# Emotional separation, autonomy in decision-making, and psychosocial adjustment in adolescence: a proposed typology

**Abstract**

Adolescence is critical for learning autonomous behavior; however, little research is available on the most appropriate balance of the emotional and behavioral dimensions of autonomy for psychosocial adjustment during this period. In this study we present a novel autonomy typology that combines both these aspects, which can be implemented as autonomy in decision-making and emotional separation. Specifically, examined age differences in emotional separation and autonomy in decision-making during adolescence. We also assessed differences in psychosocial adjustment associated with profiles of autonomy typology, sex, and age. The participants were 567 adolescents (296 males and 271 females), aged between 12 and 18 years (M = 14.48; SD = 1.69), recruited in Spanish high schools. Each participant filled out questionnaires on identity commitment, self-esteem, emotional separation and autonomy in decision-making. The results showed that the most advantageous autonomy profile is 'autonomous in decisions' (those showing low emotional separation combined with autonomous behavior in decisions) which was associated with higher levels of self-esteem and occupational and ideological identity commitment. In addition, we also concluded that the balance of autonomy effects adjustment throughout adolescence, although early adolescence may be an especially critical period.

*Keywords:* autonomy in decision-making, emotional separation, identity, family relations, typology of adolescent autonomy

**Introduction**

The adolescent period is especially critical for learning and exercising autonomous behavior in the family, which is part of the normative separation–individuation process from parents that begins in early childhood (Blos, 1979; Hill and Holmbeck, 1986; McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson and Hare, 2009; Smetana, Campione-Barr and Metzger, 2006). Separation-individuation in adolescence is not a linear process in which one moves from a state of dependency to another of independence: it is, above all a process in which the adolescent develops new forms of autonomy in a discontinuous way. It is conceptualized as a change in their internal cognitive representations of the parents as well as in the renegotiation of the bonds of infantile attachment so that they become more symmetrical. The challenge is to develop a new balance between the adolescent's independent exploration needs and his/her attachment behaviors and cognitions towards their parents (Allen, 2008). When this process is accompanied by a sense of personal autonomy and a secure emotional attachment to parents, a psychosocial maturation should occur (Koepke and Denissen, 2012).

Autonomy is considered to be a multidimensional developmental construct (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant and Moors, 2003; Goossens, 2006; Silverberg and Gondoli, 1996); research in this area has verified the existence of at least three differentiated areas: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral autonomy (Noom, Dekovic and Meeus, 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins, 2003). Cognitive (or 'values') autonomy refers to internal processes for evaluating possibilities and defining personal goals and values, although these may not coincide with those of parents or peers. This dimension consists of the young person's search for moral values that allow them to construct their identity. Emotional autonomy expresses the extent to which emotional independence from parental figures and the overcoming of childhood bonds is achieved (Lo Cricchio et al., 2016); the emotional separation construct has generated most controversy in previous research in this area (Beyers et al., 2003; Lamborn and Groh, 2009). Behavioral autonomy is defined as the capacity for self-governance or the degree to which an adolescent decides for themselves and takes control of a range of activities without parental guidance and autonomy in decision-making is the index most used to measure it (Goossens, 2006; Smetana, Campione-Barr and Daddis, 2004; Van Petegem, Beyers, Vansteenkiste and Soenens, 2012). Independent or autonomous decision making refers to the growing tendency of adolescents to make decisions for themselves, without consulting with their parents, in areas such as the use of money or their choice of friends. Decision making is often studied by using a

family decision-scale. This scale, with different variations, evaluates who makes the decisions on a wide range of issues (parents, adolescents, or both).

There is evidence that these different aspects of autonomy develop throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood at different rates and that they are differentially associated with psychosocial adjustment indicators (Fleming, 2005; Inguglia., Ingoglia, Liga, Lo Coco and Lo Criccio, 2015; Noom, Dekovic and Meeus, 2001; Oliva and Parra, 2001; Parra and Oliva, 2009). To the extent that emotional separation and autonomy in decision-making are assumed to be manifestations of healthy development (Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins 2003), we would expect that these facets positively associate with each other and are related in a similar way with psychosocial adjustment variables and with measurements of other developmental tasks, such as the formation of identity. However, so far, very little research has simultaneously addressed both facets, and the few studies that have done so only found a slight positive relationship between these two factors (Beyers and Goossens, 1999).

