

Autonomy and Parental Attachment in Traditional-Age Undergraduate Women

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Abstract:

A different pattern of autonomy development than that described by Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) was found among 325 traditional-age female undergraduates who completed the Iowa Developing Autonomy Inventory (Jackson & Hood, 1985) and the Parental Attachment Questionnaire (Kenny, 1987a). Although students displayed increased autonomy with class year, they displayed no decreased attachment to parents. Students also displayed later development of autonomy than described in Chickering's model. Differences in parental attachment were found by racial or ethnic group.

Article:

All too often the importance of the family of origin in college students' lives is overlooked or ignored by student affairs practitioners (Cohen, 1985). In its description of college students' autonomy development, Chickering's theory of psychosocial development in college students (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) tends to provide support for this approach. In this model, Chickering describes this task as being primary in the early college years and describes three aspects of autonomy development: emotional independence, instrumental independence, and the recognition of interdependence. The model describes the process of developing emotional independence as beginning with disengagement from parents and proceeding through reliance on peers and nonparental adults. In the recent revision of *Education and Identity* (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), the autonomy vector has been renamed "moving through autonomy to interdependence," to place greater emphasis on the aspect of interdependence. However, the position of the autonomy vector in the model (i.e., the early college years) and its content and process remain basically unchanged from the 1969 iteration of the model (Chickering, 1969).

The perspective of adolescence as a time of conflict with and ultimate separation from parents is derived from psychodynamic theory and from clinical work with troubled adolescents (Kenny, 1987b). However, King (1973) asserted that the generalization of data drawn from clinical work may not accurately describe the normative experience of healthy college students. The family can serve as an important social support for the individual (Caplan, 1982). Holohan and Moos (1981) suggested that family support is important in helping individuals cope with life changes. Kenny (1987b) observed that "family ties . . . provide a source of support through the leaving home period and beyond" (p. 438). Both theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Walters, & Wally, 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1988) and research (Henton, Lamke, Murphy, & Haynes, 1980) have suggested that parental attachment and family support provide the necessary base for autonomy development in college students, in contrast to Chickering's description of autonomy development in which the necessary first step is breaking away from parents (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Of particular concern is the applicability of the process described by Chickering (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) to women students. A number of theorists of women's development (Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987; Miller, 1986) have emphasized the centrality of relationships to women's

development. Given the importance of connections and relationships throughout women's lives, relationships with parents could be expected to be of particular importance to undergraduate women's development. Kenny and Donaldson (1991) found that women students were significantly more attached to parents than were men. Researchers (Straub, 1987; Straub & Rodgers, 1986; Taub, 1995; Taub & McEwen, 1991) have raised questions about Chickering's description of autonomy and women's development, related both to the timing of the vector and the content.

Although Chickering's model (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) suggests that autonomy development, including disengagement from the parents, is a task of the early college years, Straub and Rodgers (1986) and Taub and McEwen (1991) have suggested that autonomy development occurs relatively late in the college years for undergraduate women. Most of the research on parental attachment and family support has focused on first-year college students and the transition to college; little is known about the importance of family to college students beyond their first year (Kenny, 1987b, 1990).

Although a number of writers (Chew & Ogi, 1987; Hughes, 1987; McEwen, Roper, Bryant & Langa, 1990; Quevedo-Garcia, 1987; Wright, 1987) have asserted the importance of family to students of color, the importance of family support and parental attachment has been studied in mostly White populations (e.g., Renton et al., 1980; Kenny, 1987a, 1990; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991, 1992; Rich & Bonner, 1987). Therefore, little empirical evidence is available concerning the importance of parental attachment to students of color.

As part of a larger study on the developmental vector of autonomy in traditional-age undergraduate women, this researcher explored autonomy and parental attachment in undergraduate women. The purpose of the study was to examine whether autonomy and parental attachment in a diverse group of undergraduate women varied by class year, as suggested by the Chickering model (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The primary research questions were: Does autonomy vary by class year, as suggested by the Chickering model (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993)? Does parental attachment vary by class year, as suggested by the Chickering model? A secondary research question was: Does parental attachment vary by race or ethnicity?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were traditional-age (ages 16 to 25) undergraduate women enrolled at a large, public, predominantly White, mid-Atlantic university. A random sample of 628 undergraduate women was generated using equal allocation stratification by residence status, class year, and race or ethnicity (African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latina, and White); cells were slightly uneven due to an inability to fill all cells completely. Completed instruments were received from 331 participants; 4 packets were returned as undeliverable, yielding a response rate of 53.3%. Six responses were eliminated from the analysis because the respondents were older than 25. Analyses were performed on 325 responses: 73 African American women, 87 Asian women, 62 Latinas, and 88 White women. The mean age of participants was 20.06 ($SD = 1.65$). Resident students made up 58.2% of the respondents; commuters made up 41.8%. Of those students identified as commuters, 64.7% lived with parents or other relatives, 30.1% lived in off-campus rental housing, and 5.1% lived in their own homes or other off-campus arrangements.

