



Adolescent Problem Behaviour in Relation to Emotional Autonomy and Parent-Child Relationship

LES PROBLÈMES DE COMPORTEMENT DES ADOLESCENTS AVEC L'AUTONOMIE ÉMOTIONNELLE DE EN RELATION DE PARENT-ENFANT

Damanjit Sandhu^{1*}; Damanjeet Kaur²

¹ Ph.D, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala, India.

² Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala, India.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

The present research was designed to study adolescent problem behavior (internalizing and externalizing problems) in relation to emotional autonomy (deidealization of parents, non-dependency on parents, individuation, perceiving parents as people), and parent-child relationship (mothers' care, fathers' care, mothers' overprotection, fathers' overprotection). For this purpose 200 adolescent boys (age range 13-15 years, from Patiala, India) were administered Youth Self Report (Achenbach, 1991), Emotional Autonomy Scale (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), and Parental Bonding Inventory (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979). Pearson's Product Moment Correlation analyses reveals that deidealization of parents and nondependency on parents, and mothers' overprotection are positively correlated with adolescent problem behavior. Mothers' care is inversely correlated with adolescent problem behaviour. Stepwise Multiple Regression Analyses reveals that positive contributors to adolescent problem behavior are individuation, deidealization of parents, and fathers' care. While those contributing inversely to adolescent problem behavior are mothers' care and fathers' overprotection, and perceiving parents as people dimension of emotional autonomy. The results have been discussed in the light of cultural context.

Key words: Adolescence; Problem behavior; Emotional autonomy; Parent-child relationship

Résumé

La présente étude a été conçue pour étudier le comportement des adolescents problème (troubles

internalisés et externalisés) par rapport à l'autonomie affective (deidealization des parents, non-dépendance à l'égard des parents, l'individuation, les parents percevoir comme des personnes), et la relation parent-enfant (soins des mères, des soins, les mères des pères surprotection, la surprotection des pères). Pour ce but 200 adolescents (tranche d'âge 13-15 ans, de Patiala, Inde) ont été administrés rapport d'auto jeunesse (Achenbach, 1991), échelle de l'autonomie émotionnelle (Steinberg & Silverberg, Inventaire Collage 1986), et des parents (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979). Pearson's 'analyses de corrélation produit Moment révèle que deidealization des parents et des nondependency sur les parents et les mères des surprotection sont positivement corrélés avec les problèmes de comportement chez les adolescents. soins des mères est inversement corrélée aux problèmes de comportement chez les adolescents. pas à pas multiples analyses de régression révèle que les contributeurs positifs à problèmes de comportement chez les adolescents sont l'individuation, deidealization des parents, et des pères de soins. Alors que ceux qui contribuent aux problèmes de comportement inverse chez les adolescents sont des mères de soins et de la surprotection des pères, et les parents percevant comme dimension humaine de l'autonomie affective. les résultats ont été discutés à la lumière du contexte culturel.

Mots clés: Adolescence; Les problèmes de comportement; L'autonomie affective; Relation parent-enfant

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Adolescence is a time when both positive and negative developmental trajectories begin to take shape. Positive outcomes, such as formation of a coherent sense of

identity (Erikson, 1950) begin to emerge and on the other hand, behaviour problems also tend to appear and increase during adolescence (Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, Moffitt, & Caspi, 1999). It is during this period when adolescents begin to challenge parental belief system and also seek to achieve autonomy with increased influence of the peer group.

Adolescence is often associated with problem behaviours which has been defined as the act of a person who either “exerts significant negative impact on his/her quality of life or the quality of life of others”, or forms significant risk to the health and/or safety to oneself or others (O’Brien, 2003). A well known distinction in the field of psychiatry is the distinction of problem behaviour in terms of “externalizing and internalizing” disorders (Achenbach, 1978). Externalizing behaviours are defined as emotional distress (Orme & Buehler, 2001) directed outward by the individual toward their social environment (Walker et al., 2004) such as aggression, delinquency, hyperactivity, antisocial behaviour, rule breaking behaviour, crying, lying and physical fighting. Internalizing behaviour refers to the internal psychological, emotional and affective cognitions and behaviours of an individual such as social withdrawal, anxiety, depression and psychosomatic complaints (Eisenberg et al., 2001).

During adolescence both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviours demonstrate an increase in prevalence (Moffitt, 1993). Children with the externalizing behavior problems of conduct disorder are more likely to grow up to become delinquent as adolescents and criminals and violent as adults (Farrington, 1997). Similarly, children with internalizing behavior problems are more likely to grow up to become depressed and anxious (APA, 1994).

