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Adolescent Autonomy: Desire, Achievement and Disobeying Parents between Early and Late Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

A population of 12-19 year-old adolescents (n=994) was selected from a pool of 7264 students in order to study adolescent's perception of autonomy. Eleven behavioural autonomy items were elected by the adolescents and used to evaluate the frequency of desire, achievement and disobeying parents in early (12-13 year-old) and late (18-19 year-old) adolescents. Statistical comparison of the two age groups of adolescents was performed for each gender. Regarding achievement of autonomy, both male and female adolescents showed significant differences between the younger and older adolescents. Progress in autonomy was achieved by male adolescents more as a result of disobeying parents than was the cased with female adolescents. Narcissism, separation from family, and cognitive aspects were found to be important elements in adolescent's perception of autonomy. Desire for autonomy was present since the start of puberty, achievement lagged behind desire, and the capacity to fight for autonomy was a key mediator for the achievement of personal autonomy in the transition to adulthood.
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INTRODUCTION

Autonomy is a crucial developmental task of adolescence, namely because it is closely linked to individuation and identity formation (Blos, 1967; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Steinberg et al., 1992; Smetana & Asquish, 1994; Allen et al., 1994). The perception of autonomy by the adolescent is associated with behaviours that are important to modulate the level of success of transition to adulthood and home leaving (Benaches, 1981; Konopka, 1983; Williamson & Campbell, 1985; Poole *et al,* 1986; Anderson & Anderson, 1986; Meyer, 1988). Transition of adolescents to adulthood involves dramatic changes that are required by the assumption of adult roles (Fleming, 1983; Chou, 2000; Pavlidis & McCauley, 2001; Frank et al., 2002); these challenges may result in home-leaving failure with return to a family dependent role for short or extended periods (Fleming, 1986; Fleming & Aguiar, 1992; Pinheiro *et al.,* 2001; Cohen *et al*., 2003).

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The classical investigation by Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) has shown that adolescent autonomy encompasses a complex constellation of concepts; this view has been adopted by a numerous researchers (e. g., Moore, 1987; Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Bosma *et al*., 1996; Chen, 1999; Zani *et al.,* 2001; Helwig *et al.*, 2003). The introduction of an emotional autonomy scale (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986) was very instrumental in the foundation of concepts on emotional autonomy of the adolescents, and led both to a number of investigations and to recent claims for better methods to measure of autonomy (see, for instance, Chen, 1999; Ryan & Lynch, 1989, Bayers & Goossens, 1999; Schmitz & Baer, 2001). Emotional autonomy is an important contributor for autonomy of the adolescent and it was found to play an important role in the overall achievement of adolescent autonomy from the family (Taradesh et al., 2001; Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2002). Autonomy and social functioning were compared by McElhaney & Allen (2001) between families of low-risk and high risk social context and they found that expressions of autonomy were linked with positive social functioning in low-risk families but not in high-risk families. Variations in the links between autonomy and psychosocial adjustment of adolescents were also observed by Noom *et al.* (1999). Recently, changes in constructs aimed at evaluating the psychology of adolescents, particularly with regards to autonomy, have been proposed namely with the goal of improving health care of adolescents (Hanna & Guthrie, 2003; Pinto, 2004).

The current study investigated adolescent autonomy as it changes during adolescence. To address adolescent autonomy it is useful to start by defining the concept as it is adopted here. The concept of adolescent autonomy that is used here follows the definition of Steinberg (1999), in short, it is the ability to think, feel, make decisions and act on her or his own. The growth of independence is certainly a crucial component of becoming autonomous, but autonomy means more than just behaving independently. I quote Steinberg (1999, p. 276): "Although we often use the words autonomy and independence interchangeably, in the study of adolescence they mean slightly different things. Independence generally refers to teens' capacity to behave on their own. The growth of independence is surely a part of becoming autonomous during adolescence, but autonomy means more than behaving independently. It also means thinking, feeling, and making moral decisions that are truly your own, rather than following along with what others believe". In this sense, adolescence autonomy develops through relationships in families, with peers and with people outside the family. Yet, family conflict around adolescent autonomy is seen as a normal part of the process of psychological development, involving a transformation in family relationships (Steinberg, 1999). The multidimensional nature of adolescent autonomy led to distinction of three types of autonomy: emotional, behavioural and value autonomy (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Steinberg, 1999). Emotional autonomy relates to personal feelings, emotions and shifts from depending on parents to getting emotional support from others. Previous studies indicated that progress in emotional autonomy, although it does increase with age (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Bosma *et al,* 1996), is not as fast as that of behavioural autonomy (Greenberg, 1984). Emotional autonomy is accompanied by growth in the potential for conflict with parents (Honess & Lintern, 1990; Honess *et al.*, 1997) and increased acceptance of the influence of peers (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Value autonomy refers to having independent attitudes and decisions regarding politics, religion, academic options, and morals.

