

Gender differences in emotional autonomy profile among adolescents

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■ **ABSTRACT** : The present study was designed to assess the gender differences in emotional autonomy profile of urban adolescents. A sample of 200 adolescents comprising of 100 boys and 100 girls of age group of 16-18 years was drawn from four Government schools of Ludhiana city. Emotional autonomy was measured by using emotional autonomy scale developed by Steinberg and Silverberg (1986). Results revealed that majority of both male and female adolescents were moderately autonomous and gender differences in emotional autonomy among adolescents were non-significant.

■ **KEY WORDS**: Autonomy, Gender, Adolescents

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Emotional autonomy is defined as the process, through which “adolescents relinquish childish dependencies on their parents and change their conceptions of their parents” (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986). Ryan and Lynch (1989) have operationalised “autonomy” in terms of a growing sense of detachment from parents, the outcome of individuation and resistance to peer or parental pressure. It also denotes a subjective sense of independence, especially with regard to parental control and family decision making, self-reported confidence in decision making and self-governance and the use of principled or independent reasoning in moral, political and social problem solving. Autonomy has special meaning during the preteen and teen years because it signifies that an adolescent is unique, independent and capable person who depends less on parents and other adults. The development of autonomy does not end after the teen years. Throughout adulthood, autonomy continues to develop whenever someone is challenged to act with a new level of self-reliance.

Adolescence is a critical period of human development manifested at the biological, psychological and social levels of interaction, but marking the end of childhood and setting the foundations of maturity (Eisenberg, 1969). One of the

major developmental tasks of adolescence is to achieve emotional independence from parents and other adults. During adolescence, the task of development of autonomy is inevitable. It implies that the adolescents are capable of managing themselves on their own without the constant support from their parents, making their own decisions and solving their own problems (Para and Oliva, 2009).

Several studies have documented the significance of gender in psychological processes. Recent speculations and empirical findings (Mellor, 1989) suggest that males and females define and experience their object relational world differently, males tend to define themselves through separation and females tend to define themselves through connectedness. These intriguing patterns of differences emerge as early as elementary school. At this time, girls have fewer behavioral problems than boys and often out-perform boys in school (Robins, 1991). Earlier research on gender differences in development of emotional autonomy reveals several inconsistencies. Girls in families marked by traditional maternal gender role attitudes were granted fewer autonomy opportunities (Bumpus *et al.*, 2001); becoming autonomous was a more stressful experience for girls than boys (Beyers and Goossen, 1999; Lamborn and Steinberg,

1993 and Fleming, 2005) accounted that major gender differences between male and female adolescents were found at 16 years of age and thereafter, boys reported an increasing frequency of achievement of autonomy with a greater frequency of parental disobedience, whereas girls reported little progress.

It is presumed that emotional autonomy in females would be less adaptive in cultures which stress interpersonal connections than in cultures which stress interpersonal separation. Since time immemorial the fairer sex has enjoyed less autonomy than their male counterparts in different spheres of life. Traditional Indian societies have nurtured such beliefs wherein women are confined to the four walls of the home while Indian men have enjoyed autonomy and freedom in the social strata. However, with the advent of modernization and globalization, the Indian society has come a long way. Biswas (1992) stated that the traditional, affectional, religious and economic bonds that create family cohesion are weakening. "Nucleation has depleted the emotional surrounding of the individuals". Indian adolescents are gradually moving to achieve autonomy and reducing dependency on parents. Though in the modern era, the level of autonomy has increased in girls much more than it was given earlier, yet there might be gender differences in favour of males in Indian society. However, Tung and Dhillon (2006) showed that significant differences exist between the male and female adolescents on the deidealization dimension of emotional autonomy, with females capable of deidealizing the parents at an early age than males. Despite the vast changes taking place due to technological revolution, the Indian society still maintains its value and even if the difference is not as significant as ancient India, the males in India still enjoy more freedom than females in both rural and urban areas. A study by Kaur and Gulati (2013) also reported male adolescents to be significantly more autonomous than female adolescents. Urban adolescents were more autonomous as compared to rural adolescents.

It is evident from the literature that the concept of autonomy continues to be elusive and there are inconsistencies in the literature across different cultures which need to be clarified. The present study is therefore, an attempt to investigate the gender differences that exist in emotional autonomy in the Indian context.

■ RESEARCH METHODS

Sample:

This study was conducted in Ludhiana city of Punjab. Ludhiana Municipal Corporation has divided the city into four Zones. *i.e.* Zone I, Zone II, Zone III and Zone IV. Out of these four zones, one zone *i.e.* Zone IV was purposively selected. Four Government Senior Secondary Schools were randomly selected from selected zone whose principals granted permission to draw sample from their schools. The

class teachers of 10th to 12th grades were approached to make the lists of adolescents who fulfilled the necessary criteria:

- Age range of 16-18 years.
- Belonging to intact two-parent families.

