

Adolescents' Autonomy at Home:
Effects on Self-Consciousness and Intrinsic Motivation at School

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The factors that promote an intrinsic interest in learning have been of interest to educators and psychologists for some time. White (1959) proposed that an intrinsic interest in learning is motivated by the pleasure derived from being an effective agent of the learning process. Others have noted that a sense of self-determination in the performance of an activity is an essential feature of the intrinsic motive to learn (Boggiano, Main, & Katz, 1988; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Likewise, since the days of William James, psychologists have been interested in the duality of the self -- as agent or subject (I) and as the object of attention and assessment (me). A heightened awareness of the self as an object is a prominent feature of the adolescent stage of development (Elkind & Bowen, 1979), possibly because the multiple changes occurring at this time engender confusion about who the self is and how s/he should act. This heightened awareness, referred to as "self-consciousness", (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) distracts attention from the environment and can debilitate performance (Wicklund, 1975).

The thesis of this paper is that a sense of self-determination diminishes feelings of self-consciousness and promotes intrinsic motivation. Past research has shown that situational factors such as an external locus of control can increase self-consciousness and decrease intrinsic motivation within the situation itself. This paper investigates the role of family socialization patterns, specifically adolescent autonomy in family decision-making, on adolescent self-consciousness and intrinsic motivation in other environments.

Having a voice in making decisions is important to the young adolescent's developing sense of self. In contrast to the child who is told what to do, the adolescent whose parents encourage her/him to actively participate in making decisions should have a greater sense of self as an agent. When autonomy is encouraged at home, adolescents will derive a sense of satisfaction with being a cause and will approach tasks in other environments with a similar mastery orientation. Similarly, practice in being an agent of family decision-making will diminish feelings of self-consciousness in other environments. Adolescents who are accustomed to acting as agents in their family environments will be more focused on tasks, less worried about the presentation of the self in other settings.

Method

Sample. This study was part of a larger four-wave study of the transition from elementary to junior high school. Approximately 2200 sixth graders from 12 low- to upper- middle income school districts participated at all four waves. Questionnaires were group administered by project staff in the students' classrooms.

Measures. Three items from the Epstein and McPartland Family Decision Making (FDM) scale and one original item were used at each wave to measure the adolescent's perceptions of autonomy at home. Each subject was given a score based on his/her mean in the sixth and in the seventh grade. Coding of the scores based on a median split of the sample in elementary and junior high school yielded four adolescent autonomy groups -- below the median in sixth and seventh grade (lo/lo); above the median in sixth and below in seventh (hi/lo); below in sixth and above in seventh (lo/hi); and above the median at both time points (hi/hi).

Three subscales from Harter's (1981) Scale of Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Orientation in the Classroom were used to assess three dimensions of student's motivational orientation. The subscales used were a) preference for challenge vs. preference for easy work assigned, b) independent mastery vs. dependence on the teacher and c) independent judgment vs. reliance on the teacher's judgment.

Feelings of self-consciousness were assessed in academic, sports, and social settings with 10 original items (3 for social and sports, and four for academic). Alphas for these scales ranged between .71 and .74. Self-consciousness in each domain was the mean of items for that domain and was measured for each domain once in elementary and once in junior high school.

The hypotheses were that:

- 1) the hi/hi autonomy group would have the lowest self-consciousness and highest intrinsic motivation scores at both times of measurement of any group and the lo/lo group would have the highest self-consciousness and lowest intrinsic scores.
- 2) the hi/lo and lo/hi groups would show a pattern in self-consciousness and motivation consistent with their autonomy pattern (i.e., for the lo/hi group, lower self-consciousness and higher intrinsic motivation in junior high compared to elementary, etc.)
- 3) girls would report higher self-consciousness in all domains than boys (consistent with the results of past work on self-consciousness). No gender differences in intrinsic orientation were predicted.
- 4) there would be an increase in self-consciousness and a decrease in intrinsic motivation between elementary and junior high school due to the change in the nature of the school setting.