Instrumentation

Iowa Developing Autonomy Inventory (IDAI). The IDAI (Jackson & Hood, 1985) consists of 90 items designed to measure the development of autonomy as described by Chickering (1969). Participants responded using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never characteristic of me*) to 5 (*almost always characteristic of me*). The IDAI measures the three aspects of autonomy as defined by Chickering (1969), using six 15-item subscales: emotional independence (Emotional Independence-Parents and Emotional Independence-Peers), instrumental independence (Time Management, Money Management, and Mobility), and interdependence (Interdependence) (Hood & Jackson, 1986). Hood and Jackson (1986) reported internal consistency reliability coefficients of .94 for the entire instrument and from .77 to .88 for the subscales. In the current study an internal consistency coefficient (alpha) of .92 was obtained for the entire instrument, and coefficients from .72 to .85

were obtained for the subscales. Hood and Jackson (1986) reported "considerable construct validity" for the total inventory and the subscales based on relationships found between the scales and demographic variables. Winston and Miller (1987) used the IDAI in establishing the validity of the Academic Autonomy task and the Emotional Autonomy subtask of the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI) and found the SDTLI task of Academic Autonomy to be significantly correlated with the IDAI Time Management subscale (.50) and the Emotional Autonomy subtask to be significantly correlated with the entire IDAI (.34) and the subscales Emotional Independence-Parents (.41), Money Management (.32), and Emotional Independence-Peers (.42).

Parental Attachment Questionnaire. Parental attachment was measured using the Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ) (Kenny, 1987a), designed to assess attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978) in adolescents and young adults. The PAQ consists of 55 items, which make up three scales: Affective Quality of Attachment, Parental Fostering of Autonomy, and Parental Role in Providing Emotional Support. The PAQ assesses "perceived parental availability; understanding, acceptance, respect, and facilitation of autonomy; students' interest in interaction with parents and students' affect toward parents during visits; student help-seeking behavior in situations of stress; and students' satisfaction with help obtained from parents" (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991, p. 480). Item responses were obtained using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Responses to items for each subscale are summed to obtain each subscale score. The PAQ asks for a single rating for both parents; pilot studies indicated no significant differences between ratings assigned to mothers and those assigned to fathers (Kenny, 1987a).

Two-week test-retest reliability was found to be .92 for the entire PAQ and ranged from .82 to .91 for the subscales. Internal consistency reliability coefficients for the entire PAQ were found to be .95 for women and .93 for men and ranged from .88 to .96 for the subscales (Kenny, 1987a). In the current study, internal consistency reliability coefficients (alpha) were found to be .95 for Affective Quality of Relationship, .88 for Parental Fostering of Autonomy, and .82 for Parental Role in Providing Emotional Support. Kenny and Donaldson (1991) reported validity evidence in a comparison of the PAQ to the Family Environment Scales (FES) (Moos, 1985). They found that the PAQ scales were significantly correlated with the scales of the FES to which they are related, and they found no significant correlations between the scales of the PAQ and the scales of the FES to which the PAQ is conceptually unrelated.

As part of a larger study, a multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to test differences in means by class year on the PAQ and a measure of racial or ethnic identity (not reported in this article). The results of the MANOVA and of the follow-up univariate analyses are reported here. Differences in autonomy by class year were examined using ANOVA. In all cases the significance level was set at .05.

Procedure

A packet containing the instruments, a brief demographic questionnaire, a cover letter describing the study, a response postcard, and a return envelope was mailed during the Fall 1992 semester to each selected student at her local address. The initial mailing was followed up by mail 1 week and 2 weeks following the initial mailing. Four weeks after the initial mailing follow-up phone calls were made to non-respondents.

