

## Filial Relationship and Autonomy of Senior Secondary School Students in Rivers State

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### Abstract

*This study is aimed at determining the association/relationship between filial relationship (operationalized as parenting and family attachment styles) and adolescent family member's autonomy of senior secondary school students in Rivers State, Nigeria. The survey data collected from a sample of 1000 senior secondary school two (SS 2) students were used for the study. The Pearson's product moment correlation statistic was used in testing the hypothesis of the study at 0.05 level of significance. The result obtained showed a significant positive relationship between autonomy and filial relationship. It was noted that the warmer the filial relationship existing in a family, the higher the development of autonomy among adolescent members of the same family. Thus the role of early parental relationships with children needs to be emphasized in the personality development of children among Nigerian families.*

### Introduction

Filial relationship as a construct depicts the parenting or child rearing styles actually adopted by parents in bringing up their children. Where there is no such parenting, there may not be any affinity or attachment between parents and their children (Ainsworth, 1979). Parenting manifested as democratic, autocratic or laissez-faire was the precursor to family attachments that may also manifest as secure, insecure and ambivalent. Attachment as defined by Bowlby (1955) is an affectional ties that one person forms with another, binding them together in space and enduring over time. Attachment styles refer to a close emotional relationship between two or more persons often characterized by mutual affection and desire to maintain proximity. Studies have shown an attachment relationship develop from parents and newborn interaction through touch-control, contact-comfort and eye-to-eye contact and is not present at birth (Bowlby, 1955). Parental attachment that increases youngster's opportunities to engage in behaviours that enhance the development of a sense of efficacy, personal control and mastery is made of support or acceptance for disciplinary

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patterns in the form of control, permissiveness and participation. The major premise here is that parental acceptance has an enhancing effect upon psychosocial development, and parental rejection at the other extreme, presumably results in an impoverished environment and a diminished sense of personal worthiness (Ainsworth, 1979; Isabella, 1993; DeWolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997).

It is parenting and its consequent attachment relationships that constitute filial relationships. Filial relationships therefore concern the ways in which a daughter or a son should relate to parents and vice versa. The family, after all, is the primary agent of socialization and is the strongest factor in the adolescent's internalization of acceptable societal mores (Shaffer, 1999). The amounts of love, warmth, nurturance, acceptance exhibited in these relationships go a long way in developing a strong sense of who the children are. This is a very crucial factor to consider in proper adolescent development of autonomy from parents.

During the developmental stage of adolescence, young people strive for independence and begin to make decisions that impact them for the rest of their lives. According to Erikson (1968), the adolescent moves from a state of complete satisfaction and dependence to a state of independent operation and mutual regulation with others in a community. This is because the onset of adolescence brings a new set of problems to the developing ego as well as revitalizing former ones. Physiologically, the body experiences very rapid changes which result in genital maturity. At the same time, the adolescent recognises that he/she is about to face adulthood. Healthy resolution at this stage results in a sense of ego identity which Erikson defines as being at one with oneself, seeing one's relationship to one's community and to one's future.

Adolescent autonomy does not mean total independence from parents and significant others. It is also not the same thing as adolescent rebellion. Instead of doing away with earlier relationships, this is what emerging autonomy at the onset of adolescence really means; becoming emotionally independent. This is the predisposition of the adolescent to drop childish behaviours, overcoming the psychological loss of parents and other caregivers for a more stable interest and emotions. This emotional independence of the adolescent would have been perfected by earlier relationships in the mould of sibling rivalry and household chumships. These are relationships of siblings, cousins and a few neighbourhood friends usually of the same sex. Autonomous adolescents have also gained ability to be self-reliant, make decisions, choices and judgements after careful discussion and thought. The adolescent too gains in a dimension called individuality in identity formation. This is the ability of the adolescent to have and communicate a point of view and the peculiar use of communication patterns.

These are all dimensions of adolescent autonomy. Coupled with the above issues is the issue of incorporating sexuality into a still developing sense of self, the need to resolve questions about sexual values and morals and coming to terms with the sort of relationships into which the adolescent is prepared (or not prepared) to enter (Katchadourian, 1990).

Studies by Wainright and Patterson (2006), Eya (2007) revealed that adolescents whose parents described closer relationships with them reported less delinquent behaviour and substance use, suggesting that the quality of filial relationship better predict adolescent autonomy outcomes. It is ditto to the finding of Herman, Ostrander and Tucker (2007) that low family cohesion was uniquely associated with depression for African American adolescents. The studies of Boll, Ferring and Filipp (2003); Pike, Coldwell and Dunn (2005) and Criss and Shaw (2005) have supported the thesis that many aspects of familial relationships add to the quality of family life one enjoys. These could include dyadic parent-child, spousal and other filial dyads. Transactions within these dyads might involve a bi-directionality of influence. In this reciprocal interplay, adolescents, it must be emphasized are contributors to their own development, not objects of unidirectional parental influence.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is guided by psychosexual theory of Freud (1937), psychosocial theory of Erikson (1968) and filial love theory (Steinberg, 1999).