Emotional separation has been conceptualized as the experience of emotional distancing from one's parents, starting when adolescents perceive their parents as individuals who are different to themselves. This implies adopting a less-idealized perception of parents as a path towards reduced dependence on them. After a long conceptual and empirical controversy (for an overview, see Koepke and Denissen, 2012), current research distinguishes emotional separation from detachment. The opposite pole of secure attachment is detachment, which has been defined as a more radical form of emotional uncoupling from parents, in which the adolescent experiences a lack of parental support and acceptance and feels mistrusted, or even alienated (Delhaye, Kempenaers, Burton, Gooseens and Linkowski, 2011; Ryan and Lynch,1989).

There is indirect evidence of an increase in emotional separation throughout early and middle adolescence, which then stabilizes and even decreases in late adolescence (Collins and Steinberg, 2006; De Goede, Branje and Meeus, 2009; Shanahan, McHale, Crouter and Osgood, 2007; Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, Beyers and Aelterman, 2015). However, this developmental tendency does not appear when emotional separation is not differentiated from the more negative aspects of the interpersonal distance with the parents, and in these cases, there is little relationship with age (Parra, Oliva and Sánchez-Queija, 2015). According to Beyers et al. (2003), emotional separation is a healthy and adaptive process experienced by most adolescents, while detachment is characterized by the more negative and conflictive

relationships experienced by a small subgroup of adolescents. It would be expected therefore, that emotional separation increases continuously during the adolescence.

However, the relationship between emotional separation and adjustment does not show a clear direction: Emotional separation in adolescents was associated with lower levels of internalizing problems, while detachment was related to the presence of more externalizing and internalizing problems (Ingoglia, Lo Coco, Liga and Lo Cricchio, 2011) and with suicidal ideation (Pace and Zappulla, 2010). Similarly, emotional separation positively predicted personal satisfaction while detachment did so in a negative direction (Pace and Zappulla, 2009). Parent-related loneliness (but not peer-related loneliness), was significantly predicted by emotional separation, so that it could be considered the 'price to pay' during the process of a healthy process of separation–individuation (Majorano, Musetti, Brondino, and Corsano, 2015). In contrast, other studies indicate a null or even negative association with adjusted functioning (Garber and Little, 2001; Lamborn and Groh, 2009), finding a negative association between the connectedness dimension and emotional separation (Ingoglia et al., 2011; Lamborn and Groh, 2009). In contrast, Beyers et al. (2003) related positively agency with emotional separation, though neither of these studies proved a significant relationship between these two dimensions (Ingoglia et al., 2011; Lamborn and Groh, 2009). In addition, relationships between emotional separation and adjustment have been found to change with age, in such a way that high emotional separation is more negative in early adolescence than in late adolescence or emerging adulthood (Beyers and Goossens, 2003; Collins and Steinberg, 2006; Lamborn and Steinberg, 1993). An emotional distancing to parents too early is problematic, so the relationship between emotional separation and adjustment is thought to be moderated by age.

Autonomy in decision-making is one of the most visible facets of autonomous functioning during adolescence (Goossens, 2006; Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste and Beyers, 2013b). Previous studies have found evidence for a progressive increase in independent decision-making throughout adolescence (Bosma et al., 1996; García and Peralbo, 2001; Hasebe, Nucci and Nucci, 2004) that is especially marked in Western societies, but has also been observed to a lesser extent in Eastern cultures (Qin, Pomerantz and Wang, 2009). Moreover, although one might expect that greater autonomy in decision-making is positively related to psychosocial adjustment during adolescence, previous results are inconclusive because it has been associated with increased behavioral problems and a more maladaptive psychosocial profile (e.g. Kuhn and Laird, 2011; Van Petegem et al., 2012). However, several factors seem to modulate the

association between independent decision-making and adjustment in adolescents; among these, age, either alone or in combination with the specific matters on which adolescents are deciding independently, is a prominent factor. Thus, early decision-making autonomy in adolescence has been associated with poorer adjustment in young adults (Pavlova, Haase and Silbereisen, 2011). Likewise, independent decisions about private, personal topics (e.g. clothes or recreational time-use) have been shown to be beneficial in early adolescence, while independence in conventional or moral issues is positive when achieved at the end of adolescence (Hasebe et al., 2004; Qin et al., 2009; Smetana et al., 2004).

