With age, Chilean, Filipino, and U.S. youth come to believe that fewer issues are legitimately within the control of parents and that they are less obliged to obey parental rules. These beliefs vary across domains and countries, providing insight into parent-adolescent conflict and the development of autonomy.

Rules, Legitimacy of Parental Authority, and Obligation to Obey in Chile, the Philippines, and the United States

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All cultures have a period when children learn to function autonomously and prepare to take on the roles they will have as adults (Schlegel, 1995). As they move from childhood to adulthood, adolescents demand, and parents grant them, increasing autonomy. The ability to function autonomously is a central task of adolescence, and all theoretical perspectives on adolescent socialization and development emphasize the problems associated with failure to successfully negotiate that passage (Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins, 2003). The construct of autonomy, however, is conceptually complex in that it is both multidimensional and strongly linked to other indicators of psychosocial functioning. For example, autonomy encompasses cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions and includes adolescents’ behavioral self-regulation, aspects of identity development, and beliefs about parents as individuals separate from the self (Sessa and Steinberg, 1991). In addition, autonomy develops unevenly across different areas of individuals’ lives, even within specific dimensions. For example, an adolescent may be highly autonomous in sexual decision making, but be dependent on her parents in

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other areas, such as finances. Arnett and Taber (1994) have argued that unevenness in the achievement of autonomy across different areas of young peoples’ lives may be particularly characteristic of modern industrial societies and may constitute a new developmental stage of semidependency, or emerging adulthood.

**Conflict and the Negotiation of Autonomy**

Our everyday use of the word *autonomy* reflects its complexity. Researchers use the term *autonomy* to refer to a characteristic of the individual. In everyday language, however, we talk about parents “granting autonomy” to their adolescents—in other words, freeing them from external rules or constraints. Although both parents’ and adolescents’ expectations for adolescent autonomy increase with age, adolescents typically demand autonomy earlier than their parents are ready to grant it. Conflict between parents and adolescents is one marker of the negotiation between adolescents’ and parents’ definition of the boundaries of adolescent autonomy (Collins and others, 1997). Research on parents’ and adolescents’ beliefs about the legitimate domains of parental authority (for example, Nucci, Killen, and Smetana, 1996; Smetana, 1988) suggests that both parents and adolescents agree that parents can (and indeed should) regulate some aspects of their adolescents’ lives. Other areas, however, are considered outside the legitimate domain of parental authority. For example, both parents and adolescents agree that parents have the right to control youth with regard to safety issues and issues of morality, concede some parental legitimacy to the control of conventional behavior, but agree that parents do not have the right to regulate areas in the personal domain. However, parents and adolescents disagree about which domain a particular issue falls within. For example, how one dresses for church might be seen as a matter of personal taste for an adolescent but a matter of convention for the adolescent’s parent. Smetana, Crean, and Campione-Barr (Chapter Three, this volume) suggest that conflict occurs when parents try to control areas of adolescents’ lives that adolescents consider to be outside the legitimate domain of parental authority.

Is parent-adolescent conflict most likely to occur when parents exert authority over areas where youth believe they do not have legitimate authority? Cumsille, Darling, and Peña-Alampay (2002) addressed this question directly in a comparative study of 205 Chilean and 122 Filipino adolescents. Cross-cultural research allows study of the expression of autonomy through conflict in cultures that differ in social norms and family functioning. In a meta-analysis comparing individualism and collectivism cross-culturally, Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) concluded that Chileans placed a higher value on individualism than do respondents from the United States, who in turn were more individualistic than respondents from Asia (no specific comparison was available with the Philippines). Collectivism, which
was assessed independently and was not conceptualized as at the opposing end of the spectrum of individualism, was reported to be higher in Chile and Asia than in the United States. Both individualistic and collectivistic values are thought to be intimately tied to the development of autonomy, with individuals holding strongly individualistic beliefs expecting to be granted behavioral autonomy earlier than those who do not (Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins, 2003). Cultures also differ in their expectations about the relationship between parents and children. Filipino culture places a strong value on children acting toward parents out of *utang na loob*, a debt of gratitude that cannot be repaid, and with *hiya*, or behaving with propriety to avoid shaming one's family (Medina, 2001). Taken together, these findings suggest that Chilean youth may expect autonomy at an earlier age than Filipinos and be more likely to express disagreement with parents.

