Autonomy and Adolescent Social Functioning:
The moderating effect of socio-economic context

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between autonomy processes and family and adolescent functioning across two different social contexts: a poor urban setting and a relatively middle class setting. One hundred thirty-one adolescents (33% poor urban, 67% middle class; mean age=15.9, sd=0.8; 47% female, 61% white), their mothers, and their peers comprised the present sample. Observational ratings of autonomy processes within the mother-adolescent dyad were obtained, along with adolescents' reports of the quality of the mother-adolescent relationships, and both adolescent and peer reports of the adolescents' functioning. Consistent with past research, results indicated that in middle class families, undermining of autonomy was negatively related to relationship quality, and adolescents' expressions of autonomy were linked with positive indices of social functioning. In poor urban families, however, undermining of autonomy was positively linked with mother-adolescent relationship quality, and adolescents' expressions of autonomy were linked with both increased alienation in the mom-teen relationship and negative indices of social functioning. These results are considered in light of how the demands of a given social context shape adaptive parental approaches to encouraging vs. discouraging adolescent autonomy.
Research and theory on the development of adolescent autonomy have largely ignored potential context effects, perhaps because most research has focused upon middle class samples that may be characterized by relative homogeneity in the level of potential risk in adolescents' social environments (Collins, 1990; Steinberg, 1990). Several researchers have suggested that parental sensitivity in handling adolescent autonomy strivings requires a balance between appropriately setting limits on behavior and allowing sufficient freedom for trying out new behaviors and learning from both mistakes and successes (Allen, Kuperminc, & Moore, 1997). To the extent that parents' optimal role is to grant or inhibit adolescent autonomy in keeping with the level of complexity, challenge and danger in the adolescents' environment, we would expect linkages between specific aspects of autonomy-processes and adolescent social functioning to vary substantially across different socio-economic contexts. Thus, understanding exactly how and when autonomy is optimally granted clearly requires at least some consideration of the social, cultural, and environmental context in which the adolescent is developing (Allen et al., 1997). For example, parental inhibition of an adolescent's autonomy may be entirely appropriate in contexts such as dangerous urban environments, that pose a substantial threat to their well-being. However, in other settings, such as quiet suburbs, the same autonomy-inhibiting behaviors may reflect parental reluctance to allow normative autonomy development to proceed (Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole, 1990).

In white middle class samples, increases in adolescent autonomy strivings appear to play an important role in the various changes that occur in the parent-child relationship with the onset of adolescence. For example, children from these samples are less accepting of adult authority in general as they get older (Laupa & Turiel, 1986), are more tolerant of violations of parental rules, are more likely to challenge parental rights to enforce such rules (Tisak, 1986), and yield less to parents in decision-making (Hill et al., 1985a, 1985b; Hill, 1988). As autonomy-striving is thought to influence the dynamics of parent-adolescent relationships, it is not surprising that how families negotiate adolescents' increasing need for independence has been found to be systematically related to adolescent outcomes in white middle class families. For example, a substantial amount of research based on adolescent self-reports about their family experiences suggests that authoritative parenting, which involves balancing granting sufficient autonomy with appropriate amounts of firm control and acceptance, is positively related to outcomes such as success in school and positive self-concept (Baumrind, 1991; Dornbusch, et al., 1987; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mouts, 1989; Steinberg, et al., 1991; Lamborn, Mouts, Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; Paulson, 1994). Similarly, observational research has shown that a range of outcomes including higher levels of adolescent ego development and self-esteem and lower levels of hostility and depression are directly related to family communications that promote autonomy (e.g., explaining and discussing reasons for disagreements), and inversely related to statements that undermine autonomy (e.g., overpersonalizing or pressuring statements) (Allen, et al., 1994; 1996; Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connell, 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Hauser, et al., 1984). Thus, in middle class families, autonomy issues have clear implications across multiple aspects of adolescent development.

In contrast, other groups of families have been examined far less frequently and primarily with self-report methodologies. Some evidence indicates that, relative to middle class families, autonomy-processes in other groups are related to functioning in systematically different ways. For example, in studies of non-white, non-middle class families, authoritative parenting has not been consistently linked with positive child outcomes, and parenting styles involving a greater restriction of autonomy (i.e. authoritarian styles) have been related to more
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positive child adjustment (Baumrind, 1972; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & F Raleigh, 1987; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Unfortunately, these studies are based primarily upon adolescent self-reports of family autonomy processes (and in some cases of outcomes as well), which is a major limitation given extensive evidence of the biased and unreliable nature of self-reports of qualities of social interactions (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). In particular, sole reliance upon self-report data confounds the perspective of the adolescent in a given context with the actual behaviors of that adolescent and their parent, making it impossible to distinguish between context and behavior.

