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Case Report

Adolescent autonomy development: what we learned from a case study with an immigrant adolescent

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Abstract

Autonomy is an important aspect of adolescent's psychosocial development. This case study employed the Beyers' model to examine a second-generation immigrant's perception and experience of autonomy from four dimensions: Connectedness, Separation, Agency, and Detachment. An interview was conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire with a 17-year-old girl who moved to the US at 3 years of age. The informant demonstrated a high Connectedness and low Detachment with her parents, characterized by a close parent-adolescent relationship, her high trust and dependency on her parents, respecting her parents' authority and no open conflict with her parents. She had achieved a certain, but not high, degree of Separation, mainly manifested as the establishment of a private sense of self. She had also obtained some degree of Agency, reflecting as that she had developed a plan for her future (although her parents' opinion influenced her plan to a great extent) and made efforts towards her goal. The case study indicates that different cultural backgrounds result in diversity in parental authority and adolescent autonomy. There is a need to further understand adolescent's autonomy development from their own perspectives. Educators and healthcare providers need to provide adolescent-centered, family-involved, and culturally competent services.

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BACKGROUND

One of the most important psychosocial issues that teenagers deal with during their adolescence is the development of a healthy sense of independence or autonomy [1]. It has significant implications for their self-regulation, self-sufficiency, academic performance, substance use behavior, antisocial behavior, depressive symptoms, and long term health outcomes [2-6].

Autonomy has been defined in a variety of ways, such as separation from parents, being independent and self-governing within relationships, nonconformity, instrumentality, self-determination, and competence [7-10]. Beyers (2003) presented a four-factor model, including connectedness, separation, detachment, and agency as comprehensive factors in adolescent autonomy [11]. In this study, we employed the Beyers' four-factor model to examine a second-generation immigrant's perception and experience of autonomy [11]. For second-generation immigrants, their bicultural

background may lead to different perception and experiences in autonomy development from their American peers. We expected to gain an understanding of adolescent autonomy development from an adolescent's perspective.

METHODS

The Beyers' model is a comprehensive four-factor model to assess adolescent autonomy by measuring adolescent individuation and relation with family [11]. The four factors including connectedness, separation, detachment, and agency are correlated to each other positively or negatively. The model was tested previously in high school students in Grades 9-12 and 1st-year university students [11].

We obtained permission from Dr. Beyers to use the model. A semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed to incorporate factors in the Beyers' model

[11]. We approached an informant at a Chinese adolescent club meeting. The informant is a 17-year-old girl in her 11th grade. She was born in China, and came to the US with her parents at her 3 years of age. She lives with her parents and younger sister in a middle-class community. We used the IRB approved parental consent form to obtain her parents' consent, and the assent form for her to participate in the interview. We explained to her the purpose and procedure of the interview, risk and benefits for informant, voluntary nature of the participant, and confidentiality of information. She read through and signed the assent form. The interview was then conducted in a small meeting room.

RESULTS

Connectedness

The first set of questions in this study addressed the informant's connectedness with her parents. According to Beyers' model, there are several aspects reflecting connectedness: adolescent reciprocity (how the adolescent interacts with parents); parental reciprocity (how parents interact with the adolescent); Dependency (whether the adolescent seeks or values parental help); and availability (whether the adolescent perceives parents as available) [11].

Adolescent reciprocity: When asked to describe relationship between her and her parents, the informant used the words "really good" "pretty good" to evaluate her relationship with parents. She seldom got into argument with her parents and always showed respect for her parents' suggestions.

Parental reciprocity: The informant thought her mother is very nurturing and close to her. She felt comfortable to communicate with her parents, especially her mother, but her parents didn't intentionally encourage her to express her opinion. She thought that her parents might think that they fully understood their daughter or they assumed that they shared the same idea, thus they rarely asked for the daughter's opinion. The informant said "I have never expressed important opinions to them", but, she didn't care it very much. Their relationship did not change much over time when the informant grew up: "Fundamentally we are still the same as before. I am still very dependent on them and they are still very nurturing." Her parents helped her with school, particularly in history and vocabulary. Relative to her peers, she thought she was more dependent on her parents.