Chilean and Filipino adolescents (age range, 11 to 23 years; average age, 15.9) were recruited from public schools, private schools, and universities and completed a series of questionnaires. For each of thirty-eight issues, students reported on whether parents had set clear rules or expectations (assessed in terms of yes or no responses), whether it was okay for parents to set rules about that issue (yes or no responses), whether they were obliged to obey rules that they disagreed with (yes or no responses), and how frequently they had discussed or argued with their parents in the past thirty days (zero to three or more times). Initial analyses confirmed clear cultural differences in both parents’ granting of autonomy (setting rules) and adolescents’ assumption of it (legitimacy of parental authority, measured by adolescents answering yes to whether it was okay for parents to set rules and that adolescents were obligated to obey). As expected, Filipino parents were more likely to set rules, and Filipino youth were more likely than Chileans to believe it was okay for parents to do so and feel obliged to obey rules (*p* ≤ .000). Unexpectedly, however, Filipino youth were also more likely than Chileans to report arguing with their parents (*p* ≤ .000).

If Filipino culture strongly fosters obedience to parents and Filipino youth are more likely to grant parents legitimate authority, why are Filipino parents and adolescents more likely to argue? The answer appears to lie at the social intersection of autonomy: parents’ rules and adolescents’ felt obligation to obey. Adolescents reported higher conflict in two conditions. First, conflict was higher around issues for which parents had set explicit rules. Second, conflict was higher around issues that were not governed by explicit rules, but about which adolescents felt obliged to obey. In other words, conflict occurred in the presence of parental attempts to limit adolescent autonomy. Importantly, the highest level of conflict was reported around issues that adolescents felt their parents did not have legitimate authority over but that adolescents felt obliged to obey. This was true in both Chile and the Philippines. Thus, although the processes underlying parent-adolescent conflict were the same for Chileans and Filipinos, the likelihood that conflict would occur was smaller in Chile than in the
Philippines. Chilean parents were less likely to assert control through rules, and Chilean youth were less likely to feel obliged to obey them when they did, thus averting the need for direct confrontation. Filipino parents were more likely to set rules, and adolescents were more likely to believe they should obey them, resulting in higher levels of conflict. The patterning of results suggests that adolescents choose to argue with parents when they implicitly recognize their authority and hope to negotiate for greater autonomy. This is consistent with other research suggesting that adolescents choose to disclose disagreement to parents, rather than avoiding disclosure or lying, when issues are governed by rules, when they believe parents have legitimate authority over the issues, and when they feel obliged to obey (Darling, Hames, and Cumsille, 2000). Conflict reflects the moving edge in the negotiation of autonomy between parents and adolescents.

**The Different Faces of Autonomy: Rules, Legitimacy of Parental Authority, and Obligation to Obey**

How does parents’ granting of autonomy and adolescents’ assertion of autonomy differ across different age groups? How are they related to one another? Does this vary by country? Do these aspects of autonomy differ within individuals? To address these questions, students in three large cities in Chile, the Philippines, and the United States (Santiago, Manila, and Miami, respectively) were recruited through public and private secondary schools and private universities through classroom announcements and letters sent to their homes. Three hundred seventy-two Chilean ages thirteen to twenty years, 153 Filipino ages thirteen to twenty years, and 204 American ages fifteen to twenty years participated in the study. Santiago and Manila are quite ethnically homogeneous, and ethnicity was therefore not measured. Within the United States, 51 percent of the sample self-identified as Hispanic (34 percent Cuban), 28 percent as white, 6 percent as African American, less than 1 percent as Asian American, and 16 percent as other or did not provide information on their ethnicity. Overall, 56 percent of the sample was female.