RESULTS

Significant differences by class level were found in Autonomy $F(3, 321) = 4.53, p < .001$. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1. Pairwise comparisons showed that seniors scored significantly higher than first-year students and juniors. No other significant differences by class level were revealed.

Of the six IDAI subscales, significant differences by class level were found on three: Time Management, $F(3, 321) = 3.87, p < .01$; Money Management, $F(3, 321) = 6.45, p < .001$; and Emotional Independence-peers, $F(3, 321) = 3.14, p < .05$. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) results for the subscales are shown in Table 1. Means and standard deviations by class level for 648 the subscales Time Management, Money Management, and Emotional Independence-Peers are reported in Table 2.

TABLE 1.
Analyses of Variance of IDAI Subscales by Class Level

Source	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob
Time Management					
Between Groups	3	1005.04	335.02	3.87	.01
Within Groups	321	27807.88	86.63		
Total	324				
Money Management					
Between Groups	3	1797.97	599.32	6.45	.00
Within Groups	321	29836.91	92.95		
Total	324				
Emotional Independence- Peers					
Between Groups	3	641.83	213.94	3.14	.03
Within Groups	321	21905.32	68.24		
Total	324				
Interdependence					
Between Groups	3	174.81	58.27	1.33	.26
Within Groups	321	14073.76	43.84		
Total	324				
Emotional Independence- Parents					
Between Groups	3	110.66	36.88	0.43	.73
Within Groups	321	27627.04	86.06		
Total	324				
Mobility					
Between Groups	3	339.02	113.00	1.22	.30
Within Groups	321	29866.14	93.04		
Total	324				

Pairwise comparisons showed that seniors scored significantly higher on the Time Management subscale than any of the other three class levels. Pairwise comparisons showed that seniors scored significantly higher than first-year students or sophomores and that juniors scored significantly higher than first-year students on Journal of College Student Development Autonomy and Parental Attachment the Money Management subscale. Pairwise comparisons showed that seniors scored significantly higher than first-year students on the Emotional Independence-Peers subscale.

As part of a larger analysis, a MANOVA was performed to test differences in means by class year and race or ethnicity on the scales measuring parental attachment. No significant differences by class year were found in parental attachment. The analysis showed significant results by race or ethnicity, Wilks's Lambda = .68, $F(20, 995.94) = 6.19, p < .000$. No significant interaction effects were found.

Because the MANOVA showed significant effects for race or ethnicity on the PAQ, ANOVAs were performed for each of the three parental attachment scales. Significant differences by race or ethnicity were found for Affective Quality of Relationship with Parents, $F(4, 319) = 5.92, p < .000$; Parental Fostering of Autonomy, $F(4, 319) = 6.31, p < .000$; and Parental Role in Providing Emotional Support, $F(4, 319) = 3.04, p < .05$. Means and standard deviations by race or ethnicity for the parental attachment scales are reported in Table 3.

Pairwise comparisons showed that the scores on the Affective Quality of Parental Relationship subscale and the scores on the Parental Fostering of Autonomy subscale were significantly higher for White women, Latinas, and African American women than for Asian women. Pairwise comparisons showed that the scores on the Parental Role in Providing Emotional Support subscale were significantly higher for Latinas than for Asian women. No other significant differences were found by race or ethnicity in parental attachment.

TABLE 2.
Scores on Entire Iowa Developing Autonomy Inventory (IDAI)
Autonomy Scale and Time Management, Money Management, and
Emotional Independence-Peers Subscales by Class Level ($N = 325$)

Class Level	Autonomy (Entire IDAI Scale)		Time Mgmt Subscale		Money Mgmt Subscale		Emotional Ind.- Peers Subscale	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
First-year ($n = 61$)	310.02	35.15	51.56	10.61	48.72	8.54	51.31	8.11
Sophomore ($n = 75$)	320.48	31.53	52.48	7.96	51.09	10.30	54.97	8.09
Junior ($n = 91$)	317.66	35.78	53.10	10.05	52.65	9.20	52.82	8.87
Senior ($n = 98$)	329.57	32.64	56.14	8.65	55.33	10.15	54.74	7.89

TABLE 3.
Means and Standard Deviations for Parental Attachment Scales by Race/Ethnicity