Availability: The informant felt it easy to count on her parents for help and her parents had provided adequate help with her problems. She felt comfortable to talk her difficulties with her parents.

Dependency: When she met difficulties, she would try to resolve them first by herself. If she couldn't find a way out immediately, she would go to her parents for help.

Separation

There are several measures of separation. Deidealization assesses whether the adolescent perceives his/her parents as people who make mistakes, and therefore he/she will not simply copy the opinions and behaviors of his/her parents. Nondependency reflects whether the adolescent tries to solve problems him/herself or with the help of peers, before asking parents for help. Individuation refers the establishment of a private sense of self [11].

Deidealization: When asked "some people said 'parents are rich in experience and knowledge, therefore their judgments are always right and children should follow the opinions and behaviors of their parents.' what's your opinion?", the informant used the word "ambivalent" to evaluate this statement. She said it was true that parents had a lot of experiences, and were more sophisticated than their kids. However, she argued, children should not blindly follow their parent's opinion, because sometimes the parents might not understand the real situation the child faced. The informant said she had gradually developed her own thoughts. For example, her parents, "just the same as most Chinese parents" she said, thought it was very important to get excellent grade and go to an Ivy League college, however, she did not think it was that important. She felt it's important to achieve academic levels, but "it's not everything". She believed that there were many other important things in life, good relationship with people, emotional maturity, social activities, etc. But she didn't argue this with her parents. She explained that "I am not a argumental person with others. I keep silence and don't like argument. I respect them and avoid conflict with them."

Nondependency: The informant thought it was quite easy to count on her parents' help. She told me if she needed advice on something, she would be most likely to go to her parents for advice. When meeting difficulties, she would be more likely to seek for her parents' help than for friends' help because she thought her friends were not mature enough while her parents were more reliable. In fact, she seldom discussed serious problems with her friends.

Individuation Individualization: When asked whether or not there were some things about her that her parents didn't know, she said she did not like to tell her personal things to her parents. She said she had a few secrets and they accumulated as time went on. Sometimes she felt rather depressed and blue without obvious reasons, but she would hide her feelings and

pretended to be happy in front of her parents.

Agency

Three subscales are used in Beyers' model to describe Agency. Attitudinal autonomy refers to being able to list possibilities and make a choice between different options. Emotional autonomy refers to being confident in defining goals independent of the opinions of parents and peers. Functional autonomy refers to achieving one's goals through self-regulation and self-control [11].

Attitudinal autonomy: When asked if she could make a choice easily, the informant said she was an "indecisive" person. She said she always felt it was hard to decide which course to take when selecting course in high school. She usually talked this to her parents and asked for their advice. If they supported her to choose one course, then she would choose it.

Emotional autonomy: The informant said she usually complied with the wishes of others. She felt it was impossible for people to totally independently decide where to go and what to do. When people made decision, they would always consider expectation from parents, society and other relevant people. According to the informant, people had the freedom to decide things, but not totally by themselves; they could not avoid influences from others when they made decision.

Functional autonomy: The informant's goal had been influenced by her parent's opinion. Her parents set up the goal for her: "go to a good college, find a good job and settle down", which thereafter became her own goal. But there were some minor differences in goals set by herself and her parents. Her parents wanted her to go to Princeton University and then Johns Hopkins Medical School. But the informant said she would love to go to Brown University and focus on humanities because she liked interaction with people, context and memorization. She said she had made some research on Brown. She wanted to go to Brown University because it was not a huge one like other Ivy League universities; she liked living in a small town; and she liked to stay East Coast. She said she would do more research on it before she applied it. To achieve her goal of going to a good college, she had planed her study carefully and collected relevant information. She said in earlier time her parents pressed her in study but now she had been pressing herself more. She felt pressure from herself.

Detachment

Two measures are used as indicators of Detachment. Coolness/rejection refers to low levels of warmth in the relationship with parents and feeling that parents don't understand their kids. Open confrontation refers to open conflict [11].

Coolness/rejection: Looking back, the informant had expressed her satisfaction in her relationship with her parents. However, when asked whether or not her parents understood her, she said she did not think they really understood her. There were a lot of things her parents did not know about her.

