

Sociocultural Perspectives on Adolescent Autonomy

Kathleen Boykin McElhaney

Joseph P. Allen

University of Virginia

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The goal of achieving autonomy is a universal one, in the sense that all children begin life completely dependent on their caregivers to meet their needs, and thus must transition from relative dependence to relative independence in order to function as adults. While the balance of autonomy and dependence across the life span is dictated by the developmental tasks at each life stage, these are in turn influenced by biological, psychological and societal factors that may each carry different weight across diverse sociocultural contexts (Baltes & Silverberg, 1994; Raeff, 2006). Further, the principal goal of parenting is to balance children's internal needs and capabilities against external environmental requirements. While most goals of parenting may be seen as universal, how these goals are accomplished may vary based both on cultural context and environmental risk (Bradley, 2002; Coll & Pachter, 2002).

In traditional research and theory on family relationships during adolescence, the achievement of autonomy vis-à-vis the parent-adolescent relationship has been proposed as the key developmental task of adolescence (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003; McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson & Hare, 2009). Issues of identity development and achieving autonomy from parents are mainstays of the majority of the early theoretical work on adolescence (e.g., Blos, 1967). This focus is reflected in the large body of empirical literature investigating the nature of parent-adolescent relationships and how aspects of this relationship are linked to important outcomes for teens. Within this body of work, researchers have consistently emphasized the importance of warm, supportive parent-adolescent relationships that operate democratically, such that teens have opportunities to express themselves openly and to participate in family-decision making. The ideal outcome of the autonomy process from this point of view

involves a gradual re-alignment of the power structure of the parent-child relationship, which ultimately leads to independent functioning on the part of the adolescent.

Within American samples, the ways that parents handle adolescent strivings for autonomy have been consistently linked to numerous aspects of adolescent adjustment. For example, family discussions that allow for adolescents' to express their points of view openly have been linked with higher levels of social and interpersonal competence, greater self-esteem and higher levels of ego development (Allen, Bell & Boykin, 2000; Allen et al., 1994; Hall, 2002; McElhaney & Allen, 2001). In contrast, parental undermining and restriction of adolescent autonomy has been linked to a wide range of negative outcomes, including depression, poor peer relationships, greater association with deviant peers and higher levels of externalizing behavior (Allen, Hauser, O'Connor & Bell, 2002a; Allen et al., 2006; Fuligni & Eccles, 1993; Goldstein, Davis-Kean & Eccles, 2005; Laible & Carlo, 2004; Lee & Bell, 2003; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). However, this research regarding the development of adolescent autonomy has been conducted primarily from the perspective of middle class European American childrearing values, limiting generalization to other cultural and socioeconomic settings (referred to here as sociocultural context) (Smetana, 2002; McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson & Hare, 2009).

A growing body of research has been devoted to exploring sociocultural influences on development, particularly with regard to approaches to parenting (Harkness & Super, 2002; Levine et al., 2008; Park & Buriel, 2006; Peterson, Steinmetz & Wilson, 2003). This literature suggests that parenting is shaped by the broader social context, and that parents raise their children to encourage the development of those qualities that are needed for survival and success in their particular niches. When children's survival and/or subsistence are at risk, parenting

practices will be tailored towards maximizing their physical well-being. Parents' goals and approaches to parenting will thus be guided both by their cultural heritage as well as by the specific challenges in their environments, and adaptive strategies for dealing with these challenges may be passed down from generation to generation (Bradley, 2002; Bornstein & Güngör, 2009; Levine et.al, 2008). Factors such as social class, racism, prejudice and discrimination, in addition to physical hazards in the environment, can create challenging social contexts that, in turn, shape parents' approaches to socialization (Coll & Pachter, 2002). However, more mainstream research on autonomy tends to overlook the notion that parental behaviors that appear restrictive and/or overly harsh in one setting may have very different (and adaptive) meanings in other contexts, and thus different consequences for child adjustment (Ho, Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates & Pettit, 1996; McElhaney & Allen, 2001).

