

ECCE 2018
**VII International Conference Early Childhood Care and
Education**

**PERSONAL AUTONOMY DEVELOPMENT, ADOLESCENTS
SEPARATION PROCESS IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHILD-
PARENT RELATIONS**

Natalia N. Poskrebysheva (a)*, Christina V. Kremenchuskaya (a)

*Corresponding author

(a) Lomonosov Moscow State University, Mokhovaya st. 11/9 Moscow 125009, Russia,
poskrebysheva_nn@psy.msu.ru

Abstract

Personal autonomy development and separation-individuation process of adolescents are considered in the context of functional and dysfunctional autonomy development. The present study aims to show the interrelation of functional and dysfunctional trajectories of autonomy development and separation processes with the main characteristics of child-parent relations, such as parental control, the authority of parents, inconsistency of parental attitudes, cooperation and perceived acceptance. Autonomy development and separation process components researched in this study are the following: general personal autonomy, emotional autonomy, cognitive autonomy, behavioural autonomy, value autonomy, engulfment anxiety, dependency denial and separation anxiety. Child-parent relations are important conditions in the autonomy development of adolescents. Based on the research findings, different characteristics of child-parent relationships are connected with particular aspects of autonomy development. The results of the research demonstrate that perceived parental love and acceptance as well as the consistency of parents conducive to more functional trajectories of autonomy development. An increasing role of the adolescent himself in child-parent relations is an important condition of separation process. Adolescents with high levels of cooperation and agreement in general things with their parents show development in the context of separation-individuation process. Engulfment anxiety develops in suppressive, over-controlling and non-supportive adolescent-parent relations; dependency denial occurs in the situations of emotional distance and hostility of the mother-adolescent relations; separation anxiety emerge in case of parental inconsistency and low control levels along with the perceived rejection of mothers.

© 2018 Published by Future Academy www.FutureAcademy.org.UK

Keywords: Autonomy development in adolescence, child-parent relations in adolescence, functional and dysfunctional trajectories of autonomy development, separation-individuation processes, personal autonomy.



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

Personal autonomy development and individuation in relationships is one of the most important tasks of adolescence. Achievement of personal autonomy as an ability to independently set and realize life goals, the personal free choice and to gain self-confidence. The psychological separation in parent-child relations is one of the main conditions of personal autonomy development in adolescence. The harmony of this adolescent-parent relationship determines the functional or dysfunctional trajectories of autonomy development and individuation process. The authors of most of the psychological theories consider the source of personal autonomy to be in the relationships with parents (i.e.: J.Bowlby, E.Bronfenbrenner, D.Winnicott, A.Freud, M.Klein, J.Kogut, P.Crittenden, M.Ainsworth, E.Erickson et al.), or see relationships with others (primarily with parents) as a significant factor of autonomy development (i.e.: A.Bandura, E.Deci, R.Ryan et al.).

1.1. Child-parent relations in adolescence

The main characteristics of child-parent relationship in general, that can describe different types of child-parental relations, are the emotional aspect of relations, specificity of regulation and parental control, art of cooperation and interaction between parents and adolescents. There are also some integrative indicators, such as parental position, the image of the parent and the child, etc. However, each of these spheres is multidimensional. The emotional aspect of relationship implies both parental love and acceptance as well as attachment of the adolescent to the parent. Beyond that, emotions in relationships are an important prevailing characteristic. Modern studies of the influence of emotional comfort and discomfort in child-parent relations show negative effects of emotional tensions on the relationship itself and on personality development in adolescent (i.e. Birditt et al, 2009; Reid, 2015). Wherein older adolescents indicate a lower degree of perceived emotional acceptance by their parents than younger ones (Babore et al., 2014). All researchers agree, that parental love influences the psychological well-being of children and adolescents. On the other hand, secure attachment is viewed by John Bowlby and others as one of the predictors of a conducive development in childhood, adolescence and even adulthood. Secure attachment is related to happiness in adolescence and adulthood (Sillick et al., 2006). Securely attached adolescents with trustful adolescent-parent relations conduce that the adolescent becomes more sensitive to the behaviour of others, is able to notice more and to understand and feel more deeply the details of events or phenomena (Shirtcliff et al., 2017). Parental control and the regulation of children's and adolescents' behaviour is usually accepted as one of the main tasks of parenting and family socialization. But there is a need to transform regulation and control functions in relations with adolescents to improve autonomy development. Researches indicate that adolescents, who appreciate their independence, have a lower degree of parental control and insistence in their child-parent relationships. The more the regulatory function of parents is, the less independent and autonomous the adolescent is. More autonomous adolescents do not feel laissez-faire by their parents (as it might seem because of a small number of prohibitions and a relative lack of control), but appreciate support and involvement of parents in their lives: the respondents indicate that their parents show themselves sensitive to the relationship, prefer joint family entertainment, openly express their love, take into account the opinion of adolescents when making the main family decisions. (Karabanova et al., 2013).