Although 'classical' differentiation by areas is well accepted in adolescent literature, it can be integrated into the broader distinction of the two perspectives on autonomy identified by Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste and Beyers (2013b). The first of these, volition versus pressure, reflects the degree to which adolescents experience a sense of psychological freedom and personal choice in their actions. When adolescents act with volitional autonomy they value their goals and interests as authentic and personally-assumed. Instead, if they operate under pressure, they feel coerced to behave in a certain way. This pressure may have as much to do with the satisfaction of external demands as with internal pressure in the form of feelings of guilt, fears, or doubts, as suggested by Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000). The second conceptualization, distance versus proximity, implies the degree of interpersonal distance or separateness in the parent–child relationship. The more autonomous adolescents in this dimension would feel free to the extent that they avoid emotional closeness with their parents and the external limits their parents try to impose are weaker. Both general dimensions correlate differently with adolescent adjustment: volitional functioning is unequivocally beneficial for their adjustment, but on the other hand, interpersonal distance is more complex and is positively related to problem behavior and insecure attachment and is not related to well-being (Van Petegem et al., 2013b).

By combining this two-dimensional framework with the different domains of autonomy, the two facets of autonomy of interest, emotional separation and autonomy in decision-making, can be identified in a more encompassing vision. Emotional separation clearly reflects greater interpersonal distance to parents, because these adolescents need less closeness and parental emotional support. However, greater emotional separation is not associated with more intense volitional and genuine functioning; rather, on the contrary, the relationship appears to be null or moderately negative (Lamborn and Groh, 2009; Van Petegem et al., 2013b; Van Petegem et al., 2015). On the other hand, independent decision making is positively associated

with the two identified perspectives. Thus, autonomy in decision-making implies both some distance from the parents and at least partially volitional behavior, i.e., acting based on self-endorsed values and goals (Van Petegem et al., 2013b; Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins, 2003).

These different connections with two conceptualizations of autonomy help explain the different relationships between emotional separation and independent decision-making and psychosocial adjustment in adolescence. From the theoretical and empirical point of view, it is also interesting to jointly examine both facets, because these different profiles of autonomy would then respond in a more complete and contextualized way to the development of autonomy in adolescence. In their study with emerging adults, Lamborn and Groh (2009) showed the usefulness of this type of simultaneous analysis: they found that the associations between emotional separation and self-esteem were moderated by agency or self-reliance. Their results suggested that emotional separation was only problematic for emerging adults who did not feel self-reliant and was not important in predicting grades or self-esteem in the context of higher self-reliance during emerging adulthood. In parallel, the adjustment of adolescents who are more emotionally distant to their parents can be better understood if we simultaneously consider its connection with their volitional functioning. Thus, this type of analysis should allow better analysis of the optimal balance between autonomy and relatedness in adolescence (Cooper and Grotevant, 2011). As Van Petegem et al. (2013b) claim, "challenge for adolescents is not so much to balance their striving for independence with their striving for closeness, but rather to find ways to volitionally seek distance or to be proximal to their parents" (p.1009).

Therefore, we must study integrated autonomy in adolescence in such a way that it is possible to understand the simultaneous balance between the two facets of autonomy throughout the different phases of adolescence. To this end, we propose an adolescent autonomy typology. The 'independent' group shows high levels of autonomy, both in autonomous decision-making and in emotional separation from their parents. At the other extreme, the 'bonded' group is, usually the least emotionally-differentiated from their parents while also being the most likely to take them into account when making decisions. In two intermediate positions we find one group that, although more emotionally distant from their parents ('distant') still make more joint decisions with them, and another which is less emotionally distant but that has a higher level of independent decision making according to their own criteria ('autonomous in decisions').