In spite of their limitations, the results from these self-report studies merit further consideration, in part because of their consistency with sociological and ecological research that suggests that parents adopt certain beliefs and behaviors with regard to child-rearing according to the demands of their culture and environment (Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardif, 1995). Whereas higher SES parents value independence and self-direction, and tend to take more democratic approaches to parenting, parents of lower socio-economic status (SES) appear to place a higher value upon conformity and obedience, and are described as more authoritarian and controlling (Clarke-Stewart, VanderStoep, & Killian, 1979; Gecas, 1979; Hoffman, 1963; Kohn, 1979; Luster, Rhoades, & Haas, 1989; Zegiob & Forehand, 1975). One explanation for these findings is that parents living in a riskier, more dangerous setting may inhibit their children's autonomy as an adaptive response to their surroundings (Bartz & Levine, 1978; Dubrow & Garbarino, 1989; Kelley, Sanchez-Hucles, & Walker, 1993). As discussed above, in all settings parents must balance granting their children autonomy with keeping them physically safe. In more intrinsically more risky environments, such as those that may be found in low-income, urban neighborhoods, a trade-off may be made between granting autonomy and maintaining child safety. The few extant self-report studies cited above suggest that such limitations of children's autonomy may not necessarily be negative; yet, little research has directly examined the moderating effect of socio-economic status upon the link between adolescent autonomy strivings and important psychosocial outcomes and no such research has been reported that utilizes observational methods.

It is the central hypothesis of this study that the relation between adolescent autonomy and psychosocial outcomes will vary systematically across different social contexts. Specifically, relatively low levels of autonomy vis a vis parents that have been identified as maladaptive for middle-class adolescents are expected to be much more adaptive for adolescents in poor, urban environments. Examination of this hypothesis is fundamental to deriving a theory of developing adolescent autonomy that is not limited to a single, specific social context, but rather that can account for changes in the meaning and function of critical autonomy-processes across different contexts.

This study will use observational data along with self-, maternal-, and peer-reports to examine the moderating effect of living in a middle-class vs. a poor urban environment upon the relations between autonomy processes, qualities of parent-adolescent relationships, and adolescent psychosocial adjustment. It is hypothesized that, in the middle-class settings, the relationships between these constructs will be consistent with past research; that is, promotion of autonomy will be directly related (and undermining of autonomy inversely related) to higher quality parent-adolescent relationships as well as indices of adaptive functioning. However, in the poor-urban settings, with adolescents of the same age, these relationships are not expected to hold because the same autonomy processes are expected to have different meanings in these contexts. Rather, it is predicted that the opposite pattern may actually be obtained, with
promotion of high levels of autonomy linked to disruption in parent-adolescent relationships and lower levels of adolescent adjustment, and inhibition of autonomy linked to more adaptive outcomes. Consideration of both settings together, using multi-method, multi-rater data will extend our understanding of the ways in which a critical developmental process in adolescence potentially interacts with the social context within which it occurs. These effects will all be assessed within a sample selected to include substantial numbers of adolescents functioning both adequately and poorly, so as to allow assessments within a maximally meaningful range of psychosocial functioning.

Method

Sample

Adolescents and mothers. One hundred and thirty-one ninth and tenth graders (mean age= 15.9, sd= 0.8; 47% female, 61% white) and their mothers comprised the present sample. Adolescents were selected for inclusion in the study based upon the presence of the presence of any of four possible academic risk factors, including failing a single course for a single marking period, any lifetime history of grade retention, 10 or more absences in one marking period, and any history of school suspension. These broad selection criteria were established to sample a sizeable range of adolescents who could be identified from academic records as having the potential for future academic and social difficulties, including both adolescents already experiencing serious difficulties and those who are performing adequately with only occasional, minor problems. As intended, these criteria identified approximately one-half of all 9th and 10th grade students as eligible for the study.

