Gender in Adolescent Autonomy: Distinction between Boys and Girls Accelerates at 16 Years of Age

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Abstract

Introduction. Autonomy is a major developmental feature of adolescents. Its success mediates transition into adulthood. It involves a number of psychological parameters, including desire, conflict with parents and actual achievement.

Method. How male and female adolescents view autonomy was investigated in a large sample of 12-17 year-old adolescents (n=934) who were recruited from a pool of 6829 high-school students. Responses from 3 age groups on the frequency of positive responses to an 11 item-questionnaire were recorded. Each item was scored with regard to desire for autonomy, achievement of autonomy, and disobeying parents.

Results. From 12-15 years of age, responses of male and female adolescents regarding autonomy were comparable. Major differences between male and female adolescents were found at 16 years of age and thereafter: boys reported an increasing frequency of achievement of autonomy, whereas girls reported little progress. Statistical analyses showed that the enhanced level of achievement of autonomy reported by boys in late adolescence was associated with greater frequency of disobeying parents.

Discussion. We conclude that: (i) there are major gender-associated differences with regards to autonomy in adolescence; (ii) these differences start at the 16-17 year age bracket; (iii) in late adolescence, boys show a higher rate of achievement of autonomy than girls, and this is associated with a greater frequency of parental disobedience among boys.

Keywords: Adolescence, Psychology, Autonomy, Questionnaire, Behaviour.

Introduction

Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) documented the complexity and the central role played by autonomy during adolescence, and this led to a good deal of research on the psychological changes of adolescents as they advance into adulthood (e.g., Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Steinberg, 1990; Fleming, 1992; Beyers & Goossen, 1999; Schmitz & Baer, 2001; Noom et al, 2001; Allen et al., 2002). It is now clear that the level of achievement of autonomous behaviours is a key modulator in the process of transition from adolescence into adulthood (Benaches, 1981; Fleming & Aguiar, 1992; Noom et al., 1999; Chou, 2000; McElhaney & Allen, 2001; Frank et al., 2002). For instance, there is evidence of association between home-leaving failure and impaired progress in autonomous behaviours among adolescents (Fleming, 1983; Moore, 1987; Chen, 1999; Pinheiro et al., 2001; Cohen et al., 2003).

The current investigation addresses the role of age and gender in the modulation of adolescent behavioural autonomy. Adolescent autonomy is employed here in the same sense as the definition proposed by Steinberg (1999), i.e., the ability to think, feel, make decisions and act on his or her own. The growth of independence is certainly a crucial component of becoming autonomous, but autonomy means more than just behaving independently. Autonomy is believed to be developed through relationships within the family, with peers and also with people outside the family (Purdie et al., 2004). Family conflict triggered by adolescent autonomy, due to disobeying parent norms, can be considered as a normal component of psychological development that involves changes in family relationships (Steinberg, 1999).

Several studies have documented that scores for behavioural autonomy are gradually enhanced throughout adolescence, a phenomenon that is reflected in often finding sharp differences in personal autonomy between adolescents in early and late teen-age years (Bartle et al., 1988; Dornbush et al., 2001). Late adolescents achieve, in particular, a higher degree of autonomy in their choice of friends and occupation, in management of their own money, and in physical activities performed outside the family home (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Bosma et al., 1996; Allen et al., 2002). They also manifest greater ability in social integration (Greenberger, 1984) and in participation in peer and adult-oriented activities (Silverberg & Steinberg, 1987). Increase in behavioural autonomy scores during adolescence has been related to a decrease in parental influence (Smith &

Crawford, 1986) and to a gradual increase in affiliation with peers (Peppitone, 1980; Pipp et al., 1985; Bergen et al., 2003).

The importance of understanding the significance of gender in psychological processes was recently underscored and reviewed by Stewart and McDermott (2004). Some recent studies have been devoted to identification of gender differences in the psychology of adolescence. For instance, girls in families marked by traditional maternal gender role attitudes were granted fewer autonomy opportunities (Bumpus et al., 2001); becoming autonomous was a more stressful experience for girls than for boys (Beyers & Goossen, 1999; Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993); females had higher identity and lower intimacy scores and gave more decision explanations than males (Lacombe & Gay, 1998); females who were dating reported the most intense conflict with parents (Dowdy & Kliewer, 1998). Peer influence in the behaviour of early adolescence depends on the gender of the adolescent, and this modulates group identification and delinquent behaviour (Kiesner et al., 2002 and 2003).