Students completed a questionnaire in classrooms outside the regular school schedule. As part of this questionnaire, adolescents answered nine questions about each of twenty different issues. Questions examined here included assessments of rules (“Do your parents have clear rules or expectations about this issue?”), legitimacy of parental authority (“Is it OK for [your] parents to set rules?”), and obligation to obey (“If you and your parents disagree do you HAVE TO obey?”). Responses were coded 0 for no and 1 for yes. Issues were selected to represent areas that are frequent sources of parent-adolescent conflict and were identified through review of the extant literature (Smetana, 1993; Smetana and Berent, 1993) and focus groups in each country. The cultural appropriateness of stems and questions was validated in a separate pilot study.
Because it had been hypothesized that youths whose parents are authoritative (warm, strict, but granting psychological autonomy) would also be more likely to believe parental authority was legitimate and they were obliged to obey (Darling and Steinberg, 1993), three dimensions of parenting associated with authoritativeness were assessed using a nine-item measure (examples: “I can count on them to help when me I have a problem,” “My parents really expect me to follow family rules,” “They believe I have a right to my own point of view”). Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Adolescents reported separately on mothers and fathers, and the scores were combined.

The Interrelationship of Rules, Legitimacy of Parental Authority, and Obligation to Obey. In order to address questions about the interrelationship of rules, legitimacy of parental authority, and obligation to obey over age and across countries, separate three-level hierarchical linear model (HLM) analyses were performed for each country. In these analyses, the issue was nested within autonomy indicator, which was nested within person. HLM was used to estimate each indicator of autonomy across issues, test for differences between each indicator of autonomy, and predict autonomy from between-person differences in gender, age, and authoritativeness. The percentage of issues adolescents indicated were governed by rules, legitimately governed by parental authority, and that they were obliged to obey were graphed by age and country (Figure 4.1) controlling for authoritativeness and gender. In this graph, lower percentages indicate greater autonomy.

As can be seen in Figure 4.1, the relationship between rules, legitimacy, and obligation to obey differed by age and by country. In Chile, adolescents reported that more issues were governed by rules than they believed were legitimately within the control of parental authority ($p \leq .000$) or they believed they were obliged to obey in case of disagreement ($p \leq .005$). Overall, the differences among the three indicators of autonomy did not vary by age ($p > .32$), although the predicted means converge by age nineteen. In sum, all indicators of autonomy increased with age, parents were less likely to grant autonomy than adolescents were to demand it, but by late adolescence, parents and adolescents seemed to reach a common point.

Like Chilean youths, parents in the Philippines were more likely to set rules than adolescents were to believe that they were obliged to obey them ($p \leq .000$). Rules did not differ by age. Adolescents were more likely to believe that issues were within the legitimate domain of parental authority than they were to believe they were obliged to obey ($p \leq .01$). Rules and legitimacy did not differ from one another ($p = .25$). The difference between the likelihood that parents would set rules and adolescents’ beliefs that it was legitimate for parents to do so and that they should obey was larger for older than for younger adolescents ($p \leq .05$). In sum, the difference between parents’ attempts to regulate adolescent behavior and adolescents’ willingness to comply with parental regulation grows larger over adolescence.
Figure 4.1. Percentage of Issues Adolescents Report Are Governed by Parental Rules, Are Legitimately Subject to Parental Authority, and They Feel Obliged to Obey in Case of Disagreement by Age and Country
In contrast to Chile and the Philippines, adolescents in the United States were more likely to believe their parents had legitimate authority over an issue than their parents were to set a rule \((p = .001)\) or to believe that they were obliged to obey rules they disagreed with \((p = .04)\). There was no significant difference between U.S. adolescents’ beliefs that they were obliged to obey and the likelihood that their parents set rules \((p = .19)\). As in Chile, the relationship between the three indicators of autonomy did not vary by age \((p < .12)\). Comparing the three countries, parents in Chile and the Philippines appear to grant adolescents autonomy more slowly than youth believe they should. In the United States, parents grant autonomy at an earlier age than adolescents demand it.

