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Adolescent Autonomy---A Thing to be Redefined in Indian Families

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Abstract:

This review paper depicts two different perspectives about adolescent autonomy and traces the history of conceptual development of adolescent autonomy in psychology. Autonomy supportive parenting as put forward by Self determination theory is found to be best way for ensuring autonomous development of adolescents. Study observes that Indian families under collectivistic culture was always reluctant to autonomous functioning of adolescents. Misconceptions and lack of proper awareness about the very concept of autonomy exhorted this trend in Indian families. Lately, influx of individualistic culture due to globalization has made autonomy supportive parenting a necessity in Indian families with adolescents, as traditional parenting standards and values are losing their ground in parent-adolescent relationship. Study observes, suitable parental training programmes aimed to sensitize parents about various aspects of adolescent autonomous functioning as the remedy to the situation.

Keywords: Adolescents, autonomy, parenting, family, self determination theory

1. Introduction

As for any growing human organism autonomy is a fundamental need of an adolescent. Autonomy, as a journey from total dependence in infancy to self-reliant social being, is an intrinsically driven process. Quest for identity operates side by side with it. At the same time, curbing and molding this spontaneous onward course of autonomy in order to suit to the demands of family, society or culture is a part of disciplining, mentoring and socializing an adolescent. Maccoby (1984) observes that autonomy develops through three phases, beginning with parental regulation of children to increasing co-regulation between children and parent to eventual self regulation of the individual.

As any other innate psychological need, this need too is orchestrated to operate in the back-drop of intrinsically motivated forces. That is, it has its own working principles. Extrinsic motivation applied by socializing agencies like family or school for guiding adolescent is safe as far as it is in harmony with the principles of development of autonomy that is organismically programmed for spontaneous unfolding.

Extrinsic motivation in the form of rewards and other contingencies intended to discipline the adolescent, if encroaches the serenity and freedom ensured by automatic unfolding, may thwart natural course of autonomy. As a consequence, adolescent is compelled to fit his actions and behaviors to the external demands at the cost of individual life satisfaction and well-being. To state in the lexicon of need theories and humanistic theories, in such situations, individual's self-actualization tendencies will be at stake. And this is very much true since autonomy; a developmental outcome of adolescence encompasses his emotional, behavioral, cognitive and social aspects of his life. It fuels his self-reliance and growth towards a matured adult all the while restructuring his relationship with social world.

2. Autonomy and Parenting

In the scenario of parenting and family, there were two distinct perspectives through which the construct of adolescent autonomy evolved. These two constructs differed mainly in "degree and kind of detachment" attributed to the concept of autonomy in adolescents. Initial perspectives of adolescent autonomy relied on complete detachment and disengagement from parents (Bos 1979, Freud, 1958). This perspective tried to depict autonomy of adolescence within the strict walls of separation-- individuation theory. Autonomy, here was akin to severing emotional ties with parents and developing increased dependence on peers (Steinberg & Silverberg 1986, Hill& Holmbeck, 1986). According to this parents and peers exert opposite influence on adolescents. And peer influence was often one of the many causes of conflict between parents and adolescents. Conflicts between parents and adolescents were considered as "normal conflictual condition" (Blos 1979, P.77) and a necessary precursor for development in autonomy. But empirical studies that took place side by side, which measured autonomy in terms of "degree of detachment" from parents and family showed negative association with the well-being of adolescents. For example studies with emotional autonomy scale (Steinberg & Silverberg 1986) which measured autonomy, in terms of adolescent's self-reliance and independence from parents found that such emotional autonomy exhibited association with negative outcomes such as distress,

deviant behavior, lower school grades and lower feelings of connectedness with family members (Beyers & Goossens, 1999; Ryan and Lynch, 1989)

