

DIMENSIONAL ASSESSMENT OF AUTONOMY IN MIDDLE AND LATE ADOLESCENCE¹

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Abstract: *One of the most important developmental tasks in adolescence is the acquirement of autonomy and independence. A sample of 1240 adolescents has been assessed with Personal Autonomy Questionnaire from Cognitrom Assessment System), regarding 4 dimensions of autonomy: value, behavioural, cognitive and emotional autonomy. The results show that late adolescents have a more developed value, behavioural and cognitive autonomy than middle adolescents, and the urban area residents have a better developed autonomy in all its dimensions than rural area residents. No significant differences between male and female were found. Theoretical and practical implications of the study are discussed.*

Keywords: *behavioural autonomy, cognitive autonomy, emotional autonomy, values autonomy, middle and late adolescence*

1. Introduction

Chronologically, adolescence is divided into three different stages: 10/11-14/15 years – puberty or early adolescence, 14/15-18/19 years – middle adolescence and 18/19-24/25 years – late adolescence or emerging adulthood (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009; Creţu, 2009; Sion, 2007; Verza & Verza 2000; Papalia, Wendkos Old & Feldman, 2010; Birch, 2000). Early adolescence is the first stage of adolescence and it is mainly characterized by the physical transformations of the human body reaching maturity. Middle adolescence faces the evolution of the psychological and social dimensions of personality and the attempt of a teenager to discover and to accept himself. Late adolescence is a relatively steady period, in which all previous acquisitions are consolidated.

So, all the physical, psychological and social changes that take place in adolescence represent the main developmental tasks that an individual has to resolve in order to become an adult. One such task, of central importance, is gaining autonomy and independence.

Autonomy is a key-element of adolescent identity, as well as an indicator of

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psychological maturity in this developmental stage (Alonso-Stuyk, Zacarés & Ferreres, 2017). In many cases, autonomy is defined or explained through the concept of independence. Being autonomous allows a teenager to decide his own way to think, to feel and to act (Russell & Bakken, 2002). In other words, personal autonomy is the ability of setting life goals, the ability to use of the individual's free choice and to achieve self-confidence (Karabanova & Poskrebysheva, 2013), as well as the individual's capacity of psychological, moral and social self-determination and self-regulation (Assor, Kaplan & Roth, 2002).

It becomes clear that autonomy can be defined in many ways, and although we acknowledge the existence of four dimensions of personal autonomy, it is certain that these dimensions are closely linked and the individual needs all four of them in order to achieve true independence:

- In terms of **cognition**, autonomy is the expression of an individual's viewpoint (Boykin McElhane & Allen, 2001), the ability to rule one's life and to make decisions based on available information, without being subject to the will of others (Caldwell, Wasson, Brighton, Dixon & Anderson, 2003). Furthermore, autonomy is the ability to make sense of a meaningful event, which allows people to successfully coping with other negative events in their life (Folkman, 1997; Park, 2010).
- In terms of **emotion**, autonomy means the process of individuation, it means perceiving parents as people and it is based on less dependency on parents (Sandhu & Kaur, 2012). Based on the significant changes that occur in this stage, teenagers tend to gravitate more toward peer influences rather than parental influence (Bednar & Fisher, 2003).
- In terms of **behaviour**, autonomy means conduits that differentiate the adolescent from other people. Beckert (2005) suggests that autonomy means the ability to act for one's self. Behavioural autonomy can also refer to the extent that teenagers demonstrate responsibility for their actions. It is also of great importance the ability to regulate their behaviour and attitudes, while teenagers make their own mind rather than following others (Popkin, 1993).
- In terms of **moral values**, autonomy means the ability to gain control over the own person, in different situations, to act according to the own set of moral values (Băndilă & Rusu, 1999). The autonomous individual has a specific set of beliefs and principles that resist peering pressure. Russell & Bakken (2002) state that autonomy is in some extent opposite to conformity. According to these authors, conformity happens when a teenager copies other people's ideas and beliefs, when he has a certain sensitivity and takes too much of other people's opinions into account.