**Within-Person Differences in Autonomy.** A central component of social-cognitive domain is the idea that individuals’ beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority will vary across different domains (Nucci, Killen, and Smetana, 1996; Turiel, 1983). Within social-cognitive domain theory, one’s reasoning about an issue, and therefore beliefs about the legitimacy of parents’ attempts to exert control over the issue, depend on domain categorization. The focus of prior research in this area has been on normative shifts in adolescents’ and parents’ reasoning about areas of conflict and beliefs about the legitimacy of parental attempts to control behavior (Smetana, 1988, 1993). For example, the moral domain is governed by principles thought to be obligatory, universally applicable, and impersonal. Doing physical or psychological harm to others is an example of a moral violation. In contrast, the conventional domain is governed by arbitrary or socially constructed agreements about appropriate behavior. Issues within the psychological domain are often conceptualized as outside both moral or conventional control because they affect only the individual. The psychological domain can be differentiated into three subdomains: the personal, prudential, and psychological. The personal domain, which includes behaviors that affect only the self, is exemplified by choice of friends or recreational activities. The prudential domain encompasses issues that have immediate and negative consequences for the self. Some issues are multidimensional, including aspects of both the personal and the conventional. On the basis of this research, it would be expected that parents would grant, and adolescents would expect, greater autonomy in the psychological domain, particularly the personal, than in the conventional domain.

Consistent with earlier research, pilot research in the United States, Chile, and the Philippines revealed that there was little variability in adolescents’ reports of conflict or legitimacy in the moral domain (hurting other people or stealing, for example), leading us to drop moral issues from our current study. A series of factor analyses of adolescents’ responses to questions about the legitimacy of parental authority done in a sample of 121 U.S. adolescents and of the current data suggested that adolescents’ responses to issues could be meaningfully classified into one of five domains: prudential (smoking, alcohol, and drug use), parent expectations
(time on the telephone, homework, school performance), personal (choice of friends, dress, use of free time, extracurricular activities, use of money), multiple-domain (type of video viewed, spending time with people parents don’t like, unsupervised time with friends, where you go with friends, hanging out after school and after dinner, curfew), and opposite-sex relations (“Your relationships with the opposite sex [phone calls, going to dances or out with mixed-sex groups, dating]” and “Your relationship with your boyfriend or girlfriend [time you spend together, privacy you are allowed, how serious you are, your sexual relationship]”).

A series of HLM analyses was calculated in order to predict within-person differences in each indicator of autonomy as a function of domain. In these analyses, responses to personal, parent expectation, opposite-sex, and multiple-domain issues were contrasted with those in the prudential domain. Analyses were performed separately by country. The percentages of issues governed by rules that adolescents believe are legitimately subject to parental authority and that adolescents believe they are obliged to obey in case of disagreement are graphed in Figure 4.2. These percentages control for age, gender, and authoritativeness.

Parents in all three countries were more likely to set rules in the prudential domain than in other domains (Figure 4.2, top panel). Chilean parents were less likely to set rules in the prudential domain than were parents in the Philippines or the United States, but they were also less likely to differentiate across domains. Adolescents also clearly differentiated between the legitimacy of parental authority in different domains (central panel, Figure 4.2). In the Philippines and the United States, adolescents most clearly differentiated between the prudential domain and all others. In contrast, the legitimacy of authority that Chilean youth conferred to parents varied more sharply across issues in the Parent Expectation, Opposite Sex, Multidomain, and Personal domains. Within-person differences across domains were similar to those found in legitimacy of parental authority (bottom panel, Figure 4.2). Youth in the Philippines and the United States clearly differentiated between the prudential and other domains. Chilean youth differentiate more sharply across all domains.

