FOSTERING AUTONOMY IN ADOLESCENTS: A MODEL OF COGNITIVE AUTONOMY AND SELF-EVALUATION

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Abstract

Previous research dealing with adolescent autonomy has been focused on two basic concepts. One concept has been behavioral autonomy, which suggests the ability to act for one's self. The second concept has been emotional autonomy, which represents the ability to feel for one's self. Applications of these two constructs have provided little assistance to teachers and professionals in encouraging adolescent prosocial behavior or in discouraging adolescent delinquent behavior. A separate construct of adolescent autonomy that deals with cognition has been somewhat overlooked. This paper examines critical factors associated with a model of cognitive autonomy suggesting the ability to think for one's self. In addition, this paper will outline a direction for the study of adolescent cognitive autonomy demonstrating its potential for application and intervention.

Introduction

The word autonomy derives from the Latin "autos" meaning "self" and "nomos" meaning "rule". Consequently, most operational definitions of autonomy attempt to illustrate an individual's ability to rule one's self. Perplexingly, as researchers have employed the idea of ruling one's self, a uniform definition of self has been evasive. The purpose of this paper is to outline various approaches to the study of autonomy, to illustrate the limitations associated with our current direction, and to propose an alternative model to strengthen our course of inquiry as it relates to this construct. Traditional models of autonomy have included behavioral and emotional while paying less attention to cognitive autonomy.

Models of Autonomy

Behavioral Autonomy

Behavioral autonomy involves a capacity to act for one's self. Erik Erikson was one of the first theorists to conceptualize autonomy (Erikson, 1963). For Erikson, the key to successful progression through the second stage of psychosocial development was the resolution of the crisis of autonomy versus shame and doubt. According to Erikson's psychoanalytic model, the task of self-regulation associated with toddlerhood provides the child with a new sense of freedom. Locomotion, self-feeding, and potty training highlight the quest for autonomy. Thus, a sensitive period of task completion between the ages of one and three influences a child's autonomy. Accordingly, Erikson's conceptualization of autonomy could best be classified operationally as behavioral, meaning a child

is learning to “act” for him/herself. A child therefore becomes autonomous by mastering certain self-regulating behaviors.

Many current models define autonomy as the ability to rule one’s self through actions. They operationalize behavioral autonomy with concepts such as self-reliance (Greenberger, 1984), functional independence (Hoffman, 1984), self-regulation (Erikson, 1963; Markus & Wurf, 1987), competence (Deci & Ryan, 1987), personal control (Flammer, 1991), non conformity (Ryan, 1993), and reflective autonomy (Koestner & Losier, 1996). Unlike Erikson’s model however, more recent researchers position the development of behavioral independence in middle childhood rather than in the younger age group.

Emotional Autonomy

Emotional autonomy represents an ability to feel for one’s self. The century old debate between G. Stanley Hall’s philosophical camp who viewed adolescence as a time of “storm and stress” and Margaret Mead’s philosophical followers who described adolescence as a period of “calm and joy” continues to manifest itself today within the conceptualization of emotional autonomy. These two groups of researchers have been influential in pioneering the work on emotional autonomy. Each one aligning at differing ends of the debate.

The “storm and stress” model of emotional autonomy, embraced by a majority of modern researchers, portrays adolescents as deeply immersed in an emotional struggle with an alliance to either parent or peer. Accordingly, young adolescents become autonomous by learning to distance themselves emotionally from their parents (Freud, 1969). Research dealing with emotional autonomy

most often focuses on early adolescence because of significant biological, social, and emotional changes that occur during this period of development. The hormonal "storm and stress" created within the budding adolescent during puberty compels an adolescent to "grow up" and rely on outside rather then parental advisors.

Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) created a measure of emotional autonomy. Using the Emotional Autonomy Scale (EAS) they sought to measure a subjective sense of self-reliance. The assumption of these researchers was that by distancing one's self from parental influence an adolescent establishes autonomy. Their instrument might more appropriately be represented as a "detachment" scale rather than an autonomy scale (Noom, Dekovic, & Meeus, 2001). Although different labels were used, other researchers have examined this construct. Two of the most notable were Hoffman (1984) and Frank, Avery, & Laman (1988). Hoffman viewed emotional autonomy as a psychosocial separation. He used terms like emotional independence and conflictual independence to capture the essence of emotional autonomy. Frank viewed early adolescent autonomy on an emotional continuum of connectedness and separateness.