#### Socialization Goals and Values as they Relate to Autonomy Processes

The first step in exploring the link between sociocultural context and the autonomy process is to examine variations in values and beliefs regarding autonomy and its related constructs. Values that are particularly relevant to the autonomy process include views about the relation of individuals to larger groups, relations of children to family, and developmental expectations for gaining rights and responsibilities. Such values are closely tied to socialization goals, thus reflecting the implicit developmental theories upon which parenting behavior is based (Fuller & Garcia-Coll, 2010; Garcia-Coll, 1990). The majority of this literature is comprised of cross-cultural studies comparing European Americans with Asian and Latino groups (both within the United States and abroad) as well as with African Americans (e.g., Chaudari & Davis, 2009;

Dodge, McLoyd & Lansford, 2005; Russell, Crockett & Chao, 2010). A somewhat smaller body of literature has examined values according to social class and environmental context.

*Relation of individual to larger group*

One value dimension closely related to the concept of autonomy is individualism vs. collectivism. Societies that are more individualistic tend to value personal goals, with relatively less concern for the collective good, whereas more collectivist cultures are described as valuing group goals over individual goals. Middle-class European American culture is generally regarded as highly individualistic, with a particularly strong emphasis on individual autonomy, whereas numerous other cultures have been characterized as more collectivist (Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeir, 2002). For example, both Asian and Latino cultures have been characterized as more strongly emphasizing affiliation, cooperation, and harmony in interpersonal relationships (Halgunseth, Ispa & Rudy, 2006; Kitayama, Markus & Kurokawa, 2000; Lam, 1997).

Researchers have also asserted that traditional African values also favor collectivism, with Afrocentric values centering on survival of the tribe and group commonalities (Cauce, Hiraga, Graves, Gonzales, Ryan-Finn, & Grove, 1996; Coll & Pachter, 2002).

Some authors have noted that the collectivistic vs. individualistic dichotomy can't completely capture complex patterns of socialization, and have emphasized that autonomy is a developmental goal even in cultures that have been characterized as more collectivistic (Peterson, Cobas, Bush, Supple & Wilson, 2004; Smetana, 2002). Nonetheless, these cultural values can have important implications not only regarding whether and to what extent autonomy is encouraged during childhood and adolescence, but also how autonomy issues are negotiated in family relationships (Fuhrman & Holmbeck, 1995). Further, cultural values can work together with a range of other contextual variables, including ethnicity, social class, education and

environmental risk to influence family relationships and the process of autonomy development (Harwood, Scholmerich & Schulze, 2000).

*Family relationships, children, and child rearing*

Research examining values about family relationships across different cultures generally depicts some groups as highly valuing family solidarity and deference to parents, thus potentially de-emphasizing individual autonomy. Both Latino and Chinese cultures have been described as emphasizing family solidarity and parental authority, and as particularly valuing helpfulness, obedience and respect for elders as desirable traits in children (Chaudari & Davis, 2009; Fuligni & Zhang, 2004; Halgunseth, Ispa & Rudy, 2006; Harkness & Super, 2002; Phinney, Ong & Madden, 2000). Respect, obedience, and learning from elders in the community have also been noted as important socialization goals of African American parenting (Coll & Pachter, 2002; Garcia-Coll, Meyer, & Brillion, 1995), and research indicates that middle-class African American parents consider setting firm limits to be more important than encouraging independence (Smetana & Chuang, 2001). In contrast, throughout this research, both parents and teens from European backgrounds are described as emphasizing independence, self-directedness and autonomy (Chaudari & Davis, 2009; Phinney, Kim-Jo, Osorio & Vilhjalmsdottir, 2005).

Differences in child-rearing values have also been found to vary according to socio-economic variables such as social class, income, and education. One explanation for these associations centers around the fact that such variables are markers for the types of experiences and opportunities available in a given environment (Kohn, 1969; 1979; Okagaki & Bingham, 2005). Parents from lower social classes tend to live in poorer, riskier neighborhoods, and thus their tendency to value obedience, inhibit autonomy and socialize their children for compliance can be understood as attempts at protection – adaptive responses to the level of risk in their

environment (Dearing, 2004; Garbarino, Bradshaw & Kostelny, 2005; Magnuson & Duncan, 2002). Kohn (1963; 1979) provided an additional explanation for the association between social class and socialization goals, proposing that parental values are linked with occupational conditions. He noted that middle class occupations are more likely to involve self-direction and individual effort, which leads to valuing these same characteristics as socialization goals (Kohn, 1963; 1979; Wilson, Wilson & Berkeley-Caines, 2003; Wright & Wright, 1976). Working class occupations, in contrast, are subject to standardization and supervision, and depend more on collective action, all of which de-emphasize individuality and emphasize conformity and obedience.

