

*Article 9*

**“Venturing Out on My Own”: Supporting the  
Development of Female Autonomy**

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**Introduction**

Cultural feminist researchers assert that decision making from a feminine orientation is grounded in an ethic of care; connection and responsibility for relationships are associated with a female identity as opposed to autonomous “masculinity defined through separation” (Gilligan, 1993, p. 8). Gilligan’s research highlights the agency-affiliation tension in which hurting others appeared as the prominent concern among female participants, thus interfering with their ability to take a stand and act on personal choices.

For traditional-age college women, the self-other conflict is manifested through attempts to differentiate from family and meet the developmental challenges of college life (Committee on the College Student, 1990). Freshmen in particular contend with adaptation to academics, socialization, reconsideration of values, sexual experimentation, and uncertainties about interpersonal boundaries (Committee on the College Student, 1990; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Presenting problems often emerge when college life and identity exploration interfere with family and peer relationships (Committee on the College Student, 1990; Frank and Jackson, 1996). Given the ethic of care, over-concern for parents’ feelings can limit daughters’ sense of choice in making fulfilling life decisions, leaving them too dependent without sufficient control over their own lives (Erikson, 1964).

Despite Gilligan's (1993) elaboration on this dilemma, she disclaims autonomy for women, arguing that it represents emotional detachment and characterizes a male developmental pattern of rugged individualism. Autonomy has been considered integral in college student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Based on Erikson's (1964,1968) model of psychosocial development, autonomy is the exercise of personal choice with an attitude of love and cooperation. Chickering and Reisser applied Erikson's model to college student development and defined autonomy as the ability to be self-determined without disabling conflicts and the influence of others to interfere. They maintained that female autonomy involves emotional disengagement from parents (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). However, breaking ties to avoid parents' over-involvement in a daughter's decisions may interfere with healthy adjustment (Kenny, 1990).

Counselors and researchers concerned with female development and traditional-age college women seem pulled between developmental pathways of either promoting increasing self-determination or overidentification with others. Because "adolescence is a preeminent time not only for observing character development, but also for influencing it" (Loevinger, 1990, p. 116), greater understanding of how females approach interpersonal dilemmas in their actual lives can assist counselors in facilitating students' developmental needs in ways that prepare young women to make life choices that promote a balance of care and greater self-actualization. While research has sought to understand female development from a relational perspective, surprisingly little has been done to understand how young women balance personal agency and affiliation in terms of autonomy. The purpose of this study was to explore the autonomy development of late adolescent females amid conflicting feelings with important others.

## **Method**

Denzin's (1989) Interpretive Interactionism was used to design this research, in which historic life experiences were collected through

semistructured interviews. Hearing and interpreting self-stories within a qualitative research paradigm illuminated decision-making processes amid interpersonal conflicts and gave insight into autonomy development.

Stories were gathered through in-depth, face-to-face interviews during individual meetings with 23 late adolescent freshman women between the ages of 18 and 23. A culturally diverse sample was selected from available volunteers. All but 4 students attended college away from home.

Participants described significant life experiences when it seemed they had to choose between acting on either their wants or the conflicting wants of important others. Themes were drawn to present a cross-case analysis of agency and affiliation in decision making.

Agency showed self-care by acting on such decisions as distance from home and career pursuits; affiliation represented care expressed for others. Autonomy was observed in actions taken to fulfill choices (Erikson, 1968). Although this collection of experiences is unique to these young women and could limit comparison, similar patterns of development may be found among other late adolescent women.

## **Analysis**

The analysis was organized into two themes. The first, self-responsibility, explores how participants sought to gain more control over their lives. The second theme, care within relationship, addresses the role of affiliation in identity development.

### *Self-Responsibility*

This theme elucidates the intent for agency and suggests making developmental gains when maintaining a sense of personal control (Erikson, 1968). Responsibility for decision making and personal well-being implied a sense of personal control. "I need to know what I want and I need to know how I can get there to make me happy." Responses reflected the long-term significance of a quest for self-knowledge (Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1987). "How can you go through life without knowing who you are?" Conflicts surrounding

the issue of personal control dominated the interviews. “I have to do something for myself, to gain my own life.” In addition to identity formation, personal control seemed to affirm and strengthen a sense of self. “If you don’t have control over your life, then what do you have? You are the only person you can control. To let someone else control you is just giving up yourself.”

Most conscious decision making occurred in the career realm. It also reflected very little conflict with parents. Occupation was an accepted means of self-reliance, because it didn’t seem to pose a threat to family ties. Physical distance from home was a frequent source of conflict and exemplifies the need for greater control. “I need a space of my own.” The space provided external freedom from parental influence. “I think in order to be my own person I need to make that split. I want to know what it’s like to be without her for awhile.” In addition, physical distance eased the emotional separation. “I was completely out of control of the situation, nothing I could do since I was so far away.” Worries were apparent in distancing self from home. “Leaving my family was culture shock for me—not knowing a soul, venturing out on my own.” Those who showed greater agency took those risks in stride. “Not taking a chance would have made me doubt a lot of things.”