These results have several implications when looked at from the perspective of autonomy. First, parents’ granting of and adolescents’ beliefs about autonomy are clearly differentiated across domains. This is consistent with arguments by Arnett and others that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is uneven (Arnett and Taber, 1994) and the fundamental tenets of social-cognitive domain theory (Smetana, 2002). The contrast between autonomy with regard to prudential and other issues is striking in all three countries. It is particularly interesting that adolescents are least likely to endorse parents’ right to set rules or their own obligation to obey rules over multidimensional issues. This domain encompasses issues that have strong elements of the personal domain (for example, unsupervised time with friends, where you go with friends), but which parents typically
Figure 4.2. Percentage of Issues Governed by Rules, Legitimately Subject to Parental Authority, and Obligatory to Obey by Domain and Country

- **Rules**
  - Chile
  - Philippines
  - United States

- **Legitimacy of Parental Authority**
  - Chile
  - Philippines
  - United States

- **Obligation to Obey**
  - Chile
  - Philippines
  - United States

Legend:
- Prudential
- Expectations
- Opposite Sex
- Multidomain
- Personal
try to regulate for prudential reasons. It is interesting, therefore, that in all three countries and across both legitimacy of parental authority and obligation to obey, adolescents are more likely to exert autonomy in this domain than in any other.

**Between-Person Differences in Autonomy.** Our focus has been on normative differences in autonomy as a function of age and country. What predicts between-person differences in autonomy? A series of HLM analyses was performed in which country, age, gender, and authoritativeness were used to predict parental rules and adolescents' beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority and obligation to obey. Age differences have already been discussed. Other demographic differences in autonomy are relatively consistent with cultural expectations. Parents in the Philippines were more likely to set rules than parents in United States, who were more likely to set rules than parents in Chile ($p \leq .05$). Chilean youth were less likely to grant parents legitimate authority over issues or to believe they were obliged to obey rules they disagree with than youth in either the United States or the Philippines ($p \leq .05$). Gender differences in autonomy were small and were not significantly different across countries. Filipino parents set more rules for girls than for boys ($p \leq .05$). In both Chile and the Philippines, girls were more likely than boys to believe that parents had legitimate authority and that they were obliged to obey parents ($p \leq .05$).

What of authoritativeness? In prior research, U.S. adolescents who described their parents as authoritative were more autonomous than their peers from nonauthoritative families (Steinberg, Darling, and Fletcher, 1995). However, Darling and Steinberg (1993) hypothesized that adolescents with authoritative parents would be more likely to endorse the legitimacy of parental authority, making them more open to socialization. In this chapter, lower likelihood of endorsing legitimacy of parental authority is seen as an indicator of autonomy. Does authoritativeness predict greater autonomy, controlling for age and gender? In Chile, but not in the Philippines or the United States, parents high in authoritativeness were more likely to set rules ($p \leq .001$). In all three countries, adolescents with authoritative parents were more likely to believe that parents have legitimate authority over issues ($p \leq .05$). The differences between authoritative and nonauthoritative parents were largest in the United States and smallest in Chile. In Chile, youth who described their parents as authoritative were more likely to feel obliged to obey than those who did not ($p \leq .000$). Although authoritativeness did not significantly predict between-person differences in obligation to obey in either the Philippines or the United States, this relationship was not significantly different in those two countries from that in Chile ($p \leq .35$). In other words, consistent with Darling and Steinberg's hypothesis (1993), youth from authoritative families were relatively more likely to feel that parents have legitimate authority. There is no evidence that authoritativeness is associated with higher autonomy.
Conclusion and Implications