Group	Affective Quality of Relationship		Fostering of Autonomy		Providing Emotional Support	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
African American ($n = 73$)	97.32	15.37	52.23	10.41	47.45	8.34
Asian ($n = 87$)	85.04	18.98	46.44	10.40	44.40	8.11
Latina ($n = 62$)	95.48	14.36	53.00	10.10	48.98	6.94
White ($n = 88$)	92.73	18.60	53.17	9.98	47.27	9.12
Mixed Race/Ethnicity ($n = 14$)	89.36	21.40	47.79	13.80	47.21	10.20

DISCUSSION

Differences by Class Year in Autonomy

Seniors were found to be significantly more autonomous than both first-year students and juniors. The direction of this difference is consistent with theory (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and research (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Taub & McEwen, 1991). Although the direction of the difference is consistent with Chickering's theory, statistically significant gains in this vector were not seen until the senior year in this study, which is not consistent with Chickering's model. Using a general measure of autonomy, previous researchers (Taub & McEwen, 1991) found seniors to be significantly more autonomous than those in the other 3 class years and found seniors to be significantly more autonomous than first-year students and juniors on a measure of academic autonomy.

This study and previous research (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Jordan-Cox, 1987; Straub & Rodgers, 1986; Taub & McEwen, 1991) indicate that women gain autonomy late in their college careers instead of in the early

college years, as Chickering described (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Autonomy may seem a less desirable state to women, whose development and socialization stress connectedness, compared to men (Gilligan, 1982). In the context of connectedness, disengagement from parents, reduced dependence on peers, and freedom from needs for reassurance, approval, and affection—all descriptions of autonomy in the Chickering model—may not be felt as a need or may not even be welcome.

Demands of the senior year may compel seniors to be more autonomous. Erikson (1964) described the role that society's and social institutions' demands and expectations play in psychosocial development. As the end of the college years approaches, senior women have most likely seen many of their close friends leave school. These experiences with separation may have resulted in reduced dependence on peers. As the end of college approaches, senior women may also begin to focus on their own separation from the peers and social and institutional structures that have sustained them throughout their college years. Anticipation of their own separation from these significant people, places, and routines may trigger increased autonomy. Also, seniors recognize the end of college as a time for deciding about their future and acting on their decisions. This recognition may stimulate increased instrumental independence—"the ability to carry on activities and to cope with problems without seeking help, and the ability to be mobile in relation to one's own needs and desires" (Chickering, 1969, p. 58). In addition, seniors face the developmental task that Chickering termed "clarifying purposes": making decisions about "avocational and recreational interests, vocational plans and aspirations, and general life-style considerations" (p. 16). These decisions may both require and spur increased autonomy, as students distinguish their own interests and plans from those of their peers.

Seniors were found to be significantly better at time management, an aspect of instrumental independence, than students in the other class years. Although one might reasonably assume that experience would teach one time management skills, the sudden improvement during the senior year is surprising. Perhaps impending graduation, combined with the demands of a job search or application to graduate or professional school and schoolwork, requires seniors to be better managers of time. Impending graduation may motivate seniors to become better time managers so that they can meet their graduation requirements and graduate on schedule. No longer can one make up a course or meet a requirement sometime later and still graduate "on time."

Seniors were found to be significantly better at money management, another aspect of instrumental independence, than first-year students or sophomores, and juniors were found to be significantly better at money management than first-year students. Again, this would appear to be a skill that experience teaches and society expects. The gradual increase in the means appears to support this.

Seniors were found to be significantly more emotionally independent from peers than first-year students. Apparently, emotional independence from peers comes later for the women students in this study than described in the Chickering model (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The experience over the college years of seeing friends leave school and the anticipation of one's own separation from one's friends may spur this aspect of development. In addition, as seniors grapple with the developmental tasks of the vectors of clarifying purposes and developing integrity (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), they may both require and develop greater independence from peers as they sort out their own values and priorities. Once again, this study indicates that women students experience emotional independence from peers *prior to* emotional independence from parents in their achievement of autonomy—the opposite of the process described by theory (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

No significant differences by class year were found for the other three autonomy subscales: Emotional Independence-Parents, Mobility, or Interdependence. If women do experience significant gains in these areas, these may occur after they graduate from college.