Open confrontation: She had never had open confrontation with her parents. Just as described above, she is a quite obedient daughter and never wanted to conflict with her parents. Her parents were more restricted than her friends' parents. She would give up a friend's party because of her parents' objection. "I don't ask them because I don't expect they will allow me to do". However, she did not complain on it and concluded that "I don't have a huge problem with that parent's restriction".

CONCLUSION

The four dimensions, Connectedness, Separation, Agency, and Detachment, describe different aspects of adolescent autonomy development, have different implications, and relate to each other. Development of autonomy in adolescence implies a movement from a closely connected relationship with parents in early adolescence towards a relationship with a balance between Connectedness and Agency [12]. During this process, increases in Separation could serve as a stepping stone towards this healthy form of autonomy [12].

The result of this case study shows consistence with Beyers' model [11]. The four different and related factors give us a comprehensive understanding in adolescent autonomy. The informant demonstrated a high Connectedness with her parents. Her family has a close parent-adolescent relationship, characterized by her high trust and dependency on her parents. She also thought highly of her parents as being available and helpful. She has achieved a certain, but not high, degree of Separation. As she grew up, she became more emotionally independent and a longer interpersonal distance from her parents. Although she was still quite dependent on parents when encountering problems, she began to solve them by herself as possible. This developmental process involves deidealization of the parents and subsequently being nondependent. Another aspect of this process is that she has secrets for her parents. Although she could easily talk with her parents, she didn't like to talk too many person things to her parents, which reflects her own individuality.

The informant has obtained some degree of Agency, reflecting as that she had planned for her future and made efforts towards her goal. But influenced by the cultural traditions and high parental authority, the

informant's agency just reached a relatively low level. Her parents' opinion influenced her plan to a great extent. Although her parents seldom encouraged her to express her opinions, she did not value expressing her opinion very much. She saw her parents as her primary sources of support and advice.

Finally, the Detachment level between the informant and her parents is very low, as the informant held high respect for parent authority and did not argue with her parents. Her family, like most of Chinese families, seems to have an obvious parent-child hierarchy. Children possess the traditions of respecting parental authority and emphasize the obedience of children to their parents. This traditional culture may reduce the conflict between parents and adolescents.

An overall impression is that the informant still depended upon parents for emotional support and guidance, but she had gradually gained the ability to make and follow through with her own decisions, lived by her own principles, and had become less emotionally dependent on parents.

From the informant's experiences, we can see that different cultural backgrounds result in diversity in parental authority and adolescent autonomy. Comparing to her friends in the U.S., the informant held a higher respect for parental authority and less of an emphasis on individual autonomy. She is less dependent and autonomous. As she said, most of her peers could make a lot of decisions independently and their parents would allow them to do so, which was impossible in her family. This result is consistent with previous research on parental authority and adolescent autonomy in young people with bicultural background [13]. The informant understood this as cultural difference. She commented that "usually Asian parents are more restricted with their children."

Comparing to her peers in China's urban area, however, the informant had achieved a higher level of autonomy. She had earned some money by herself by babysitting her younger sister during the summer and doing some laundry work at home. She owned the right to decide how to spend the money. Sometimes she would go to watch movie, but she saved up most of them for her college. This was quite rare among high-school students in China. From this, the informant has been influenced by the independent adolescent culture in the U.S.

This case study demonstrates the need to further understand adolescent's autonomy development. Adolescents in different age, culture, with different gender, parenting style and socioeconomic status, may have different perspectives and experiences in autonomy. Researchers, Educators, and practitioners need to gain a better understanding of adolescents'

needs in autonomy from culture, and better yet an individual perspective. In order to provide adolescent-centered, family-involved, and culturally competent education and health care services, educators and practitioners need to take steps to improve their cultural desire, awareness, knowledge, skills and encounters [14]. These include that educators and practitioners have internal desire to become culturally competent and respect adolescent's own perspectives, are aware of bias and prejudice towards adolescents and people from other cultures, are knowledgeable about adolescence and other cultures, having skills to conduct a cultural sensitive assessment, and having active interactions with adolescents and people from different cultures [14]. By proving individualized plans to adolescents, we can better meet their education and health services needs.

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