Behavioural autonomy refers to the ability to make decisions independently and to follow through on these decisions with actions. The development of behavioural autonomy has not been the focus of much research in spite of behaviours being considered as important hallmarks of transition between childhood and adulthood. In fact, most of the available research has been focused on finding correlations between autonomy and other parameters, thus neglecting the role of age of the adolescents on the modification of autonomy. A few reports have documented that the scores of behavioural autonomy gradually increase during adolescence and, thus, they present sharp differences between adolescents in early and late teen-ages. It was reported that late adolescents achieve a higher degree of autonomy regarding the choice of friends and occupation, of management of their own money, and of physical activities performed outside the family home (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Bosma *et al.* 1996). They also depict higher abilities for social integration (Greenberger, 1984), participating in a larger number of peer and adult-oriented activities (Cooper & Peterson, 1984 *in* Silverberg & Steinberg, 1987). Increase in behavioural

autonomy scores have been related to a decrease in parental influence (Smith, 1985) and to a gradual enhancement of affiliation with peers (Peppitone, 1980), and this has been associated with the perception of greater autonomy and lesser attachment to parents (Pipp *et al.,* 1985).

The present investigation has adopted a developmental perspective on behavioural autonomy of adolescents and it was aimed at the study of three dimensions: desire of autonomy, achievement of autonomy and degree of disobeying parents during autonomy. To achieve these goals, perceptions of autonomy were compared between two age groups of adolescents. Instead of using a concept of autonomy previously defined by the researcher, we have rather decided to construct a questionnaire based on autonomy as it is defined by the adolescents themselves. Our data document the relative importance of each of eleven behaviours of autonomy in a large population of adolescents from 12 to 19 year olds. In addition, the herein results reveal differences and similarities on how autonomy is perceived and lived at the start and at the end of adolescence.

METHOD

General Design of the Study

This research involved two phases. The aim of the first phase was to establish how the concept of autonomy was perceived by the adolescents. Based on this information, a questionnaire was elaborated to be submitted to a larger pool of adolescents pertaining to two age groups (early and late teenagers). The questionnaire was directed to three dimensions of behavioural autonomy: *desire of autonomy*, *achievement of autonomy* and *disobeying parents* as a component of autonomy.

Phase 1: Identification of Behaviours Associated to Autonomy by Adolescents

The initial identification of behaviours that adolescents associate with autonomy was obtained by the use of "content analysis" (Kimberley, 2001), a research methodology that examines the responses to a set of research questions. The herein questions were the following: what are the meanings of (i) "autonomy", (ii) "to have autonomy"**,** (iii) "to be autonomous", and (iv) "not to be a child anymore". The questions were submitted to a pool of 40 adolescents with a similar age distribution of the larger population of adolescents that participated in the second phase of this study. The result of the "content analysis" allowed the identification of the 11 most cited categories of "behaviours of autonomy", that were identified by the adolescents. These 11 items of "behaviours of autonomy", listed in Table 1, were used as the instrument of the second phase of this research.

Table 1: Items of behaviours of autonomy most cited by adolescents and selected for the questionnaire submitted later to a large population of adolescents, including two subpopulations of early (12-13 years old) and late (18-19 years old) adolescents of Matosinhos, Portugal.

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

Phase 2: Scoring by Adolescents of 11 Items of Behavioural Autonomy

The 11 items of autonomous behaviours that were revealed from the responses of adolescents in phase 1 (see above) were submitted to a population of 994 adolescents aged 12 to 19 years old, in order for them to score each item with a yes/no answer with regards to whether the specific behaviour was: (i) desired; (ii) achieved; and (iii) led to disobeying parents. These answers were used to determine the percentage of positive response in: (i) the total population; and (ii) in chosen subpopulations of early (12-13 years old; n=549) or late (18-19 years old; n=60) adolescents.

