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Adolescent Autonomy in Parent-child Relations

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Abstract

The role and functions of the adolescent-parent relations are considered as characteristics of the social situation of development. The developmental processes of the value, emotional, cognitive and behavioral components of autonomy in their heterochrony are discussed. The results of the research demonstrated complicated non-linear relationship between the level of personality autonomy and child-parent relation's parameters (the level of parent's control, the adolescent's independence and self-management competence, communication and cooperation with parents).

Keywords: personality autonomy, independence, social situation of development, child-parent relations, adolescence developmental heterochrony

1. Introduction

The achievement of personal autonomy as the ability of setting life goals, the implementation of a personal, free choice and gaining self-confidence is a key task of the adolescence.

The term “autonomy” is an umbrella-term; its definition is reflected in the existence of different concepts that describe the phenomenology of individual autonomy and of its development in adolescence. The authors of some theories (primarily psychoanalysis) consider the source of personal autonomy in the relationships with parents, which implements the functions of acceptance, recognition, protection, emotional support, and respect (i.e.: J. Bowlby, E.Bronfenbrenner, D. Winnicott, A. Freud, M. Klein, J. Kogut, P. Crittenden, M. Ainsworth, E. Erickson et al.), the authors of other concepts focus on internal sources of the development of adolescent autonomy (i.e.: A. Bandura, E. Deci, R. Ryan et al.).

2. Autonomy development in adolescence

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Modern developmental studies have shown that autonomy and self-regulation are evolve on the basis of long-term significant relations [1], [2]. H. Grotevant and C. Cooper associate the development of personal autonomy with two kinds of processes: on the one hand, the self-affirmation (gaining self-confidence and responsibility), on the other – the separation process as opposition to others [2]. Parent-child-relations reveal the opportunities for the balance of individuation and cooperation with parents as a basis for the development of personal autonomy. Adolescents included in warm emotional relationships, receiving care and support tend to independent decision making and self-expression, show more psychological maturity, school competence and subjective well-being, they feel more confident and tend less to depression and deviant behavior [3]. As parents as adolescents are involved in the transformation of the child-parent relationship: from one-way-leading to collaborative. Not the destruction of existing relations, but the change in the image of parents (as the ideal as the real image) leads to the development of personal autonomy without rejecting parent or reduce his authority.

Modern studies have shown the interrelation of the autonomy development in adolescence with increasing distance between adolescents and their parents [4], with emotional distancing from parents and change of parents’ conceptions [5], with the transformation of relations to more equality [1], with the acquisition of individuality in relationships with parents [6], with social adjustment [7], [8] and with the level of the moral maturity of adolescents [9].

Implementing the age-focused approach and the theory of the structure and dynamics of psychological age [10], [11], [12] open new perspectives in the study of the genesis of personal autonomy of adolescents: helps to identify the role and importance of the components of the social situation of development in autonomy development. In Russian studies autonomy is describes in connection to self-release, the "second birth" (appearance of individuality in adolescence), personal maturity, self-government and "feeling of adulthood" [10], [11], [12], [13], [14]. Modern studies try to define the concept of autonomy as integrative term [15], [16], [17], [18], [19]. Concrete studies of causes and effects of autonomy are rare in the modern Russian psychology; they show the interrelation of personal autonomy with psychological dependence with parents [16], [19], [20], [22] the consequent development of autonomy depending on the type of attachment [20], the development of autonomy in age crises [21]. The majority of theoretical approaches and empirical studies show the heterogeneity of the construct of autonomy. The most common structure element- division is to separate emotional, behavioral, cognitive and value autonomy.

3. The present study

The aim of the present study is to investigate the development of personality autonomy in adolescence in the context of the social situation. The tasks of the study are various, because of the lack of psychodiagnostic methods of autonomy research. One of the big tasks was to develop and test the diagnostic tools for the study of autonomy within the emotional, cognitive, behavioral and value components. Another task was to interconnect the specificity of the parent-child relationships in adolescent with the development of the personal autonomy components – as personality maturity and as component of the adolescent-parent-interaction.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

Participants were 455 adolescents of 14-16 years, students from nine Moscow schools. The participants were 9th grade students (n=250) and 10th grade students (n=255) of Moscow public schools. The mean age was 15 years and 4 month (SD=0,7). There were adolescents from complete families (n=363) and one-parent families (n=92); from general education schools (n=331) and gymnasiums (n=124). The sample is representative of adolescents in large cities and metropolitan areas in Russia.
4.2 Measures