1.2. Personal autonomy development and the separation process in adolescents-parents relations

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 (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2003). Personal autonomy development and a specific kind of separation in child-parent relations are the main tasks of psychological development in the adolescence. Studies have shown that autonomy and self-regulation are evolved on the basis of long-term significant relations (Collins et al., 2004). 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 (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2003). Parent-child-relations reveal the opportunities for the balance of individuation and cooperation with parents as a basis for the development of personal autonomy. Researchers emphasize that attachment and separation are independent phenomena, not bipolar characteristics of a single phenomenon. Moreover, studies indicate that emotional support and the warmth of relationships, characteristic of reliable attachment, have a beneficial effect on the development of personal autonomy (Levy et al., 1998). Different types of child-parent relations and different characteristics of that relations are connected with different aspects of autonomy development. Researches demonstrate some interrelations of autonomy development with the emotional and the regulatory aspects of adolescent-parent relations. The promotion of autonomy of secure attached adolescents provides optimal conditions for the development of social skills, the development of identity and the psychological well-being. Parental support contributes to the development of a positive self-relationship and higher self-esteem levels, on the basis of which self-confidence and independent behaviour develop. The functional level of separation and secure attachment are predictors of successful social adaptation (Mattanah et al., 2004). There are some specific forms of directive control that causes difficulties in separation and autonomy development. Directive control is a form of insensitivity to the needs of the child and the use of various manipulative tactics to the purpose of psychological pressure on the child and adolescent (Mayseless et al. 2009, etc.). Parents use such methods of psychological influence (for example, manipulation with guilt and shame, deprivation of parental love and others) to ensure that the child meets the stated requirements and standards of conduct (Barber, 1996), but in fact, they reduce the possibilities to separation and individuation of adolescents. There are two forms of directive control: dependency-oriented control and achievement-oriented psychological control. In the first case, persistent manipulative tactics of parents (especially mothers) are aimed at maintaining close emotional and physical affinity with the child. Suppression of the child's independence is carried out through hyperprotection and initiating a sense of guilt^ parents tend to regard any attempt at autonomous behaviour as a betrayal of the family. Such relationships lead to fear of separation, the desire for emotional intimacy and protection from the significant other, i.e. contribute to the development of dysfunctional dependence (Kins et al., 2012). The dysfunctional independence is associated with the achievement-oriented control. In this case, parental love is characterized by conditional acceptance: the child can only deserve the love and approval of parents by conform to the parental standards and requirements. Since the skills and abilities are most advantageously demonstrated in individual work, in which an independent solution of the problem can be shown, rather

than in cooperation with others, the need for interpersonal relations begins to depreciate (Blatt et al., 1992), which leads to the emotional isolation of the individual from other people.

2. Problem Statement

Studying the trajectories of the development of personal autonomy and separation processes in adolescence in the context of child-parent relations is a promising direction of the scientific analysis of the psychological specifics of adolescence. Nevertheless, we find a small number of empirical studies in this field, especially on Russian adolescents. The theories of autonomy development open problem questions of functional development of autonomy: how much dependence is needed to be have relations with others? And how much independence is needed to increase individuation and promote separation? There are also questions of dysfunctional autonomy development: when is the independence redundant? when does an excessive independence lead to isolation? When is dependence so intrusive that it does not hold relations but rather destroys them? Proceeding from the theoretical research, we can conclude that there is necessity for a detailed research of the complex construct of autonomy in the context of different types of relationships with parents in adolescence, since at least, there are two trajectories of dysfunctional development of personal autonomy and separation in adolescence - dysfunctional dependence and dysfunctional independence.

