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DEVELOPMENTAL CONCERNS IN ADOLESCENTS: BEHAVIOR AUTONOMY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS

Huma Zafar* & Muhammad Tahir Khalily
International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

The current study was undertaken to empirically examine the impact of behavior autonomy on psychological stress in adolescents. Based on the existing evidences it was hypothesized that behavior autonomy would predict psychological stress in adolescents. The sample of the study comprised of 600 adolescents recruited from different schools and colleges of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan through convenient sampling technique. The participants ranged in age between 12 to 18 years with mean age of 15.14 (±SD=1.98). The Urdu translated versions of Behavior Autonomy Scale (Peterson, 1986) and Stress Scale (a subscale of Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale by Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) were used. In addition, a short demographic sheet that comprised of participants' personal information regarding their institutional affiliation and age was also used. The Linear Regression analysis was employed for statistical analysis of data. The results revealed behavior autonomy a significant predictor of psychological stress in adolescents. Implications of the findings and avenues for future studies are suggested.

Keywords: Adolescence, Behavior Autonomy, Psychological stress, Developmental Concerns

* Correspondence Address: Huma Zafar, PhD., International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: dr.huma.zafar@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is considered to be an intricate period in human life between childhood and adulthood (Byrne, Davenport, & Mazanov, 2007; Dixon, Scheidegger, & Mc Whirter, 2009). It is a period of intense stress (Spear, 2000; Dekovic & Meeus, 2006) as the growing adolescent experiences physical maturation, a drive for autonomous functioning and other social changes (Blakemore, 2008; Casey, Getz, & Galvan, 2008; Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008). Besides these new and varied experiences, s/he is also required to adjust to the responses of other people regarding these concomitant changes (Archibald, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Research findings reveal an increase in problem behaviors during this transitional stage, which suggests that adolescence may be a stressful period (Alsaker & Dick-Niederhauser, 2006).

Behavior autonomy is defined as the "extent to which adolescents acquire freedom of action from parents" (Peterson, 1986, p.232). It refers to self-direction and an ability to control one's decisions after having considered outcomes and consequences. The current study examined behavior autonomy as adolescents' perception of parental provision of freedom regarding behavioral and relational domains. These may relate to adolescents' choice of clothes, peers, educational aspirations, and career goals. Numerous researchers have documented that a major developmental trajectory of adolescents is autonomous functioning (Greenberger, Josselson, Knerr, & Knerr, 1975; Peterson, Cobas, Bush, Supple & Wilson, 2004; Smetana, 2002), which is postulated to be an indicator of mental health (Jahoda, 1958). Some theorists believe that autonomy is related to individuation and identity formation (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1959, 1968) which is necessary for the adaptive progression of the adolescents' development.

Research provides evidence that an autonomous individual characterizes positive mental health, high self-esteem, positive self-concept, and is found to be self-motivated, self-initiating, and self-regulating (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2001). Lack of opportunity for adolescents to participate in decision-making develops low autonomy (Dornbusch et al., 1985; Litovsky & Dusek, 1985). It has been found that adolescents whose autonomy is undermined do not learn to assert their individuality or express their opinions (Steinberg, 1990), and hence they depend on others for decision-making (Eccles, 1991). Researchers have reported that adolescents develop frustration in response to the pressing drive to attain

autonomy when it is in some way undermined by their parents (Hagan, Hollier, O'Connor, & Eisenberg, 1992; Kobak & Ferenz-Gillies, 1995).

Adolescence is a period in which the growing children are increasingly vulnerable to stressful life events (Stark, Hargrave, Hersh, Michelle, Herren, & Fisher, 2008). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined stress as "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being." Previous researches have highlighted the importance of developmental processes in the optimum functioning of individuals. For instance, Edidin and Gaylord-Harden (2009) and Beck (1983) found that lower levels of autonomy predict higher levels of internalizing symptoms. Likewise, Kobak, Sudler and Gamble (1991) also suggested that lack of opportunity to develop autonomy may contribute to a vulnerability to psychological stress in adolescence. Other studies also indicated that adolescents who are not allowed to exercise autonomy by their parents exhibit negative behavior such as depression, unhealthy relationships with peers, and externalizing symptoms (Allen et al., 2006; Lee & Bell, 2003; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005).