Adolescents completed measures about personality autonomy, autonomy in interaction with parents, questionnaires on child-parent interaction and parental behavior. The "Checklist of autonomy" – a scale to identify the overall level of autonomy of adolescents and the level of development of its emotional, cognitive, behavior and value components [23], [24] was used to identify: a) the level of emotional autonomy as the possibility to express their emotions and feelings, and the emotional independence from others, b) the level of cognitive autonomy as the autonomy in mental and cognitive activities, c) the level of behavioral autonomy as the ability of independent action, d) value autonomy as autonomy in fundamental beliefs, motivations and values. The questionnaire “Scale of emotional autonomy” (EAS) was used to determine the level of the emotional component of adolescent autonomy [3]. The questionnaires "Parent-child interaction" [25] and ADOR ("Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory"), the russian-language version adapted by Wasserman et al. were used to define the character of parent-child relationships in adolescence.

5. Results

The main results of the study were focused on the interrelation between the development of autonomy in its components (emotional, cognitive, behavioral, value) with features of parent-child relationships of adolescents as characteristics of the social situation of adolescents.

5.1 Heterochrony of personal autonomy development

The results reveal the nature of the heterochrony of personal autonomy development in adolescence. The uneven development of different components of autonomy is shown: the lowest rates were obtained to the emotional component, relative low lies the behavioral component, relative high – the cognitive component. The highest level reaches the value autonomy (Mann–Whitney U test, p <0.01). Mean values of the autonomy components are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Heterochrony of personal autonomy development in adolescence

| Autonomy component | Mean | SD  |
|--------------------|------|-----|
| Emotional Autonomy | 10,26| 1,77|
| Cognitive autonomy | 11,45| 2,05|
| Behavioral autonomy| 11,17| 2,11|
| Value autonomy     | 11,80| 1,84|

5.2 Child-parent relationship and autonomy development in adolescence

The results of the investigation of parent-adolescent relationship show positive perspectives in adolescents’ view on the family system. The description of the relationships concludes emotional warmth, joint interests and a high level of cooperation in parent-adolescent relationships. These results contradict with the common view of increasing distance, conflicts and dissatisfaction in parent-child relationships through adolescence. The participants of the study generally described the relationship with their parents as satisfyingly, they indicated that the parents feel a keen interest on them, give them enough possibilities to be realize their interests and spend their free time, thus they are interested in their affairs, hobbies, etc. The degree of emotional closeness with parents (especially with the mother) shows a readiness to share with them the most sacred and important things, adolescents spoke of parents as "warm" and empathized. Surprisingly, most of the adolescents are satisfied with the relationships and do not indicate an increasing level of control and requirements from the parents.
Based on the results of the investigation of the level of personal autonomy and through the procedure of cluster analysis we distinguished 5 groups of adolescents with different autonomy development status: 1) adolescent with very high autonomy index; 2) independent adolescents with high level of autonomy; 3) moderate autonomous adolescents; 4) subordinate adolescence with a relative low level of autonomy development; 5) dependent adolescents with low levels of all autonomy components. Between these groups revealed significant differences in the general level of autonomy and in the components of autonomy by Mann-Whitney U-test (p<0.01). The distribution of adolescent in subgroups is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of adolescent in subgroups according to the level of autonomy development

| Subgroup                        | Number of adolescents in subgroup | % of sample |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| High autonomous adolescents     | 43                                | 9           |
| Independent adolescents         | 157                               | 35          |
| Moderate autonomous adolescents | 150                               | 33          |
| Subordinate adolescence         | 83                                | 18          |
| Dependent adolescents           | 21                                | 5           |

The comparison of the child-parent relationship characteristics of the five subgroups showed significant differences. These differences in the characteristics of the adolescent-parent relationships in the subgroups are presented in Table 3.

High autonomous adolescents are characterized by low parental control, severity, defectiveness. The parents of these young people do not tend to over-take care of their children; they do not require absolute obedience and consider their children as independent persons. The parents of those adolescents have a more differentiated approach to their misdemeanors, they provide as much freedom as the adolescents need and are sensitive to the needs and interests of the adolescent. The families of high autonomous adolescents practice joint activities; parents are ready for listening with understanding, openly showing their love, able to admit they were wrong and to apologize. They also take into account the opinion of the adolescent when making family decisions.

