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# Intimacy development in late adolescence: Longitudinal associations with perceived parental autonomy support and adolescents' self-worth

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## ABSTRACT

The present longitudinal study tested for the role of perceived parental autonomy-support and late adolescents' self-worth in their intimacy development. A sample of 497 Belgian late adolescents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 17.9$ , 43.5% girls) participated in this two-wave study. Results indicated that perceived autonomy-supportive parenting did not relate significantly to change in adolescents' experienced intimacy (in terms of closeness and mutuality), but was associated with a decrease in unmitigated agency (an excessive focus on the self) and unmitigated communion (an excessive focus on the other) across time. Adolescents' self-worth predicted an increase in experienced intimacy and a decrease in unmitigated agency and communion, and the initial level of experienced intimacy predicted an increase in self-worth. Finally, results suggested that adolescents' self-worth may mediate some of the longitudinal relations between perceived parental autonomy-support and adolescents' intimate functioning. No evidence was found for moderation by romantic involvement, gender or age.

## 1. Introduction

The development of a sense of intimacy within relationships with friends and romantic partners has been described as a crucial developmental task for adolescents and young adults (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Sullivan, 1953). Multiple theories have proposed that one's experiences in intimate relationships are to some extent determined by previous experiences within the parent-child relationship (e.g., Bowlby, 1988; Brown & Bakken, 2011; Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2011). However, longitudinal studies examining these links of parent-child relationships with adolescents' development of intimacy are relatively underrepresented. In a recent review (Zimmer-Gembeck, Van Petegem, Ducat, Clear, & Mastro, 2018), we located only about a dozen longitudinal studies that have examined how parents' behaviors may shape the development of their children's intimate relationships with friends and partners in later life. Moreover, several theories (Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006) highlight how parents' autonomy support in particular should be critical for adolescents' experiences of intimacy within close relationships. However, despite the availability of new, more precise, definitions and assessments of autonomy and parental autonomy-support (e.g., Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010; Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, & Beyers, 2013), autonomy-supportive parenting

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has not previously been integrated into research on adolescent and early adult intimacy development. Thus, the first aim of this study was to directly test the proposition that perceived autonomy-supportive parenting would promote the development of intimacy within close relationships with friends and partners. Thereby, we focused not only on adolescents' experienced closeness and mutuality as a positive aspect of one's intimacy development, but also focused on unmitigated communion (an excessive focus on the other) and unmitigated agency (an excessive focus on the self) in order to examine maladaptive manifestations of intimate functioning (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). A second aim of this study was to investigate the role of adolescents' self-worth, as previous research suggests that a person's self-worth is an important determinant of one's intimate relationship satisfaction (Erol & Orth, 2016). In addition, both developmental models of the construction of the self (e.g., Harter, 1999) and Attachment Theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1969) suggest that one's self-image would explain why the quality of the parent-child relationship would have implications for the child's relationships outside the family. Therefore, we examined bidirectional associations between feelings of self-worth and adolescent intimacy, and we tested whether self-worth mediated the longitudinal relation between perceived autonomy-supportive parenting and adolescent intimacy.

### 1.1. Adolescent intimacy revisited

Intimacy can be conceptualized as the degree to which a person experiences a sense of closeness and mutuality within a relationship, and is able to express his/her personal thoughts and feelings vis-à-vis the other person (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Sullivan, 1953). In other words, intimacy is defined in terms of feelings of felt security, trust, mutual caring, and self-disclosure (e.g., Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Sharabany, 1994), and implies valuing and seeking closeness towards the other, one's acceptance and openness for the (sometimes intense) emotions that are indissolubly part of an intimate relationship, one's capability for mutual reciprocity and self-disclosure, and one's sensitivity towards the other's needs and feelings (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Testifying to the importance of this developmental task, previous research found that adolescents' experiences of intimacy in best friend and romantic relationships relates positively to psychosocial functioning (e.g., Buhrmester, 1990). Moreover, such experiences during adolescence would form an important experiential basis for establishing a qualitative and affectionate relationship with a romantic partner during adulthood (e.g., Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994).

Given the current definition of intimacy, adolescents' intimate functioning only appears problematic when there is a low ability to be close to others and when support of others is dismissed. However, deficits in intimacy also may appear in other ways, for instance when one becomes fully absorbed in a relationship. Indeed, as argued by Shulman and colleagues (e.g., Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997), intimacy deficits may manifest in two ways, that is, as being excessively focused on meeting one's own needs even when in a relationship, but also as an excessive focus on the other or the relationship at the expense of one's own well-being. In the present study, we operationalize these two possibilities by drawing upon the literature on unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999, 2000). Specifically, Helgeson and Fritz elucidated upon Bakan's (1966) work on the distinction between the two fundamental modalities of agency and communion. Agency reflects a focus on the self and on separation, whereas communion reflects a focus on others and on connectedness. Importantly, adaptive functioning implies that one's agency is "mitigated" (i.e., softened) by communion, and vice versa. *Unmitigated agency*, then, entails an excessive focus on the self to the exclusion of others, and is characterized by arrogance, hostility, cynicism, and a negative view of others (Helgeson & Fritz, 2000). *Unmitigated communion*, on the other hand, reflects a focus on others to the exclusion of the self, and is characterized by self-neglect and an overinvolvement with others' problems (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). Both unmitigated agency and communion have been associated with maladaptive behavior. Unmitigated agency has been associated with more distress and low self-esteem, externalizing problems, and a manipulating interpersonal style (e.g., Ghaed & Gallo, 2006; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). Unmitigated communion has been associated with more depressive symptoms and lowered self-worth, as well as other interpersonal difficulties (e.g., intrusiveness; Aube, 2008; Fritz & Helgeson, 1998).

### 1.2. Is perceived parental autonomy support a longitudinal predictor of intimate functioning?

Autonomy support is a parenting dimension that pertains to the degree to which parents encourage their children to function volitionally and to act upon personally endorsed values and interests (Soenens et al., 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat, & Collins, 2011). Specifically, autonomy-supportive parents are more empathic towards their children, offer relevant choice whenever possible, and provide a meaningful explanation when choice is limited (Grolnick, 2003; Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008). Controlling parenting, by contrast, involves the use of pressure and coercion to force one's children to behave, think or feel in particular ways, for instance through guilt induction or love withdrawal (Barber, 1996; Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009), and is shown to be the conceptual opposite of autonomy-support (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Sierens, 2009).

Abundant research confirms the beneficial outcomes associated with autonomy-supportive (relative to controlling) parenting across several life domains. Indeed, several cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have documented the interrelation between perceived autonomy-supportive (vs. controlling) parenting and subjective well-being (e.g., Brenning, Soenens, Van Petegem, & Vansteenkiste, 2015; Rowe, Zimmer-Gembeck, Rudolph, & Nesdale, 2015). In addition, previous work documented significant cross-sectional associations between autonomy-supportive (relative to controlling) parenting and indicators of adolescents' interpersonal functioning, including social competence (e.g., Cook, Buehler, & Fletcher, 2012; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005), relational aggression (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, Duriez, & Niemiec, 2008), and one's capacity to disclose about negative emotions to one's romantic partner (Roth & Assor, 2012).

Although autonomy-support is argued to represent an important determinant of adolescents' intimacy development (e.g., Zimmer-

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