



## Development of emotional autonomy from adolescence to young adulthood in Spain



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### ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to learn whether emotional autonomy is truly part of a developmental stage for Spanish adolescents and young adults or if it is an indicator of difficult family relationships. Using a longitudinal design, a sample of ninety young people was followed for ten years, from their initial adolescence until their first years of adulthood. At four observation points, the participants completed various questionnaires to evaluate their emotional autonomy, the cohesion in their family relationships and their life satisfaction. There were no gender differences in the development of emotional autonomy. Family cohesion and life satisfaction showed significant negative associations with emotional autonomy and these associations became more pronounced as participants moved from adolescence into adulthood. Based on our results, emotional autonomy from parents does not seem to be a developmental stage taking place during adolescence, but rather, an indicator of difficult family relationships.

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In recent decades, a large body of research has been focused on analysing the process by which girls and boys acquire autonomy from their parents. In this case, autonomy is understood as a developmental stage during adolescence, which marks entrance into the adult world (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). Autonomy within the framework of family relationships during adolescence appears to be composed of at least three dimensions (Noom, Deković, & Meeus, 1999). The first of these dimensions is behavioural as it refers to a young person's ability to act independently. The second dimension is cognitive as implies the acquisition of a sense of competence and agency, through which the person knows how to take control of his or her own life. The third dimension is emotional as it refers to the perception of independence through self-confidence and individuality, plus the establishment of emotional bonds that are more symmetrical than those seen in their relationship during childhood.

The last of these aspects, emotional autonomy, which involves individuation and relinquishing dependence on parents (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), has sparked a great deal of interest among researchers to the extent that it has generated a certain degree of controversy. On the one hand, there are authors who understand the emotional distancing from parents as a fundamental requirement for healthy development during adolescence (Blos, 1979; Freud, 1958). According to this perspective, emotional autonomy would be positively related to adjustment and health during adolescence and would tend to increase during these years (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). In contrast, there are authors who question the need for separation

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from parents during adolescence (Fuhrman & Holmbeck, 1995; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). For them, a high level of emotional autonomy would stem from unsatisfactory family relationships and would be related to a series of indices that imply poor adolescent adjustment (Fuhrman & Holmbeck, 1995; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Furthermore, this emotional autonomy would remain stable through adolescence, thus appearing as a characteristic aspect of how certain families function rather than a feature of the normal state of the relationships between parents and adolescents.

Part of the controversy regarding the Emotional Autonomy concept comes from the Emotional Autonomy Scale (EAS Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). EAS is the most commonly used measure of emotional autonomy, however, some authors (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003; Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Schmitz & Baer, 2001; Turner, Irwin, Tschann, & Millstein, 1993) claim that this instrument really measures detachment from parents, and not adolescent autonomy.

Upon delving into the meaning of emotional autonomy, some authors find that the relationship between emotional autonomy and adjustment is moderated by age (Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993; Silverberg & Gondoli, 1996). Thus, some authors state that emotional autonomy would be more positive in later adolescence and in early adulthood than in earlier years (Beyers & Goossens, 2003; Frank, Pirsch, & Wright, 1990). According to these authors, as the extent that children consolidate a coherent vision of themselves and the family system adjusts after the initial years of adolescence, their emotional autonomy from their parents may have a more positive effect. Nevertheless, research into the development and meaning of emotional autonomy during early adulthood is scarce (Arnett, 2000, 2006; Beyers & Goossens, 2003; Kins, Beyers, & Soenens, 2013; Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011).

Research analysing family relationships during young adulthood highlights the existence of continuity between these and previous years. Parent–child relationships during young adulthood are in part a function of the history of their family relationship, so, family interactions during young adulthood depend, to a great extent, on the previous patterns of interaction (Rodríguez & Rodrigo, 2010; Thornton, Orbuch, & Axinn, 1995; Tubman & Lerner, 1994). It is important to indicate that this continuity tends to weaken with the passing of time (Belsky, Jafee, Hsied, & Silva, 2001). In other words, the evidence of continuity appears to be greater when comparing the emerging adult–parent relationships with those of adolescent–parent relationships, than when going back to the years prior to childhood. Research also indicates that young adults increase their relative power in relationships with parents during their third decade of life, and that the family relationships usually improve during these years, with a lower conflict rate (Noack & Buhl, 2005).

The well-being of young people during emerging adulthood is highly related to the quality of their family relationships (Roberts & Bengtson, 1993). The quality of these relationships continues to be essential for adjustment during this developmental stage (Powers, Hauser, & Kilner, 1989; Umberson, 1992). Levels of involvement, warmth and support in the parent–child relationship influence the emerging adult's psychological adjustment (Tubman & Lerner, 1994). According to Aquilino (2006), "The family of origin functions as a base of operations for the explorations of emerging adulthood" (p. 203). The family aid young adults in different ways: through material support such as co-residence in a parental household or parental financial subsidies, but also through the availability of parents as a source of comfort and guidance for young adults.

High perception of family cohesion, defined as the emotional bonding that family members have towards one another, is associated with higher levels of adolescent and young adult well-being (e.g., Barber & Buehler, 1996; Crespo, Kielpikowski, Pryor, & Jose, 2011; Fosco, Caruthers, & Dishion, 2012; Johnson, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2001). The focus of family cohesion is how family systems balance the separation of their members versus togetherness (Olson, 2000), and includes warmth and affection, closeness, and support in family relationships. Extensive literature documents that adolescents' perceptions of low cohesion within their families is associated with heightened feelings of depression and reduced social acceptance (e.g. Cumsille & Epstein, 1994; Wentzel & Feldman, 1996). Family cohesion leads to improvements in adolescent social problem-solving skills and social self-efficacy (Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010), while low levels of family cohesion result in an earlier onset of romantic and sexual experience (De Graaf, van de Schoot, Woertman, Hawk, & Meeus, 2012). Family cohesion is also related to young adults' well-being (Crespo et al.; Fosco et al., 2012) and lower levels of stress and depression (Fosco et al., 2012; Johnson, Gans, Kerr, & Deegan, 2008; Reinherz, Paradis, Giaconia, Stashwick, & Fitzmaurice, 2003) during early adulthood. Family cohesion, especially during late adolescence and young adulthood, may support young adults' need to redefine family relationships, and to then establish a sense of separation in order to explore their own identity while maintaining a sense of connection with their family (Minuchin, 1974; Mullis, Brailsford, & Mullis, 2003).

In western industrialised societies, young adulthood implies readjustment in the family system during which a more symmetrical relationship between parents and children is established. This new reality demands that many aspects of family relationships be rethought, including the establishment of a new balance between the autonomy of young adults and their needs for dependence (Aquilino, 2006). In this regard, we understand that it is essential to delve into the meaning of emotional autonomy during the initial years of adulthood. This must be carried out while bearing in mind that a variety of transition to adulthood models can be found depending on the country (Scabini, 2000).

The situation in Spain would be represented by the *Mediterranean model* (Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006, p. 21), which is a model characterised by living in the family home until well over the age of twenty and leaving that home, generally, to live with a partner. EUROSTAT data from 1983, 1994 and 2008 showed that the percentage of young adults (ages 24–29) in southern Europe who were still living with their parents was up to three times greater than the percentages in Northern and Central European Countries. Iacovou and Berthoud (2001) have identified two behavioural models in young European adults – one that include nations of Southern Europe such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece; and the northern European model, composed of Germany, Denmark, Scandinavia, Holland, UK, France, Belgium and Luxembourg. In northern Europe, youngsters leave home earlier and more commonly live alone or in cohabiting unions. The same Northern European pattern was found in

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