The number of adolescents differed in the two subpopulations (early and late adolescents) because this difference reflected the distinct proportion of 12-13 or 18-19 years old adolescents that attended High School in the town where the research was performed. The features of the population used in this second phase of the investigation are described below.

Characterization of the Population of Adolescents

The population used in this study was a representative sample chosen among all students from High Schools of Matosinhos (a suburban town located at the periphery of Porto, the largest city in Northern Portugal) Total number these students was 7.264; these adolescents were aged between 12 and 19 years old. A sample of 994 was chosen from this pool according to criteria of proportionality. It was made up of 51% males and 49% females with ages ranging between 12 and 19 years old (average age: 14 years). The large majority of the adolescents in the sample (96%) lived with both biological parents; only 4% of them lived in a single-parent family.

The social and economic status of the families of the adolescents followed a wide spectrum. Parent's education varied from illiterate to highly educated parents. Regarding education of the father: 63% had elementary school degree, 26 % had intermediate degrees and 11% had a university degree. Regarding education of the mother: 70% had an elementary school degree, 24% had a intermediate degree and 6% had a university degree. The social and economic status of the father was the following: 8% were self employed and 90% were employees, 72% had middle or low class. With regards to the mother: 50% were employees, 44% were home workers, 34% had middle or poor class income.

Statistics

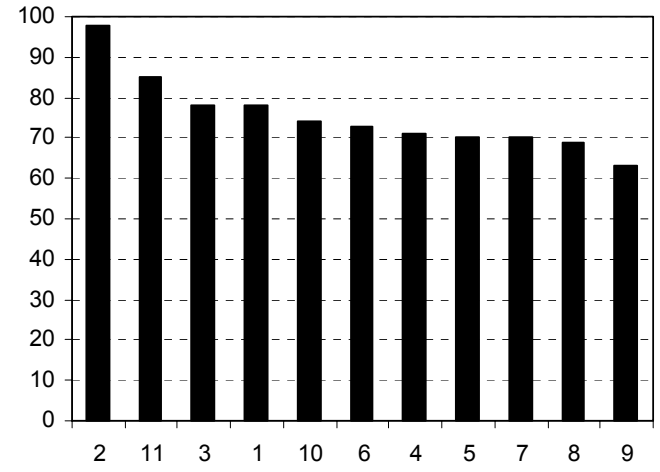
Statistical comparison was made for each gender between the population of early (12-13 years old) and late (18-19 years old) adolescents with regards the 11 items of behaviours of autonomy. We analysed the data frequencies and the statistically significant differences, taking as independent variables gender and age. In what concerns gender and age effects, we compared differences between proportions using the Chi-Square Test and the Test for Linear Trend (Package BMDP) (age being an ordinal variable).

RESULTS

The use of a content analysis methodology allowed the identification of the behavioural categories that were more often chosen by adolescents in response to the questions on how they perceived their own autonomy. The 11 autonomy behaviours that were the most frequent ones referred by the adolescents are depicted in Table 1. These categories were adopted for the questionnaire used as the self-report measure of autonomy.

Desire and Achievement of Autonomy by Adolescents

The selected 11 behavioural items of autonomy were submitted to the adolescents in order to calculate the percentage of them that responded with a yes answer to whether they: (i) had the desire to acquire the specific item of autonomous behaviour; (ii) had been able to achieve the same item of behaviour. The data regarding desire and achievement are shown in Figure 1 (A – desire to acquire behaviour; B – achievement of the behaviour).



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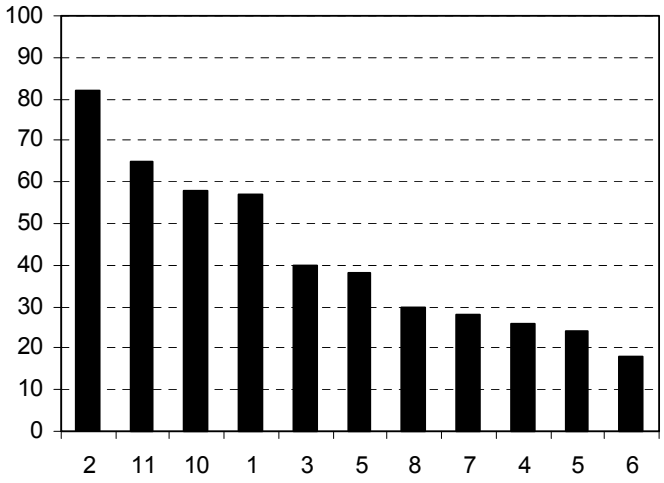