Independent adolescents show low parental control and perceive their child-parent relationships as satisfying. Significantly higher (compared with the group of the high autonomous adolescents; Mann-Whitney U-test, p<0.01) are the indicators of control and authority of the mother in the child-parent interaction of adolescents in this group. Independent adolescents report the highest level of consent in the child-parent relationship. Independent adolescents can easily reach mutual agreement with their parents, and their parents also tend to agree with their children.

Moderate autonomous adolescents speak about their parents in terms of emotional closeness and involvement of the parents. Those adolescents tend to think of their mothers as role models, they are very satisfied with the relationships with their mothers. In general we can say that this group is the group with the most emotionally filled and intimate relationships with their parents.

Subordinate adolescence is characterized by low levels of personal autonomy and higher parental control and autonomy in child-parent relationship. Subordinate adolescence recognizes the authority of their mothers, want to emulate them and think their opinion is most significant. However, this group is characterized by the highest rates on the scale of "inconsistency" of parental attitudes. Parents of subordinate adolescence do not provide sufficient autonomy and those adolescents do not use the strategy of cooperation in relationships. The mother is an example for those adolescents and the relationship with her satisfy the adolescents.

Dependent adolescents have the lowest results in all components of autonomy. They are characterized by the highest control in child-parent relationships and rigor in those relationships. They tend to perceive their parents as inimical, they describe their relationships with parents as having no emotional intimacy, cooperation and
harmony. In general, the combination of rigor, control, hostility, emotional distance in those relationships leave no space for equal cooperation, that is needed for autonomy development.

Table 3. Differences in characteristics of the adolescent-parent relationships for adolescents with different level of autonomy development (Mean)

|                                      | High autonomous adolescents | Independent adolescents | Moderate autonomous adolescents | Subordinate adolescence | Dependent adolescents |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Positive interest in relationships with mother | 13,39                      | 14,21                   | 14,61                           | 14,07                  | 10,05                 |
| Positive interest in relationships with father | 12,68                      | 13,17                   | 12,72                           | 11,45                  | 9,68                  |
| Defectiveness of mother              | 9,34                       | 9,65                    | 9,31                            | 10,33                  | 10,90                 |
| Defectiveness of father              | 7,53                       | 8,39                    | 9,01                            | 9,10                   | 10,74                 |
| Hostility of mother                  | 5,90                       | 4,85                    | 4,84                            | 5,36                   | 8,52                  |
| Hostility of father                  | 4,44                       | 4,45                    | 5,36                            | 5,21                   | 7,32                  |
| Autonomy in relationship with mother  | 11,54                      | 11,15                   | 10,10                           | 9,56                   | 7,57                  |
| Autonomy in relationship with father  | 12,29                      | 11,24                   | 10,12                           | 9,28                   | 7,47                  |
| Inconsequence of mother              | 8,68                       | 8,47                    | 8,37                            | 8,96                   | 8,76                  |
| Inconsequence of father              | 7,21                       | 7,85                    | 8,38                            | 8,09                   | 8,63                  |
| Exactingness of mother               | 14,33                      | 14,44                   | 14,69                           | 14,51                  | 15,00                 |
| Exactingness of father               | 13,80                      | 13,95                   | 15,02                           | 14,28                  | 14,89                 |
| Rigor of mother                      | 11,67                      | 11,97                   | 11,97                           | 12,16                  | 14,19                 |
| Rigor of father                      | 11,69                      | 12,38                   | 12,92                           | 12,59                  | 14,79                 |
| Control by mother                    | 13,94                      | 15,50                   | 15,70                           | 16,86                  | 17,24                 |
| Control by father                    | 13,51                      | 14,61                   | 15,33                           | 16,17                  | 16,82                 |
| Emotional closeness to mother        | 16,43                      | 17,23                   | 17,67                           | 17,28                  | 14,29                 |
| Emotional closeness to father        | 15,43                      | 15,45                   | 16,06                           | 15,05                  | 13,68                 |
| Acceptance of mother                 | 16,90                      | 17,94                   | 18,10                           | 17,05                  | 15,55                 |
| Acceptance of father                 | 18,13                      | 18,36                   | 17,40                           | 16,63                  | 15,55                 |
| Cooperation in relationship mother   | 15,83                      | 17,12                   | 17,29                           | 15,85                  | 12,10                 |
| Cooperation in relationship father   | 15,77                      | 16,07                   | 15,99                           | 14,75                  | 12,58                 |
| Agreement with mother                | 15,31                      | 15,39                   | 14,82                           | 14,72                  | 14,14                 |
| Agreement with father                | 14,77                      | 15,18                   | 14,69                           | 14,44                  | 14,32                 |
| Consistency of mother                | 16,02                      | 16,08                   | 16,28                           | 15,81                  | 16,00                 |
| Consistency of father                | 17,06                      | 16,53                   | 16,08                           | 15,85                  | 16,21                 |
| The authority of mother              | 14,98                      | 16,96                   | 17,48                           | 17,30                  | 14,71                 |
| The authority of father              | 16,83                      | 16,84                   | 16,23                           | 16,79                  | 15,95                 |
| Relationship satisfaction with mother | 17,62                      | 18,64                   | 19,18                           | 18,25                  | 16,29                 |
| Relationship satisfaction with father | 18,34                      | 18,05                   | 17,68                           | 17,34                  | 16,11                 |