Such observations might have led to a need for redefining the initial concept of autonomy in adolescent phase of development. During 1980's and 1990's many developmentalists challenged the above described perspective of autonomy. They proposed that autonomy does not necessitate the severing of childish ties with parental figures (e.g., Allen, et al., 1994a, 1994b; Collins, 1989; Collins & Repinski, 1994; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Steinberg, 1990). Kobak and Cole (1994) viewed autonomy as a transaction between individual and interpersonal environment. Grotevant and Cooper (1986) argued that autonomy is not an intra-psychic phenomenon characterized by independence of individuals from significant others, instead it involved a reciprocal interaction between higher levels of connectedness with parents that co-exist with higher levels of personal individuation. Responsible autonomous functioning and self-regulation is characterized by attachments and connections to caregivers that have undergone a healthy transformation (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). The perspective of autonomy that gained popularity among modern family psychologists and psychotherapists is the one which is based upon close relationship with parents. It differed from the former perspectives of autonomy in its explanation of the path through which adolescents accomplish autonomy. Evidences kept on reiterating that adolescents achieve autonomy not through emotional detachment but through supportive relationship with parents. For example, Hill & Holembeck (1986) in the study titled "Attachment and autonomy during adolescents" gave cogent empirical proof for the fact that autonomy always co-existed with positive family interactions. A common theme underlying these observations is that autonomy requires a "sense of agency" that provide a psychological support in its onward course.

The most revolutionary among those who adhered to the above mentioned perspective of autonomy were Ryan and Deci. Self-determination theory put forward by Ryan and Deci (1985) view autonomy as a construct imbued with self-determination rather than "self-reliance" or "independence", yet, orthogonal to independence or emotional detachment (Ryan 1993). According to this, autonomy and dependence are not opposites (Ryan & Lynch 1989) Being autonomous or self regulated means being self governing and being the initiator of one's own actions. Such actions are freely or intrinsically endorsed and draw impetus from integrated and internalized values and interests (Deci & Ryan 1985, 2000) rather than from external rewards and contingencies. Non-autonomous actions are guided by controlled (mostly external) self-regulation. People act just because they have no other choice than to engage in activity. Pressure from society, reward or some other forms of contingencies by significant others initiates and sustains individual's behaviors or actions.

Bandura's (1986) view gives more meticulous explanation for this perspective. According to him, autonomy as a basic psychological need does not function on its own and environment does not simply endow this faculty into the system of human being. Rather, individuals gradually build up this ability to regulate one's own cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects of life from the previous episodes of transactions with the environment. To actualize this, individual must engage in self regulatory practices and mold particular form of relations with others so as to forge a new sense of relatedness amidst the process of being autonomous.

Kobak and cole (1994) recognizes "meta-monitoring" which includes the ability to monitor one's own models of self and others, reflect on these models and revise them if necessary. In familial context, early attachment to parents may facilitate or impede child's development of "meta-monitoring". Adolescent's ability to be autonomous is nothing but his growing capability for meta-monitoring. Meta-monitoring does not create a detachment or disengagement from parents but adolescents revise the models of their relationship with parents. In other words increasing autonomy brings forth a transformation (Collins, 1990, 1995)-- but not detachment-- in their relationships with parents. Moreover, studies vouch for the positive consequences associated with acting in self-determined or autonomous way (Deci & Ryan 2000; Vallerand, 1997) particularly in the optimal functioning and well-being of adolescents in diverse domains (Deci & Ryan 2000; Grolnick et al 1997).

3. Autonomy Supportive Parenting

Self determination theory (SDT) depicts autonomy as one of the basic psychological needs which is inherent in the individual and draws on organismic principles to elucidate its operational nature. Any threat to the satisfaction of this need is detrimental to the well-functioning of organism. Growth towards autonomy operates in conjunction with social forces and SDT recognizes two types of social environments. They are environment that support autonomy and that do not support autonomy. An "autonomy supportive" home environment is indispensable for adolescent optimal functioning and well-being and parents are considered as the sole architectures of it. In the parlance of SDT, autonomy supportive parenting is characterized by

1. Recognizing and respecting the feelings and perspectives of the child
2. Offering choices and encouraging initiatives
3. Providing rationale and explanation for behavioral limits
4. Minimizing use of control

Autonomy supportive parents display an authentic interest in their children's needs and whereabouts and never manipulate the bond with their children for their own good (Ryan and Solky 1996).

Reeve & Jang (2006) lists out some practices of autonomy supportive parenting.

