Endorsement of parental authority in adolescence: Bedouin vs. Jewish adolescents in Israel

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**ABSTRACT**

The study examines Bedouin and Jewish adolescents’ endorsement of parental authority, in an attempt to clarify the role of culture in the context of parent–child authority relations in the family. It included 412 Jewish adolescents (213 boys; 199 girls) with age ranges from 12 to 17 ($\bar{X} = 14.39$; SD = 1.26), and 130 Bedouin adolescents (78 boys; 50 girls; 2 participants did not report their sex) with an identical age range ($\bar{X} = 14.79$; SD = 1.71). Participants filled in the Parental Authority Instrument (PAI; Yaffe, 2017), designed to measure the child’s perceptions of his parents’ legitimate authority regarding 28 items representing common parent–child conflicts in adolescence. The children’s age was significantly correlated with the two parental authority scales (the child’s obligation to obey and the parent’s right to set rules) only for the Jewish group. Bedouin adolescents perceived their parents’ authority as more legitimate than Jews adolescents did for most domains, particularly for the personal domain.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received 4 February 2017
Accepted 10 April 2017

**KEYWORDS**

Parental authority; domain; adolescents; Bedouin; Jewish

**Introduction**

Smith (1971, 1977) defined parental authority as the legitimacy attributed by the descendant to the parent’s right to control certain aspects of his behaviour. He asserted that parental legitimate authority differs from other parental control bases in two main qualities: (1) the child’s willingness to comply with the parent’s directions, while the parent is not present to enforce them; (2) the likelihood that child would willingly obey the parent’s rules, although he/she does not agree with them.

A growing body of research offers support for these assumptions, showing a positive association between adolescents’ conceptions of parental authority in terms of legitimacy, and several behavioural outcomes related to adolescence. Specifically, several studies have demonstrated that youngsters who perceived their parents’ authority as legitimate in relation to specific issues, and felt obligated to obey them, presented with more actual compliance with their parents’ demands and were more likely to disclose conflictual information (Darling, Cumsille, Caldwell, & Dowdy, 2006; Darling, Cumsille, & Martinez, 2007; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campion-Bar, 2006). Conversely, additional studies showed a link between the frequency of lying to a parent, positive attitudes towards deviance and lower endorsement of parental authority and of the obligation to obey (Cumsille, Darling, & Martinez, 2010). Thus, behaviourally disturbed children were found to endorse their parents’ authority less than normative children (Darling, Cumsille, & Martinez, 2008).
Consistent with the social-cognitive domain theory (Turiel, 1983, 2002), a large body of research shows that conceptions of parental authority of parents and children vary between social domains, such as moral, conventional, personal, friendship and prudential (Smetana, 1988, 2000; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005). Family members tend to agree that the parent should have the right (i.e., legitimate authority) to regulate children’s actions on moral issues (e.g., lying, stealing), prudential issues (e.g., negative and harmful actions, such as smoking, drinking alcohol and drug use) and conventional issues (Smetana, 1988, 1993, 2000; Smetana & Asquith, 1994). However, with respect to personal or friendship issues, children tend to consider parental authority as illegitimate.

As part of children’s psychological development towards autonomy, their conceptions of parental authority constantly change. With age, therefore, parental authority becomes less endorsed, as adolescents strive to appropriate more and more issues to their personal domain, which is situated off limits for parental authority jurisdiction (Smetana et al., 2005).

Although autonomy constitutes a universal milestone characteristic of children’s development, its reflection in particular ages and contexts may vary significantly across cultures. With relation to parent–child relationships, several studies show that cultural features and values influence the family’s conceptions and practices of parental authority. Apart from the fact that conservative societies and ethnic groups tend to apply more authoritarian and stricter discipline methods in the family (e.g., Davidov & Khoury-Kassabri, 2013), additional findings also suggest that these groups may also favour and value parental authority endorsement among children. Darling, Cumsille, and Peña-Alampay (2005) found that parents of Philippine adolescents set more rules at home, compared to American and Chilean parents, and that their children perceived their parents’ rules as more legitimate and felt more obligated obeying them. Among the former group of adolescents, the normative decline in parental authority endorsement and obligation to obey was observed only from the age of 17 onwards. Consistent with these findings, Yau and Smetana (1996) revealed that Chinese adolescents do not differ by age in relation to the frequency and intensity of conflicts with their parents. With age, they also did not demonstrate a significant increase in the number of issues under conflict with parents, as well as in the desire to make decisions with respect to those issues. In general, these adolescents reported significantly fewer conflicts with parents in comparison with their European–American counterparts, which imply a stronger endorsement of parental authority in this group.

