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# Emancipation and Family Power Structure among College Students

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**ABSTRACT**—The relation of family power structure and autonomy to the behavior of a post-adolescent group was investigated. The sample consisted of 26 boys and 8 girls aged 18 to 20 years. Autonomy was measured by responses to questions on the dispensing of funds, integration into family activities, emotional attachment to parents and rejection of parental authority. Power was assessed with the Osgood Semantic Differential Scales. Data was analyzed according to sex and child's perception of like-sexed parent's power. Boys that rejected parental authority saw selves as more powerful than fathers. Irrespective of power relations with mother, girls did not reject parental authority and consistently perceived father as more powerful than self.

The research was undertaken to assess the relation of emancipation from family control and the balance of family power structure as perceived by a group of late adolescents enrolled in a state college. Matriculation into college generally necessitates an exit from the family nest, a new phase in parental control and the adolescent's development of autonomous behavior patterns in preparation for adulthood and maturity.

Anthropologists were the first to note the difference in adolescent behavior between primitive societies and our own. They labeled this interstitial age period one of "sturm and strang," to describe the adolescent revolt against parental edicts. Benedict (1938:161) viewed this problem as one characteristic of our culture. She illustrated the discontinuities in child-adult role prescriptions for three specific areas: submission-dominance, irresponsibility-responsibility, sexless versus sexually expressed behavior. Thus, the transition from child to parent requires a reversal in role enactments for the individual, particularly in the area of submission-dominance.

Kingsley Davis (1962:348) points out that our society does not institutionalize the readjustment of authority and control in families as children progress through the successive phases of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood to full social maturity. Consequently, each phase means fewer areas of control retained by parent and more areas assimilated by the maturing youngsters. Parents relinquish their normative role of responsibility for fulfillment of needs and decision making as offspring grow in ability to "deal" with the environment themselves.

This process has been described by Davis (1962:348) as a shift in power relations. It concerns the changes in submission-dominance patterns characteristic of parent-child relationships. Such changes imply that submission to parental control will find the child still committed to a family power structure suitable for early developmental needs whereas rejection of submission should induce a reversal in family power structure for the child. Early developmental needs finds the child dependent upon par-

ents for nurturance and support. The source of gratification can represent power for those in the dependent position. An increase in independence should change this relationship wherein the child moves from a position of powerless dependence to autonomy substantiated by increased feelings of self-power. Therefore, research was designed to verify the relationship of independent behavior patterns to the child's feelings of self-power relative to parental figures.

## Method

The sample was all Winter Quarter entering freshmen, at St. Cloud State College, aged 18-20. The measuring instruments consisted of a questionnaire and the Semantic Differential Scales developed by C. Osgood and associates (Osgood, 1957:36,37). The questionnaire provided information on the social characteristics of subjects. Four variables were selected to provide an index of autonomous behavior patterns. These were, independent decision making, emotional attachment to parents, integration into family activities and submission to authority. Responses to these questions were forced choice answers—yes, no, does not apply.

The Osgood Semantic Differential Scales consist of five 7-point scales that assess an individual's power as perceived by the respondent. These scales consist of the following pairs of adjectives: soft-hard, small-large, weak-strong, cowardly-brave, delicate-rugged. They are arranged so that individuals may receive a score of from 1 to 7 for each pair. The five scales were then averaged to yield a power score for father, mother and self as perceived by the subject. These three power scores provided the assessment of family power structure for each subject.

The sample was first separated by sex. Utilizing the Semantic Differential Power Scores, each sex was then subdivided into two categories, subjects who perceived self as equal or greater in power than like-sex parent, and subjects who perceived selves as lower in power than like-sex parent. The questionnaire responses that assessed the four areas of autonomous behavior were coded and percentages were derived for each category. An examination of these computations should provide insight into the following proposition: Individuals who perceive

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selves as more powerful than like-sex parent will manifest more autonomous behavior than individuals who perceive selves as lower in power than like-sex parent.

