

An exploratory study of Chinese college students' autonomy development and parental influence

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Autonomy is a basic psychological need for human beings and is closely related to people's well-being and optimal functioning according to self-determination theory (SDT). In China, which is in transition from a traditional collectivist society to a more competitive and individualistic society, college students' autonomy development may be challenged. Given that little is known about Chinese college students' autonomy, this qualitative study explores the process of their autonomy development as well as parents' role in that process.

A grounded theory approach guided this study, since little was known about the topic. The study also examined the applicability of SDT and emerging adulthood theory to participant experiences. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 26 participants for in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding, following the classic grounded theory approach.

The process of autonomy development of the participants was revealed in the results. Before entering college, participants' autonomy was underdeveloped, and they relied mostly on their parents for decision-making. Between high school and college, participants were involved in choosing a college major after taking their college entrance examination. For many, this marked the first time in their lives they had participated in major decision-making. After the selection of a college major, participants started to actively explore autonomy in college by making various decisions on their own. In this process of autonomy development, parents' attitudes towards their children's autonomy changed, from pressuring participants to follow their opinions to becoming supportive for participants' independent decision-making. In addition, parents provided two types of support, emotional and instrumental, to their children in the process of their autonomy development. Participants demonstrated a generally good mental health situation.

Chinese traditional culture and the country's education system were discussed as two main factors contributing to the unique pattern of autonomy development among participants. Cultural differences were discussed to deepen the understanding of Chinese college students' autonomy. Additionally, other cultural factors were examined as to their impact on participants' mental health and parental attitude change. The implications for policy, practice, and future research as well as study strengths and limitations were presented.