Gender modulates the self-image of the adolescent: for instance, body dissatisfaction and dieting are twice as frequent in girls (Borresen & Rosenvinge, 2003). When comparing self-evaluation of autonomy achievement in adolescence and in young adulthood between the two genders, a stronger connection between the two times was found among girls; that is, negative self-evaluation in adolescence was more often associated with negative self-evaluation in adulthood in girls than it was in boys (Verhofstadt-Deneve et al., 2003). It is clear that there are gender differences in psychopathology, with higher incidence of morbidity in girls than in boys (Joseph et al., 2003; Sloan & Kornstein, 2003; Arnold, 2003). For instance, the frequency of sexual abuse suffered by adolescent girls is higher than for boys, and abused girls are at an increased risk of psychopathology and of attempting suicide (Bergen et al., 2003). Also, gender influences the rate of adolescents' help seeking for emotional problems (Zwaanswijk et al., 2003; Pinto, 2004).

The purpose of the present study was to investigate gender differences and changes related to age during adolescence (from puberty to 17 years old), with regard to autonomy, and along three psychological dimensions: desire for autonomy, achievement of autonomy and disobeying parental rules. These dimensions had not yet been studied simultaneously. The theoretical model guiding this research is psychodynamic, focusing on separation-individuation and identity formation theories (Blos, 1967; Mahler et al, 1975; Josselson, 1980) that conceive autonomy as a crucial developmental task preparing

the adolescent for a gradual transition into adult roles. Adjustment to adulthood depends on how successful the adolescent is in achieving separation and connectedness to parents (Silverberg & Steinberg, 1987). These models indirectly link autonomy to individuation and to emotional attachment, two psychological processes that interfere in the adolescent psychological dilemma: the desire for and fear of separating from parents.

Research goals were accomplished by comparing perceptions of autonomy among four age groups of adolescents. Instead of using a concept of autonomy previously defined by the researcher, it was decided instead to use a questionnaire based on autonomy as defined by the adolescents themselves. This questionnaire was validated and adopted in our previous research (Fleming, 2005). Our data document the relative importance of eleven autonomous behaviours in a large population of adolescents between 12 and 17 years of age. In addition, results identify similarities and differences between boys and girls as to how autonomy is perceived and lived out over the period of adolescence.

Method

Subjects

The adolescent sample was made up of high-school students, drawn from a pool of 6829 youngsters between the ages of 12 and 17. A sample of 934 individuals was recruited from this pool according to criteria of age proportionality. It encompassed 52% males and 48% females with ages ranging between 12 and 17 years (average age: 13.1 years). The large majority of these adolescents (97%) lived with both biological parents; only 3% of them lived in a single-parent family. There was a wide spectrum of social and economic status among the adolescents' families.

Materials and Procedure

Identifying major behavioural items of adolescent autonomy. To begin, a questionnaire was designed to determine what items the adolescents considered to be indicative of behavioural autonomy. Questions had to do with what they thought autonomy was, what it was for them not to be a child anymore, what were the expressions of autonomy in their daily lives, what behaviours they saw as representing autonomy. Content analysis was performed on responses to the questionnaire from a sample of adolescents (n=40) with a similar age distribution to the larger population of

adolescents that participated in the second phase of this study. This allowed identification of 11 items of autonomous behaviour most frequently cited by the adolescents.

These 11 items are shown in Table 1 and were adopted to construct an adolescent behavioural autonomy questionnaire that was used as a self-reporting measure of autonomy; the scale's internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's Alpha was 0.74. The questionnaire was then submitted to a total of 934 adolescents in order to obtain yes/no answers for 3 aspects of each item: desire, achievement and parental disobedience.

***Table 1*: 11 Behavioural Items Selected**

1.	To decorate my room as I wish.
2.	To dress as I please and choose my own hairstyle.
3.	To have my own money to spend without supervision.
4.	To go out at night.
5.	To go out without having to say where.
6.	To come in and out of the house as I please.
7.	To go out at weekends.
8.	Not to spend holidays with the family.
9.	To have a girlfriend or a boyfriend.
10.	To solve my own problems without the help of parents.
11.	To have my own ideas about politics, religion and education.