A psychosocial task associated with adolescence is the development of emotional autonomy which can serve as an important framework for understanding adolescent problem behaviours. Emotional autonomy is defined in terms of relationships with others and includes relinquishing dependencies and individuating from parents (Steinberg, 1999). It is an ability to feel for one’s self. The ‘storm and stress’ model of emotional autonomy, embraced by a majority of modern researchers, portrays adolescents as deeply immersed in an emotional struggle with an alliance to either parent or peer. Accordingly, young adolescents become autonomous by learning to distance themselves emotionally from their parents (Freud, 1969). The well-known classic perspectives on adolescent autonomy of Anna Freud (1958) and Peter Blos (1979) believed that conflict between adolescents and parents is normal and necessary for the development. Blos (1962) has suggested that the primary task of adolescence is to repudiate parental relationships, to disengage psychologically from internalized influences of parents, and to detach from parents, for the development

of identity. Jersild (1957) also proposed that it is important for one to be weaned, in a psychological sense, from emotional dependence upon parents, in order to become an independent young adult. Bloom (1980) also held similar views and proposed that detachment from parents is necessary for the healthy development of a sense of identity. Steinberg & Silverberg (1986) have described emotional autonomy in relation to parents as increasing individuation from parents (e.g. perceptions that parents do not know or understand the adolescent), increasing perceptions of parents as people (e.g., recognizing that parents may act differently when not with their children) and decreasing idealization of parents. Furhman & Holmbeck (1995) have reported that emotional autonomy scores reflect adolescent’s detachment from parents.

However, in contrast, researchers have proposed that healthy adolescent development is more likely to occur in context of continued positive relationships with parents (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). Researchers now believe that adolescents can in fact maintain connectedness with parents while asserting their individuality (Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Dunlop et al., 2001). Emotional autonomy development is thus a paradoxical process that involves the establishment of an autonomous ego functioning and at the same time the maintenance of nurturing family relationships. However it has important implications for adolescent mental health and adjustment. Noteworthy here are the negative repercussions on adolescent mental health when autonomy is understood as a process of detachment. Frank et al. (1990) have suggested that deidealization of parents is linked to adolescents’ feeling of insecurity. Ryan & Lynch (1989) have also viewed the development of emotional autonomy as detachment and noted that although detachment could result in some increases in self-reliance, it might also result in loss of valuable connections to others, leading to other problems such as lack of a consolidated identity, lower self-esteem, and problem-behaviour. Consistent with these findings, Lamborn & Steinberg (1993) found that adolescents who display high emotional autonomy are also more likely to be engaged in delinquent activities. In a similar vein, Matos et al. (1999) have also suggested autonomous qualities to be related to heightened feelings of insecurity. Non dependency on parents might be stressful too as parents are not used as a resource. Beyers & Goosens (1999) also believe that the process of emotional autonomy could be stressful for adolescents, especially for those caught in the middle of transition.

Various researchers are of the view that emotional autonomy assumes different meanings depending upon the quality of parent-child relationship. Parker (1983) highlighted the two factors responsible for maintaining parent-child bond; care and overprotection. Parent-child relationship is best facilitated when adolescents rate their parents as high in care and moderate to low in

overprotection (Noller, 1995). Over-protectiveness in the parent-child relationship often functions to inhibit adolescent social competence by fostering “internalized problem” and fails to achieve emotional autonomy. (Barber, 1992; Barber et al., 1994). Bosma et al. (1996) reported that higher levels of emotional autonomy associated with increased parent-child conflict results in poor behavioural adjustments such as greater deviance and poorer academic competence (externalizing problems). Emotional autonomy stemming from weak parent-adolescent relationship results in negative implications on adolescents’ psychological development (Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993). Noom et al. (1999) indicated that higher levels of emotional autonomy in combination with poor relationships with parents, fosters behaviour problems in adolescents. Adolescents whose autonomy is squelched are at risk for developing feelings of depression, and those who do not feel connected are more likely than their peers to develop behaviour problems (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O’Conner, 1994).

On the other hand, research also suggests that greater autonomy granting by parents could also promote adolescent aberrant behaviour (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Highly autonomous adolescents also report increased conflict with parents and reduced family cohesiveness. Consequently, these adolescents become prone to behavioural problems and delinquency. Sometimes the adolescents may misinterpret parental encouragement for autonomy (e.g. Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Matos et al., 1999) and thus autonomy may prove to be a double edged sword for the psychosocial development of adolescents, resulting in aberrant behaviour and other unhealthy outcomes.