One of the most intriguing sectors in Israel is the Bedouin society, in which the family has not been sufficiently studied in the above context. Bedouins are considered a minority group, that is, a group of people which differ from the majority in national, ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic and other characteristics (Bailey, 1979). Today, the Bedouin society still retains ancient norms and values, despite the fact that its members are undergoing far-reaching changes in all areas of life. Nevertheless, the Bedouin identity and values have not become blurred and still exist alongside modernization, to which Bedouin people integrate their legacy with various systems of the modern’s life (Shochat & Ben-David, 2000).

As in every traditional ethnic group whose culture differs from the majority in several substantial aspects, we expected to find differences between the Bedouin and the Jewish Israeli society also in the family areas – especially with respect to the relationship between parents and children. Arab families in the Middle East have been specifically described as emphasizing traditional conservative values, such as obedience to authority and autocratic parenting decision-making (Al-Simadi & Atoum, 2000; Dahir, 1987; Dwairy et al., 2006). The traditional Bedouin family is characterized by a patriarchal, hierarchical structure, which favours the values of authority and family honour (Al-Krenawi, 2000). Accordingly, we assume that the characteristics and conceptions of parental authority in this society differ from those accepted in Western societies, and resemble more closely those observed among conservative groups and nations around the world.

The current study aims to examine the differences between Israeli Bedouin and Jewish adolescents in the endorsement of their parent’s parental authority, as a way of clarifying the role of culture in the development of children’s autonomy and of parent–child authority relationships in the family. Under the assumption that the values of the Bedouin family resemble the values of families from conservative and collectivistic societies mentioned above (e.g., family honour, strict rules, obedience and respect
towards elders; Dahir, 1987; Smetana, 2000), we presumed that the parental authority in this family would differ from the parental authority in the Western family in its extent, the context of conflict with parent and the process.

Given the above, we hypothesized that Bedouin adolescents would generally perceive their parents’ authority as more legitimate (in terms of the perception of their parent’s right to set rules and their own obligation to obey those rules), compared to Jewish adolescents of the same age group in Israel. Assuming that Bedouin adolescents reach autonomy later than their Jewish counterparts, it was also hypothesized that the differences between these two groups in the perceptions of their parent’s parental authority would be manifested in all the domains but particularly in respect to personal issues (i.e. the personal and social domains). Accordingly, we hypothesized that the negative association between the adolescents’ age and the perceptions of the legitimacy of their parents’ authority (that is, parent’s right to set rules and adolescent’s own obligation to obey) would be significantly weaker in the Bedouin group.

Method

Participants

The sample included two main groups of Israeli Jewish and Bedouin adolescents. The Jewish group contained a total of 412 participants (213 boys; 199 girls) of the age range between 12 and 17 (\( \bar{X} = 14.39; \) SD = 1.26). Most of this sample attended a large network of schools spread in large city in northern Israel. The Bedouin comparison group contained 130 participants (78 boys; 50 girls; two participants did not report their sex) of an identical age range (\( X = 14.79; \) SD = 1.71), from 14 localities in northern Israel. Both groups constituted a convenient sampling process. All the Jewish participants studied in middle and high school’ grades, ranging from 7th grade to 12th grade. The distribution of the Bedouin participants ranged from 6th grade (about 10%) to 12th grade (the participants’ age was held as a covariate for all analyses). Table 1 presents the other demographic data for each group separately.