Thus, the final sample consisted of 200 adolescents aged between 16-18 years who belonged to intact two parent families. The sample was divided to have equal number of boys (n = 100) and girls (n = 100).

Tools:

Socio-personal characteristic sheet:

Self-structured proforma was employed to study the socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. This scale included the information on gender, age, birth order, parental education, parental occupation, monthly income and type of family.

The emotional autonomy scale:

The emotional autonomy scale developed by Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) was used to assess the magnitude of emotional autonomy among the adolescents. This scale consists of four point likert type 20 structured items categorized under sub components *i.e.* cognitive component and affective component.

The cognitive component of the scales includes the following dimensions:

Perceives parents as people:

It measures the perception of parents as people outside the parental role (e.g. My parents act differently when they are with their own parents from the way they do at home).

Parental deidealization:

It includes items that tapped the adolescent's relinquishing of childish perceptions of parental omnipotence rather than the adoption of exceedingly oppositional, critical, or negativistic attitudes towards parents (e.g. My parents and I agree on everything).

The affective components of the scale includes:

Non-dependency on parents:

It includes items that capture an absence of childish dependency from parents rather than absolute freedom from parental influence (e.g. I go to my parents for help before trying to solve a problem myself).

Individuation:

It includes items which reflected healthy separation from parents that occurs within the context of a supportive family environment (e.g. There are some things about me that my parents don't know).

The items are presented as declarative statements, and the adolescents in the study were asked to indicate their

degree of agreement with each item on a four-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Out of 20 items, 11 are negatively phrased whereas 9 are positively phrased. For the positive items, ‘strongly agree’ is 1, ‘disagree’ is 2, ‘agree’ is 3 and ‘strongly disagree’ is 4. Higher score indicates a higher level of emotional autonomy. The internal consistency of the measure as determined by Cronbach’s alpha is .75.

Procedure:

Each respondent was contacted personally in school

setting and he/she was administered the tools individually and the respondents were given required instructions of the given tests. Answer sheets were scored following the scoring procedure in the manual. On the basis of raw scores, percentages, mean values, standard deviation, t-test and Chi square were calculated to examine the gender differences in emotional autonomy of adolescents.

■ RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 highlights the distribution of respondents as

Table 1: Profile of adolescents as per socio-personal characteristics					
Sr. No.	Variable	Particulars	Total (n=200)	Boys (n ₁ =100)	Girls (n ₂ =100)
1.	Age	16 years	78(39.00)	39(39.00)	39(39.00)
		17 years	73(36.50)	40(40.00)	33(33.00)
		18 years	49(24.50)	21(21.00)	28(28.00)
2.	Birth order	1 st	69(34.50)	32(32.00)	37(37.00)
		2 nd	64(32.00)	35(35.00)	29(29.00)
		3 rd	40(20.00)	20(20.00)	20(20.00)
		4 th and above	27(13.50)	12(12.00)	14(14.00)
3.	Paternal education	Illiterate	18(9.00)	10(10.00)	8(8.00)
		Below matriculate	47(23.50)	24(24.00)	23(23.00)
		Matriculate	77(38.50)	33(33.00)	44(44.00)
		Intermediate	35(17.50)	19(19.00)	16(16.00)
		Graduate	23(11.50)	14(14.00)	9(9.00)
4.	Maternal education	Illiterate	31(15.50)	16(16.00)	15(15.00)
		Below matriculate	75(37.50)	41(41.00)	34(34.00)
		Matriculate	59(29.50)	25(25.00)	34(34.00)
		Intermediate	23(11.50)	8(8.00)	15(15.00)
		Graduate	12(6.00)	10(10.00)	2(2.00)
5.	Paternal occupation	Unemployed	5(2.50)	0(0.00)	5(5.00)
		Labour	47(23.50)	23(23.00)	24(24.00)
		Service	92(46.00)	48(48.00)	44(44.00)
		Business	51(25.50)	24(24.00)	27(27.00)
		Retired	5(2.50)	5(5.00)	0(0.00)
6.	Maternal occupation	Housewife	145(72.50)	79(79.00)	66(66.00)
		Labour	24(12.00)	10(10.00)	14(14.00)
		Service	24(12.00)	10(10.00)	14(14.00)
		Business	7(3.50)	1(1.00)	6(6.00)
		Retired	0(0.00)	0(0.00)	0(0.00)
7.	Monthly family income	Less than Rs. 5000	57(28.50)	20(20.00)	37(37.00)
		Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10,000	69(34.50)	43(43.00)	26(26.00)
		Rs. 10,000 to Rs.15,000	41(20.50)	22(22.00)	19(19.00)
		More than Rs.15,000	33(16.50)	15(15.00)	18(18.00)
8.	Type of family	Nuclear	139(69.50)	61(61.00)	78(78.00)
		Joint	61(30.50)	39(39.00)	22(22.00)