3. Research Questions

In the context of problem statement, there are two main questions under study:

3.1. What is the main difference in child-parent relations of adolescents with different trajectories of autonomy development and separation processes?

Are adolescents with functional personal autonomy characterized by more harmonical relations with their parents than adolescents with dysfunctional trajectories of personal autonomy?

3.2. Which aspects of autonomy development are interrelated with different types of child-parent relations?

How do general personal autonomy, emotional autonomy, cognitive autonomy, behavioural autonomy, value autonomy, engulfment anxiety, dependency denial, separation anxiety relate to certain characteristics of child-parent relations in adolescence?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate interrelation between the characteristics of relations in adolescent, primarily of child-parent relations, and personal autonomy and separation-individuation development.

5. Research Methods

The subjects under test were 129 adolescents aged 13-17 years old, 45% of males and 55% of females. The sample was representative of adolescents in large cities and metropolitan areas in Russia. The

adolescents partook in the investigations about personal autonomy and separation and individuation processes, and completed questionnaires on child-parent interaction and parental behaviour.

5.1. Autonomy and Separation-Individuation Scales

The "Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence" (SITA), "Dysfunctional Separation-Individuation Scale" (DSIS) and the "Checklist of Autonomy" test were used as methods of autonomy and separation research. Three scale-forms of "Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence" (SITA) were translated and adapted to the Russian sample and used to assess engulfment anxiety, dependency denial and separation anxiety. "Dysfunctional Separation-Individuation Scale" (DSIS) assessed difficulties in the self-other differentiation, splitting and relational disturbances. The "Checklist of autonomy" test is a scale to identify general level of autonomy of adolescents and the level of the development of the following: a) emotional autonomy as the possibility to express their emotions and feelings, and emotional independence from others, b) cognitive autonomy as the autonomy in mental and cognitive activities, c) behavioural autonomy as the ability of independent action, d) value autonomy as the autonomy in fundamental beliefs, motivations and values.

5.2. Child-parent relations measurements

The questionnaires "Parent-child interaction" (Markovskaya, 1999) and the Russian-language version of ADOR («Children's Report of Parental Behaviour Inventory») adapted by Wasserman et al. (Wasserman et al., 1995) were used to define the character of parent-child relationships in adolescence.

6. Findings

The main research findings relate to autonomy research and the interrelation of autonomy and the separation-individuation development with the main characteristics of child-parent relations of adolescents.

6.1. Autonomy and separation-individuation development. The validity of the Russian versions of SITA and DSIS

The obtained results characterize high levels of psychological well-being in the survey sample, which is reflected in the high index of personal autonomy (mean value = 43.7) and its four structural components, as well as in medium and low indicators of difficulties in the separation-individuation process: SITA's separation anxiety reached 25.94, engulfment anxiety - 21.01 and dependency denial 28.77; "Dysfunction of separation -individualization" level is 95.75. The study findings are presented in table 1.

Table 01. Autonomy development and separation

Autonomy component/ separation indicator		Mean	SD
Autonomy checklist	General autonomy	43.7	4.78
	Emotional autonomy	9.75	2.14
	Cognitive autonomy	11.34	2.02
	Behavioural autonomy	10.8	1.89
	Value autonomy	11.81	1.85
SITA	Separation anxiety	25.94	6.39
	Engulfment anxiety	21.01	5.25
	Dependency denial	28.77	7.49
DSIS	Dysfunction of separation-individualization	95.75	27.82

The data of autonomy development are consistent with the values obtained by the authors of the questionnaire (Poskrebysheva, 2010): total autonomy (compare values = 44.68); emotional autonomy (compare values = 10.26); cognitive autonomy (compare values = 11.45); behavioural autonomy (compare values = 11.17); value component (compare values = 11.80). The development of autonomy proceeds heterochronically: with relative high levels of value and cognitive and relatively low levels of behavioural and emotional autonomy. Gender differences in the autonomy development have been revealed: male adolescents demonstrate a higher level of development of emotional autonomy than female adolescents (Mann-Whitney U-test, $p=0.022$).