Measures

Parental Authority Instrument (PAI)

The adolescents’ endorsement of their parents’ parental authority was measured using the Parental Authority Instrument (PAI; Yaffe, 2017), designed for self-report by the child. The original instrument contained 28 items \( \times 4 \) measurement scales. For the purposes of the current study, we only utilized the two following scales from the complete instrument: (1) The child’s obligation to obey; (2) the parent’s right to set rules. These two scales operationally define the dimension of legitimacy of parental authority (Yaffe, 2013, 2017). The score in each scale constitutes the mean of the responses on all its items, while the overall authority score is obtained from a simple sum of scores on the two scales. The range of responses is between 0 and 3, while the range for the overall authority scale (i.e. legitimacy of parental authority) is between 0 and 6. In the current study, the two scales recorded high coefficients of reliability as internal consistency (\( \alpha = .92 \) and \( \alpha = .90 \), respectively), and mean scores of 1.72 ± .56 and 1.76 ± .56, respectively. The internal correlation coefficients between the instrument’s scales appear in table 2 for each group separately.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the demographic variables by group.

|                | Min | Max | Mean | SD  |
|----------------|-----|-----|------|-----|
| Jews (n = 412) |     |     |      |     |
| Number of rooms| 3   | 10  | 5.11 | 1.10|
| Family size (number of children) | 1 | 7 | 2.77 | .94 |
| Bedouins (n = 130) |     |     |      |     |
| Number of rooms  | 2  | 7   | 3.87 | .94 |
| Family size (number of children) | 1 | 8 | 4.09 | 1.35 |
Procedure

With respect to both groups followed, separate institutional ethical committees gave their permission in advance to conduct the detailed procedure.

Jewish group

With permission from the central department of education to conduct the study at the school’s network and with the children’s parents’ permission, a member of the research staff arrived at the school and administered the instrument during class time, with supervision of the teacher. After the relevant instructions were publicly read in class, the time required for filling in the questionnaires was between 45 and 60 min at most. The children were given a series of anonymous questionnaires (for several research needs), including the PAI. All children gave their consent to take part in the study, and were allowed to retire at any time.

Bedouin group

As part of the data collection study in the Bedouin group, the researchers visited fourteen Bedouin villages in northern Israel one by one. In each locality, they appointed Arabic speaking representatives who knew families who could be interested and suitable to take part in the study, and they were entrusted with reaching those families for administrating the questionnaires. The researchers held preliminary meetings with representatives and informed them about the research framework, presented them with the data collection process and instructed them about the research tools and the procedure. The representatives of each locality expressed their consent to take part in the data collection process on a voluntary basis. They met two members (mother/father and child) of each family in a neutral place or at the family’s home and instructed them about filling in an anonymous format questionnaires kit in Hebrew (for several research purposes), including the PAI. All children gave their consent to take part in the study, and were allowed to retire at any time.

Results

A preliminary analysis of the data was first conducted in order to identify the demographic variables needed to be held as covariates as part of the statistical examinations of the research hypothesis. Subsequently, a set of multivariate analyses of covariance were performed to examine the research hypothesis regarding the differences between Jewish and Bedouin adolescents in parental authority endorsement (i.e. the obligation to obey and the perceived parental right to set rules).

Table 2 shows the correlations between the demographic variables and the parental authority scales for Jewish (n = 412) and Bedouin (n = 130) adolescents.

| Variable                  | 1   | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     |
|---------------------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Child’s age            | –   | .26**| .06   | −.43***| −.37***|
| 2. Number of rooms (SES)  | .05 | –     | .25*  | −.02  | .04   |
| 3. Family size            | .01 | −.04  | –     | −.04  | −.04  |
| 4. Obligation to obey     | .15 | −.09  | .10   | –     | .79***|
| 5. Legitimacy of rules    | −.08| −.11  | .17   | .51***| –     |

Notes: Figures above the diagonal refer to Jews; Figures below diagonal refer to Bedouins.

*p < .01; **p < .005; ***p < .001.
the perception of the parents’ right to set rules and to the perception of the obligation to obey. That is to say that the Bedouins adolescents’ endorsement of parental authority remains relatively stable throughout adolescence.