*Expectations about autonomy: Timetables*

As children move towards adulthood, new rights and responsibilities are awarded to them, both by their parents and by society as a whole. Parental granting of privileges tends to be governed by judgments of maturity/readiness, and thus examination of parents' timetables provides a way to access their implicit developmental theories regarding autonomy (Goodnow & Collins, 1990). Research has revealed that families in more collectivistic cultures, including Asian Americans and recent Asian and Latino immigrants to the United States, as well as native Asians all have later timetables for granting privileges than those of European descent in both the United States and Australia (Feldman & Quatman, 1988; Feldman & Rosenthal, 1990; Fuligni, 1998). Further, timetables of middle class African American mothers appear to reflect specific cultural patterns and issues including concerns over health and safety, the need for adolescents to be self-sufficient at home, and more freedoms for adolescent boys vs. girls (Daddis & Smetana, 2005). In all cases, the researchers attribute these patterns to sociocultural context: variations in cultural values as well as to specific environmental challenges that families face.

### Components of the Autonomy Process in Different Contexts

Past research and theory on the autonomy process has identified several aspects of the parent-adolescent relationship as markers for how autonomy is negotiated within the family setting. Two aspects of the parent-adolescent relationship that have received substantial empirical attention include parenting style and parent-adolescent conflict. Parenting style refers to categorization of parental behavior according to two dimensions: warmth and control (e.g. Baumrind, 1991). Parents who are high in control but low in warmth have been characterized as authoritarian, an approach to parenting that is generally equated with the discouragement of individual autonomy. In contrast, authoritative parenting (high in both control and warmth) has been highlighted as optimally promoting autonomy while also setting appropriate limits. A separate body of literature has examined the presence of parent-adolescent conflict as a marker for increased bids for autonomy on the part of the adolescent; the ways in which such conflict is negotiated can indicate the degree to which autonomy is encouraged vs. discouraged within the parent-adolescent relationship (e.g. Smetana, 1988).

#### *Parenting style and parental control: Cross-cultural studies*

With regard to cultural variations in parenting style, most studies have compared European American parents to parents in other cultural groups. Studies have suggested that these parents tend to encourage independence and autonomy more than Asian parents, particularly Chinese parents. Chinese and Chinese American parents have been described as more authoritarian, more frequently power-assertive and restrictive and less frequently autonomy-granting and child-centered than European American parents (Chao, 2001; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1990). Similarly, African American parenting has been characterized as relatively more strict, with

more emphasis on authority and discipline (particularly physical discipline) than European American parenting, though not necessarily as compared to Latino parents (Florsheim, Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1996; Forehand, Miller, Dutra & Chance, 1997; Garcia-Coll, Meyer & Brillion, 1995; Portes, Dunham, & Williams, 1986).

Several researchers have cautioned against applying parenting typologies across cultural groups, arguing that parenting is not effectively captured by broadly generalized parenting styles (e.g. Chao, 2001). Other researchers have similarly noted that characterizing parenting solely according to ethnicity and/or cultural background is inappropriate, due to the multifaceted nature of all of these constructs (Cauce et al., 1996; Lim & Lim, 2004; Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, & Hiraga, 1996). To this point, research has demonstrated that ratings of strictness and control in both African American and Chinese families do not covary with other indices of family functioning and/or parenting in the same manner as in other groups (Chao, 2001; Crockett, Veed & Russell, 2010; Deater-Deckard et al., 1996; Dodge, McLoyd & Lansford, 2005; Hill, 1995). More specifically, in families from non-European backgrounds, authoritarian parenting does not tend to covary with harsh parenting, and it is also not inversely related to parent-child closeness or to children's satisfaction with the parent-child relationship (Chao, 2001; Dornbusch, et.al, 1987; Hill, 1995; Kelley, Power & Wimbush, 1992; Quoss & Zhao, 1995). While it seems clear that approaches to parenting do vary according to cultural context, the precise nature of these variations as well as their implications for child and adolescent development are still not well understood.

*Parental control: Parenting according to social class and context*

In addition to variations according to cultural context, there is also evidence that parental restriction of autonomy varies according to level of environmental risk, and that strict parental

control may carry different meaning in high vs. low risk settings. As noted previously, parents living in impoverished and dangerous neighborhoods tend to exert strict controls on their children's behavior, thus inhibiting their autonomy (Dearing, 2004; Garbarino, Bradshaw & Kostelny, 2005; Magnuson & Duncan, 2002). Additional research has indicated that, in high-risk families, such restrictiveness has been found to correlate *positively* with ratings of family democracy and with parental effectiveness (child compliance) (Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole, 1990). Similarly, adolescents living in high-risk neighborhoods viewed mothers who attempted to undermine their autonomy while discussing an area of disagreement as *less* psychologically controlling, and characterized their relationship as involving higher levels of trust and acceptance (McElhaney & Allen, 2001). The opposite pattern was found for families in low-risk environments: those teens perceived the same maternal behaviors as *more* psychologically controlling, and rated their mothers as less trustworthy and less accepting.