Behaviours that can be associated with the adolescent's strive to gain independence include:

- a special focus on self-esteem, self-direction and self-regulation, a certain refinement of gender role expectations, the development of a sexual identity, certain changes in the dependence on family and other adults (Auslander, Rosenthal, & Blythe, 2006; Harter, 1990; Maccoby, 1999; McCabe & Barnett, 2000; Steinberg, 2001);

- the development of emotional and behavioural autonomy (Elliott & Feldman, 1990);
- the possibility of defining their own person, outside of their birth family (Stover & Tway, cit. in Monseau & Salvner, 1992);
- the use of peers simply as guides in the formation of identity, as teenagers try to establish a sense of self that separates them from their families (Bednar & Fisher, 2003);
- the exercise of different roles and social statuses (Sălceanu, 2015);
- the achievement of a broad social network and the development of social investments outside of the family (Beyers, Goossens, Van Calster & Duriez, 2005; McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson & Hare, 2009);
- a broader motivational engagement and academic achievement, through self-direction (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon & Deci, 2004);
- a detachment from constraints, manipulation, physical and verbal threats, punishments, guilt or competition (Skinner & Wellborn, 1994, *apud* Adams & Berzonsky, 2009);
- a displacement of interests towards academic activities, in the process of choosing an occupation or a career field (Sălceanu, 2015).

2. Objectives and Hypotheses

The main objective of the study was to emphasize the existence of significant differences between the four dimensions of autonomy, regarding middle and late adolescents, male and female adolescents, urban and rural area residents.

We issued three hypotheses, as follows: (1) We presume there are significant differences between middle adolescents and late adolescents regarding the dimensions of autonomy. (2) We presume there are significant differences between male and female adolescents regarding the dimensions of autonomy. (3) We presume there are significant differences between urban area and rural area residents regarding the dimensions of autonomy.

3. Sample and Methods

We used a sample randomization technique (see Sîntion & Călin, 2014: 116) and we questioned 1240 adolescents, using the Personal Autonomy Questionnaire (Cognitrom Assessment System). The sample consisted in 453 middle adolescents and 787 late adolescents, aged between 16 and 25 years of age, 443 male and 797 female, 843 residents of urban areas and 397 residents of rural areas.

The questionnaire is meant to assess four autonomy dimensions: cognitive, behavioural, emotional and values autonomy.

To ensure the ethics of the research, we obtained from all the participants their written consent, as well as the permission from school chairman to conduct the study.

4. Findings and Results

Hypothesis 1 - We presume there are significant differences between middle adolescents and late adolescents regarding the dimensions of autonomy. We obtained the next mean rank scores:

Table 1

Mean ranks of autonomy dimensions – variable Age

Age	Values autonomy Mean Rank	Behaviour autonomy Mean Rank	Cognitive Autonomy Mean Rank	Emotional Autonomy Mean Rank
Middle adolescents (453)	550.02	548.64	574.78	597.96
Late adolescents (787)	661.07	661.86	646.82	632.70

We used Mann-Whitney U Test for independent samples, since the distribution of scores was not normal. We obtained the next statistical values:

Table 2

Mann-Whitney Test results – comparison on autonomy based on Age

Autonomy dimensions	Values	Behaviour	Cognitive	Emotional
Mann-Whitney U	146329.00	145704.00	157543.50	168043.50
Wilcoxon W	249160.00	248535.00	260374.50	270874.50
Z	-5.26	-5.36	-3.41	-1.64
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.00	.001	.09

We discovered statistically significant differences regarding cognitive, behaviour and values autonomy, which are better developed in late adolescence.

Hypothesis 2 - We presume there are significant differences between male and female adolescents regarding the dimensions of autonomy. We obtained the next mean rank scores:

Mean ranks of autonomy dimensions – variable Gender

Table 3

Gender	Values autonomy Mean Rank	Behaviour autonomy Mean Rank	Cognitive Autonomy Mean Rank	Emotional Autonomy Mean Rank
Male adolescents (443)	607.70	596.81	595.87	594.87
Female adolescents (797)	627.61	633.67	634.19	633.98

We used Mann-Whitney U Test for independent samples, since the distribution of scores was not normal. We obtained the next statistical values:

Table 4

Mann-Whitney Test results – comparison on autonomy based on Gender

Autonomy dimensions	Values	Behaviour	Cognitive	Emotional
Mann-Whitney U	170865.00	166040.50	165625.00	165183.00
Wilcoxon W	269211.00	264386.50	263971.00	263529.00
Z	-.94	-1.73	-1.80	-1.84
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.34	.08	.07	.06

We discovered no statistically significant differences regarding any autonomy dimensions based on gender.