Table 3 displays the results of the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) for the differences in perceptions of parental authority (two scales and total score), by sex and ethnic group (2 × 2). The adolescent’s age was held as covariate due to its theoretical and statistical inverse relation with the changing perceptions of parental authority during adolescence. The data show significant differences between Jewish and Bedouin adolescents’ perceptions of their parents’ right to set rules and their own obligation to obey. No sex differences were observed regarding these parental authority perceptions. Similarly, no interaction effect was found between group and sex, both in relation to the adolescent’s obligation to obey \( (F(1,534) = 2.37, p > 0.05) \) and to the perceptions of the parent’s right to set rules \( (F(1,534) = 1.06, p > .05) \). Generally speaking, these findings suggest that Bedouin adolescents are more likely than Jewish adolescents to endorse the authority of their parents (legitimacy of parental authority), as reflected in their obligation to obey and their perception of their parents’ right to set rules in the family, and that this endorsement diminishes less with age than in Jewish adolescents.

In an attempt to identify the thematic source of the differences in the perceptions of parental authority between the groups of Jewish and Bedouin adolescents, we also calculated the mean scores of the general parental authority scale (i.e. ‘legitimacy of parental authority’) for each domain in both groups. Table 4 shows the results of the multivariate analysis of covariance, comparing between the groups, with the adolescents’ age held as covariate. The results reveal that apart from the domain of welfare and safety of the child, there are significant differences in the perceptions of the legitimacy of parental authority with respect to the remaining four domains between Bedouin and Jewish adolescents. Regarding each of these domains in parent–child relationships in the family, Bedouin adolescents tend to better endorse their parents’ authority than Jewish adolescents. Examination of the effect size for

Table 3. Mean, standard deviations and the results of a multivariate analysis of covariance for the differences between Bedouins and Jewish adolescents’ perceptions of the obligation to obey and the parents’ right to set rules.

| Sex          | Group          | Sex          | Group          |
|--------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| Boys (n = 290) | Girls (n = 248) | Jews (n = 410) | Bedouins (n = 130) |
| Obligation to obey | 1.73 (.54)  | 1.70 (.57)  | 1.62 (.54)  | 2.03 (.50)  |
| Right to set rules | 1.79 (.56)  | 1.74 (.54)  | 1.73 (.56)  | 1.88 (.53)  |
| Legitimacy of Parental authority (overall score) | 3.53 (1.02) | 3.44 (1.04) | 3.45 (1.04) | 3.90 (.90)  |

Table 4. Mean, standard deviations and the results of a multivariate analysis of covariance for the differences between Bedouin and Jewish adolescents’ perceptions of the legitimacy of parental authority by domain.

| Bedouins (n = 125) | Jews (n = 406) |
|--------------------|----------------|
| M  | SD | M  | SD |
| Personal | 3.67 | .97 | 2.43 | 1.28 | 128.89*** | .20 |
| Routine | 3.84 | 1.18 | 3.62 | 1.26 | 6.62* | .01 |
| Family conventions | 3.96 | 1.00 | 3.67 | 1.10 | 8.86*** | .02 |
| Welfare and safety | 4.43 | 1.22 | 4.57 | 1.16 | .13 | .00 |
| Social | 4.13 | 1.26 | 3.73 | 1.35 | 13.96*** | .03 |

Notes: Partial \( \eta^2 \) is a measure of effect size after accounting for covariates; Legitimacy of parental authority equals obligation to obey + parental right to set rules.

* \( p < .01 \); ** \( p < .005 \); *** \( p < .001 \).
each domain shows that the larger differences between the groups refer to the personal and social domains (in descending order).