Living at home was not necessarily associated with autonomy. “I have never felt like I needed to get out or needed freedom. My parents trust me so much.” There were alternatives for physical bounds. “I work two jobs and go to school. That helps me keep my self ground.”

Self-approval was the criterion for autonomous decisions. “I have to do what’s right for me,” characterized that approval. An internal dialogue guided self-responsibility. “Am I hurting myself? Did I put any limits on what I could do? Maybe I should have done that differently.” Self-reflection was based on awareness of personal thoughts, feelings, and needs. While reasoning, the opinions of trusted others were considered, as well as recognizing the influence of parents. “She has instilled a lot in me. Even when I don’t agree with her, I’ll think about it.” Thus, some dependence characterized autonomy.

Internal directedness contrasted with actions that were controlled

more by others. This external orientation is associated with less autonomy as it “relates to a lack of self-awareness, a tendency to regulate social behavior on the basis of external rather than internal cues” (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996, p. 228). Avoiding conflict was associated with minimal agency for fear of parents’ disapproval. “I’ll lose their respect or they’ll get angry with me and I don’t like that kind of conflict.” Loss of parents’ approval was described as feeling “like an awful kid. . . . inadequate. . . . that they didn’t love me . . . or I’d feel alone.”

### *Care in Relationship*

Greater autonomy was linked with a sense of connectedness as care was expressed by showing compassion for others. Initiative to create some degree of separation flowed from a belief that “I put myself first,” while accepting conflicting feelings. “I understand that she’s my mom and I’ll be there for her, but yet I have to move on to another part of my life.” Tension was greater where response to personal needs was fairly new. “I can’t keep putting people in front of me and find out who I am at the same time.” Sharing the benefits of personal success was a means to connect amid interpersonal conflict. “Knowing that she gave me the values and things that I need to push me along to succeed in life. That, to me, would be a reward – for her to see me grow and become a good person.”

Receiving care from others was instrumental in supporting agency. “My mom taught me to be very independent. She knows that’s a very important quality to have. We’re a really close family. My mom is very supportive of me.” Where family support was unavailable, assistance from others was sought. “There’s always somebody out there, even if it’s just one, to help you get what you want.”

While there was freedom to choose in supportive relationships, too much involvement by others was associated with more care for others and less agency. “My parents are overprotective. They don’t want me to make any mistake . . . I am worried about what they’ll think, I don’t want to hurt them.” Participants who did not act on worthwhile choices within key relationships showed internal conflict,

confusion, and guilt. Personal thoughts, feelings, and dreams were silenced to concede to others' wishes and avoid hurt or angry feelings; thus care for others limited the sense of choice in exploring personal potential. Differences may have been spoken, yet actions were attempts to control others' feelings. In such cases, Erikson's (1964) explanation of identity confusion can be applied. Without a solid inner sense of self, participants were susceptible to outer influences and unable to draw from an inner strength to support self-worth and explore identity (Erikson, 1964).

### **Summary**

Results of this study suggest that autonomy development is associated with a balance between giving care to self and others, as well as receiving care. Self-care was demonstrated by open communication and acting on self-defining choices while listening to and accepting the differing feelings of important others. Action was taken based on doing what was right for the individual, thus others' reactions were considered without necessarily influencing decisions. Personal agency was characterized by a sense of connectedness with others, reasoning, self-responsibility, self-awareness, and fulfillment in life choices.

Being open about differences with important others appeared elemental for development. However, most cases showed limited agency to avoid interpersonal conflict. Thus, precautions can help allay the fear of conflict, such as focusing on similarities with families to promote connection, as well as differentiation. Minimize the guilt felt from discussing families by remaining emotionally neutral. Finally, incorporate effective conflict resolution skills in counseling and ensure that young women have other close relationships to buffer any emotional impact from differences in key relationships.

While care for others weighed heavily in decision making, participants who also received care made self-affirming choices. The presence of trusting affiliations in which mutual compassion and active listening were present without effort to change feelings or control behavior supported personal agency. When parents showed

trust in daughter's ability and respect for her life choices, the participant demonstrated greater self-responsibility.

Freedom to air differences and act on worthwhile choices within accepting relationships increased participants' self-awareness to resolve internal conflicts, which supports Gilligan's (1993) argument that the female voice is silenced if personal thoughts, feelings, and desires are unacknowledged. Counselors have the opportunity to provide trusting relationships for college females, as well as facilitating identity development. Listen with a discerning, open ear and reflect students' experiences within their actual familial and cultural contexts. Encourage young women to respond to their own voices by showing acceptance and trust in their unique abilities. Offer tools for positive relating by modeling effective communication using appropriate self-disclosure and active listening. Develop mentoring programs to provide encouraging relationships that extend beyond the counseling office. Create support groups or friendship groups for relationship building and identity exploration. The reference list following this article gives helpful resources on late adolescent female development.

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