The research data shows common and different in separation process of Russian and American (Sabaka, 2009) adolescents. Whereas the average values for engulfment anxiety (mean=21.01) and dependency denial (mean=28.77) do not differ from the received American data (mean=22.66 and mean=29.14), the values of the separation anxiety significant difference: compare mean=25.94 for Russian adolescents and mean=34.70. The adaptation and approbation of the Russian versions of the SITA and DSIS scales demonstrated the possibility of using these questionnaires to assess the difficulties of the separation process in the Russian sample (with sufficient internal consistency: separation anxiety- $\alpha=0.590$, engulfment anxiety- $\alpha=0.702$, dependency denial- $\alpha=0.704$; DSIS- $\alpha=0.743$).

6.2. Interrelation of autonomy development and separation process with the child-parent relations of adolescents

According to the study findings, personal autonomy positively correlates (all the correlations mentioned in the present article are significant) with basic trust ($r=0.280$) and restraint ($r=0.303$). Among the autonomy components, the emotional autonomy component shows the highest correlation with these characteristics of relations ($r=0.388$ and $r=0.341$). Basic trust shows negative correlations with all aspects of dysfunctional separation - with the scale of dysfunctional separation ($r= -0.285$), with separation anxiety ($r= -0.260$), with engulfment anxiety ($r= -0.215$) and with the dependency denial ($r= -0.408$). Conflicts in relations show positive correlations with almost all dysfunctional autonomy development aspects: with the scale of dysfunctional separation ($r= 0.197$), with engulfment anxiety ($r=0.216$) and with the dependency denial ($r=0.216$).

Autonomy development and separation in child-parent relations correlate with both - emotional relations and the regulatory aspect of parenting. Positive correlators of the general level of autonomy are consent on the main issues of the adolescents with their parents ($r=0.258$), consistency in relationships ($r=0.267$), perceived acceptance from mothers ($r=0.252$) and authority of fathers ($r=0.247$). The relations with parents show main correlations with the development of value and cognitive autonomy. Higher levels of value autonomy are achieved by adolescents with emotionally close relationship ($r=0.321$) and perceived parents' authority ($r=0.255$). Cooperation in mother-child relations and acceptance from fathers correlate with value autonomy ($r=0.233$; $r=0.203$) and cognitive autonomy ($r=0.220$; $r=0.203$). Furthermore, cognitive autonomy rises in families with consent on the main issues of the adolescents with their parents ($r=0.324$) and with adequate parental demands.

The separation process shows significant positive correlations of functional separation and acceptance from parents. Engulfment anxiety is related to excessive parental control ($r=0.226$), insistence

($r=0.260$) and inconsistency ($r=0.363$) as well as with the lack of parents' authority ($r= -0.352$), cooperation in relationship ($r= -0.269$) and emotional closeness ($r= -0.313$). Dysfunctional separation (DSIS) shows negative correlations with acceptance ($r= -0.266$) and consistency ($r= -0.387$), and positive correlations with parental insistence ($r= 0.250$).

7. Conclusion

Based on the study findings, we may conclude that there is a difference in the child-parent relations of adolescents with different trajectories of autonomy development and separation processes. Adolescents with functional personal autonomy are characterized by more close relations with their parents that include high levels of cooperation, perceived acceptance, but also an adequate level of demands from the parent to adolescents. Different aspects of autonomy development are interrelated with different types of child-parent relations. Some conditions of child-parent relations affect the general level of autonomy and functional separation, some are factors of specific aspects of autonomy development. The result of dysfunctional autonomy research show that the less basic trust and the more conflicts in relations are, the higher the potential risk at dysfunctional separation and the lower chance for positive autonomy development are. Acceptance of the unique individuality of adolescent and a positive interest in relations are positively related to the functional trajectories of autonomy. The higher the emotional rejection and hostility toward adolescents are, the more problems of separation in child-parent relations are.