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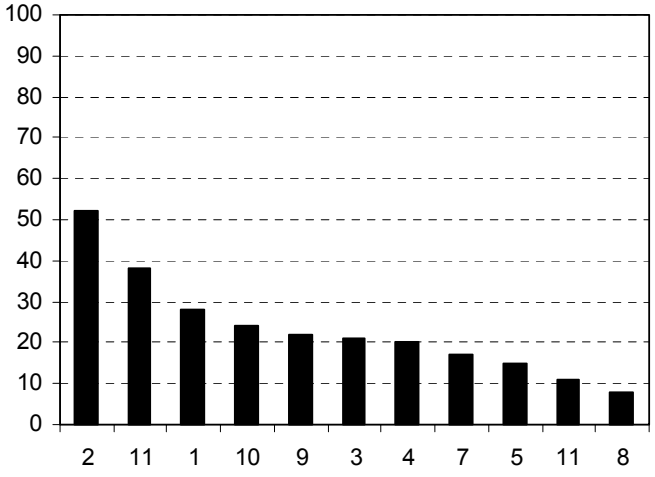

C

Figure 1. Percentage of all adolescents (n=994) that have expressed desire (A), had achieved (B) or had disobeyed to parents (C) with regards the 11 behaviours of autonomy that are listed in Table 1.

Desire of Autonomy

The majority of adolescents (more than 63%) expressed the desired to achieve all of the 11 behaviours (Fig 1) and, interestingly, this was also true for both age subpopulations of adolescents (Fig 2A). Autonomous choice of dressing and hair style (item 2) was both the most desired (95.8%) and the most achieved (82%) of the 11 behavioural items listed in Table 1. Almost all of the adolescents expressed a desire for this behaviour. The majority of the other behavioural items were desired by 70-80% of the adolescents. Exception to these percentages were: on one hand, the desire to express own ideas (item 11) that was reported by more of 84% of the adolescents, and, on the other hand, the desire to have a girlfriend/boyfriend (item 9) that was wished by 64% of the adolescents.

Achievement of Autonomy

The frequency of actual achievement of the behavioural items lagged well behind the frequency of their desire (compare A and B in Figure 1). In general, only half of the adolescents had achieved the behaviours that they reported to desire. This gap between desire and achievement is particularly wide in items 4-8 (item 4=28%; item 5=19%; item 6=12%; item 7=27%; item 8=29%) all of them related with different situations of physical separation from the family.

Comparison between Early and Late Adolescents

Two populations of adolescents pertaining to two age groups were compared in order to determine the frequencies of desire and achievement regarding the 11 items of behavioural autonomy. These populations were made up of adolescents in early (12-13 years old) and late (18-19 years old) adolescence. The data in frequencies are shown in Figure 2 (A – desire of autonomous behaviour; B – achievement of the autonomous behaviour). It is pertinent to underline that regarding desire of autonomy the two populations are not different: desire of autonomy is, thus, present since the beginning of adolescence. However, older adolescents scored always higher than the younger ones with regards to the frequency of actual achievement of autonomy (Fig 2B). In order to further investigate these differences, statistical analysis was applied to early and late adolescents, separating them by gender. The data are shown in Tables 2 and 3 (on desire) and in Tables 4 and 5 (on achievement).

Table 2. Association between desire of autonomy and age (early and late teens) in male adolescents. Significant values indicate that early and late teenagers 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. Night Out	10.642 (a)	1	0.001**
5. Out without Notice	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	4.337	3	0.227 *ns*
9. Have Girlfriend	16.725 (a)	1	0.0001***
10. Decide without Advice	6.563 (a)	1	0.01**
11. Own Ideology	20.991 (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.