Joseph Allen and his associates (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor 1994; Allen and Hauser, 1996; McElhaney & Allen, 2001; and Kuperminc, Allen, & Arthur, 1996) have attempted to carry out a separate line of scientific inquiry to assess adolescent emotional autonomy following more closely the "calm and joy" transition described by Margaret Mead. Allen views emotional autonomy as

relatedness in opposition to distancing. Most of Allen's recent research focuses on the establishment of personal values and the ability to set goals. His ideas allow for emotional autonomy, or the ability to feel for one's self, while maintaining continued relations with parents. In support of Allen's model, research dealing with the issue of attachment to a parent figure and autonomy has convincingly demonstrated a strong correlation between securely attached adolescents and adolescent autonomy (Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003). Allen classifies his research as a combined cognitive and emotional dimension of adolescent autonomy. Presumably, he includes cognition because of a goal setting component. However, it is truly an affective dimension that he is assessing and therefore would be more accurately classified as emotional autonomy. Others who have followed similar lines of study are Bandura (1977), whose Social Learning Theory included self-efficacy, and Grotevant and Cooper (1985), who assessed adolescent individuation through mutuality and permeability.

Cognitive Autonomy

A much less studied dimension of autonomy involves an individual's ability to think for one's self. Many of the researchers mentioned above have attempted to include some dimension of cognitive autonomy in their research models but do not elaborate on its impact. Most often their focus has been on either goal setting (Allen et al., 1994; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Noom et al., 2001) or decision making and agency (Frank, 1988; Dworkin, 1988; Flammer, 1991; and Beyers et al., 2003). These studies have provided scant understanding of the potential

utility of the cognitive component in autonomy. Methodologically, the cognitive facet of autonomy proves most challenging. The observability of cognitive constructs is problematic. Consequently, the only consensus within this realm of inquiry is that if an adolescent is capable of reaching a level of cognitive autonomy it would not occur until late adolescence, after formal operational thought had been established.

Implications of Behavioral Autonomy

There are some advantages to couching autonomy in a behavioral framework. The most salient of these is the relative ease of measurement. Because observation of behavior is generally easier and clearer than assessment of emotion or cognition, one can see why it has been a more popular way to operationalize autonomy. In addition, behavioral models are also more likely to appear successful in training applications. Using conditioning, researchers and practitioners are generally able to demonstrate changes in behavior with an appropriate administration of reinforcements. Thus, it appears that autonomy can be fostered behaviorally. Lastly, age differences in behavior are easiest to document. This implies that development of autonomy can be recognized by examining changes that occur in the overt form of a person's motion over time.

These advantages must be considered in light of significant disadvantages accompanying a behavioral approach to autonomy. A major criticism of this behavioral model is that although evidence of independence can be observed by an individual's successful completion of tasks, there is a jump in logic in

classifying this independence as autonomy. A reinforcement associated with autonomous behavior fosters further autonomous behaviors. White (1959) and others (Harter, 1978) criticized the classification of independent behavior based on extrinsic rewards. They insist that motivation for behavior cannot be overlooked. Accordingly, true autonomy is the result of intrinsic rather than extrinsic reinforcements.

Evidence of long-term effectiveness with intervention programs employing behavioral autonomy is scarce. The recidivism rate of youth participants in behavior oriented drug offender programs is quite high. Seemingly, although offenders are taught to behave appropriately and autonomously, they are unable to maintain their behavioral change over time. Many critics sight the dependence on extrinsic rewards as a possible reason for this problem.

As mentioned earlier, this type of autonomy is often conceptualized in younger children. However, most young children who learn certain independent behaviors lack the ability to generalize to other situations. For example, a young child who is capable of opening the house door with a key will commonly struggle to figure out how to unlock a car door with a key.

Implications of Emotional Autonomy

Because researchers have been able to study to some degree emotional autonomy in early adolescence, they have been able to remove the transparent effects of external reinforcement associated with behavioral autonomy. Studying autonomy from an emotional perspective involves an introspective quality that seems necessary for true autonomy. In other words, most of the behavioral

autonomy shortcomings are addressed by assessing autonomy through affective dimensions.