The sample was divided into two sub-samples, composed of middle class vs. poor urban families according to both location of residence and family income. Poor urban families were defined as those who both lived in the city district, and whose family income placed them at or below 200% of official Federal poverty line for the year in which data was collected. Utilizing these criteria, approximately 33% of the 131 families were classified as poor urban (n= 43), with the remaining 67% being classified as non-urban or middle class (n= 88). These families will be referred to as ?middle-class,? as a reflection less of their income than of their general social environment, as a few poor, suburban families are included in this group. Table 1 presents demographic data regarding these two groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Middle Class</th>
<th>Poor Urban</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age (mean, sd)</td>
<td>15.9, 0.8</td>
<td>15.9, 0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>61%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intact families (%)</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
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<td>Crime rate (index)</td>
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These data indicate that while adolescents' age and gender composition was approximately the same across the two groups, there were associations in the expected directions between poor urban status and family income and mothers' level of education. In addition, there were relatively more intact families in the middle class sample than in the poor urban sample (see Table 1).

Families were classified according to socio-economic context rather than solely according to family income in order to be able to isolate the unique environmental risks that may be associated with living in a poor urban neighborhood. A substantial body of research has documented that poor neighborhoods in urban areas are particularly prone to higher crime rates (Krivo & Peterson, 1996). An examination of the crime rates for the area in question reveals that the rate of index offenses in the urban neighborhoods studied was approximately 2.6 times the rate in the non-urban neighborhoods (Virginia Department of State Police, 1995). In
addition, the rate of drug-related arrests for both possession and sale/manufacturing of drugs was approximately 2-3 times greater in the urban versus the suburban area (Virginia Department of State Police, 1995). Thus, it is likely that the adolescents in the poor urban neighborhoods were exposed to even higher levels of dangerous crime. Further, the population density in the urban neighborhoods was approximately 1,543.0 people per square kilometer, versus 38.4 people per square kilometer in the middle class neighborhoods (Slater & Hall, 1996). Thus, teens in urban families are likely to have easier access to peers in that they are less likely to require parental assistance (e.g. transportation) to associate with their friends outside of school. This easier access may serve to decrease parental control, and - coupled with the increased crime rates - implies that these teens' opportunities to engage in risky, delinquent activity are likely to be greater than their counterparts living in non-urban areas. Therefore, the nature of the socio-economic context in the urban areas is likely to transform the meaning of both the adolescents' strivings for autonomy, and parents' efforts to monitor and/or control their teens' activities.

Peer sample. The teens in the study were asked to provide names and phone numbers of up to 5 friends who "knew them well" to participate in a peer interview. Up to two of these friends were contacted and brought into our offices to be interviewed. In cases in which data were gathered from two peers, their ratings of the teen in the study were averaged to create one peer variable. A total of 193 peers were interviewed (mean age=16.29, sd= 1.3; 54% female; 60% white). Peers reported that they had known the teens in the study an average of 4.6 years (sd= 3.6).

Procedure

After adolescents who met study criteria were identified, letters explaining the study were sent to each family of a potential participant. Interested families sent back post cards containing information about how to contact them by phone. Families came in for two 3 hour visits, and were paid $105.00 for their participation. At each session, active, informed consent was obtained from both parents and teens, who were interviewed separately and assured confidentiality for all data except joint family interaction procedures. Peers were contacted by phone and came in separately for one 45 minutes session. Active consent was also obtained from both the peers and their parents, and peers were assured complete confidentiality. All data in the study were protected by a Department of Health and Human Services Confidentiality Certificate which protects data against subpoena by federal, state, or local courts and other agencies.

Measures

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment. Adolescents' perceptions of the current degree of trust, communication and alienation in their relationships with their mothers were assessed using this 25-item inventory (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Teens were asked to rate how true each item was with respect to their mothers on a 5-point scale from ?never? to ?almost always?. Cronbach alphas measuring internal consistency for the three subscales were .91, .88, and .86, respectively. This questionnaire has been shown to have good test-retest reliability and has been related to other measures of family environment and teen psychological functioning (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987).

Child Report of Parenting Behavior Inventory. In addition, information was gathered utilizing two scales of the shortened 30-item version of the original 108-item Child Report of
Parenting Behavior Inventory: Acceptance vs. Rejection and Psychological Control vs. Autonomy (Schaefer, 1965; Schluderman & Schluderman, 1970). Teens were asked to say whether each item was not, somewhat or a lot like their mothers, and the resulting answers were summed for each subscale. Each was found to be internally consistent, with Cronbach alphas equal to .94 and .82. Past research has found these scales to have good test-retest reliability and to be significantly related to a variety of other aspects of family functioning, as well as to adolescent outcomes such as academic performance (Collins, 1990; Schaefer, 1965; Schluderman & Schluderman, 1970; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).