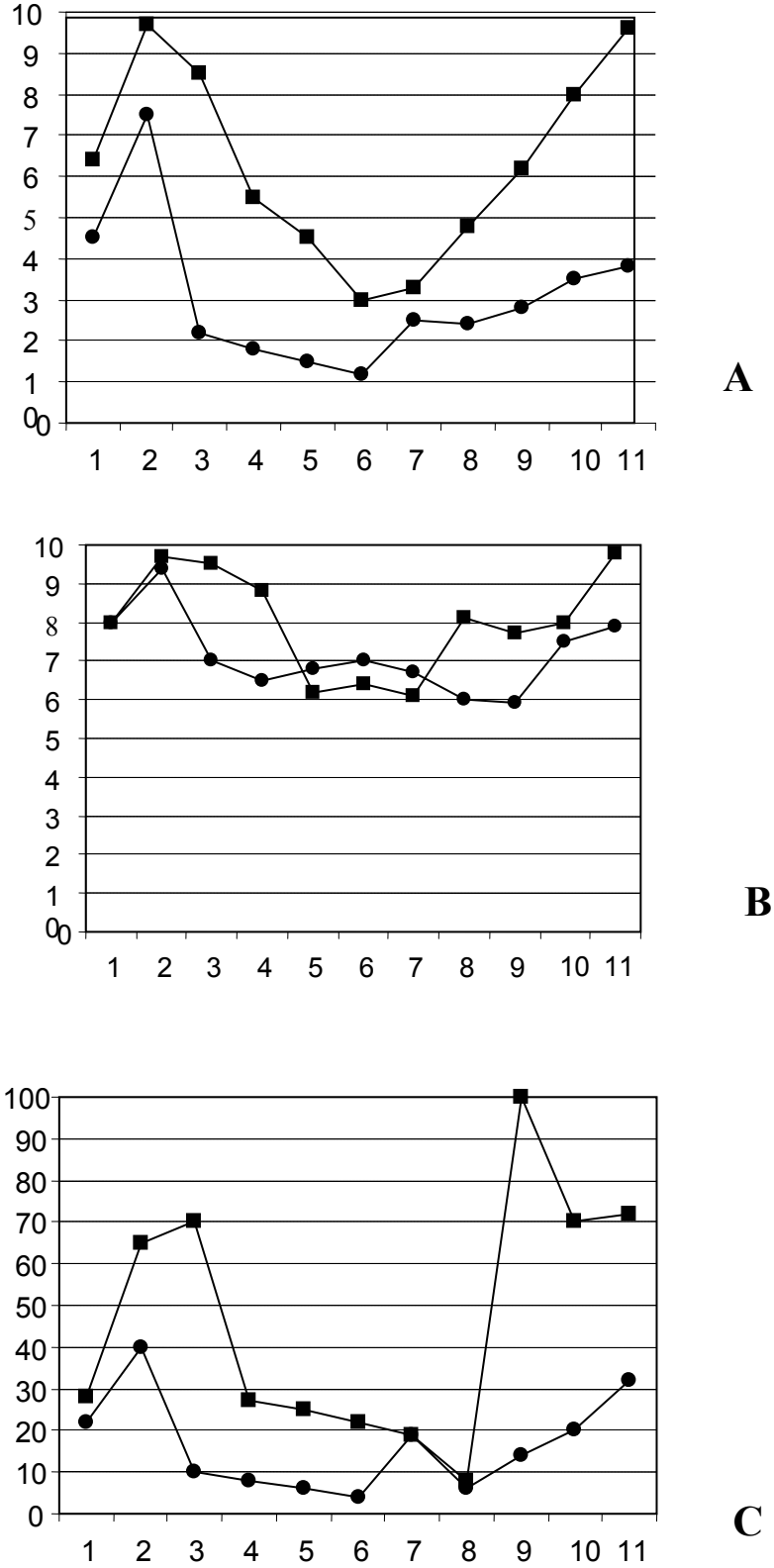

Figure 2. Comparison between older (18-19 years; squares in the figure) and younger (12-13 years; dots in the figure) adolescents with regards to the percentage of youngsters that have expressed desire (A), had achieved (B) or disobeyed to parents (C) with regards to the 11 behaviours of autonomy listed in Table 1.

Table 3. Association between desire of autonomy and age (early and late teens) in female adolescents. Significant values indicate that early and late teenagers are different regarding desire for the autonomy item.