Although emotional autonomy provides introspective insight, there are several important cautions to consider when relying on emotional autonomy as an absolute indicator of independence. The most obvious concern is equating detachment and autonomy. Transferring emotional dependence from parents to peers or to a significant other does not constitute true autonomy. If a young adolescent no longer depends, either emotionally or behaviorally, on parents but reassigns reliance to another person, clearly, they are not demonstrating autonomy.

Subjective, self-assessed feelings of independence do not render observable characteristics of autonomy and should be interpreted cautiously. Hence, in an effort to more clearly conceptualize autonomy, the observability of behavior has been replaced with self-assessments of feelings. Although this might be a more accurate portrayal of autonomy, the inability to accurately measure feelings creates additional questions and concerns.

Toward Understanding Cognitive Autonomy

Given the shortcomings outlined above about behavioral and emotional autonomy, it is difficult to conceive of why cognitive autonomy has not received more attention. One possibility might be the methodological limitations mentioned above. How can researchers accurately measure independent thinking? Cognitive autonomy is not alone in this limitation. We can, without difficulty, trace many unexplored phenomena within the behavioral sciences that

remain a mystery because we lack precision in measurement. For example, David Elkind's constructs of imaginary audience and personal fable make intuitive sense to many but haven't faired well empirically mainly because of methodological shortcomings (Buis & Thompson, 1989). Our inability to measure a construct should not be our sole reason for not attempting to gain understanding of it. In fact, if we look closely at the implications of limiting autonomy to a behavioral or an emotional model, it becomes evident that even if we succeed in properly identifying a child's place on the autonomy continuum without cognition, we severely limit any meaningful application.

Will development within behavioral autonomy or emotional autonomy foster prosocial behavior in generalized settings? Can we, through training within a behavioral or emotional model, assist a young person to make good decisions even if that person is exposed to risk taking behaviors? Answers to these questions are complex. For the sake of this paper, we will simplify the matter by looking at current trends in socially discouraged risk taking behaviors. Teenage pregnancy and inappropriate drug use continue to plague our society. Although teenage pregnancy has declined somewhat over the past decade, the United States continues to have one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the developed world (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2003). Recreational and experimental drug abuse have maintained high levels despite national efforts to curb them (Johnson, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2003). By looking at all of the models of autonomy as they have been explained in this paper, some insight for future research might be gained.

Two issues merit discussion as we examine the growth of adolescent autonomy. First, the pattern of autonomy presented in research seems counter intuitive to development. There is an inherent contradiction built into the model. Most people generally believe that human thought leads to feelings and those feelings lead to actions. Although the actual process is far more complicated than this (the reciprocity of all three components is markedly interactive) we can postulate that the base interaction is somewhat linear. On the other hand, the direction of autonomy development described above is exactly reverse. Developmentally we grow autonomous from behavioral (childhood) to emotional (early adolescence) and ultimately to cognitive (late adolescence). Consequently, autonomy occurs from behavior to feelings to thought. So actions proceed from thoughts to feelings to behaviors while autonomy proceeds from behaviors to feelings to thoughts. Granted, if a child succeeds in behaving autonomously she might feel more independent and ultimately think independently. However, is such independence intrinsically motivated? If not, then does it have the capacity to sustain independent thought across situations? Evidence would suggest otherwise. One danger to this stage-like order of cognitive development (autonomy) is that today's adolescents and children face dire consequences for decisions which they too often make behaviorally or emotionally. David Elkind (2004) highlights this problem. "TV exposes children to experiences they could never have had without it. But exposure is one thing, and understanding it is another. Making experiences more accessible does not make them any less confusing or any less disturbing." Pg. 85.

The second point is that the development of autonomy seems to follow a pattern that might have been healthy a generation ago but is not today. The pattern begins with behavioral autonomy that leads to a rudimentary capacity to self-regulate. Basically, an intrinsic motivation to behave will lead to an increase in autonomy. Next, emotional autonomy stems from a developing faculty of self-control. Finally, when an individual has achieved a higher order of thinking they can introspect and implement self-evaluation skills. A generation ago a developed sense of self-regulation and self-control might have been sufficient preparation for adolescence. Given adolescent exposure to a variety of risk taking behaviors today, we cannot delay teaching self-evaluation until late adolescence.