Thus the literature suggests a strong link of adolescent problem behavior with emotional autonomy and parent-child relationship. It would be interesting to study the associations of emotional autonomy with adolescent mental health in India as Indian culture which is traditionally collectivistic, has not been very encouraging of adolescent autonomy. The value of interdependence is inculcated in children since early ages (Chao & Tseng, 2002). The Indian parenting practices stress importance of familial bonds, dependence on and loyalties to the family, filial piety, obeying parents, academic achievement, and discourage autonomy and/or detachment from family (Dasgupta, 1989).

Seemingly, adolescent problem behavior in relation to emotional autonomy and parent-child relationship pose an interesting research enquiry. Thus the present research was designed with the aim of studying adolescent problem behaviours (internalizing and externalizing problems) in relation to emotional autonomy (deidealization of parents, non-dependency on parents, individuation, perceiving

parents as people) and parent-child relationship (mothers’ care, fathers’ care, mothers’ overprotection, fathers’ overprotection), and to understand how the latter two predict adolescent problem behavior.

METHOD

Sample: The sample comprised of 200 school going adolescent boys (age range 13 - 15 years). The mean age of the participants was 14.2 years. The schools were randomly selected from a list of schools in Patiala city, of Punjab state of North India. The participants came from middle class socio-economic status with urban background.

Instruments: Following instruments were used to achieve the objectives of the present study.

1. Youth Self Report: Youth Self Report was developed by Achenbach (1991), and measures behavioural and emotional functioning of adolescents (11-18 years). In the present study, the scores on three subscales- anxious/depressed, withdrawn/depressed, somatic complaints are referred to as ‘internalizing problems’. Also Rule breaking behaviour and aggressive behaviours are referred to as ‘externalizing problems’.

2. Emotional Autonomy Scale: Emotional Autonomy Scale developed by Steinberg & Silverberg (1986) consists of 20 structured items to assess four dimensions of adolescents emotional autonomy: perceives parents as people, parental deidealization, non-dependency on parents and individuation.

3. Parental Bonding Instrument: Parental Bonding Instrument, developed by Parker, Tupling & Brown (1979), is a 25 item instrument designed to measure childrens’ perceptions of parent-child relationships in terms of parental behaviours and attitudes. It measures four dimensions i.e. mothers’ overprotection, fathers’ overprotection, mothers’ care, fathers’ care.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pearsons’ Product Moment Correlation Coefficients of adolescent problem behavior with emotional autonomy and parent-child relationship are presented in Table 1. Also, Stepwise Multiple Regression Analyses (Tables 2 & 3) were applied to study the contributions of the predictor variables (emotional autonomy and parent-child relationship dimensions) towards the criterion (internalizing problem behaviour and externalizing problem behaviour in adolescents) and to determine the amount of variance in the dependant variables (internalizing and externalizing problem behaviour) that could be accounted for by the different predictor variable.

Table 1
Correlation Coefficients between Adolescent Problem Behaviour, Emotional Autonomy, and Parent-Child Relationship

| | | Internalizing Problem Behaviour | Externalizing Problem Behaviour |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Emotional Autonomy | Deidealization of Parents | 0.47** | 0.42** |
| | Non-dependency on Parents | 0.49** | 0.43** |
| | Individuation | 0.09 | 0.07 |
| | Perceiving Parents as People | -0.13* | -0.12 |
| Parent- Child Relationship | Mothers' Care | -0.50** | -0.45** |
| | Mothers' Overprotection | 0.49** | 0.41** |
| | Fathers' Care | 0.06 | 0.14* |
| | Fathers' Overprotection | 0.09 | 0.08 |

** p<0.01

* p<0.05

Table 2
Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Internalizing Problem Behaviour

| Variables | R ² | R ² Δ | β | p | F |
|------------------------------|----------------|------------------|------|------|---------|
| Mothers Care | .25 | .25 | -.50 | 0.00 | 67.11** |
| Fathers Care | .34 | .09 | .33 | 0.00 | 51.67** |
| Individuation | .39 | .05 | .21 | 0.00 | 51.67** |
| Deidealization of Parents | .40 | .01 | .23 | 0.03 | 32.36** |
| Fathers OverProtection | .41 | .01 | -.12 | 0.04 | 27.08** |
| Perceiving Parents as People | .42 | .01 | -.11 | 0.07 | 23.39** |
| Mothers Over Protection | .43 | .01 | .17 | 0.10 | 20.29** |

**p<0.01

Table 3
Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Externalizing Problem Behaviour

| Variables | R ² | R ² Δ | β | p | F |
|---------------------------|----------------|------------------|------|------|---------|
| Mothers Care | .20 | .20 | -.45 | 0.00 | 49.28** |
| Fathers Care | .31 | .11 | .37 | 0.00 | 45.16** |
| Individuation | .35 | .04 | .18 | 0.00 | 34.46** |
| Fathers Over Protection | .36 | .01 | -.16 | 0.00 | 26.32** |
| Parental Deidealization | .37 | .01 | .28 | 0.06 | 24.58** |
| Non-dependency on Parents | .40 | .03 | .14 | 0.10 | 18.51** |