Conflict Tactics Scale. Teen reports of physically aggressive behavior within the mother-adolescent relationship were obtained using a scale from this 21-item measure that asks the adolescents to rate how often both they and their mothers utilized a variety of different conflict resolution methods on a 4-point scale, from never to many times (Straus, 1979). The physical aggression scale had adequate internal consistencies, with Cronbach alphas ranging from .68 to .81. For this study, ratings of the adolescents’ behaviors were averaged with ratings of their mothers’ behaviors to create a scale assessing the overall levels of verbal and physical aggression within the dyad. This scale also demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha equal to .76.

Autonomy and Relatedness Coding System. Adolescents and their mothers participated in a revealed differences task in which they discussed a family issue about which they disagreed. Typical topics of discussion included money (19%), grades (19%), household rules (17%), friends (14%), and brothers and sisters (10%); other possible areas included communication, plans for the future, alcohol and drugs, religion, and dating. These interactions were videotaped, and then transcribed.

Both the videotapes and transcripts were utilized to code the mother-adolescent interactions for behaviors promoting/exhibiting and/or undermining autonomy using the Autonomy and Relatedness Coding System (Allen, Hauser, Bell, Boykin, Tate, 1995). Concrete behavioral guidelines were utilized to code both mothers’ and adolescents’ individual speeches on one or more of 10 subscales. Two of these subscales (stating reasons and exhibiting confidence) are combined to yield the exhibition of autonomy scale, and three others are utilized for the undermining autonomy scale (overpersonalizing, pressuring, and/or recanting ones’ own position).

Each interaction was coded by two trained coders, and inter-rater reliability for these scales was calculated using Spearman-Brown correlations. Reliability coefficients for the three scales utilized in these analyses (adolescents exhibiting autonomy, adolescents undermining autonomy, and mothers undermining autonomy) were .86, .77, and .71 respectively. Copies of this coding manual are available upon request. Past research utilizing this coding system has found it to be a reliable predictor of both family and adolescent functioning (Allen et al., 1994a; 1994b; 1996).

Problem Behavior Inventory. Adolescents’ reports of their delinquent activity were gathered using this 37-item inventory (Elliott, Ageton, Huizinga, Knowles, & Canter, 1983), a well-validated interview which yields a scale summing the total frequency of delinquent acts in the past six months (Cronbach alpha= .77). As sums of these frequencies were found to be highly negatively skewed this scale was log-transformed prior to being used in these analyses.

Adolescent Self-Perception Profile. The adolescents’ peers answered questions regarding the teens’ social acceptance and close friendships using a modified version of the Adolescent
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Self-Perception Profile (Harter, 1985). The same items were used as in the original measure, but were modified to allow peer ratings of the adolescent, rather than self ratings. Peers rated how true each item was of the teen on a 4 point scale from "not true at all" to "very true". For the purposes of this study, the scores on the 5-item social acceptance scale and the 5-item close friendship scale were averaged to create an overall measure of social or "friendship" competence. The sub-scales used to create this overall measure showed good internal consistency, with Cronbach alphas equal to .83 and .81, respectively; similarly, the overall scale yielded a Cronbach alpha of .88.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Plan of analyses

Both adolescent gender and family socio-economic context were included as predictors in all regression analyses presented below. Predictor variables and interaction terms were entered following gender and socio-economic context, and a number of significant interactions with socio-economic context were found; however, no significant interactions were found for gender. Regression analyses were then conducted to examine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables separately for the two socio-economic groups. Again, models included main effects of gender as well as gender interaction effects, and no such effects were found. Given the relationship between socio-economic context and other demographic factors such as ethnicity as reported in Table 1, moderator effects of other demographic variables were also examined. In no cases were these effects as strong as those for socio-economic context, nor did they ever significantly contribute to predictions after including the effects of socioeconomic context, thus suggesting they provided no additional information beyond the context variable entered into all models.