*values in parentheses indicate percentage

per socio-personal characteristics. It is evident from the table that among the total sample, a major proportion of the respondents (39.00%) were 16 years old, 36.50 per cent were 17 years old and a mere 24.50 per cent were 18 years old. However, among boys, a major proportion of the respondents (40.00%) were 17 years old and among girls, majority of the respondents (39.00%) were 16 years old. The table also reveals that the greatest proportion (34.50 per cent) of the adolescents were first born, followed by 32.00 % who were 2nd born, 20.00 per cent who were 3rd born and a mere 13.50 per cent had an ordinal position of 4th or above. However, among boys, it was found that majority of the respondents were 2nd born (35%) and 32.00 per cent, 20.00 per cent and 12.00 per cent reported to be 1st born, 3rd born, 4th born and above, respectively. Among girls, it was observed that majority of the respondents (37.00%) were 1st born followed by 29.00 per cent 2nd born, 20.00 per cent were 3rd born and a meagre 14.00 per cent were in the category of 4th and above.

Data on paternal education, as depicted in Table 1 reveal that major proportion (38.50%) of the adolescents had father who were educated upto matric level and only 9.00 per cent of the adolescents had father who were illiterates. Among boys, a major proportion (33.00%) had father who were matriculates and only 10.00 per cent were illiterates. Similarly among girls, 44.00 per cent of them had father who were matriculate and only 8.00 per cent had illiterate father. Regarding mother's education, Table 1 shows that an equal proportion (37.50 %) of adolescents had mothers who were educated below primary and matric level. Only 6.00 per cent of the respondents had mother who were graduates. Among boys, it was reported that highest proportion of the respondents had mothers (41.00 %) who were educated below primary level and merely 8.00 per cent were educated till intermediate level. Among girls, it was found that 34.00 per cent of them had mothers who had acquired education below primary level and matriculates. Only 2.00 per cent of them had mothers who were graduates.

It can also be observed from Table 1 that majority (46.00%) of the respondents had father who were employed in the service sector and only 2.5 per cent of them had father who were unemployed or retired, 25.50 per cent of the respondents had father who were engaged in business and 23.50 per cent reported that their fathers were labourers. In both boys and girls, it can be observed that majority (48.00% and 44.00%, respectively) were employed in service sector. 5.00 per cent of the boys had father who was retired and none of the boys had father who was unemployed. However, among girls, it can be observed from Table 1 that fathers of 5.00 per cent of the girls were unemployed and none of them had father who was retired.

Data on mother's occupation depict that mothers of 72.50 per cent of the respondents were unemployed and

engaged in household activities and just 3.50 per cent of them had mothers who were engaged in business and self-employment. Among boys, it can be noted that 79.00 per cent of them had mothers who were housewife and only 1 per cent reported that their mothers was self-employed. Similarly, among girls it was observed that 66.00 per cent of them had mothers who were unemployed and engaged in household activities, 14.00 per cent of them had mothers who were employed in service sector and worked as labourers, and that mothers of just 6.00 per cent of girls were engaged in business.

Among total respondents, a major proportion (34.50 %) belonged to families with monthly income ranging from Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10,000 and only 16.50 per cent of them hailed from families with monthly income of more than Rs. 15,000. Similarly among boys, a major proportion (43.00%) of them belonged to families with income of Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10,000 and 15.00 per cent of them belonged to families with monthly income more than Rs. 15,000. Among girls, majority (37.00%) of them hailed from families with monthly income less than Rs. 5000 per month and families with monthly income more than Rs. 15,000 were reported by just 18.00 per cent of the respondents. The largest percentage (69.50%) of the total respondents belonged to nuclear families and only 30.50 per cent of them hailed from nuclear families. Among boys, 61.00 per cent and 39.00 per cent of them reported that their family was nuclear and joint, respectively. Majority (78.00 %) of the girls hailed from nuclear families and just 22.00 per cent of them reported that they belonged to joint family.

Gender difference in emotional autonomy profile:

Table 2 gives the gender wise distribution of adolescents across different levels of emotional autonomy and its various dimensions. It can be noted that among both boys and girls, majority of them were in the moderate category across all the dimensions of emotional autonomy.