Analysis

Repeated measures MANOVAS and post hoc univariate follow up tests were used as the analysis techniques. There were two between subject factors (child sex and family autonomy pattern) and two within subjects factors for each MANOVA. The within subjects factors were self-consciousness domain (academic, sports, social) for the self-consciousness analyses and components of intrinsic motivation for the intrinsic motivation analyses and time of measurement (elementary/junior high school) for both analyses.

Table 1 shows the results of the MANOVAS for self-consciousness and intrinsic motivation. The main effects of the between subject factors will be discussed first followed by a discussion of the within subjects effects.

Self-Consciousness

Family decision-making autonomy had a marginal effect on self-consciousness but had a significant effect on adolescent self-consciousness in the academic setting in the predicted direction.

Girls' self-consciousness scores were significantly higher than boys', especially in the sports domain. Contrary to prediction, self-consciousness scores for girls and boys declined between elementary school and junior high and this was especially true in the math domain.

Intrinsic Motivation

There was a significant main effect of autonomy on intrinsic motivation. Adolescents in the lo/lo group had lower overall intrinsic scores than any other group in elementary and junior high.

Several effects of time were significant. First, as expected there was a decline in all dimensions of intrinsic motivation between elementary and junior high school. Second, the large difference between the lo/lo and the hi/lo groups in elementary school is diminished in junior high school when the hi/lo group reports lower autonomy at home. Furthermore, there were no differences in the mastery or challenge scores in elementary school between the hi/lo and hi/hi autonomy groups. However, the hi/lo group had lower mastery and challenge scores than the hi/hi autonomy group in junior high. These results show a consistent pattern over time of family autonomy on classroom challenge and mastery orientation.

There were also several effects specific to the intrinsic dimension assessed. Autonomy at home affected adolescents' preference for challenge and independent mastery in the classroom but had no effect on independent judgment in the classroom.

The decrease in intrinsic motivation during the transition to junior high school is less marked for independent mastery than for preference for challenge or independent judgment.

Discussion

Participation in family decision-making at home is associated with lower feelings of self-consciousness in the academic domain but has no effect in the social or sports domains. This may be due to the similarity of the two contexts - i.e., the adolescent's sense of agency at home and self-consciousness in the classroom occurs in relationships with adults in both settings. In contrast, in the sports and social domains the focus is on peer relationships which may be less affected by the adolescent's increased role in family decisions.

Similarly, autonomy affected the mastery and challenge dimensions of intrinsic motivation but not the independent judgment dimension. The items in

this subscale tap opinions of the proper roles and practices for teachers and students compared to the other two scales which focus more on characteristics of personality and motivation which should be more consistent across situations. These results confirm Harter's contention that intrinsic motivation is not a unidimensional construct.

References

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Table 1. Effects of family autonomy and child sex on adolescent self-consciousness and intrinsic motivation.

df	Between effects	Self Consciousness n = 2137	Intrinsic Orientation n = 2261
3	Autonomy	2.43	41.65****
1	Child Sex	85.66****	1.20
3	Autonomy by Child Sex	1.74	.94
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df	Within effects		
2	Domain	665.80****	215.49
6	Domain by Autonomy	7.08****	7.17****
2	Domain by Child Sex	22.86****	4.00*
6	Domain by Autonomy by Sex	1.90	.41
1	Time of Measurement	513.41****	26.49****
3	Time by Autonomy	1.33	3.12
1	Time by Child Sex	8.90*	20.69****
3	Time by Autonomy by Sex	.57	.69
2	Domain by Time	12.15****	241.73****
6	Domain by Time by Autonomy	1.73	18.75****
2	Domain by Child Sex	.11	3.23
6	Domain by Time by Autonomy by Child Sex	1.25	.88

*p < .01

** p < .001

*** p < .0001

**** p < .0000