Autonomy Items	*X2*	*df*	*p*
1. Decoration	0.277	3	0.964 *ns*
2. Clothing	0.750	3	0.861 *ns*
3. Money	8.685 (a)	1	0.003**
4. Night Out	3.115 (a)	1	0.077 *ns*
5. Out without Notice	1.423	3	0.7 *ns*
6. Out without Hours	0.490	3	0.921 *ns*
7. Out at Weekends	8.182	3	0.042*
8. Holidays	13.819 (a)	1	0.0001***
9. Have Boyfriend	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 and late teens) in male adolescents. Significant values indicate that early and late teenagers are different regarding achievement for 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. Night Out	125.340 (a)	1	0.0001***
5. Out without Notice	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	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.

Table 5. Association between achievement of autonomy and age (early and late teens) 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. Night Out	24.180 (a)	1	0.0001***
5. Out without Notice	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	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.

Desire for Autonomy

Regarding desire for autonomy behaviours, the statistical comparisons show that: (i) the differences between early and late males are statistically significant for the majority of behavioural items (7 items out of 11) (ii) in contrast, the differences between early and late females are statistically significant for a minority of behavioural items (5 items out of 11); (iii) the most significant age differences that are common to both genders are related to have own set of ideas (item 11) and to manage own money (item3). It may be concluded that significant differences concerning desire were mostly similar between the two populations for almost half of the items studied. Older adolescents reported a higher frequency of desired behaviours than younger ones in what concerned staying out at night (item 4), spending their own money (item 3), enjoying holidays in separate from the family (item 8), and having girlfriend/boyfriend (item 9). Interestingly, 3 of the 4 items related with experiences of physical separation from the family were elected by similar percentages of younger and older adolescents, since they presented no significant differences (Tables 2 and 3).

Achievement of Autonomy

Regarding the achievement of autonomy behaviours, the statistical comparisons show that: (i) the differences between early and late males are statistically significant for all of behavioural items, whereas (ii) early and late females show two items of no significant age difference, and both items (6 and 7) are related to staying out of the family home (Tables 4 and 5). It is pertinent to stress that major gains (i. e., highly significant statistical differences) of older adolescents, males and females, in achievement of autonomy were found with regards to have their own money to spend

(item 3), in the expression of their own ideas on religion, society, and education (item 11), in being able to solve their own problems without the help of the parents (item 10), and in staying out at night (item 4). In contrast, small progress was reported by older female adolescents in the achievement of physical separation from the family (e. g., spending weekends outside the family, item 7; and in having no parent control over the hours of coming in and out of the house, item 5).

Expression of Conflict with Parents

The frequency of disobeying parents in relation with the achievement of behaviours of autonomy is shown in figures 1C and 2C. These data revealed that the decreasing frequency of items of autonomous behaviours that are listed in figure 1 reflected a decrease in the frequency of disobeying behaviours that was reported by the adolescents. Comparison of B and C in figure 1 showed that the items of higher frequency of conflict were also the ones that presented the highest levels of achievement of autonomy, thus pointing for a positive role for actions of disobeying parents in achieving autonomy.

The older group of adolescents reported higher percentages of adolescents referring actions of conflict with parents than younger adolescents. Disobeying parents' advice was reported by virtually all 18-19 year olds with regards to having a girlfriend/boyfriend (item 9). Only 2 items showed similar frequencies of disobeying parents in the two age groups of adolescents: they were both related with physical separation from the family (spending weekends, item 7, or holidays, item 8, outside the family).

Statistical analysis (Tables 6 and 7) revealed that gender differences are particularly striking when comparing changes in behaviours of disobeying to parents between the two age groups of adolescents. In fact, older male teenagers refer a significant difference when compared with younger male teenagers regarding all but one of the 11 items of this dimension. In contrast, in female adolescents only 6 of the 11 items of disobeying parents are scored significantly different between early and late teenagers.

DISCUSSION

This investigation documents the hierarchy of autonomy-related desires of a large population of suburban adolescents, it compares desire of autonomy with its actual achievement, and it evaluates the role of conflict with parents in the advancement of the process of autonomy of the adolescents. The major differences and similarities on autonomy between adolescents in early and late adolescence are illustrated.