Age groups of adolescents. The sample of 934 adolescents was divided into 3 groups with the following ages: 12-13 (n=549), 14-15 (n=261), and 16-17 (n=124). The frequencies of yes responses to the 3 parameters (desire for autonomy, achievement of autonomy and disobeying parents) for each of the autonomy items was compared between males and females for each of the 3 age groups.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical comparison was performed for each gender and age group for the 11 items of autonomous behaviours. We analysed data frequencies and statistically significant differences, taking as independent variables gender and age. As for gender and age parameters, we compared differences between proportions using the Chi-Square Test and the Test for Linear Trend (Package BMDP), with age being an ordinal variable.

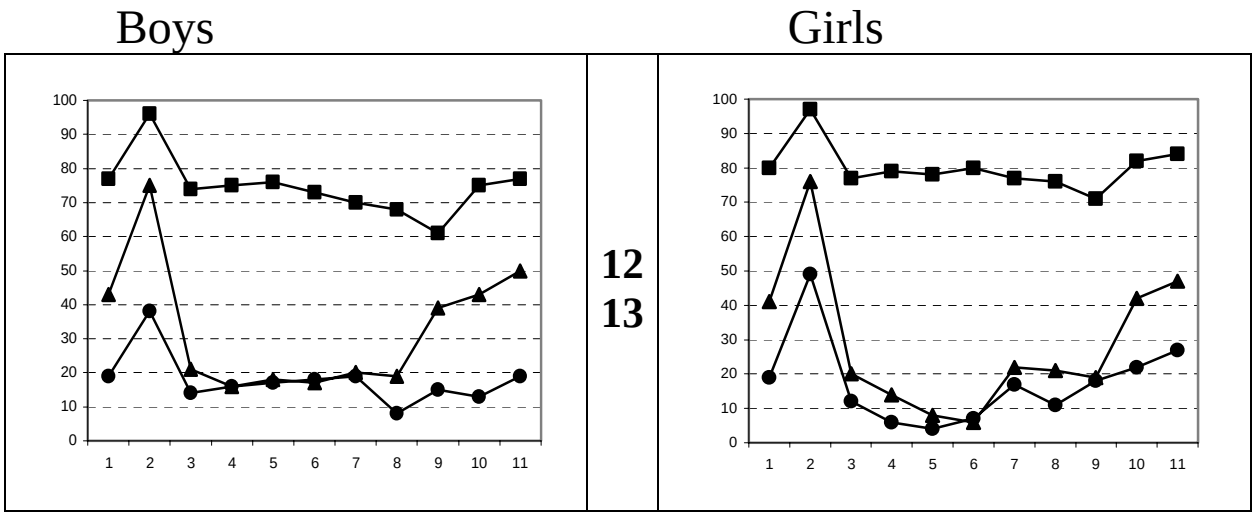
Results

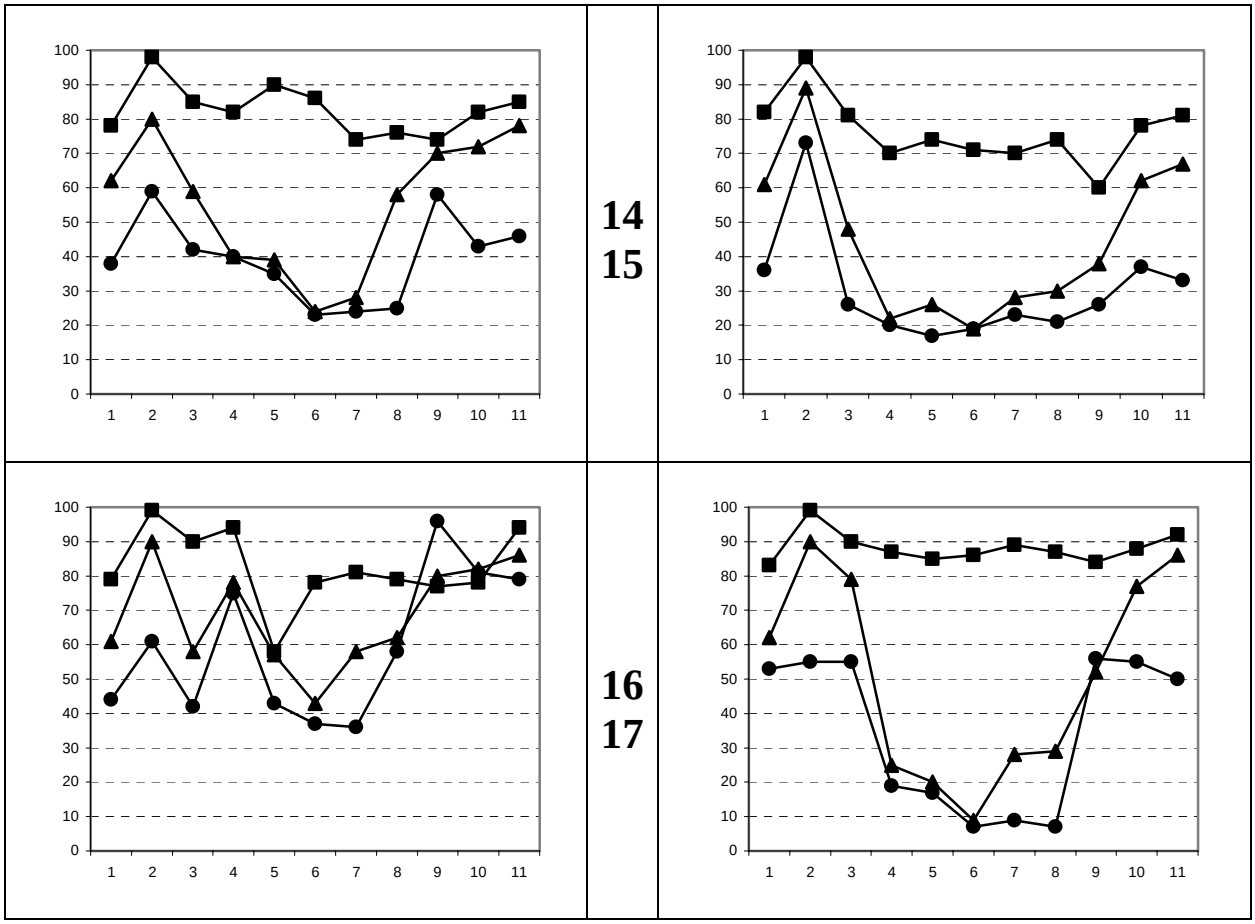
Preliminary Analysis

For each of the 11 items of behavioural autonomy (listed in Table 1), the adolescents were asked record a yes or no answer regarding 3 questions: (i) Was the autonomous behaviour item desired? (ii) Was the autonomous behaviour achieved? (iii) Was the autonomous behaviour reason for disobeying parental advice?

Figure 1 illustrates the percentages of male and female adolescents that responded yes to each of the 11 items listed in Table 1. This figure is organized in 3 pairs of graphs; on the left side are results from males, and on the right side the results from females; the 3 age groups (12-13, 14-15, and 16-17) are indicated between each pair of graphs. In each graph, three lines are drawn: the top line (squares) refers to percentage of yes responses for each of the 11 items (Table 1) on desire for autonomy, the middle line (triangles) indicates yes responses on autonomy achievement for each of the 11 items, and the middle/bottom line (dots) shows yes responses for parental disobedience triggered by each of the 11 items.

Figure 1. Comparison between 3 age groups (middle) of adolescent boys (left) and girls (right) with regards to the percentage of youngsters that have expressed desire (top line, with squares), had achieved (middle line, with triangles) or have disobeyed their parents (lower line, with circles) with regard to 11 behaviours of autonomy, listed in Table 1 and shown here in the same numerical order.





Analysis of the data depicted in Figure 1 revealed that: (i) autonomous behaviours are desired by the majority of adolescents, particularly after they reach 14 years of age; (ii) autonomy is more frequently desired than actually achieved, particularly in girls; (iii) male and female populations become distinct at 16 years of age and thereafter; (iv) achievement of autonomy is associated with disobeying parents (in Figure 1, lines for achievement of autonomy and for disobeying parents get closer to each other, particularly in boys).

The frequency of desire for autonomous behaviours is the only parameter that does not clearly distinguish male from female adolescents: most of the 11 behavioural items were desired by 70% or more of the boys or of the girls, and from early (12-13 years old) to late adolescents (16-17 years old).

In order to determine statistical differences, a chi-square test was performed comparing males and females (Table 2)

Table 2. Association between adolescents' desire for autonomy and gender. Significant values indicate differences regarding desire for the autonomy item between boys and girls.