When examined in the family context of adolescent development, autonomy reflects parents' attempts to regulate their children's behavior and adolescents' beliefs that parents have the right to do so and that they must conform to parental control attempts even when they disagree with them. In three culturally distinct countries, Chile, the Philippines, and the United States, older adolescents are less likely than younger adolescents to believe that parents have legitimate authority over their lives and that they are obliged to obey them in case of disagreement. This is consistent with a growing body of cross-cultural research in this area (for example, Nucci, Camino, and Sapiro, 1996; Yau and Smetana, 2003). It has been hypothesized that this change in adolescents' beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority, combined with a slower change in parents' beliefs about the legitimate areas of their own authority, contributes to a normative increase in conflict (see Chapter Three, this volume). These results suggest that the picture is somewhat more complex. Conflict appears to be most likely when adolescents do not concede parental authority and (1) parents either attempt to regulate the behavior or (2) adolescents believe they are obliged to conform to parental standards. In other words, if parents do not attempt to regulate behavior or if adolescents believe they do not have to obey if they do, no conflict will occur. For example, although Chilean youth were less likely to concede parental authority, they argued less with parents than Filipinos did, because Filipino parents set more rules and Filipino adolescents felt they needed to obey them.

Autonomy is not a unitary construct in that (1) parents' granting of autonomy and adolescents' beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority and their own obligation to obey follow different trajectories, and (2) the autonomy parents grant and adolescents assume varies sharply depending upon domain. It should be noted that although most discussions of normative changes in adolescents' beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority assume that adolescents' desire for autonomy will run ahead of parents' willingness to grant it, adolescents in the United States report that they believe their parents have the right to regulate more areas of their lives than parents try to regulate. It is possible that this reflects the fact that U.S. parents often impose rules only in areas where they seem needed. Thus, parents of youths who are following parents' standards may not need to set rules to gain adolescent compliance to parental standards. In a separate study using the U.S. and Chilean data analyzed here, we examined the predictors of parents' trust (Darling, Cumsille, Peña-Alampay, and Sharp, 2003). In that study, parental trust was assessed as trust that adolescents would use good judgment, not do anything “really dumb,” follow rules when parents were not around, act in accordance with parent standards when parents were not around, and tell parents the truth. In other words, it assessed parents' trust that youth would act with responsible autonomy. The number of rules parents set was unrelated.
to parental trust. However, youths who exercised responsible self-regulation (parent-adolescent agreement, obedience in the case of disagreement, parental knowledge, and low levels of lying) reported higher levels of parental trust. Parental trust may obviate the need for regulation of issues that evoke both the private and the prudential domains. One finding in this chapter that at first seems paradoxical is that adolescents who describe their parents as authoritative are more likely to believe their parents have legitimate authority. If beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority and obligation to obey are interpreted as indicators of psychological autonomy, these results are inconsistent with previous findings that adolescents from authoritative families are more autonomous than their peers (Steinberg and Silk, 2002). The analyses reported here focus on individual differences in autonomy and control for age, thus predicting the relative autonomy of individuals within age groups. As Steinberg and Silverberg (1987) observed many years ago, early (or premature) autonomy from parents is not necessarily healthy autonomy. It seems sensible that responsible autonomy in adolescents should reflect a clear acknowledgment of the appropriate and protective role of parents. That youth who describe their parents as authoritative are more likely to acknowledge their authority as legitimate is not surprising. Future research should examine the relationship between individual differences in legitimacy beliefs and indicators of psychological autonomy and well-being for youth at different ages and in different cultures.

The development of responsible autonomy is the central task of adolescence from both cultural and individual perspectives. This process is complex, however, and these results suggest that it proceeds unevenly across different domains and depending on what aspect of autonomy is assessed: that granted by parents or that claimed by adolescents. Cross-national comparisons allow insight into these processes and help to increase the variability of our observations so that we do not immediately believe that what is directly before us is all that there is. Although youth in all cultures move toward greater autonomy with age, their paths to that goal vary.

References


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