Descriptive statistics

Given the analytic strategy just discussed, means and standard deviations for all predictor and outcome variables are presented separately for middle class vs. poor urban adolescents in Table 2. T-tests were conducted in order to examine group differences between these two samples on the variables in question, and the results of these analyses are also presented. 1 As indicated, middle class adolescents were found to exhibit higher levels of both positive and negative autonomy during the interaction task (see Table 2). Further, middle class adolescents reported higher levels of alienation and aggression in their relationships with their mothers. Finally, the peers of poor urban teens rated those adolescents as more competent in friendships than the middle class teens' peers.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Primary Analyses

Negotiating autonomy and the mother-adolescent relationship

The first set of models examined the relationship between behaviors undermining autonomy and adolescents? perceptions of the mother-adolescent relationship. Regression analyses examined main effects of gender, socio-economic context, and behaviors undermining

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adolescent autonomy, followed by the interaction of each predictor with a dummy variable for adolescent?s socioeconomic context.

In examining adolescents? perceptions of the degree of psychological control exercised by their mothers, a significant moderating effect of socioeconomic context was revealed within an overall significant model ($R^2 = .08, p < .05$; Interaction term: $F(1,122) = -2.42, p < .05$). Specifically, regression analyses conducted separately for each group revealed that middle class teens with mothers who undermined their autonomy during the interaction task rated their mothers as granting them less psychological autonomy ($\beta = .30, p < .01$), whereas this relationship was non-significant for poor urban teens. This interaction effect is depicted in Figure 1.

Further, these analyses also revealed significant moderating effects in predicting adolescents? perceptions of trust ($R^2 = .08, p < .05$; Interaction term: $F(1,123) = 2.00, p < .05$), and acceptance ($R^2 = .10, p < .05$; Interaction term: $F(1,122) = 3.08, p < .01$) in their relationships with their mothers. Specifically, poor urban teens saw highly undermining mothers as more trustworthy ($\beta = .37, p < .05$) and more accepting ($\beta = .44, p < .01$); again, these relationships were non-significant for middle class teens (stats). See Figure 1 for graphs of these interaction effects.

Analyses also indicated that adolescents' behaviors undermining autonomy with their mothers were related to the quality of the mother-adolescent relationship, specifically to the levels of aggression within the dyad, and that this relationship again differed for middle class vs. poor urban adolescents ($R^2 = .09, p < .05$; Interaction term: $F(1,123) = -2.15, p < .05$).

Specifically, adolescents' behaviors undermining autonomy during the mother-adolescent interaction were found to be related to increased levels of physical aggression only in middle class families ($\beta = 0.29, p < .05$). The direction of this relationship was reversed in poor urban families, although the magnitude of this relationship was not significant ($\beta = -.21, p = .20$). See Figure 2 for a graph of this interaction effect.

Further evidence that the link between negotiation of autonomy and mother-adolescent relationship quality differed across socio-economic groups came from examining adolescents' behaviors exhibiting autonomy during the interaction task. A significant interaction effect was found for socio-economic context ($R^2 = .14, p < .001$; Interaction term: $F(1,122) = 2.21, p < .05$), and separate regressions demonstrated that in poor urban families, adolescents' behaviors exhibiting autonomy were related to teens feelings more alienated from their mothers ($\beta = .43, p < .01$). This relationship was non-significant in middle class families ($\beta = -.02, p = .86$). See Figure 2 for a graph of this interaction effect.

In sum, both mothers? and adolescents? behaviors with regard to undermining vs. promoting autonomy were found to relate to the quality of the mother-adolescent relationship, although the pattern of these links was found to vary substantially across the two groups. In poor urban families, teens felt closer to mothers who undermined their autonomy, whereas middle class teens saw these mothers as psychologically controlling. Further, higher levels of
adolescents' undermining of autonomy was linked with increased physical aggression in the mother-adolescent relationship only for middle class adolescents. Finally, in poor urban families, higher levels of adolescents' exhibition of autonomy was linked to increased mother-teen alienation.

Negotiating autonomy and adolescent adjustment

Regression analyses also demonstrated that adolescents' behaviors exhibiting autonomy had different consequences for middle class vs. poor urban teens outside of the home, particularly for externalizing behaviors. In examining the link between adolescents' behaviors exhibiting autonomy and their self-reported delinquent activity, a significant moderating effect of socioeconomic context was revealed within an overall significant model ($R^2 = .08, p < .05$; Interaction term: $F(1,125) = 2.02, p < .05$). Regressions conducted separately for each group indicated that adolescents' behaviors exhibiting autonomy were related to increased levels of self-reported delinquency for poor urban teens ($\beta = .44, p < .01$), whereas this relationship was non-significant for middle class teens ($\beta = .03, p = .79$). See Figure 3 for a depiction of this interaction effect.