### Results

The following table indicates the percentage of boys and girls who indicated feelings of equal or greater power than the like-sex parent and those who felt less self-power than the like-sex parent.

TABLE NO. 1. Power Structures of Sample Families

Sex	Equal or Greater Power than Like-Sex Parent	Less Power Than Like-Sex Parent	Number
Boys	.69	.31	26
Girls	.62	.38	8

$$X^2 = .006 \text{ } p < .05 \text{ } df = 1$$

Both sexes apparently have about the same distribution for self-power in relation to parent model. All the girls saw their fathers as the most powerful member of the family but 62 per cent perceived themselves equal or more powerful than mother and 38 per cent perceived themselves as being less powerful than mother as well as father.

The boys perceived their mothers as the least powerful member of the family except for one or two instances. The data suggests that at the time the questionnaire was administered, approximately two-thirds of the boys and two-thirds of the girls had already reached a level of development wherein the influence or dominance of the parent model was reduced and subjects' self-power had been heightened. This distribution of power indicates that these subjects had experienced sufficient opportunities to make decisions and were no longer dependent upon parents for fulfillment of needs.

Practically all subjects had had a job before entering college. They were queried as to how they spent their earned money to assess the presence of independent decision making in behavior. Four choices were included—friends' suggestion, parental suggestion, own decision or all three influences. Since none responded friends' suggestion, this category was dropped. Male responses were more consistent than female responses. Almost all the

TABLE NO. 2. Relation of Power Structure and Independent Decision Making.

Type of Decision	MALES		FEMALES	
	Equal or Greater Power than Like-Sex Parent	Less Power Than Like-Sex Parent	Equal or Greater Power than Like-Sex Parent	Less Power Than Like-Sex Parent
Own	.95	.50	.80	100
Parent	.00	.38	.00	
All	.05	.12	.20	

$$X^2 = 4.65 \text{ } p = \text{n.s.} \text{ } df = 2$$

males who felt equal or greater self-power dispensed funds on the basis of their own decisions. Of those who felt less self-power than father 50 per cent dispensed funds as a result of their own decisions, 38 per cent did so because of parental suggestion, and 12 per cent thought all three factors were influential. Almost all the

girls felt they had dispensed funds as a result of their own decisions irrespective of whether they perceived themselves of equal, greater or lesser power than parental figures. The responses do not indicate a relationship to the power structure of families. One can note, however, that practically all choices were parental suggestion or own decision, with friends' influence absent, as a factor in decision making.

Emotional attachment to parents also yielded somewhat different patterns between the sexes. Slightly more girls than boys responded "yes" to questions that assessed the subjects' reliance on parents when "blue" and the tendency to confide in parents.

TABLE NO. 3. Emotional Attachment to Parents.

Sex	Yes	No	Number
Boys	.21	.79	26
Girls	.37	.62	8

$$X^2 = .21 \text{ } p = \text{n.s.} \text{ } df = 1$$

This difference suggests that girls are more emotionally dependent upon parents than boys; 37 per cent replied "yes" in contrast to 21 per cent of the boys. On the other hand, emotional attachment can be congruent with expressive behavior. The girls' responses coincide with societal expectations since expressive behavior and dependence is generally regarded as feminine in our society.

The degree of integration into family activity should be somewhat different for subjects who perceive self as equal or greater in power in contrast to those of less self-power. The question "Do you have more fun away from home than at home" was included to assess subjects' integration into family activities (Straus, 1962:19). Successful relationships outside the family can increase feelings of self-power in relationship to the rest of the family. Gratification gained outside the family can provide support for the individual's autonomy and thus increase one's self-power. The data appear similar for the sexes.

TABLE NO. 4. Relation of Power Structure and Integration Into Family Activity.