It is noteworthy that in contrast to the group of the Jewish adolescents, in which a general significant within-subject effect for the domain was obtained (\(F(4,1616) = 9.29, p < .001\)), the Bedouin adolescence group did not display such an effect (\(F(4, 492) = 0.74, p > .05\)). That is to say that Jewish-Israeli adolescents make more distinction between issues when considering their parents’ legitimate authority than Bedouin adolescents. Subject to that, the repeated measure analysis of the differences between domains for each group separately, shows a similar hierarchical trend within domains between the groups. Jewish adolescents significantly perceive their parents’ authority to be less legitimate for issues of the personal domain, in comparison to all four other domains (\(-1.24 \leq \text{Mean difference} \leq -2.14, p < .001\)), and they perceive their parent’s authority to be significantly more legitimate for issues of the welfare–safety domain (.83 \leq \text{Mean difference} \leq 2.14, p < .001). Similarly, but with less prominent effects, Bedouin adolescents perceive the personal domain to be less legitimate for parental authority than other domains, with the exception of the routine domain (\(-.29 \leq \text{Mean difference} \leq -.46, p < .001\)), and they perceive the welfare–safety domain to be most legitimate (.30 \leq \text{Mean difference} \leq .76, p < .001).

**Discussion**

Conflicts between parents and children over the magnitude of the child’s autonomy during the adolescence period reflect a normal and successive movement of the children's development towards autonomy (Smetana et al., 2005). This movement is characterized by a consistent decline in the endorsement of parental authority with age, while adolescents strive to appropriate more issues under their personal domain, that is, out of their parents’ jurisdiction. Essentially, parent–children tension throughout adolescence over the thematic boundaries of parental authority underlies a normal process whereby children move towards independence from their parents and transit to adulthood (Smetana, 1996).

However, several studies suggest that this ‘normal process’ of the transition towards autonomy varies across nations and cultures (Darling, Cumsille, Peña-Alampay, & Coatsworth, 2009; Darling et al., 2005, 2007; Yau & Smetana, 1996), notably regarding the pace and intensity of decreasing parental authority. The current study sought to examine these very issues among Bedouin families, while using Jewish families as a comparison group. As far as we know, a very little research has been made on conceptions of parental legitimate authority in families from Arab societies.

**General differences between Bedouin and Jewish adolescents in endorsement of parental authority**

The first research hypothesis addressed the differences between Bedouin and Jewish adolescents in the legitimacy attributed to their parent’s authority. It was hypothesized that Bedouin adolescents would generally perceive their parents’ authority as more legitimate. Consistent with the few studies that have specifically inspected the role of the culture in relation to conceptions of parental authority (Darling et al., 2005; Yau & Smetana, 1996), we found that Bedouins adolescents, rather than Jewish adolescents, endorsed their parents’ right to set rules and expressed more obligation to obey them. This finding supports the hypothesis that parental authority is generally more endorsed (i.e. perceived as legitimate) among growing up Bedouin teenagers, and underlines the role of culture in relation to conceptions of parental authority. While parental authority serves as a measure of protecting children's security (e.g. the prudential domain) and promoting their autonomy (e.g. the personal domain) (Smetana, 2002), this finding suggests that alongside these two of its functions, families in conservative groups hold parental authority (e.g. obedience and respect to parent’s demands) as a value in itself. Our finding was consistent with the fact that obedience to authority has deep roots in Arab culture (Dahir, 1987), which serves as a common value across Arab sects and Middle Eastern countries and regions (Dwairy et al., 2006).
**Specific differences between Bedouins and Jews in endorsement of parental authority**

Subsequently, we hypothesized that the differences between the groups' perceptions of parental authority would be manifested in all the domains, and particularly in the personal issues domain. Excluding the welfare–safety domain (which conceptually corresponds to the prudential domain), our results supported that hypothesis, showing that the Bedouin group significantly perceived their parents' authority as more legitimate with respect to all the considered domains (personal, routine, family conventions and social). Examination of the effect size for each domain confirmed, as expected, that the larger differences between the groups refer to the personal and social domains. The most noticeable effect observed was for the personal domain, indicating that the major source of differences between Bedouin and Jewish adolescents' perceptions of their parents' authority refers to aspects of the adolescent's autonomy, such as contents of viewing and browsing, appearance and leisure activities. Such a result well demonstrates the conjecture that Arab families are dictatorial in decision-making, where the ultimate authority is retained by the parent (Al-Simadi & Atoum, 2000).