The notion of allowing early adolescents to continue making decisions about risk taking behaviors from a behavioral or emotional frame of reference is troublesome. As a society we express a desire, through our choices of media exposure, to have younger children "grow-up" more quickly today. However, we do not provide them with the necessary tools to handle the decisions associated with this increased exposure to life.

Self-evaluation is a powerful incubator and predictor of cognitive autonomy. Hence we must abandon the logic that would have us believe that external forces direct us to act (or think or feel) independently. Likewise, self-regulation and self-control fall short of defining autonomy. Instead, we must examine ways to enhance self-evaluation in an effort to promote autonomy.

From this perspective, we would deemphasize autonomy in early childhood along with the belief that young children cannot think in a higher order, therefore they cannot truly be autonomous. Rather, up to adolescence the child is learning to act based on external cues. It might appear autonomous but it is really a reaction to stimuli or an action in anticipation of a reward. Not until a child can use some form of higher order thinking can he or she begin to think autonomously. Ultimately to think for one's self is the height of man's potential.

Toward Studying Cognitive Autonomy

Rather than simply allowing this potential to evolve at its own rate, societal changes have prompted a need to encourage and foster the development of cognitive autonomy at earlier ages. To this end we must first attempt to study the nature of cognitive autonomy empirically by examining the process and the conditions associated with it.

A successful study of cognitive autonomy must answer two tenets specific to the process. First, there must be something observable to measure. As mentioned earlier, the very nature of a cognitive construct makes this difficult. What can researchers observe that demonstrates an individual's capacity for self-governed thought? Drawing on previous work on autonomy and related constructs, the areas of cognitive autonomy most observable might include making informed, independent decisions (Lewis, 1981; Parker & Fischhoff, 2002), voicing educated and appropriate opinions (), weighing the influence of others on thinking (Berndt, 1996), considering consequences (Trad, 1994), and self-evaluating practices (Demetrious, 2003). Of these, decision making and

self-evaluation skills present the most promise for observation and thus would be the most helpful choices for fulfilling the first tenet.

In addition to being observable the process must identify the product as unique to cognitive autonomy. Because all types of autonomy are interrelated, it would be impractical to set the bar with such precision. Nonetheless, we should be able to conclude to some degree through scientific inquiry, that what we observe to be cognitive autonomy is mostly attributable to cognition and not to behavior or emotion. Self-evaluation is the best match for this task. The unique personal conditions associated with self-evaluation include an internal locus of evaluation and some capacity for higher order thought processes. Thus, by observing the constructs of decision making, opinion voicing, influence weighing, consequence considering, and self-evaluating we initiate a distinction between individual capacities to think autonomously. By focusing our intervention strategies on self-evaluation skills we can measure individual increases in autonomous development.

Conclusion

In the current climate of adolescent development we need to go beyond the widely used measures of autonomy which address behaviors and emotions. As Kegan (1994) outlines, ultimately our expectations for adolescents will not be satisfied if they act independently. Likewise our expectations will not be satisfied if they become emotionally independent. The only area of independence for adolescents that will both satisfy adults and aid adolescents in making informed decisions is an ability to think for themselves.

An effort to study this construct independently of the other facets of autonomy could produce a clear picture of how cognitive autonomy develops and how we might foster that development. There are specific areas within cognitive autonomy that can be monitored in its assessment. These include making informed, independent decisions, voicing educated and appropriate opinions, weighing the influence of others on thinking, considering consequences, and self-evaluating practices. Of these variables, decision making and self-evaluation are the most observable. Once we have assessed cognitive autonomy, self-evaluation may prove to be the most promising in application. If we can facilitate self-evaluation skills in adolescents we might be able to facilitate autonomy. Additional research is needed to further understand cognitive autonomy. Technology has reduced many methodological concerns of the past and there are more opportunities and greater potential today to evaluate a cognitive construct. Although cognitive autonomy will always require some subjective self-analysis, when connected to self-evaluation we can include other assessments that might triangulate our measure to help us more fully understand this construct and foster a broader understanding of adolescent autonomy.

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