Marital Satisfaction & Adolescent Autonomy: Autonomous Relatedness in Mother & Father-Adolescent Interactions and Ego Development

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Abstract

This study examines interrelations between qualities of the couple relationship and adolescent autonomy. Data were collected from 128 adolescents and their mothers and a subset of 98 adolescents and their fathers at age 13, and again at age 14. Mothers who were more satisfied in their couple relationship had adolescents with higher ego development levels at age 13, more rapid growth in ego development from age 13 to 14, and higher levels of autonomy in mother-teen interactions. Fathers who were more satisfied in their couple relationship had adolescents with higher ego development levels at age 13, and higher levels of autonomy in father-teen interactions. These findings have important implications for current theories of adolescent autonomy development.
**Introduction**

- This study explores how parents’ satisfaction in their relationship as a couple relates to the development of two facets of their teen’s autonomy:
  1. autonomous relatedness in mother and father-adolescent interactions
  2. adolescent ego development.
- The teen’s ability to carry on autonomous discussions while maintaining a warm, nurturing relationship with parents has been linked to an array of positive outcomes (e.g. Allen, 1994).
- Further, advances in adolescent ego development -- described as having an autonomous self-- is a marker for adaptive outcomes in adolescence (e.g. Rierdan, 1998).
Research has linked parent-teen relationship quality to teen autonomy, but little research has focused on the influence of the couple relationship.

A growing body of evidence links a couple’s relationship with both partners’ parenting (Cowan, 1996).

This suggests that qualities of the couple relationship may influence adolescent autonomy development.

In this study, hierarchical regression analyses are used to explore relationships between both mothers’ and fathers’ marital satisfaction and

1. adolescents’ negotiation of autonomy in interactions with both mothers and fathers,
2. adolescent ego development.
Method

PARTICIPANTS
Multi-method, multi-reporter data were collected from 128 teens and their mother figures, and a subset of 98 teen and their father figures recruited through a public school (42% male, 35% minority, median family income $50,000). Adolescents were followed from age 13 to 14.

MEASURES

Marital Satisfaction
Mother’s and father’s self reported marital satisfaction was measured with the seven-item marital satisfaction subscale of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), a widely used measure of marital adjustment.

Adolescent Ego Development
Ego development at age 13 and 14 was coded from teens’ responses on the Sentence Completion Test (Westenger et al., 1998; Loevinger & Wessler, 1978). The SCT correlates answers of open ended responses such as “I feel sorry..” with 7 stages of ego development.
Method (cont.)

Adolescent Autonomous Relatedness

Adolescent’s promotion of autonomous relatedness with mothers and fathers at age 13 was evaluated by applying the well validated Autonomy and Relatedness Coding System (Allen et al., 1990) to ten minute videotaped (1) adolescent-mother, and (2) adolescent-father interactions in a revealed differences paradigm. Promotion of autonomous-relatedness is based on adolescents’ expression of confident and reasoned arguments that also convey interest and respect for the parent’s position. Each occurrence of the behaviors is coded on a zero to four scale, and scores are combined.
Measures Summary

**Ego Development Level Age 13 & 14**—Based on adolescent responses on the Sentence Completion Task.

**Mother & Father Marital Satisfaction**—Assessed from mother’s and father’s self report on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale.

**Adolescent Autonomous Relatedness With Mothers and Fathers At Age 13**—Based on behavioral coding of of adolescents’ expression of confident and reasoned arguments that also convey interest and respect for the parent’s position.
Results
Hierarchical regressions reveal:

1. Adolescents with higher ego levels had mothers (β = .22, p < .05) and fathers (β = .21, p < .05) who reported higher marital satisfaction, after accounting for adolescent gender (Table 1a & 1b).

2. Additional findings support links between mothers’ marital satisfaction and growth in adolescent ego development from age 13 to age 14.

- Adolescents whose mothers were more satisfied in their marital relationships made higher gains in ego development over time in comparison to the rest of the sample (β = .17, p < .05) (Table 2).
Results

3. Mothers’ and fathers’ marital satisfaction is linked with adolescent displays of autonomy in interactions with their parents at age thirteen. Hierarchical regression analysis demonstrate that

- teens who displayed more autonomy with their mothers had mothers who were more satisfied in their couple relationships ($\beta = .19$, $p<.05$) (Table 3a).

- Adolescents who displayed more autonomy with their fathers had fathers who were more satisfied in their couple relationships ($\beta = .32$, $p<.01$) (Table 3b).
### Tables 1a&b: Marital Satisfaction and Teen’s Ego Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teen Ego Development Age 13</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>Total R²</th>
<th>Chg R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1.</strong> Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2.</strong> Mom’s Marital Satisfaction</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.05*</td>
<td>.05*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *** p < .001. ** p < .01. * p < .05. + p < .10.; n=128

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teen Ego Development Age 13</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>Total R²</th>
<th>Chg R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1.</strong> Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.16</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2.</strong> Dad’s Marital Satisfaction</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.07*</td>
<td>.07*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. *** p < .001. ** p < .01. * p < .05. + p < .10.; n=98
### Tables 2: Marital Satisfaction and Teen’s Ego Development Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>β</th>
<th>Total R²</th>
<th>Chg R²</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step I.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teen Ego Development Age 13</td>
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<td>.25***</td>
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<td><strong>Step 2.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.26***</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3.</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mom’s Marital Satisfaction</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.30***</td>
<td>.04*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *** p < .001. ** p < .01. * p < .05. + p < .10.; n=121
### Tables 3a&b: Marital Satisfaction and Teen’s Autonomy

#### Teen Autonomy With Mom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>β</th>
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<th>Chg R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td><strong>Step 1.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2.</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mom’s Marital Satisfaction</td>
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<td>.05*</td>
<td>.05*</td>
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</table>

Note. *** p < .001. ** p < .01. * p < .05. + p < .10.; n=117

#### Teen Autonomy With Dad

<table>
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<th>β</th>
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<th>Chg R²</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1.</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad’s Marital Satisfaction</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.09**</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *** p < .001. ** p < .01. * p < .05. + p < .10.; n=73
Findings Summary

Higher Teen Ego Development Age 13

Relates to

Higher Mom/Dad Marital Satisfaction

Relates to

Higher Mom Marital Satisfaction

Relates to

Higher Mom/Dad Marital Satisfaction

Relates to

Higher Teen Autonomy in Interactions with Mom & Dad

Growth in Ego Development Age 13-14
Conclusions

• Results demonstrate that:
  • Qualities of the couple relationship have important links to:
    • Adolescent ego development
    • Adolescent autonomy in relationships with mothers and fathers
  • These findings underscore the need to consider both mother’s and father’s marital satisfaction in understanding adolescent autonomy.
References


