Family Decision-Making Autonomy from Middle Childhood to Adolescence: Person-Based Patterns and Media-Related Issues

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Introduction

- Autonomy development is a central task of adolescence and predicts youth adjustment (links & learning, 2012; Orel et al., 2012).
- One common marker of behavioral autonomy is family decision-making autonomy: how much control youth vs. parents have over teenagers’ every-day decisions.
- The appropriateness of decision-making autonomy depends on the domain of issues considered (Smetana, 2006; Smetana et al., 2005).
- Shifts from parental to joint control during adolescence are normative for prudential (health, safety) issues and conventional norms.
- Shifts from joint to adolescent control are normative for personal (privacy, preferences) and multifaceted (mixed personal & other) issues.

- Media-related behaviors are ubiquitous in children’s lives (e.g., social media posts, text messages).
- However, normative levels of decision-making autonomy over media issues have not been examined nor compared to other behaviors (e.g., personal, multifaceted).
- Decision-making autonomy has also rarely been examined prior to adolescence (Wray-Lake et al., 2016; Cumsille et al., 2006; Smetana et al., 2005).

- Purpose

- Identify patterns of family decision-making for 4 types of issues: personal, multifaceted, media, and conventional behaviors.
- In three age groups:
  - Middle childhood, early adolescence, middle adolescence

Participants

- 842 parents of U.S. children aged 9-17:
  - 299 parents of elementary school children (2nd-5th grade, n=299), 247 parents of middle school children (6th-8th grade, n=247), 296 parents of high school children (9th-12th grade, n=296).

Decision-Making Items

- Personal:
  - Choosing my child’s style of clothing
  - What music my child listens to
  - Family of origin (friends)
  - Whether my child can join a school or community-based extracurricular activity
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- Media:
  - Whether my child has his/her own cell phone
  - Whether my child has high autonomy over media

- Multifaceted:
  - Whether my child can play video games
  - Whether my child can choose his/her own bedtime

- Conventional:
  - Whether my child can choose his/her own room
  - Whether my child can go to bed (bedtime)

Compressions

- 842 parents (n=299, 247, 296)

LPA Details

- 4-factor CFA:
  - 842 parents of U.S. children aged 9-17
  - Multifaceted (friends)
  - Personal, multifaceted, media, conventional issues

- Middle School Latent Profile Analysis

- High School Latent Profile Analysis

- Elementary School Latent Profile Analysis

Analyses

- LPA conducted in Mplus v. 7.3.
- FIML estimation of missing data and MLR estimator.
- 3-step prediction of profile membership from age, sex, ethnicity, SES.
- Low autonomy profile more likely for Black youth (elemental & high autonomy)
- High autonomy profile more likely for older youth (all age groups)
- Female HS students more likely to be in the High than Low autonomy profile

Bar Charts

- Equal letters signify equivalent values across topics, within profiles.
- Equal numbers signify equivalent values within topics, across profiles.
- All other values significantly different.

Main Findings

- Age Group Comparisons
  - 3 profile solution in all age groups
  - Low, moderate, high autonomy
  - Similar profile patterns & proportions
  - Moderate autonomy profile most different between ages
  - Mean decision-making autonomy higher for older age groups and for older youth within age group

- Treatment of Media Items
  - High autonomy profile: media items treated like personal issues (more freedom than traditional multifaceted issues)
  - Low autonomy profile: media items treated like conventional issues (and multifaceted ones) until high school.
  - Moderate autonomy profile: media items treated like multifaceted issues and increase in freedom at fastest rate

- Little control (like conventional issues) in elementary school but high control (like personal issues) by high school

Discussion

- Similar profiles and age-related increases in autonomy as observed for teens’ beliefs about legitimate parental authority (Cumsille et al., 2006)
  - Demonstrate optimal overlap in parents’ and teens’ perspectives

- But more youth in moderate & high autonomy classes here
  - Highlights distinction between beliefs about the acceptability of control and actual daily occurrence in which makes decisions
  - Ability for shared decision-making key

- Ethnic differences consistent with greater parent unilateral decision-making observed in black families (Lamborn et al., 1996)

- Treatment of media items differs by profile and age
  - High school, it’s normal for families to treat media as a personal decision and grant youth more control over these behaviors (vs. traditional multifaceted issues)
  - But high autonomy families begin this trend early; they differentiate classic from multifaceted issues in elementary school, and treat media use as a personal decision by middle school.

- Media-related decision-making autonomy appears particularly tied to development for youth in moderate autonomy families.