Autonomy Items	*X2*	*df*	*p*
1. Decoration	0.131	1	0.716 *ns*
2. Clothing	4.609	1	0.032*
3. Money	1.192	1	0.275 *ns*
4. Out at night	5.245	1	0.022*
5. Out without reporting in	7.460	1	0.006**
6. Out without hours	6.465	1	0.011*
7. Out at weekends	0.0001	1	0.979 *ns*
8. Holidays away from family	0.015	1	0.901 *ns*
9. Have girl- or boy-friend	2.138	1	0.144 *ns*
10. Decide without Advice	0.981	1	0.322 *ns*
11. Own Ideology	0.0001	1	0.0001***

ns, non significant; * significant (p< .05); ** very significant (p< .01); *** highly significant (p< .001); df, degree of freedom.

The test indicates that the interaction gender/items of behavioural autonomy are non-significant for 7 of the 11 items. Statistically significant differences were reduced to: (ii) girls desire to choose dress and hair-style (item 2) more than males, and boys desire to stay out without parental control (items 4, 5 and 6) more than females.

Data on age differences, taking boys and girls separately, are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Association between desire for autonomy and age in male adolescents. Significant values indicate that early teen males (12-13 year olds) and late teen males (16-17 year olds) are different regarding desire for the autonomy item.

Autonomy Items	*X2*	*df*	*p*
1. Decoration	0.496	3	0.919 *ns*
2. Clothing	6.116 (a)	1	0.013 *
3. Money	11.749 (a)	1	0.003**
4. Out at night	10.642 (a)	1	0.001**
5. Out without reporting in	17.575	3	0.0001***
6. Out without hours	1.540	3	0.673 *ns*
7. Out at weekends	4.852	3	0.183 *ns*
8. Holidays away from family	13.819 (a)	1	0.0001***

9. Have girlfriend	7.191	3	0.066 *ns*
10. Decide without advice	7.517 (a)	1	0.006**
11. Own ideology	20.017 (a)	1	0.0001***

(a) Test for Linear Trend; *ns*, non significant; * significant (p< .05); ** very significant (p< .01); *** highly significant (p< .001); df, degree of freedom.

Table 4. Association between achievement of autonomy and age (early teens, 12-13 year olds, and late teens, 16-17) in male adolescents. Significant values indicate that early and late teenagers are different regarding achievement of the autonomy item.

Autonomy Items	***X2***	***df***	***p***
1. Decoration	10.278 (a)	1	0.001**
2. Clothing	19.537 (a)	1	0.0001***
3. Money	82.947 (a)	1	0.0001***
4. Out at night	125.340 (a)	1	0.0001***
5. Out without reporting in	52.876 (a)	1	0.0001***
6. Out without hours	19.400 (a)	1	0.0001***
7. Out at weekends	31.829 (a)	1	0.0001***
8. Holidays away from family	57.136 (a)	1	0.0001***
9. Have girlfriend	57.458 (a)	1	0.0001***
10. Decide without advice	54.171 (a)	1	0.0001***
11. Own ideology	57.986 (a)	1	0.0001***

(a) Test for Linear Trend; *ns*, non significant; * significant (p< .05); ** very significant (p< .01); *** highly significant (p< .001); df, degree of freedom.

These data indicate that several autonomous behaviours are increasingly desired by both genders as the adolescents become older: spending money (item 3), solving one's own problems (item 10) and having one's own convictions (item 11).

A wide gap between the lines for desire of autonomy and achievement of autonomy is seen in all graphs of Figure 1, with the exception of those regarding boys after reaching 16 years of age. This indicates that in most adolescents there is a dissociation between desire for and achievement of autonomy. In girls, even during late adolescence, autonomy is limited to a few items, namely those related to emotional autonomy (item 9: having a boyfriend) or cognitive autonomy (item 10: solving problems without parents help; item 11: own ideology).

In fact, regarding the *desire* dimension, data revealed gender differences in 4 items only, while regarding the *achievement* dimension, data showed that boys and girls differs in 8 items: girls achieve autonomy in room decorating (item 1) and dressing (item

2) more often than boys, and boys achieve autonomy on staying out without parental control (items 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8) and dating (item 9) more often than girls, as is documented in Table 5.

Table 5. Association between achievement of autonomy and age (early teens, 12-13 years old, and late teens, 16-17 years old) in female adolescents. Significant values indicate that early and late teenagers are different regarding achievement for the autonomy item.