Differences by Class Year in Parental Attachment

Interestingly, although autonomy did increase significantly with class year in this sample, parental attachment did not decrease significantly. As Kenny (1990) observed about her similar findings regarding parental

attachment, this finding "challenge[s] the simplistic view that gains in autonomy are achieved during the college years as ties with family wane" (p. 45). In addition, the women in this study displayed significant gains in emotional independence from peers but no significant gains in emotional independence from parents.

In combination with the findings about parental attachment, this finding supports the existence of an entirely different process or sequence of autonomy development for women from that described by the Chickering model (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In the conceptualization of the development of autonomy in the Chickering model, the first step is breaking away from parents, and then development proceeds to attachment to peers and independence from peers, and finally culminates in the recognition and acceptance of interdependence. This conceptualization may not be appropriate for college women. The findings of this study suggest that undergraduate women may become more autonomous without experiencing a break in parental attachment.

Differences by Race or Ethnicity in Parental Attachment

White women, Latinas, and African American women had significantly higher scores on the Parental Fostering of Autonomy subscale than did Asian women in this study, and Latinas had significantly higher scores than Asian women on the Parental Role in Providing Emotional Support subscale. These findings appear to reflect cultural differences in relationships between parents and college-age daughters. For example, Asian cultures typically stress filial piety (devotion of the children to the family), family order, interdependence, and group worth (Chew & Ogi, 1987). In this context, significantly lower parental facilitation of the daughter's autonomy, as found in the current study, is not surprising. A value on emotional restraint also is commonly characteristic of Asian cultures (Chew & Ogi, 1987). This may explain why in this study the Asian women participants had significantly lower perceptions of the parental role in providing emotional support and affective quality of relationship.

The significant difference between Asian women and Latinas in perceptions of the parental role in providing emotional support may also reflect the culture found in Hispanic families, where family unity and loyalty are stressed, as well as cooperation among family members. As Sue and Sue (1990) noted:

Interpersonal relationships are maintained and nurtured within a large network of family and friends. For the family, a critical element is to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships. There is deep respect and affection among friends and family. (p. 230)

Perhaps the PAQ is measuring relative expressiveness, which has cultural variations. Exploration of differences on the basis of generations in the United States, particularly for the Latina and Asian students would be interesting. As Sue and Sue (1990) observed, "With the exception of Japanese Americans, the other Asian populations are now principally comprised of foreign-born individuals" (p. 189). Families that have been in the United States longer might reflect a more "dominant culture" model of family support and parental attachment, whereas foreign-born or first-generation parents might reflect a different pattern or patterns. Assessment of level of acculturation might have provided important clarification. Researchers should note that the PAQ measures respondents' perceptions, rather than parents' perceptions or behaviors. Thus, cultural boundedness may exist in responses; that is, what seems to be "quite a bit" in one culture may be different from what is "quite a bit" in another.

IMPLICATIONS

A growing body of research indicates limits to the applicability of Chickering's psychosocial model (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) of college student development. Yet, Chickering's model is probably the most widely used theoretical base in the field of student development and student affairs. Graduate programs need to clarify for students the limitations of the model and teach about the emerging theory and research that is extending and modifying the model. Similarly, practitioners, who have long relied on the Chickering model as a framework for developmental programming, need to recognize the limitations of the model, particularly the portion concerning autonomy development as applied to women students. Notably, the

recent revision of the model (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) does not address the limitations indicated by this study.

Student affairs professionals need to recognize the importance of family ties to women students. Practitioners must recognize that attachment to parents does not necessarily indicate a lack of autonomy on the part of women students and that continued attachment to parents in the later college years does not necessarily indicate delay or regression in development. Traditionally, although little emphasis has been placed on parents, student affairs practitioners, consistent with Chickering's model, have placed the greatest emphasis on parents at the beginning of students' college careers, most notably in orientation programs. Including parents and other family members in orientation programming and family weekend programs are ways to recognize the importance of family and to include them in the student's college experience; however, student affairs practitioners need to find ways to include parents in the students' experience throughout the college years. Student affairs professionals also need to be aware of culturally based differences in parental attachment among undergraduate women.

Future research is needed to explore and explicate undergraduate women's developmental process. Research to explore the role of attachment to peers and attachment to parents in autonomy development may also be useful. Also, research is needed to explore attachment to parents and peers, plus autonomy development, among undergraduate men of diverse races and ethnicities. Contemporary attachment theory (Lopez, 1995) may provide a useful framework to guide future research.

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