Hypothesis 3 - We presume there are significant differences between urban areas and rural areas residents regarding the dimensions of autonomy. We obtained the next mean rank scores:

Table 5

Mean ranks of autonomy dimensions – variable Residence

Residence	Values autonomy Mean Rank	Behaviour autonomy Mean Rank	Cognitive Autonomy Mean Rank	Emotional Autonomy Mean Rank
Urban area residents (843)	639.74	637.98	639.45	640.88
Rural area residents (397)	579.64	583.38	580.27	575.56

We used Mann-Whitney U Test for independent samples, since the distribution of scores was not normal. We obtained the next statistical values:

Mann-Whitney Test results – comparison on autonomy based on Residence Table 6

Autonomy dimensions	Values	Behaviour	Cognitive	Emotional
Mann-Whitney U	151116.00	152598.50	151364.50	149315.00
Wilcoxon W	230119.00	231601.50	230367.50	227921.00
Z	-2.761	-2.507	-2.719	-3.001
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.012	.007	.003

We discovered significant differences regarding all autonomy dimensions: urban area residents have a better development of autonomy dimensions.

5. Conclusions

The main objective of the study was the identification of significant differences between the four dimensions of autonomy, regarding middle and late adolescents, male and female adolescents, urban and rural area residents.

One of the differences we identified regards *cognitive autonomy*, which is better developed in late adolescents than middle adolescents and in urban area residents than in rural area residents. Due to the natural course of development, a better developed cognitive autonomy allows late adolescents either to be prepared for important decisions in adulthood (Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2002) or to better acknowledge and avoid different kinds of risks and to make decisions that could lead them to undesirable life situations. In absence of adequate cognitive development, young teens often rely on instinct rather than judgement when they analyse a risk-taking behaviour (Beckert, 2007). Other studies (Mann, Harmoni & Power, 1989) show that young adolescents are less able to create options, identify a wide range of risks and benefits, foresee the variety of the consequences of alternatives, and acknowledge the credibility of the information from sources. While middle adolescents seem to rely more often on the advice they receive from peers, late adolescents have a better developed sense of self, of their ideals and beliefs.

Based on Erikson's developmental stages (1968), adolescents have to resolve the crisis between a unique self-identity versus role confusion. Crises are seen as possibilities to develop new stages of development that can find solution to early problems (Hakola, 2009). For example, one of the crises of middle adolescence is shaping a vocational identity. It can be difficult for a high-school student to choose the next step for career development. A career choice means the adolescent has to take into account his abilities and skills, his domains of interest, the benefits he would obtain from a certain career, his value system, the opportunities of employment in that field, the economical and psychological support of his family and friends, etc. There are so many questions that need answer at this point, that middle adolescents can feel confused. Late adolescents usually have more answers in this matter. Choosing a faculty and a specialization is usually proof that some of these challenges are answered.

Another more developed aspect of cognitive autonomy in late adolescence is the ability to negotiate and compromise conflicts. Conflict is a dominant trait of adolescence. The lack of experience or self-confidence makes the middle adolescent more predisposed to take the adult model as referral. Late adolescents have a better developed ability to express their own opinions and appreciate perspectives that differ from their own (Allen, Hauser, O'Connor & Bell, 2002).

Cognitive autonomy can be also expressed in the ability that late adolescents have to find the social environment where they can belong to and create meaningful relationships to other people and groups (Chen, Lay, Wu & Yao, 2007). Late adolescents have a better sense of purpose, of fitting a certain group, of engaging different activities, challenges and tasks. They also have a better-defined purpose in life and the means to

fulfil their goals.

Cognitive autonomy is also better developed for residents of urban areas. In Romanian context this does not seem an understatement. On one hand, Romanian society is still quite traditional, and although family life, meaning of family, relationships between spouses or parent-children relationships have undergone a profound change, there still are many elements from the realm of normative control and institutional canons (Mardare, 2015). On the other hand, rural areas in Romania are not as economically developed as urban areas (Mursa & Paraschiv, 2019), which is actually a problem since almost half of national population lives and works in rural areas. As consequence, real opportunities to develop relationships in small communities are scarce; employment opportunities are low as well; many families cannot afford to send their children to a university because of their low income. Furthermore, there are a lot of teenagers that do not even finish high-school. All these are proofs that autonomy is greatly influenced by the environment factors and education.