6. Discussion
The presented heterochrony of personal autonomy development in adolescence represent the uneven development of different components of autonomy. The lowest rates were obtained to the emotional component, relatively low lays the behavioral component, relatively high – the cognitive component. The highest level reaches the value autonomy; the higher levels of value and cognitive autonomy in comparison with behavioral and emotional autonomy show the personal orientation of adolescence in field of values and decision-making. The value development is one of the central issues in adolescent and plays a crucial role in personality development. The higher the level of value autonomy, the more independent the attitudes and beliefs of the adolescent are. Development of value autonomy is linked with the consciousness of the attitudes and beliefs, of the hierarchy of values, of value orientation. Value development and moral development are considered as one of the most important development trends in adolescent. The value autonomy is connected with the moral development, but it is not the same development context. Value autonomy means, adolescents no just assume the existing values from society, but evolve their own conclusions about the values and the hierarchy of the attitudes and beliefs and make the values to their own, include them in the system of the Self. The high level of cognitive autonomy supports this conclusion: the possibility of the cognitive processes is the basis of the consideration of the value system, the own conclusion- and decision-making.

The construct of adolescent autonomy can be represented as functional unity of two bases: the value-affective complex and the operational-technical complex. Advanced development of cognitive autonomy is the foundation of the development of behavioral and value autonomy. Value-autonomy, as a center of development and aspirations of motivational sense of identity, creates the conditions for achieving a necessary level of emotional autonomy by self-acceptance and self-sufficiency. The blocks of behavioral-cognitive (operational-technical complex) and emotional-value (value-affective complex) of autonomy are linked through cognitive and value components: the presence of beliefs is the key to the development of critical thinking, the critical thinking is the base for prospective activities and has to be consistent with the individual values.

The results of the cluster analysis with dividing the adolescents in five groups with different levels of autonomy development showed that adolescents, who appreciate their independence, have a lower degree of parental control, policy and insistence in their child-parent relationships. The more the regulatory function of the parents, the less independent and autonomous the adolescent. With increasing levels of autonomy increases the level of cooperation in the child-parent relationships. More autonomous adolescents do not feel laissez-faire by their parents (as it might seem because of the small number of prohibitions and the relative lack of control), but appreciate support and involvement of parents in their lives: the respondents indicated that their parents show themselves sensitive to the relationship, prefer joint family entertainment, openly express their love, take the opinion of the adolescents into account when making family decisions. The psychoanalytic assumption that a high level of autonomy development is connected with more distance in the child-parent relationship seems untenable: adolescents, indicating an emotional distance from parents reveal themselves as the least autonomous adolescents in our study sample.

Obtained results indicate the productivity of the age-focused psychological to the description of personal autonomy as a construct integral to the system of social relations/ The essential role of child-parent interaction in the development personal autonomy is shown. As part of a cooperative relationship with parents adolescents get the opportunity to experience a different strategy of independence and autonomy, which, in turn, contributes to the development of his personal autonomy as an indicator of maturity.

In the relationship with parents the awareness of the need for autonomy and its motivational objectification occur. The reflection of the position of the adolescent in the child-parent relationship, the awareness of nonequivalence in the field of own decision-making are the basis of the development of the autonomy motivation commitment to personal autonomy.
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