In a nut shell, existing evidences indicate that individuals with healthy autonomous functioning may experience less psychological stress. Nonetheless, low behavior autonomy leads to increased psychological stress. However, the above stated studies are conducted in Western culture and to our knowledge little has been explored in this context in our Pakistani cultural context. Hence, the present study attempted to explore this aspect in Pakistani adolescents. More specifically, it investigated the predictive association between behavior autonomy and psychological stress in adolescents. It is imperative to conduct such study in our culture as psychological stress can have far reaching consequences for adolescents if it persists for a long period, such as increased risk for developing depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, substance use, marked psychosocial difficulties (e.g., Gotlib, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1995). Thus, addressing and identifying the role of developmental patterns can foster awareness regarding the value of autonomy development in adolescents. The findings obtained will be of vital significance as these will broaden the understanding on these crucial developmental processes and will help family therapists and counselors working with adolescents to focus on these domains.
Contemplating the existing literature, following hypothesis was formulated for the current study.

1. Behavior autonomy would predict psychological stress in adolescents.

METHODS

Participants

The sample for the study comprised of 600 adolescents with equal proportion of gender: male (n = 300) and female (n = 300) between the ages of 12-18 years with a mean age of 15.14 (±SD=1.98). The sample was drawn from the desired population through convenience sampling technique from different schools and colleges of Rawalpindi and Islamabad (Pakistan).

Measures

Demographic Information Sheet

A short demographic information sheet was developed for the current study to gather descriptive data about the participants such as institutional affiliation and age.

Behavior Autonomy Scale (BAS)

The behavior autonomy was measured by a 10-item behaviorally focused self-report Behavior Autonomy Scale (Peterson, 1986) that assesses an individual's perception of autonomy from his or her parents. Participants' responses to each item measuring behavior autonomy are measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly agree*). Higher scores on these Likert-type responses connote higher perceived behavior autonomy, whereas lower scores indicate lower behavior autonomy. Cronbach's alpha reliability for this scale is α = .87 (Peterson, 1986). Behavior autonomy scale was translated in Urdu for the current study. The Cronbach's alpha obtained in the present study is .77 which indicates good internal consistency.

Stress Scale (SS)

The Stress Scale of Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) is used to measure psychological stress. It contains 14 items which measure symptoms of stress and associated physical arousal during the past week. The participants are asked to use 4-point severity/frequency scale from 0 to 3 scale with (0) *did not apply to me at all* and (3) *applied to me very much, or most of the time* to rate the extent to which they have experienced a

stressful state over the past week. The score for stress scale are calculated by summing the scores on relevant items. Higher scores on this measure suggest higher levels of stress. The scale has adequate psychometric properties with Cronbach's alpha of .90 for the Stress subscale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). For the current study the stress subscale of DASS was translated in Urdu (Zafar & Khalily, 2014). The Cronbach's alpha obtained in the present study is .60 which indicates satisfactory internal consistency.

Procedure

The Board of Advance Studies and Research (BASR) approved the current study which indicates that the study was in concordance with the code of research ethics. The data was recruited from different educational institutions of Rawalpindi and Islamabad (Pakistan). After seeking permission from the respective head of the institutions, the participants fulfilling the requirements of the study were approached in person from each institution in their classroom during school/college hours. They were briefed about the research being carried out and were assured that all the information taken from them would be kept confidential and only be used for the research purpose. After gaining the participants' consent, they were requested to provide pertinent information about their institutional affiliation and age. Once they were comfortable, the instructions were given. Questionnaire booklets containing the translated Urdu versions of Behavior Autonomy Scale and Stress Scale were distributed among the participants and they were asked to complete the questionnaires. The participants took an average of half an hour to complete the questionnaires. No monetary or any other incentive was given to the participants for their participation in the study.