Another important difference we identified was the one regarding *behaviour autonomy*, which is also more developed in late adolescence and in residents of urban areas. A study conducted by Musaagaoglu & Gure (2005) shows that behavioural autonomy is strongly correlated with parenting styles in early and middle adolescence. Adolescents that described their parents as authoritative have a better developed behavioural autonomy than teenagers with authoritarian and permissive-indulgent parents. The authoritative parenting style focuses on balance and is characterized by reasonable demands and high responsiveness (Cherry, 2018). These kinds of parents provide love and warmth in addition to limits and fair discipline. That means that children can express themselves, discuss options, they are encouraged to be independent and to use critical thinking. So, although expectations are high, authoritative parents tend to be also flexible. A study conducted by García & Peralbo (2001) shows that parents with high level of education tend to be more aware of the onset of the transition to adolescence. In Romanian rural areas, as we stated before, educational level is lower than in the urban areas, partially due to the infrastructure and to the low economic development. As consequence, adolescents residing in urban areas are more autonomous during middle and late adolescence, as their parents make some developmental tasks easier for them.

Another explanation for the differences in the development of behavioural autonomy between middle and late adolescents is the parental control. Adolescence is a stage where parental control usually declines, in comparison with childhood. Adolescents share power with their parents, are involved in decisions regarding different aspects of family life. Although parents tend to set limits, adolescents strive to gain and use their rights. Late adolescence is characterized by lower parental control. For example, many young people leave their homes as they go to a university in a different city. Parents tend to become confidants for autonomous adolescents, as teenagers who gained their independence want to get close to their parents again and share their problems or ask for advice.

In addition, another explanation for the differences between rural and urban areas residents is regarding the high level of work load of urban parents. Due to the fact that parents spend nowadays a great amount of time at their places of work, adolescents tend to spend less time with their families, and more time alone or with their friends. For late adolescents, there is another aspect to be mentioned: the fact that more and more of them get full-time jobs during their university studies, in order to gain financial independence from their parents or to help raise the income of their families. These are all the more reasons for behavioural autonomy to develop.

Another statistically significant difference we discovered is the one regarding *values autonomy*, between middle and late adolescents, and urban and rural residents. A study conducted by Moskvicheva, Bordovskaia, Dudchenko & Borisova (2016) showed intergenerational transmission of life values, between adolescents and their parents. This is evidence that supports the idea that adults represent real models for adolescents, but they are not the only ones. Other sources of values are the social and cultural influences (Golu, 2000, cit. in Creţu, 2009).

A study on adolescents and moral values (Sălceanu, 2014), grounded in the theory of moral values of Rockeach, shows that today's adolescents value most health, freedom and self-esteem (as terminal values) and ambition, love and capability (as instrumental values). Another study on youth (Sălceanu, 2016) shows that early adults value health, family security and inner harmony (as terminal values) and ambition, responsibility and courage (as instrumental values). This is proof that not only values are assumed from our families, but they also can change in time. Although some similarities exist between the two hierarchies, due to the fact that late adolescents face an even larger range of opportunities, their value systems can evolve. At individual level, values are selected and prioritized based on their significance for the individual, their intensity and their guiding function.

Another explanation is the fact that decision making based on moral grounds can be problematic for middle adolescents, especially in the situation where the moral status of the situation is ambiguous, or can be disputed, or when preoccupations come in conflict with other reasons (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009). Still, late adolescents benefit from a broader range of experiences and can critically judge a problematic situation.

Regarding the difference between urban and rural areas residents, it seems that adolescents in urban areas have better developed value autonomy. The explanation may be the fact that in some traditional Romanian rural communities, usually the father is the head of the family, and he is the one that gets to make decisions regarding his family. As we already said before, low educational levels of parents from rural areas mean lack of flexibility, understanding and responsiveness towards the adolescent's need.

The last significant difference we discovered was the one regarding *emotional autonomy*, which is better developed at adolescents living in big cities. As we stated before, due to their parents' busy work schedule, more and more adolescents spend

time alone or with their friends. This is one of the causes of the development of the adolescent's individuality and self-confidence. Adolescents establish meaningful emotional bonds with peers and with other adults (like teachers or mentors), detaching themselves from their families (Parra, Oliva & Sánchez-Queija, 2015; Kaur, 2013).

Although the hypothesis regarding autonomy dimensions differences between male and female adolescents was not confirmed, we can conclude that the objective of the study was achieved.

In conclusion, this study provides further evidence for the importance of adolescent with his social environment, as these influences help the future adult to shape his beliefs, his skills, his capacity of healthy decision making and of adapting his needs to the requirements of our society, all with the goal of achieving a real state of well-being.

Although many differences that were obtained are basically due to the natural course of human development, it is not possible to fully understand human evolution apart from the educational, cultural, economic, social or historical context they take place in.

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