Yet, some specific significant differences in the perceptions of the legitimacy of parental authority were identified within the Bedouin group, for the most part between the personal (on the one hand) and the welfare–safety (on the other hand) domains, and the rest of the domains (apart from the routine domain). These findings suggest that, despite the singularity of each group, the pattern of domain differences in the Jewish and Bedouin groups corresponds to the pattern observed in Western contexts in previous research (Smetana, 1988, 2000; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana et al., 2005). That is, Jewish and Bedouin adolescents ascribe the least legitimate parental authority to personal issues and the most legitimate parental authority to welfare–safety issues (subject to the differences between the groups in the level of authority granted to each domain). Nevertheless, a form of diminished distinction between the domains of parental authority was identified for that matter in the Bedouin group, which may relate to the authoritarian properties of this culture. As demonstrated in past research, authoritarian families tend to discern less between the domains of children's autonomy, as they treat more personal issues as part of their legitimate jurisdiction to exert control (Smetana, 1995). Thus, in the Bedouin group we did not find a general significant effect for the domain on parental authority, which implies that parental authority endorsement among Bedouin adolescents is more homogenous across the domains compared to Jewish adolescents (although an identical hierarchical trend within domains was found for both groups).

**Differences between Bedouin and Jews in the association between age and parental authority endorsement**

We hypothesized that the inverse association between adolescents' age and their endorsement of parental authority would be significantly weaker in the Bedouin group than in the Jewish group. One of the significant hallmarks of the movement towards autonomy during adolescence is manifested in the child's decreasing endorsement of parental authority with age. Our findings supported this course for the Jewish group solely, whereby negative correlations between adolescents' age and their perceptions of their parents' legitimate authority obtained (i.e. the parent's right to set rules and the child's obligation to obey). Consistent with previous research (Smetana, 1988, 1993, 2000; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana & Daddis, 2002; Smetana et al., 2006), the mid-power correlations observed in this group (whose age ranges between 12 and 17) reflect the gradual transition from unilateral authority to mutual authority (Youniss & Smollar, 1989). As hypothesized, however, this trend differed in the Bedouin group, where the adolescents' age was not significantly correlated with their endorsement of their parent's authority. As demonstrated by Darling et al. (2005), in some cultures the normative decline in the legitimacy of parental authority and the obligation to obey among children may begin later in the course of adolescence. Finding out whether this is also the case in the Bedouin families requires a separate examination in a sample of adolescents with a wider age range. We should also consider questioning the significance of the parental authority decline in relation to children's gaining autonomy...
among families from conservative and authoritarian cultures. Perhaps this decline itself in Bedouin families (or its manifestation in the descendants’ perceptions), does not equally reflect developmental processes of striving over autonomy as is the case in regular Western families.

In recent research conducted by Smetana, Ahmad, and Wray-Lake (2015) among Iraqi, Syrian and Palestinian refugee adolescents in Jordan, only minor negative correlations found between the participants’ age and their judgements of the legitimacy of parental authority (not significant for the prudential domain in the total sample). In contrast to the relatively large associations obtained in previous studies in Western contexts between these variables (see: Darling et al., 2005; Smetana & Daddis, 2002), these discrepancies may reinforce our notion regarding the distinct perceptions of parental authority of Bedouin adolescents in terms of course and significance (as might be the case in the context of other conservative groups). Inconsistent with the Western contexts adolescents, Smetana et al. (2015) also found the personal domain not to be enlarging with age, suggesting that the movement towards autonomy in these groups is not reflected through the gradual appropriation of multifaceted issues to be personal.

The current study brings a contribution to reducing the gap of research on legitimate parental authority in Arab societies, by focusing on one of the less studied sub-Arabic cultures in the Middle East. However, its findings should be subjected to several methodological limitations, which might account for the differences between the groups in the studied variables. First, since the samples were taken separately, the sampling process was not identical for the two groups. Additionally, it is most likely that there were socioeconomic differences between the groups, which were not taken into account in the study (apart from the house size indicator). In the absence of this information, we did not match the groups but rather used convenience samples for the purpose of comparison. Accordingly, even though the current findings presented substantive discrepancies in parental authority endorsement between the two ethnic groups of adolescents, further examination is required in order to refine the cultural role in this regard.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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