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Although the interaction term only reached significance at the trend level in the regression equation predicting friendship competence ($R^2 = .12, p < .01$; Interaction term: $F(1,109) = 1.91, p = .06$), analyses that were conducted separately for middle class vs. poor urban teen revealed a similar pattern for this variable as well. Specifically, it was found that adolescents' ability to assert their autonomy with their mothers was related to higher friendship competence for middle class teens ($\beta = .28, p < .05$), whereas this was not the case for poor urban adolescents ($\beta = -.08, p = .61$). A graph of this interaction effect can be found in Figure 3.

In sum, adolescents' behaviors exhibiting autonomy were found to have negative correlates for poor urban adolescents, in the form of increased alienation from their mothers and increased levels of delinquent activity. These same behaviors were found to have positive correlates for middle class adolescents, in the form of increased competence with peers. Similarly, middle class adolescents' behaviors undermining autonomy were linked to increased levels of aggression in their relationships with their mothers, whereas this finding was non-significant (and in the opposite direction) for poor urban adolescents.

Discussion

This study examined how the negotiation of adolescent autonomy within the parent-adolescent relationship relates to both the quality of that relationship, as well as the level of adolescents' social competence and externalizing behaviors, in both middle class and poor urban families. Because behaviors promoting vs. undermining autonomy were thought to have different meanings and consequences across different socio-economic settings, it was hypothesized that the links between the negotiation of autonomy and both family and adolescent outcomes would differ substantially across the two samples. Such hypotheses were consistently supported by the data, as discussed below.

Negotiation of autonomy was found to have important implications for the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, although the implications varied substantially according to socio-economic context. Analyses revealed that in middle class families, the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship suffered when either mothers or adolescents engaged in behaviors that
undermined autonomy by guilt-invoking, pressuring, and/or overpersonalizing. Specifically, these types of behaviors were linked to increases in adolescents’ perceptions of their mothers as psychologically controlling, as well as increased levels of aggression within the mother-adolescent relationship. Unlike middle class teens, however, poor urban teens did not view mothers’ overpersonalizing or pressuring behaviors during the interaction task as overcontrolling. In fact, when poor urban mothers engaged in these types of behaviors, their adolescents actually rated them as more trustworthy, and reported feeling more accepted by them. Finally, for poor urban adolescents, increased exhibition of autonomy - in the form of stating reasons in a forceful manner - was related to increased levels of alienation in the mother-adolescent relationship. Exhibiting autonomy was not linked to negative outcomes for middle class teens, either within or outside of the family.

In terms of functioning outside of the home, again the pattern of relationships between the negotiation of autonomy and adolescent outcomes was found to vary according to socioeconomic context. Specifically, middle class adolescents who were able to promote their autonomy in their relationship with their mothers by stating their positions clearly and confidently during a disagreement were more socially competent. Friends of these adolescents reported that they were more socially accepted, and more successful in forming relationships with their same-age peers. However, when poor urban adolescents promoted their autonomy with their mothers, they reported engaging in increased levels of delinquency outside of the home. Thus, whereas a style of exhibiting autonomy involving challenging of parental authority is related to positive social adjustment in middle class adolescents, this same negotiation style appears to be linked to negative consequences for poor urban teens.

Overall, these findings lend support to the notion that the context of a poor urban setting changes the nature of the task of achieving autonomy, and thus behaviors promoting vs. undermining autonomy take on different meanings according to the context in which they occur. Thus, in poor urban settings, maternal behaviors that cut off discussion by pressuring adolescents to change their positions may benefit these teens by convincing and/or coercing them to stay out of trouble. Further, poor urban mothers who engage in behaviors such as overpersonalizing (e.g. saying “I will just be too worried if you go out with Ray tonight - I’m scared you might get in trouble”) may be sending a positive message to their adolescents - one that says that these mothers are highly caring and invested in what happens to the teens. This same statement in a middle class setting, however, might communicate overprotection and be seen by the adolescent as manipulative and guilt-invoking. A more careful analysis of how adolescents view their mothers’ behaviors may help to pinpoint what about these autonomy-undermining statements leads them to be seen as controlling by middle class adolescents, and as promoting the relationship by poor urban teens.