In addition to the moderating effects of the level of community risk, researchers have examined the role of parents' experiences and opportunities in the workplace. For example, a large body of anthropological research has documented variations in parenting behaviors according to subsistence tasks, with the particular finding that parental encouragement of autonomy and self-direction varies according to such tasks (Barry, Child & Bacon, 1959/67, Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Research within industrialized communities similarly proposes that approaches to parenting are aimed at helping children to achieve outcomes that are valued within social class (Gecas & Nye, 1974; Kohn, 1979; Luster, Rhodes & Haas, 1989). These studies have indicated, for example, that higher SES parents endorse valuing self-direction and tend to be both more involved with their children and less restrictive of their actions, whereas lower SES parents value conformity and demonstrate this value by being more restrictive of their children

(Luster, Rhoades & Haas, 1989; Tudge, Hogan, Snezhkova, Kulakova & Etz, 2000; Weininger & Lareau, 2009). Socioeconomic status, social class and type of work are all clearly highly complex constructs that are likely to affect family functioning via numerous pathways (e.g., Duncan & Magnuson, 2003), and associations between these variables and approaches to parenting are not always straightforward (e.g., Tudge et.al, 2000). Nonetheless, these findings are generally consistent with the notion that parental approaches to autonomy are associated with valuing self-direction vs. conformity, which in turn varies according to sociocultural context.

### *Parent-adolescent conflict*

Parent-adolescent conflict has been thought to be an important component of the autonomy process within American families. It has been proposed that parent-adolescent conflict is a marker for adolescents' increasing bids for autonomy, and that the ways in which such conflict is negotiated are indicative of parents' and adolescents' general approaches to the autonomy process (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Goossens, 2006; Smetana, 1988). However, direct expression of conflicts may be more prevalent in cultures that value individual autonomy, whereas avoidance of conflict via compliance, negotiation or withdrawal may be favored in cultures that value harmonious relationships (Markus & Lin, 1999). Economic realities such as the necessary reliance on family members for support and survival may also serve to reduce parent-adolescent discord and increase harmony (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Finally, in cultures in which adolescence is relatively short and youth are granted the rights and privileges of adulthood, parent-adolescent conflict may not be as necessary or relevant to the process of separation and individuation (Schlegel & Barry, 1991).

Although there may be some cultural universals with regard to parent-teen conflicts, existing data indicate that certain aspects of parent-adolescent conflict do indeed vary across

both cultural and contextual lines (Gabrielidis, Stephan, Ybarram, Pearson & Villareal, 1997; Haar & Krahe, 1999; Kapadia & Miller, 2005). With regard to similarities, both levels of parent-teen conflict and general topics of disagreement (e.g. chores) appear to be relatively consistent across cultural groups within American samples, as well as within other cultures (Cauce et al., 1996; Fuligni, 1998; Yau & Smetana, 1996). Further, studies suggest that, like middle-class American teens, adolescents from other cultural groups are likely to see conflicts with parents as issues of personal choice (Cauce et al., 1996; Yau & Smetana, 1996). Yet, adolescents and parents from non-European groups and/or those that adhere to more collectivistic values tend to have fewer conflicts, with parents engaging in more of the final decision-making, and teens being more likely to emphasize respect and preserving harmony in their relationships with their parents (Cauce et al., 1996; Dixon, Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Phinney et al., 2005; Qin, Pomerantz & Wang, 2009; Yau & Smetana, 1996). Further, certain patterns of conflict resolution (e.g. parental appeals to health and safety, parental power assertion) seem to be particularly characteristic of specific cultural and socioeconomic settings (Smetana, Daddis & Chuang, 2003; Smetana & Gaines, 1999; Smetana, 2000).