Freud (1937) was the first to stress how early life of the infant shapes his/her later life. During the phallic stage, Freud's theory stresses that the fact that if a child receives harsh or restrictive treatment, he will lack enough self-confidence, curiosity and ambition; and may develop anxiety about his/her body and inappropriate sexual behaviours.

Freud also believes that the feelings of warmth, trust and security that infants gain from secure attachments sets that stage for healthy development later in life. Of course, one implication of this viewpoint is that insecure attachment may forecast less than optimal developmental outcomes in the years ahead.

At the genital stage (age 12-18years), further changes take place in the body. The further changes in hormones and genital organ maturity that take place during puberty reawaken the sexual energy of the adolescent. As the adolescent approaches adulthood, they develop interest in the opposite sex, develop intimate relationships, becomes free of parental influence, develop the capacity to be interested in others, engage in some sexual experimentation and begin to assume adult responsibilities. There is a trend away from narcissism and toward altruistic behaviour and concern for others. Accordingly, working and loving as well as deriving satisfaction from them are of paramount importance.

This is what Erikson (1968) refers to as the basic trust without which the psychological development of the child is hindered. Erikson believes that through satisfying the child's psychological needs like love, warmth, acceptance, encouragement and security, the child shall develop self-confidence, good personality and appropriate sexual behaviour. The importance of warmth and nurturance for the development of competence and moral behaviour can be traced to the earliest infant-parent attachment relationship.

The filial love theory of Steinberg (1999) speculate about father-child, mother-child and parents-child relationships as well as household chumship, peer love and their interactions on each other on the overall development of autonomy.

### **Problem**

Many parents have problems establishing and maintaining limits, privileges and responsibilities with their children. They are not firm, fair, explicit and consistent with their children. When parents act as wrong role models, directly or indirectly rewarding inappropriate behaviours, then adolescents' involvement in all kinds of untoward behaviour could increase. The reason being that the parents are the most consistent and salient models of behaviour and dispensers of reinforcement (Geerheart, Depinter and Sileo, 1986). Besides, the family operates as a multilevel social system with interlocking relationships rather than simply as a collection of members. Both the parent-child subsystem is embraced in the network of interdependencies that constitute a family. In these multiple interlocking relationships, the roles of parents, spouse and offspring carry different functional demands, development opportunities, constraints and reciprocal obligations. So when an aspect of this network of relationships goes dysfunctional, it is bound to affect the whole network.

As children grow into adolescence, their autonomy gains ascendancy at the expense of earlier efforts at identification with parents as models. Like all interpersonal transitions, this movement can be fraught with anxiety. If the interpersonal tasks of adolescence have been negotiated successfully, the young person enters late adolescence and young adulthood able to be intimate and carving a niche for one's self. If not, the resultant frequent frictions would distract adolescence from noble goals.

In a bid to stem the tide of escalating filial quandaries, families are responding more to counselling, government have empowered Social Welfare Departments to mitigate the ugly trend. Agencies such as Society for Family Health (SFH) are out to encourage family health, yet the slide continues unabated. This study is therefore conceptualized to proffer solutions to help delinquent adolescents created by filial quandary.

## **Hypothesis**

We hypothesized that the autonomy of students is not significantly related to their filial relationship.

## **Methodology**

The study utilized the survey research design. Stratified random sampling technique was used in the selection of a sample of 1000 participants from senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The criteria for stratification was based on the school type i.e. girls only, boys only, rural and urban locations. The sample was made up of 490 males and 510 females. They came from various backgrounds, which reflected the socio-economic status of their parents or guardians and their religion. They also came from various ethnic groups. Their age range lay between 14-17years.

### *Instrumentation*

This research instrument was constructed by the researchers. It was validated by the experts from the department of Educational Foundation of the University of Calabar. It was constructed to measure variables of the study, which are filial relationships and autonomy. Face validity has been established for the instrument of this study where all the items in the instrument were subjected to rigorous scrutiny by experts. In addition to face validity, authors established the "factorial analysis" to confirm construct validity. The instrument was pilot tested. Internal consistency was confirmed via the Cronbach Alpha Co-efficient which is 0.73 while a test-retest was established as reliability co-efficient at 0.87.