Scoring and Statistical Analysis

After data collection all the questionnaires were compiled and entered into SPSS (version 17). The Linear Regression Analysis was used to test hypothesis of the current study. Descriptive statistics was also utilized.

RESULTS

Table 1
Mean, Standard Deviations, and Alpha Reliability Coefficients of Behavior Autonomy Scale, and Stress Scale (N=600)

Variables	*No of Items*	*Mean*	*SD*	*α*
Behavior Autonomy Scale	10	20.1	5.2	.77
Stress (subscale of DASS)	14	33.0	4.4	.60
Age		15.14	1.98	

Table 2
Linear Regression Analysis with Behavior Autonomy as predictor of Psychological Stress among adolescents (N=600)

Predictor	***B***	***SE***	***β***	***R^2***	***Adjusted R^2***	***F***	***Sig.***
Constant	39.82	.66					
BA	-.34	.03	-.40	.16	.16	112.8	.000**

Note= BA= Behavior Autonomy
***p < .001; df= 1, 599*

DISCUSSION

The key findings obtained in the present study reveal that behavior autonomy significantly predicted psychological stress. It accounted for 16% variance in scores of psychological stress (Table 2). Thus, these findings indicate that how developmental tasks may be connected with adolescents' psychological stress. The current study corroborates previous research findings. Previous researches have revealed that a major developmental task of this period is the development of autonomous functioning (Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993; Peterson, Steinmetz, & Wilson, 2005). Researchers have found that adolescents' failure to

resolve this fundamental psychosocial developmental tasks successfully can result in maladjustment (McClanahan & Holmbeck, 1992) and internalizing symptoms (Eberhart & Hammen, 2006; Quintana & Kerr, 1993). The current study demonstrates an association between an individuals' ability to respond effectively to the developmental changes and susceptibility to psychological stress.

Previous research regarded autonomy development in adolescents as prerogative of the western culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). However, the findings of the current study lend support to Helwig's (2006) review that provided evidence that developmental trajectories towards autonomy are consistent across different cultures. Delegation and sharing of family responsibilities with the adolescents and involvement in decisions regarding personal and family issues are normative in many societies and cultures, as these help the adolescents to gain competencies. Autonomy development is a basic need of individuals for personal and interpersonal growth (Cohler & Geyer, 1982; Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, the type of autonomy for a certain culture may have different weightage (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Raeff, 2004; Kagitcibasi, 2005). The low levels of behavior autonomy may impede healthy psychological development in adolescents. Stress in adolescents may be a reflection of adolescents' failure in resolving stage-salient developmental tasks.

Conclusion

The current study empirically examined the possible role of behavior autonomy in the development of psychological stress in adolescents and provided helpful perspective. The findings suggest that difficulties in establishing behavior autonomy in adolescents may play a role in the development of psychological stress. Hence, it is important to become attuned to the developmental tasks and their role in long term optimal functioning.

There are certain noteworthy limitations of the current study that point to directions for future research. The study inducted adolescents between the ages of 12 to 18 years only which limits the generalizability of results beyond the adolescent students. In future studies sampling can be addressed with more diversity and randomness. Convenient sampling was used in selecting the sample of the current study which does not guarantee any assurance that the sample is representative of the population. Behavior autonomy variable was not measured separately for mothers and fathers. The rationale for including responses from

adolescents regarding both parents separately, rather than combining them, is that it allows us to measure the separate contributions of the influence of mothers and fathers on autonomy from parents. The future studies may focus on identifying mediating variables that influence healthy functioning and adaptation of adolescents. The family environment can be viewed as an ecological niche in which an adolescent navigates the dynamic developmental process of autonomy development.

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