A few comments are pertinent regarding the list of behaviour items related to adolescent autonomy that we have identified by the "content analysis" (phase 1 of this study) and that made up the questionnaire that was submitted to the studied population of adolescents. Firstly, the majority of the population of adolescents (63% or more) considered all of the 11 behavioural items of autonomy to be desired, and since early adolescence. This finding confirms the pertinence and consistence of the questionnaire as an appropriate form of *operationalization* of the concept of adolescent autonomy. It is apparent from the herein data that the adolescents do consider that autonomy is a concept that encompasses a wide variety of dimensions. Interestingly, the majority of the items of the herein questionnaire resemble those created by others researchers, namely Murphy *et al* (1963), Poole *et al* (1986), Smith (1985), Moore & Hotch (1981), Moore (1987), Hoffman (1984) and Bosma *et al*. (1996).

Comparison with data from other studies allows the conclusion that, in spite of the influence of different cultures, there are similarities on how adolescents of different nationalities and regions of the world perceive their own autonomy. In fact, autonomy is universally seen as a key value for the adolescent in all investigations reporting data from cultural and social environments other than the one of this study (Konopka, 1983; Meyer, 1988; Williamson & Campbell, 1985; Benaches, 1981; Poole *et al,* 1986; Bosma *et al.*, 1996; Zani *et al.,* 2001).

Although directed to behaviours of the adolescents, the herein questionnaire also offered information on the two other components of autonomy (emotional and value) that have been

Table 6. Association between capacity to disobey and age (early and late teens) 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. Night Out	65.553 (a)	1	0.0001***
5. Out without Notice	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	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 and late teens) 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. Night Out	8.147 (a)	1	0.004**
5. Out without Notice	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	5.915	3	0.115 *ns*
9. Have Girlfriend	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.

proposed before (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Steinberg, 1999). In fact, the 11 ítems may be seen as reflecting the three types of autonomy: behavioural (items 1 to 6), emotional (items 7, 8, 9) and value autonomy (items 10 and 11). The fact that the 11 autonomy-related items were largely desired by almost all of the adolescents, including 12-13 year olders, confirms the well-established concept that autonomy undergoes an elaborated and dynamic construction during adolescence. Clearly, our results confirm that the process of autonomy involves different dimensions, namely those related with emotional, physical and cognitive separation from parents, reflecting the central positioning that autonomy plays in the psyche of adolescents (see, for instance, Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986; Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Steinberg, 1990, 1999).

The 11 autonomy items chosen by the adolescents can be organized in components that illuminate the concept of autonomy as the adolescents consider it, namely narcissism ("love for own image", Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967), disengagement ("ability to have less parental control", Moore, 1987), self-reliance ("acting on their own accord", Steinberg, 1999). The narcissistic component of psychological development of the adolescent, which is closely linked to body image, was present in all of the items in the list. In particular, it was expressed, explicitly, in items 1 and 2 (room decoration; dressing code and hair style) and indirectly in the desire to establish new and extra-familiar relationships and to distance from familiar control (expressing the desire of being attractive to and appreciated by others). The disengagement component was also present: separation from the family, at least during a transient period used to explore the outside world, was an attractive goal for the adolescents, and it was stated through items 4-8 (referring different ways of staying out of the family home). The desire for emotional autonomy from the family was clearly depicted in item 9 (having a girlfriend/boyfriend). Self-reliance was present in items 10 and 11 that reflect the need to acquire a rationale to offer a foundation for several behaviours of autonomy.

It was interesting to find that the autonomy items most valued by the adolescents were those that triggered conflict with their parents. In fact, the items most cited by the studied population of adolescents were found to be the same that were the most frequently reported by the adolescents as source of actions of disobeying parents. In fact, we found an almost perfect correspondence between the achievement level that an item was referred (Fig. 1B) and the frequency level that the same item was cited as being a reason for disobeying parents (Fig. 1C).

Our data was obtained with a population of suburban youngsters from Southwest Europe (Matosinhos, Portugal). It is interesting to state that adolescents have, in general, referred the same kinds of autonomy-related behaviours that have been described in other regions of the Western world and along several decades (Murphy et al., 1963; Moore & Hotch, 1981; Smith, 1985; Poole at al., 1986; Moore, 1987; Bosma *et al.* 1996). Individual autonomy has been recently reported also to be a salient aspect of Chinese adolescents' social reasoning (Helwig et al., 2003). Differences with regards to emotional autonomy and social outcomes were found in distinct ethnic groups (Asian and European) of Americans (Chen, 1999). Thai Muslim adolescents also chose autonomy as a key feature of their desires (Anderson & Anderson, 1986).