Sex	Equal or Greater Power Than Like-Sex Parent		N	Less Power Than Like-Sex Parent		N
	Yes	No		Yes	No	
Boys	.61	.39	17	.50	.50	8
Girls	.67	.33	4	.00	.00	100

$$X^2 = .007 \text{ } p < .05 \text{ } df = 1$$

Almost two-thirds of the boys and two-thirds of the girls who indicated a higher level of self-power in relationship to the like-sexed parent had gratifying experiences outside the family. Among those who felt less self-power than the like-sexed parent, boys were distributed evenly and girls were still firmly integrated into the family. We may note that these girls perceived selves as less powerful than both father and mother in contrast to boys in this group who saw selves as less powerful than father but still more powerful than mother. The

discrepancy among the respondents in the less self-power group, where boys are distributed evenly as to gratification outside family activities and girls are still integrated into family activities, illustrates the less potent perception expressed by the girls.

A direct index of autonomy is the extent to which subjects rejected parental criteria for behavior. Subjects were asked to check 11 items to which parents would object, then asked to indicate those they had rejected. The most revealing item "not informing parents of whereabouts," was distributed as indicated in Table 5.

TABLE No. 5. Proportion Rejecting Parental Restriction on Movements.

Sex	Equal or Greater Power Than Like-Sex Parent	Less Power Than Like-Sex Parent	N
Boys	.72	0	26
Girls	.20	0	8

$\chi^2 = 15.38$   $p < .001$   $df = 1$

Seventy-two per cent of the boys who perceived themselves as equal or greater in power than like-sexed parent, rejected this form of parental supervision. Boys who perceived selves as lower in power than father did not reject this supervision but complied with parental expectations. The responses were similar for girls. The low percentage of girls that rejected parental supervision can be attributed to the differences in power structure perceived by the sexes.

One might again note the difference in perception of family power as it was expressed by the sexes. The boys never saw mother as more potent than self whereas the girls, irrespective of the potency of like-sexed parent, consistently saw father as more potent than self. Thus, while mothers as well as fathers have been removed from the boys' cognitive power reference, fathers remain as a symbol to limit the movements of daughters as they reach the adult stage.

### Conclusion

The social development of this group of adolescents indicated somewhat incongruent patterns of autonomy. The results indicate that at the time the questionnaire was administered, approximately two-thirds of the sample perceived selves as equal or greater in power than like-sexed parent. Almost all decided how to spend their funds themselves regardless of power relations; fewer boys than girls were emotionally dependent upon parents; two-thirds had developed interests outside the home which provided enough gratification to minimize the attractiveness of family activities and induce independence from certain areas of one's family life; last, this group, particularly the boys, rejected submission to parental control.

The three measures of autonomy—emotional attachment, integration into family activities and submission to parental authority—were cross-tabulated with each other. Chi-Square tests revealed no significant relation between the three indices and the hypothesis of independence could not be rejected. Similarly, emotional attachment to parents and responsibility for decision making were unrelated to power relations. However, tests of independence did reveal that integration into family activities and rejection of informing parents of whereabouts were significantly related to power relations.

The results of this exploratory investigation should provide some insight into the process that underlies the development of autonomy. One can derive a general implication that this is probably an uneven transition rather than a sharp definite change. Absence of a relation between the various measures of autonomy lead one to conclude that either the practices in the culture condition autonomous behavior in the early phases of development and thus preclude the occurrence of an abrupt shift in behavior, or, the adolescent rejects some aspects of a previous phase of development. For example, in our society, expenditure of funds is initiated at an early age with allowances, rewards for chores, etc.

The variable that was most significantly related to power structure, "informing parents of whereabouts," provided evidence that those who submitted to restriction of movement in time and space perceived selves as lower in power. Parental control of this area of behavior sustains the original family power structure established during childhood. Rejection of control should heighten feelings of self-power that can prove relevant for a cognitive image of autonomy. Evidence suggests that this change in cognitive image can induce a reversal in the balance of family power structure as it is perceived by a group of post-adolescents.

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