**p<0.01

As evident from the results, emotional autonomy is an important correlate of adolescent problem behavior. Deidealization of parents and non-dependency on parents are positively correlated with internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescents, while perceiving parents as people dimension is inversely correlated with internalizing problems in adolescents. Also deidealization of parents and individuation are positively contributing

towards problem behavior in adolescents. As adolescent boys realize their parents' weaknesses, parents no longer serve as ideal for them, and as suggested by Frank et al. (1990) deidealization of parents is linked to adolescents feelings of insecurity. Consistent with these findings, Lamborn & Steinberg (1993) found that adolescents who display high emotional autonomy may also be more likely to be engaged in delinquent activities.

On the other hand, perceiving parents as people dimension of emotional autonomy is contributing inversely to internalizing problem behavior. Seemingly internalizing problem behaviour like anxiety, withdrawal/ depression, somatic complaints etc. scores are low where adolescents have the capacity to perceive their parents in roles beyond parenthood. Such children are realizing that their parents have their own lives and other roles to play as well. They have achieved a level of self-governance and maturity where they allow their parents to maintain their own interests, lifestyles etc. Capacity to "perceive parents as people" is a cognitive aspect of emotional autonomy, and seemingly developed understanding about parents' other roles and viewpoints that parents also have their own lives to live seems to be a characteristic of psychosocially mature and healthy adolescents.

Thus emotional autonomy plays a mixed role in its contribution towards adolescent problem behaviour. The concept of emotional autonomy has always been a debatable issue (Ryan & Lynch, 1989) and authors have considered it as a 'double edged sword' (Frank et al., 1990). The present results seem convincing keeping in mind the cultural context, as in the typical Indian families, autonomy is not a very desirable personality trait. Indian society expects and promotes dependency in youngsters and children in early adolescence are thought to be too immature to be on their own emotionally, and parents continue to be a source of support even in the early adulthood years and sometimes beyond. Thus, severing emotional ties, disengaging from parents, laying boundaries between self and parents might not be very fruitful for the adolescent mental health and development. Earlier researchers (Allen et al., 1996) have suggested that implications of emotional autonomy are positive if it takes place when parents support the adolescent in this quest. But in the absence of parental support, emotional autonomy can make adolescents insecure and more vulnerable to peer pressure. However emotional autonomy seems to bode positively for adolescent development when it is in the form of developed understanding about parents' roles other than that of a parent. Probably Indian parents react positively to this psychosocial change in an adolescent.

Regarding the association of parent-child relationship with problem behaviour, it is reflected from the results that adolescents report more problem behaviour in the presence of greater mothers' overprotection and lesser mothers' care. Lack of warmth, love and affection from mother predicts greater problem behavior in boys. Similarly overprotection from mother predicts increased internalizing problems in boys. Oppositely adolescent problem behaviours are on the rise where fathers provide greater warmth to adolescent boys, or when fathers' show lesser controlling behavior towards their adolescent sons. The present results can be interpreted within the cultural

context. The structure of the Indian families has been described as patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal (Sheth, 1995). Baumrind (1972) theorized that if parenting behavior is consistent with cultural values, children will accept it. For example, children respond differently if spanking signify love and concern in their community than if spanking is seen as unacceptable behavior. In Indian culture the mothers' role is that of affection, love, and care provider. Mothers perform the nurturing role, while fathers' role is that of a strict disciplinarian in normal Indian households. Also Indian, especially Punjabi mothers display a special fondness for a male child. Any deviance of parental roles might not bode positively towards development of adolescent boys. In an another Asian study, Chen, Lui & Li (2000) report that paternal, but not maternal indulgence significantly predicted children's adjustment difficulties. Oliveira et al., 2002 also suggest that children with authoritarian mothers display more externalizing and internalizing problem behaviours than do children with authoritative mothers. Similar results have been reported by Bates et al. (1998). Research has also shown a link between warm and supportive mother-adolescent relationship and less teen involvement in problem behaviours (Bahr, Maughan, Marcos & Li, 1998). Lezin et al. (2004) similarly report that higher level of care received from mother leads to better outcomes in adolescents.

Overall, emotional autonomy and parent-child relationship explain 43% and 40% of the variance towards internalizing and externalizing problems respectively. Thus, it can be said that emotional autonomy and parent-child relationship are strong predictors of adolescent problem behavior. However the results may be interpreted keeping in mind the cultural milieu.

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