Autonomy Items	*X2*	*df*	*p*
1. Decoration	9.902 (a)	1	0.001**
2. Clothing	9.467 (a)	1	0.002**
3. Money	60.384 (a)	1	0.0001***
4. Out at night	24.180 (a)	1	0.0001***
5. Out without reporting in	13.920 (a)	1	0.0001***
6. Out without hours	3.815	3	0.282 *ns*
7. Out at weekends	3.040	3	0.385 *ns*
8. Holidays away from family	18.739 (a)	1	0.0001***
9. Have boyfriend	76.028 (a)	1	0.0001***
10. Decide without advice	45.439 (a)	1	0.0001***
11. Own ideology	48.387 (a)	1	0.0001***

(a) Test for Linear Trend; *ns*, non significant; * significant (p< .05); ** very significant (p< .01); *** highly significant (p< .001); df, degree of freedom.

Major differences in autonomy between boys and girls were found when the adolescents reached 16 years of age. This gender difference was due to a sudden increase in the frequency of autonomy achievement reported by boys at this age, a change that did not correspond to a comparable percentage of girls of the same age. Analysis of the different items showed that girls were not able to reach, in particular, a high frequency of achievement of autonomous behaviours related to temporary separation from the family (e.g., items 4-8: staying out at night, at week-ends, on holidays).

Significant increase in autonomy with age is reported for all items by boys (Table 6); whereas for girls, there are two behavioural items that show no significant enhancement with age, i.e., item 6 (spending weekends out) and item 7 (spending holidays away from relatives) (Table 7).

Table 6. Association between capacity to disobey and age (early teens, 12-13 years old and late teens, 16-17 years old) in male adolescents. Significant values indicate that early and late teenagers are different regarding capacity to disobey parents for the autonomy item.

Autonomy Items	*X2*	*df*	*p*
1. Decoration	5.214 (a)	1	0.022 *ns*
2. Clothing	8.324 (a)	1	0.003**
3. Money	41.814 (a)	1	0.0001***
4. Out at night	65.553 (a)	1	0.0001***
5. Out without reporting in	43.977 (a)	1	0.0001***
6. Out without hours	21.546 (a)	1	0.0001***
7. Out at weekends	8.292 (a)	1	0.004**
8. Holidays away from family	15.339 (a)	1	0.0001***
9. Have girlfriend	19.555 (a)	1	0.0001***
10. Decide without advice	19.790 (a)	1	0.0001**
11. Own ideology	13.112 (a)	1	0.0001***

(a) Test for Linear Trend; *ns*, non significant; * significant (p< .05); ** very significant (p< .01); *** highly significant (p< .001); df, degree of freedom.

Table 7. Association between capacity to disobey and age (early teens, 12-13 years old and late teens, 16-17 years old) in female adolescents. Significant values indicate that early and late teenagers are different regarding capacity to disobey parents for the autonomy item.

Autonomy Items	*X2*	*df*	*p*
1. Decoration	8.426	3	0.038*
2. Clothing	6.348	3	0.095 *ns*
3. Money	25.917 (a)	1	0.0001***
4. Out at night	8.147 (a)	1	0.004**
5. Out without reporting in	7.189 (a)	1	0.007**
6. Out without hours	5.593	3	0.133 *ns*
7. Out at weekends	5.127	3	0.162 *ns*
8. Holidays away from family	5.915	3	0.115 *ns*
9. Have boyfriend	50.866 (a)	1	0.0001***
10. Decide without advice	7.209 (a)	1	0.007**
11. Own ideology	0.392	3	0.941 *ns*

(a) Test for Linear Trend; *ns*, non significant; * significant (p< .05); ** very significant (p< .01); *** highly significant (p< .001); df, degree of freedom.

The overall data, according Figure 1, suggest that the major gender difference regarding adolescent autonomy is the capacity of 16-year-old boys to increase the frequency of actions of parental disobedience. This capacity for conflict clearly distinguishes male and females at this age and thereafter. For boys, the only item that remained low regarding parental disobedience (around 20% of yes responses) was the one on spending holidays away from the family. In contrast, for girls, 5 of the 11 autonomy items were consistently scored at less than 20% with regard to parent disobedience; these items had mostly to do with situations of temporary separation from the family.