Separation anxiety appears in the relations with low basic trust and high conflict rate. Emotional closeness, parental authority and acceptance lead to a more harmonic development of value autonomy. Cooperation and agreement in major life issues with parents and an adequate level of parental demands are the best conditions for cognitive autonomy development. Parental consistency, clarity of parental actions combined with interest to the adolescent are the main "protecting factors" in developing health autonomy and functional separation in the adolescent-parent relationship. Emotional closeness and acceptance instead of emotional distance and adequate demands in parental control instead of absence of control provide positive autonomy development in adolescence.]

References

- Babore, A. Picconi, L., Candelori, C., Trumello, C. (2014). The emotional relationship with parents: A validation study of the LEAP among Italian adolescents. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* July 2014/11(6), 728-739
- Barber, B. K. (1996). *Parental Psychological Control: Revisiting a Neglected Construct*. *Child Development*, 67: 3296–3319
- Birditt, K. S., Miller, L. M., Fingerman, K. L., & Lefkowitz, E. S. (2009). Tensions in the Parent and Adult Child Relationship: Links to Solidarity and Ambivalence. *Psychology and Aging*, 24(2), 287–295
- Blatt, S. J., & Homann, E. (1992). Parent–child interaction in the etiology of depression. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 12, 47–91
- Collins, W. A., Laursen, B. (2004). Parent-adolescent relationships and influences. In Richard M. Lerner, Laurence Steinberg, editors. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, 2nd Edition. New York: Wiley;
- Kins, E., Beyers, W., Soenens, B. (2012). When the separation-individuation process goes awry: Distinguishing between dysfunctional dependence and dysfunctional independence // *International Journal of Behavioural Development*. - r.. - 1 : T. 37.

- Levy, K. N., Blatt, S. J., Shaver, P. R. (1998). Attachment styles and parental representations // *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. - V. 74. - pp. 407–419.
- Markovskaya, I.M. (1999). Oprosnik dlya izucheniya vzaimodeystviya roditel'ev s detmi [Questionnaire for the study of interaction between parents and children]. *Semeynaya psichologiya i semeynaya terapiya*. #2:42-49
- Mattanah, J. F., Hancock, G. R., Brand, B. L., (2004). Parental Attachment, Separation-Individuation, and College Student Adjustment: A *Structural Equation Analysis of Mediatonal Effects* // *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. - 2 : Volume. 51. - pp. 213–225.
- Mayseless, O., & Scharf, M. (2009). Too close for comfort: inadequate boundaries with parents and individuation in late adolescent girls. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 79, 191–202.
- Karabanova, O.A., Poskrebysheva, N. N. (2013). Adolescent autonomy in parent-child relations. *Procedia - social and behavioural sciences*, 86(10):621–628,
- Poskrebysheva, N.N. (2010). Socialnaya situaciya razvitiya kak uslovie stanovleniya lichnostnoj avtonomii podrostka [Social situation of development as a condition of personal autonomy development in adolescence]. Thesis. Moscow,
- Reid, K.M. (2015). The Relationship Between Parents' Poor Emotional Health Status and Childhood Mood and Anxiety Disorder in Florida Children, National Survey of Children's Health, 2011–2012. *Matern Child Health* 19: 1071
- Sabaka, S. M. (2009). Psychometric integrity of a measure of dysfunctional separation-individuation in young adolescents: Muncie, Ind.: Ball State University.
- Shirtcliff, E. A., Skinner, M. L., Obasi, E. M. and Haggerty, K. P. (2017), Positive parenting predicts cortisol functioning six years later in young adults. *Dev Sci*. 2017 Nov;20(6)
- Sillick, T. J., & Schutte, N. S. (2006). Emotional intelligence and self-esteem mediate between perceived early parental love and adult happiness. *Emotional Intelligence*, 2(2), 38–48
- Wasserman, L.I., Gorkavaja, I.A., Romitsina, E.E. (1995) Test Podrostki o roditel'ax [Children's Report of Parental Behaviour Inventory]. Folium. Sankt-Peterburg
- Zimmer-Gembeck, M.J., Collins, W.A. (2003). Autonomy Development during Adolescence. In Gerald R. Adams, Michael D. Berzonsky, editors. *Blackwell handbook of adolescence*. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, UK;