### *Data collection*

The instrument was administered personally by the researchers to the participants in the sampled schools. The questionnaires were administered to the students in their various groups in each of the sampled schools. The purpose of the investigation was briefly explained to them as contained in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was carefully explained for comprehension of what was required of them. The participants were encouraged to give true and unbiased responses to every item. Assurance was given to respondents for the confidentiality of the information given so as to remove fears of their private life being exposed. The participants were also told that the exercise was not an examination, therefore, there was neither correct nor wrong answers to the items on the

questionnaire. Respondents were prevented from interacting with each other. This was to reduce the misrepresentation of information.

### *Data analysis*

The autonomy of senior secondary school students is not significantly related to their filial relationship. There are two variables involved in this hypothesis; these are filial relationship (which is the independent variable) and their autonomy (which is the dependent variable).

The statistical analysis technique deployed to test this hypothesis was Pearson's correlation analysis. The result of this analysis is presented in Table 1. The result presented in Table 1 has shown a calculated r-value of 0.43, which is higher than the critical r-value of 0.062 at 0.05 level of significance with 991 degrees of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a positive strong significant relationship between the autonomy of senior secondary students and their filial relationship. This means that the more their level of autonomy, the higher their level of filial relationship.

**Table 1: Pearson's correlation analysis of the relationship between students' autonomy and their filial relationship**

Variable	Mean	SD	$\sum X/\sum Y$	$\sum X^2/\sum Y^2$	$\sum XY$	r
Autonomy(x)	63.60	9.84	63159	4113209		
Filial relationship (y)	70.98	9.91	70480	5099958	4524041	43*

\*Significant at .05 level, critical  $r = .062$ ;  $N = 993$

### **Discussion**

The results of the analysis show a significant positive relationship between filial relationship and autonomy. This implies that the higher the individual's degree of filial relationship, the more his/her degree of autonomy.

A psychological theory to interpret in the light of one's result is the psychosexual theory of Freud. From Freud's point of view, early good relationship between parents and their children is very important for the child's personal adjustment to the society he/she finds him/herself. Poor parent-child interaction may lead to weak spots in the child's development. This is consistent with the assertion of

Eya (2007) that positive parent-child relationship tends to reduce alienation while negative or impoverished parent-child relationship tends to encourage alienation in the adolescent who falls headlong into peer pressure. Warmer and stronger parent-child relationship tends to reduce alienation while negative or impoverished parent-child relationship tends to encourage alienation in the adolescent. This is also consistent with the finding of the study that the warmer the level of filial relationship, the more the level of autonomy of adolescents. This is also similar to the findings of Wainright and Patterson (2006) that adolescents whose parents described closer relationship with them reported less delinquent behaviour and substance use, suggesting that the quality of parent-adolescent relationship better predict adolescent outcomes. It is ditto to the findings of Herman, Ostrander and Tucker (2007) that low family cohesion was uniquely associated with depression for African American adolescents. The studies of Boll, Ferring and Filipp (2003), Criss and Shaw (2005) and East and Khoo (2005) emphasize that good filial relationship shape up siblings relationships, which in turn influence adolescent outcomes including their autonomies hence the result posited that there is a significant positive relationship between filial relationships of senior secondary school students and their autonomies.

At this juncture also one might consider looking at the study's methodology as touching the sampling, the instrument and the conduct of the study. The sampling technique that was used in the study that is the criteria of stratification which was boys only, girls only and co-educational helped to improve the internal validity of the study. And of course, the data collection instrument predetermined the questions and answers one anticipated. This is the plus for the survey design; there were ample opportunities for exploring researcher's ideas and the theories that guided the study. To that extent, the research results can be generalized to different postulations, settings and conditions. To that extent, one considers this study to be a good example of a study in social psychology in general and educational psychology in particular. Especially to the extent that the assumption of the study which claims subjects honesty and willingness to disclose all their negative tendencies were true.

### **Recommendation and conclusion**

The findings reveal that:

The individual's sense of autonomy has a strong link with the degree of his/her filial relationship. Based on the findings of this study, and subsequent conclusion, the following recommendations are made

1. Parents should be made aware of the importance of warm filial relationships. The warmer the filial relationship existing in a family, the higher the autonomy of the adolescents in that family. Higher autonomy means better adjustment and more quality participation in the ideals of society. Democratic and even autocratic parenting style are better options to permissive style as far as the autonomy of the adolescent is concerned

2. Parents should be caring enough to figure out whether their children are tending towards anxious-avoidant attachment style. Children in this mould display more negative autonomy outcomes. The importance of early childhood years to the development of a secure and enduring attachment relationship between children and their parents. Students who are securely attached scored higher on the autonomy variables; so a secure attachment is encouraged. High family closeness in the form of robust sibling relationships is encouraged as these serve as frame of reference for individual development and family functioning. Students with low level of household chumship are significantly more involved in negative autonomy outcomes than those with moderate and high levels.

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