- Tuning in to the child's needs and interests
- Listening to help identify and articulate—as clearly and completely as possible—these needs and interests, as well as the particular outcomes the child is interested in achieving
- Resisting the urge to impose their own agenda, interests, and goals on the child
- Helping the child design, selects, and implements strategies to
- achieve self-determined goals

- Supplying any needed resources to implement the strategies the child has selected

In the same vein, parental practices that hamper autonomous unfolding are

- Insisting that a child subscribe to the parents' own agenda, interests, and goals (e.g., selecting a topic the parents think is of interest and directing the child to work on this topic)
- Supplying a child with solutions or answers
- Minimizing a child's sense of choice by employing "ought," "should," and "must" statements when discussing a school activity
- Telling the child what the standard of success must be.

A number of parenting behaviors such as warmth, connection, involvement, monitoring and autonomy support, joint decision making, lack of psychological control, emotional autonomy as capable of imparting positive influence in adolescent behaviors and outcomes (Allen et al., 1994a, 1994b; Barber, 1996; Barber & Olsen, 1997; Brown et al., 1993; Eccles et al., 1997; Gray & Steinberg, 1999) has been recognized by the researchers as autonomy supportive. Psychological control, a phenomenon increasingly studied in the field today is considered as behaviors that constrain or limit the development of autonomy (Barber, 1996). Feelings of being externally coerced and compelled are accompanied by developmental disadvantages (Harter, 1999; Higgins, 1991; Ryan, et al., 1995, 1997). When parents dictate what a child should do, how it should be done, and how success is to be defined, the child is less likely to see the task as valuable or important and, as a result, less likely to be motivated to perform the task. According to Harter (1999), adolescents who fail to move to internal standards but continue to rely on external standards and feedback will not develop an internalized, relatively stable sense of self which is the necessary ingredient in identity development.

4. Indian Families and Adolescents

This perspective of autonomy support is something which is yet to be assimilated by parenting practices in collectivistic societies like India. Indian families promote social cohesion and interdependence in families. For Indians, the goal of parenting is not to provide the children with sufficient skills to leave the family but to instill a sense of obligation and duty to the family, to function interdependently (Saraswathi and Dutta, 2010) and to recognize the needs of others (Paiva, 2008). Attempts of adolescents to be autonomous is often checked against collectivistic values and standards cherished by the family and related parental beliefs and practices. Parents and families do not acknowledge the organismic principle under which the need for autonomy functions and fails to tap the potential of intrinsic forces which fuels autonomy in the process of disciplining and socializing adolescents. Parents often mistook autonomy for "separation" or "detachment" and viewed the prospect of adolescent autonomy often with trepidation. Thus adolescent's autonomy related issues in the familial contexts are rooted mainly in care taker's lack of awareness of dynamics of autonomy as a psychological need and its possibilities to flourish within the boundaries of strong emotional bonds with the significant others. Today, this lack of awareness of caretakers is likely to pose a serious threat to adolescents of Indian families compared to their counter parts two or three decades ago. Because, Indian family is in transition thanks to globalization and consequent depletion in traditional, cultural standards (Das, 2002; Siddiqui, 2007). Globalization came with ideas and values emphasizing individualism. (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Verma & Saraswathi, 2002). The changes in socio-economic-political-cultural milieu of Indian society have led to changes in the structures, functions, roles, relationships and values of family. Norms of interpersonal relationships are gradually becoming more egalitarian and reciprocal (Kashyap, 2004) and there is emergence of modern Indians breaking with traditions. This fluid transitional state of Indian families causes ambiguities in roles, responsibilities, relationships, values and models of emulation and the family emotional support structure is weakening (Aparajita, 2011). And there is a weakening of collectivistic standards and values in families. Families are compelled to strike a balance amidst the influx of individualistic culture in which individual autonomy is exhorted and respected. Hence in this era need for autonomy of an adolescent in an Indian family may assume the form of a cantankerous or even rebellious urge if not met with a proper channel for unfolding. Parents should be cautious to pay heed to this need of their adolescent progenies and ensure that it is respected and acknowledged in their daily behavioral transactions with adolescents.

Indian parenting scenario is yet to come to terms with such new demands. Parenting is at crossroads. It has lost hold on traditionally set standards but has not established itself in any alternative effective strategies. What parents can do is to make up their minds and develop a trust in the natural forces that guides in autonomous development of their children. Parental training programmes should equip the parents with the essential know-how for experimenting and implementing tenets of autonomy supportive parenting. As parenting is the cardinal agency for developing self-determined, healthy, autonomous personalities, parental intervention is the best way for addressing issues related to adolescent autonomy.

5. References

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