The herein study has identified the major differences between early and late adolescence on the frequency that autonomy is desired. In fact, if nearly early adolescents expressed the desire "to dress and choose hairstyle as I please", older adolescents expressed more frequently that younger ones the wish to staying out at night, spending their own money, enjoying holidays separated from the family, and having a girlfriend/boyfriend. This indicates that the enhanced in frequency of desire of autonomy, as adolescents grow older, does not involve all of the behavioural components of autonomy. This is additional evidence for adolescent autonomy not to be unidimentional in nature, in agreement with what was originally proposed by Steinberg and Silverberg (1986).

The process of autonomy has been found to play a central role in the development of the adolescent since there are reports of a frequent association between adolescent psychopathology and how the youngster desired and achieved separation from his/her parents (Fleming, 1983, 1992a; Chou, 2000; Pavlidis & McCauley, 2001; Frank et al., 2002). Parent attachment and autonomy support was found to be associated with scholastic competence of the adolescents (Wong et al., 2002). Schoenrock et al. (1999) have proposed that family variables, such as family support, are more strongly associated with social competence of the adolescent than personal autonomy. Pinquart & Silbereisen (2002) have described that changes in mothers' connectedness with their

children paralleled the changes in adolescents, with a significant increase in connectedness with older adolescents in comparison with younger ones; there was also a decreased connectedness in younger adolescents and an increase in older ones. An explanation may be found in the behavioural changes that our results indicate: the adolescents get closer and closer to the adult patterns of behaviour and this change may decrease the differences between generations, thus facilitating their connectedness.

The psychosocial outcome of adolescents' autonomy have been shown to depend on the authoritativeness of the family (Fleming, 1992b); for instance, behavioural autonomy is associated to lower school grades and higher levels of deviant behaviour when authoritativeness was partially out but not when authoritativeness was evident (Beyers & Goossens, 1999). Impairment of adolescents' autonomy by parents may lead to expression of enhanced hostility when the youngster reaches early adulthood (e. g., 25 years old), as it was shown by Allen *et al.* (2002). These questions deserve further investigation.

CONCLUSION

Our results show that autonomy items (e. g., spending weekends outside the family, and having no control by parents regarding coming in and out of the house), that presented no differences in frequency of desire between younger and older adolescents, were mostly the same that had no difference between the two age groups in the frequency of achievement. This finding documents that the advancement in personal autonomy during the late years of adolescence is not a given feature of growing into adulthood, but rather that it requires an increased desire of the adolescent to fight for his/her autonomy. Some of the data of the herein study extends previous investigations (Figueiredo *et al*., 1983, 1985; Meyer, 1988; Bosma *et al.,* 2001; Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2002) and, therefore, may be considered to be expected findings. For instances, there was a higher percentage of older than young adolescents that achieved autonomy behaviours. Also, older adolescents disobeyed parents more than did younger ones. In contrast, it was surprising that only small differences were found between the two age groups with regards to the frequency that adolescents expressed desire for the 11 items of behaviour of autonomy. Taken this together with the results on the differences in frequency of disobeying parents between the two groups, it is pertinent to propose that it is the capacity of the adolescent to fight for his autonomy (and, of course, of the family to accept the adolescent's desire of autonomy) that is the key mediator of achievement of autonomous behaviours by the adolescents, as they undergo the transition to adulthood. Our results may contribute to improve health care and educational programs and expand previous results (Hanna & Guthrie, 2003; Pinto, 2004).

Finally, the herein data support the following conclusions: (i) Autonomy has to be conquered by the adolescent (namely through disobeying parents´ rules in order to alter/negotiate another ones); this achievement is related with the assumption of the body and the conquest of a mental space to think by one self and to establish relationships outside the family. (ii) The desire of autonomy is probably the psychological event that "pulls" the adolescent through the separation-individuation process from early to late adolescence (Blos, 1967). (iii) The passage from desire into the capacity of being autonomous is, in most cases, obtained through challenges to the parents' authority, and this conflict leads to a mature intra-psychic transformations and important modifications in parent-adolescents interactions (iv) The sequence of behavioural items that increase in adolescence follows a pattern that starts from a more narcissistic dimension into a more relational one, i. e., into decision-making abilities and feelings of self-reliance.

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