10. Frequency of baths or showers	1	2	3	4	5
11. Clothes worn	1	2	3	4	5
12. What look to have, in terms of hair style and general appearance	1	2	3	4	5
13. How allowance is spent	1	2	3	4	5
14. Sports practiced	1	2	3	4	5

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15. What interests or hobbies to follow	1	2	3	4	5
16. Where to go when going out	1	2	3	4	5
17. Time returning home at night	1	2	3	4	5
18. People to spend time with	1	2	3	4	5
19. How to behave in terms of sexuality	1	2	3	4	5
20. Participate or not in religious activities	1	2	3	4	5
21. How much time dedicated to homework	1	2	3	4	5