Cognitive domain:

In the cognitive domain, a major proportion of boys (44.00%) and girls (41.00%) moderately perceived their parents as people. This implies that largest proportion of adolescents could perceive their parents beyond the realms of parenthood and family setting. Regarding parental de-idealisation, almost equal proportion of both boys (50.00%) and girls (51.00%) moderately de-idealised their parents. Even if no significant gender difference existed however, a higher proportion of boys (30.00%) as compared to girls (24.00%) were reported to highly perceive their parents as people. However, high level of parental de-idealisation was reported by higher proportion of girls (18.00%) as compared to boys (13.00%).

Affective domain:

In the affective domain, a major proportion of the respondents, 53.00 per cent of boys and 51.00 per cent of girls were moderately non-dependent on parents, *i.e.* adolescents allegedly showcased absence of childish dependency from parents. Individuation was moderately prominent among 53.00 per cent of boys and 55.00 per cent of girls. In other words, 53.00 per cent of boys and 55.00 per cent of girls considered themselves to be moderately independent individuals characterized by healthy separation from parents. It can also be observed that inspite of non-significant gender differences, higher proportion of boys (24.00%) than girls (21.00%) were least dependent on parents. Moreover, low individuation was reported to be equal among boys (19.00%) and in girls (19.00%).

In the total emotional autonomy score, it was reported that 59.00 per cent of boys and 52.00 per cent of girls were moderately autonomous. High level of emotional autonomy was reported by 24.00 per cent of both boys and girls. 17.00 per cent of boys and 24.00 per cent of girls were found to be least autonomous as far as the total emotional autonomy was concerned.

It can also be noted from Table 2 that gender has no significant influence on all the dimensions of emotional autonomy and the composite emotional autonomy of adolescents because the distribution of the respondents across the three levels of emotional autonomy was not significantly different in both the genders. These findings are in contrast to Tung and Dhillon (2006) who reported significant gender differences on the deidealization dimension and overall emotional autonomy, with females capable of deidealizing the parents at an early stage than males. Similarly, Kaur and Gulati (2013) also reported male adolescents to be significantly more autonomous than female adolescents. Urban adolescents were more autonomous as compared to rural adolescents.

A comparison of mean scores of emotional autonomy and its various dimensions among boys and girls as shown in Table 3 also implies that there were no significant gender differences between the mean scores in any of the dimensions of emotional autonomy and emotional autonomy in total. This finding contradicts the observations of Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) who accounted that female adolescents were more emotionally autonomous than male adolescents.

	Components of emotional autonomy	Level of autonomy	Boys (n ₁ =100)		Girls (n ₂ =100)		Total (n=200)		χ ²
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Cognitive domain	Perceives parents as people	Low	26	26.00	35	35.00	61	30.50	2.10
		Medium	44	44.00	41	41.00	85	42.50	
		High	30	30.00	24	24.00	54	27.00	
	Parental de-idealisation	Low	37	37.00	31	31.00	68	34.00	1.35
		Medium	50	50.00	51	51.00	101	50.50	
		High	13	13.00	18	18.00	31	15.50	
Affective domain	Non-dependency on parents	Low	24	24.00	21	21.00	45	22.50	0.73
		Medium	53	53.00	51	51.00	104	52.00	
		High	23	23.00	23	23.00	46	23.00	
	Individuation	Low	19	19.00	19	19.00	38	19.00	0.11
		Medium	53	53.00	55	55.00	108	54.00	
		High	28	28.00	26	26.00	54	27.00	
	Total emotional autonomy	Low	17	17.00	24	24.00	41	20.50	1.64
		Medium	59	59.00	52	52.00	111	55.50	
		High	24	24.00	24	24.00	48	24.00	

	Dimensions of emotional autonomy	Boys		Girls		t-value
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Cognitive domain	Perceives parents as people	13.68	2.79	13.15	3.03	1.29
	Parental de-idealisation	9.50	2.57	9.97	2.82	1.23
Affective domain	Non-dependency on parents	8.91	2.15	9.15	2.55	0.72
	Individuation	14.25	2.11	14.09	2.09	0.54
	Total emotional autonomy	46.34	5.82	46.36	7.12	0.02

A major reason of insignificant differences among boys and girls regarding emotional autonomy may be due to the fact that Indian society is gradually shunning old myths and taboos and empowering girls to be equally independent like their male counterparts especially in urban areas. However, earlier researches have highlighted the influence of various familial and contextual factors that have a profound impact on emotional autonomy (Lamborn, 1990).

Conclusion:

From the study it can be derived that majority of the male and female adolescents were moderately autonomous and gender does not have a significant role in the development of emotional autonomy among adolescents. Therefore, there is a need to examine whether the findings of the researches conducted in this area necessarily vary across different individuals, locale, familial and cultural contexts.

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