Statistical analysis shows that boys are different from girls because of the higher frequency that they report disobeying parents, in particular for items 4, 5 and 6 that are related to escaping parental control. Taken together with the above reported differences in autonomy achievement between boys and girls, it is pertinent to consider that the greater capacity to challenge parental authority expressed by boys is related to achievement of higher levels of autonomy.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate age and gender differences in adolescents with regard to how they perceive autonomy. This was done by determining how often autonomy is desired and achieved by adolescents, and how frequently autonomous behaviours were reported as a cause of conflict with parents. Statistical analysis revealed that desire for autonomy, achievement of autonomy and disobeying parents varied as a function of age and gender of the adolescents.

The data indicated that only small differences were found between the two genders with regard to desire for autonomy. In contrast, marked gender differences were found regarding achievement of autonomy: the trend towards autonomy was clearly more pronounced in males than in females. Our study also revealed that the most significant gender differences occurred around middle-adolescence, i.e., distinction between boys and girls accelerated at 16 years of age.

Content analysis leading to the selection of 11 autonomy items, and the proportion of adolescents beginning at ages 12-13 who desire to achieve these items, support the view that autonomy is not one-dimensional in adolescence but rather is expressed by distinct dimensions: attitudinal, emotional and regulatory aspects of adolescent

behaviour, as found by previous researchers (see, for example, Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Steinberg, 1990; Noom et al, 2001).

Regarding changes in autonomy according to age, our findings support previous reports that have identified an increase in autonomy scores over the period of adolescence, thus reinforcing autonomy as a key value in the developmental tasks of adolescence for both sexes (Bartle et al. 1988; Dornbush et al, 2001; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Bosma *et al.* 1996; Greenberger, 1984; Peppitone, 1980; Pipp *et al.*, 1985).

The importance of understanding the significance of gender in psychological processes, recently underscored by Stewart and McDermott (2004), was further supported here. In fact, the present investigation has identified major gender differences in several parameters of adolescent autonomy. Gender modulates the self-image: on one hand, autonomous choice of dress and hair-style were more frequently reported by girls than boys as Borresen and Rosenvinge (2003) also found, and, on the other hand, exploratory activity outside the family milieu was more frequently cited by boys than by girls.

The major finding of this study on autonomy is that gender dissociation between adolescents occurs at the 16th year of age. In fact, boys achieved autonomy earlier than girls, in spite of similar levels of frequency of desire for autonomy detected in both sexes. Our results indicate that this gender difference is derived, at least in part, from the greater capacity expressed by boys to disobey parental advice. Girls limited their conflicts with parents to emotional items, such as having a boyfriend; girls' focus on emotional issues has also been pointed out previously (Tradesh et al., 2001).

This study confirms that most adolescents, independently of their gender, desire autonomy. This psychological trait of the suburban high-school students that were studied has been reported by adolescents of other cultural and social environments (Benaches, 1981; Konopka, 1983; Williamson & Campbell, 1985; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Anderson & Anderson, 1986; Meyer, 1988). Clearly, specific traits of Portuguese culture have also to be considered as having modulated our data. Our questionnaire can now be used by us or others in comparative studies on the psychology of adolescence in different geographical, national or ethnic groups.

Disparity between desire and achievement was observed here in most adolescent age groups. This indicates that adolescents have to face opposition to their desire for autonomy, and this is consistent with the finding that conflict with parents fosters autonomy, as can be deduced from the association found between increase in frequency

of parental disobedience and achievement of autonomy reported by boys in late adolescence.

In conclusion, this study establishes the 16th year of age as a milestone of gender separation in adolescence with regard to achievement of autonomy. This study suggests that the earlier achievement of autonomous behaviours by boys is not due to a higher level of desire for autonomy, but rather to an earlier capacity of boys to express conflict with parents.

Our findings suggest that girls value autonomy and personal agency as much as boys, but girls do not demonstrate the same capacity to struggle as boys, remaining more dependent on parental norms. Our findings do not support the idea stated by many scholars and by many researchers that men value autonomy more than women. This may be due to the fact that they studied only achievement and not the desire for autonomy, a crucial dimension in psychological development.

It is plausible to speculate whether women tend to prevent conflicts with parents in order to preserve emotional attachment. It is also known that girls, in general, demonstrate higher levels of enmeshment and of separation anxiety (Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993; Beyers & Goossens, 1999; Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993), which can explain their lower capacity for achieving behavioural autonomy. Different parental practices concerning boys and girls may explain our findings: girls were granted fewer autonomy opportunities and were more restricted; boys are socialized toward more autonomy and girls toward connectedness.

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