Similarly, these data indicate that achieving autonomy in a manner that has generally been found to be beneficial for adolescent adjustment in middle class families - engaging in reasoned discussions in which each person has the opportunity to state their point of view - may actually have negative consequences for poor urban adolescents. In this sample, behaviors promoting autonomy were linked with increased social competence for middle class teens, but to increased delinquency for poor urban teens. These data suggest that in a poor urban context, it may be developmentally risky to attempt to break away from parental control during mid-adolescence. Poor urban adolescents have increased accessibility to peers - as well as older adolescents - who may be involved in illegal and/or dangerous activities; thus, poor urban teens who are highly autonomous at age 16 are attempting to take control of their activities in an
Adolescent autonomy offers increased opportunity for getting involved in deviant behavior. Alternatively, teens who are highly motivated to establish their autonomy may be at a greater risk in a poor urban environment due to a limitation in opportunities to gain autonomy. In other words, poor urban teens may not have the opportunity to gain autonomy via a part-time job, scholastic success, or extra-curricular activities, and thus for these teens, problematic behavior may be one easily accessible arena through which they can assert themselves and gain independence.

It is important to note that the models tested in this study explained relatively modest proportions of the variance in the outcomes being examined. Thus, although the ways that families negotiate adolescent autonomy appears to have important implications for both adolescents' level of social competence and their exhibition of externalizing behaviors, it is clear that other factors also play a role in these outcomes. Also, as these data are cross-sectional, the direction of these effects cannot be determined from these data, and some of these effects may be reciprocal. It could be, for example, that poor urban adolescents who are already defying their mothers by engaging in delinquent activity are then also more likely to assert themselves during discussions of disagreements, rather than the reverse. Future research utilizing a longitudinal design can attempt to address this question of causality. Finally, as this data was gathered from a relatively high-risk sample, the generalizability of these results beyond this group is not clear. However, the fact that the results from the middle class families in this sample do correspond with prior work on non-at-risk middle class samples suggests that the links between negotiation of autonomy and adolescent outcomes discussed here are generalizable across families within a middle class socio-economic context.

In sum, this study suggests that negotiation of autonomy within the mother-adolescent relationship has important implications for both the quality of that relationship as well as adolescent adjustment, but that these implications differ according to the families' socio-economic context. Thus, this study represents a first step in understanding how the process of negotiating autonomy relates to adolescent social functioning across various socio-economic settings. As noted above, future research can build on these results by exploring the interplay of both cultural and socio-economic factors, examining the direction of the effects discussed here, as well as verifying the generalizability of these findings to non-at-risk samples. Determining how various behaviors with regard to autonomy might promote vs. inhibit healthy development during adolescence will add to our understanding of this developmental stage as a whole, which in turn can help both parents and adolescents manage the challenges of this transitional period as successfully as possible.
References


Nisbett & Wilson, 1977


Table 1: Demographics of poor urban and middle class samples

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<th>Middle-Class (N = 88)</th>
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<td>Adolescents’ Age</td>
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<td>Mean (SD)</td>
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<td>22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Composition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intact (both biological parents)</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-intact</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers’ Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not complete high school</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= Two years of college</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors degree or beyond</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
Table 2: Mean differences between poor urban and middle-class samples on all variables examined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Poor Urban Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Middle-Class Mean (SD)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autonomy/Control variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent exhibiting autonomy</td>
<td>1.57 (0.93)</td>
<td>2.06 (0.84)</td>
<td>3.05**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent undermining autonomy</td>
<td>0.69 (0.44)</td>
<td>0.95 (0.59)</td>
<td>2.84**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother undermining autonomy</td>
<td>0.87 (0.50)</td>
<td>0.89 (0.49)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological control</td>
<td>17.04 (4.01)</td>
<td>16.50 (4.72)</td>
<td>-0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>22.96 (5.39)</td>
<td>21.81 (6.13)</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>40.34 (7.66)</td>
<td>37.66 (8.86)</td>
<td>-1.68+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>34.16 (8.50)</td>
<td>33.06 (8.78)</td>
<td>-0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>16.42 (6.49)</td>
<td>20.16 (6.24)</td>
<td>3.12**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical aggression</td>
<td>1.32 (1.59)</td>
<td>2.04 (2.35)</td>
<td>2.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adolescent adjustment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer-reported friendship competence</td>
<td>3.27 (0.46)</td>
<td>3.03 (0.61)</td>
<td>-2.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reported delinquency</td>
<td>1.83 (1.53)</td>
<td>1.54 (1.43)</td>
<td>-1.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001