#### Negotiation of Autonomy and Adolescent Outcomes

The above research indicates that parents value and utilize different approaches to parenting and autonomy promotion vs. restriction according to a variety of sociocultural factors. The importance of understanding group differences in approaches to autonomy becomes even clearer when the links between parenting behaviors and adolescent outcomes are considered. Research within American samples has demonstrated associations between certain styles of negotiating autonomy and a variety of important indices of adolescent adjustment (Allen et al., 2002a; 2002b; 2006; Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003). This

research emphasizes the importance of warm, supportive parent-adolescent relationships in which parents encourage and support the adolescents' developing autonomy. Such research may be overlooking the fact that other styles of negotiating autonomy may be equally adaptive in some settings.

#### *Parenting style and adolescent outcomes*

Although authoritative parenting has consistently been linked with positive outcomes in families of European American descent, several studies have revealed that both cultural and environmental factors moderate the links between parenting style and adolescent outcomes. Some studies have indicated that authoritative parenting does not similarly benefit teens from other sociocultural backgrounds, and others have further suggested that authoritarian parenting and its correlates are linked to more adaptive outcomes in riskier settings and/or when such behavior is in line with cultural parenting values (Chao, 2001; Fung & Lau, 2009; Lamborn, Dornbusch & Steinberg, 1996; McElhaney & Allen, 2001). For example, unilateral parent decision-making that does not allow for adolescent input has been found to be associated with positive adolescent outcomes (less involvement in deviance, higher academic competence) in African American families, whereas this same decision-making style is associated with poorer outcomes in European American families (Lamborn, Dornbusch & Steinberg, 1996). Thus, parenting that involves encouragement of adolescent autonomy may be beneficial for groups in which it is valued, whereas in other contexts, parenting that involves autonomy restriction appears beneficial (Lansford et al., 2005).

#### *Parental control and adolescent outcomes*

Similar to the research on parenting style, in communities in which adolescents are exposed to high levels of risks (e.g. high crime rates), and also within cultural groups that highly

value family solidarity and deference to parents, strict parental control has been found to be unrelated to problem behaviors, and even to predict beneficial child outcomes (Duane & Halgunseth, 2005; Lamborn, Dornbusch & Steinberg, 1996; Simons, Lin, Gordon, Brody, Murray & Conger, 2002). This finding has been replicated with regard to various forms of behavioral control (e.g. unilateral decision making, close parental monitoring) and in some cases, psychological control. For example, in both low-income and high-crime settings, parental restrictiveness and close parental monitoring predicts higher levels of adolescent academic competence and decreased involvement in problem behaviors (Baldwin, Baldwin & Cole, 1990; Beyers, Bates, Pettit & Dodge, 2003; Dearing, 2004; Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996). Further, several surveys of parenting practices in primarily African American samples have demonstrated that the level of environmental risk moderates the links between parental control and adolescent adjustment. In high-risk contexts within these samples, parental restriction of autonomy during early and middle adolescence is linked with higher levels of academic competence, decreased externalizing behaviors, and more positive self-worth (Dearing, 2004; Gonzales et al., 1996; Gutman, Sameroff & Eccles, 2002; Mason et al., 1996; Smetana, Campione-Barr & Daddis, 2004).

### *Summary and Conclusions*

A growing body of research on sociocultural influences on parenting and youth development suggests that sociocultural context can shape the degree to which autonomy is valued, the ways in which it is conceptualized, and the manner in which it is negotiated within parent-adolescent relationships. While achieving autonomy may be considered a universal developmental goal, the degree to which parents promote vs. restrict their teens' autonomy is likely to be influenced by a range of values and beliefs. Not only is there variation in the ways

in which parents' (and adolescents) approach the autonomy process, but the consequences of autonomy promotion vs. restriction also show variation according to sociocultural context. More specifically, while parental restriction of adolescent autonomy appears to be clearly linked to maladaptive outcomes in predominately European American samples, the same is not necessarily true in other groups.

Research that aims to fully understand family processes with regard to this aspect of child and adolescent development should thus carefully consider the roles of cultural values and the constellation of variables that contribute to level of environmental risk. Though there has been increasing attention to sociocultural context in developmental research, future research should aim to extend our understanding of the conditions under which autonomy restriction is appropriate vs. maladaptive. Further, it would be useful to identify more carefully the aspects of the autonomy process that unfold similarly across settings, and those that are more particular to certain cultures or contexts. It seems premature to generalize our current theories regarding this crucial developmental process to all families until we have a more complete and nuanced understanding of the role of sociocultural context. This latter point is particularly important when designing prevention and/or intervention efforts that are aimed at altering parenting practices, presumably to improve adaptive outcomes for children and teenagers.

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