We propose two specific objectives; first, we consider age differences in emotional separation and autonomy in decision-making throughout adolescence: we would expect continuous growth in both facets as an expression of this progressive developmental task. Second, we analyze the differences in psychosocial adjustment in terms of the self-esteem and identity commitment associated with each of the autonomy profiles, age, and sex. The processes involved in the development of self-esteem and the formation of identity-commitments are related to the development of autonomy and reflect the degree of psychological adjustment reached (Côté and Levine, 2015; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra and Meeus, 2010; Harter, 2012; Karas, Cieciuch, Negru and Crocetti, 2014; Zacarés, Iborra, Tomás and Serra, 2009). We hypothesize that 'autonomous in decisions' adolescents show healthier adjustment throughout their adolescence, while 'distant' adolescents have a less psychosocially well-adjusted autonomy profile. We expect the greatest gender differences to be in decision-making autonomy because previous studies on autonomy-granting and decision-making also have noted differences between adolescent girls and boys, like girls reporting that they expect to make decisions independently from their parents at later stages than boys do (Qin-Hilliard, 2003). However, we hypothesize that the effect of the autonomy profile on adjustment will be similar in both boys and girls.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 567 Spanish adolescents aged between 12 and 18 years ($M$ = 14.48 and $SD$ = 1.69). All of them were high school students in publicly-funded private and public institutions in Valencia and its metropolitan area. Both genders were distributed almost equally (52.2% boys) and most participants came from intact families (81.8%; $N$ = 464). They were divided into three groups: early adolescence (12 and 13 years, $N$ = 191, 33.7%; $M$ = 12.52 and $SD$ =.51; 56.5% boys), middle adolescence (14 and 15 years, $N$ = 191, 33.7%; $M$ = 14.53 and $SD$ =.51; 55.8% boys), and late adolescence (16 to 18 years, $N$ = 185, 32.6%; $M$ = 16.47 and $SD$ = .64; 44.6% boys). Regarding the family position, a similar proportion of first-born adolescents (44%) and those in an intermediate position (43%) was observed. Youngest siblings were the least represented at 13%. Among the participants, 11% were only children, 49% had one sibling, 22% had two siblings, and 18% had three or more siblings. The percentage of adolescents with an immigrant

background was 17% (11% Latin American, 4% Eastern European, and 2% North African). The adolescents' parents' ages ranged between 30 and 70 years ($M$ = 43.6 and $SD$ = 4.84) and 41.8 % had a primary education level, 41.6% had secondary-school level, and 16.5% had graduated from university. Regarding their employment situation, 24.5 % of the parents had no paid work (of which 97% were mothers), 19.3% worked part-time, and 49.8% worked full-time.

## Procedure

Data were collected using random sampling, with an unknown probability regarding sex and age, from a general population of adolescent students in the Valencian autonomous community. We took the differential strata of both variables (sex and age) into account, thus maintaining their sample representativeness and proportion. The different colleges and high-schools that participated were chosen based on their availability and location in the city of Valencia. The counselor at each school was contacted (all of them agreed to participate) and obtained the corresponding parental permissions (only 2% of guardians did not give permission) for participation. The students freely chose to participate, and were assured complete confidentiality and anonymity. The final response rate was 94%.

## Measures

### *Autonomy in decision-making*

We used the Perspectives on Adolescent Decision Making Questionnaire (PADM, Bosma et al., 1996), a measure with 21 items which each represent a decision area for the adolescent ('domestic tasks', 'curfew time', etc.) using a Likert-type response scale with five anchor points from 1 ("My parents have the last word on this subject") to 5 ("Only I decide on this topic"). This allows us to identify how the adolescents perceive the family rules, what they think about the ultimate decision-maker, and who decides in each significant area. In terms of internal consistency, the Cronbach alpha index in this study was .86.

### *Emotional separation*

As indicated by others (Beyers et al., 2005; Ingoglia et al., 2011), we constructed an emotional separation scale based on the Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) Emotional Autonomy Scale. The final emotional separation instrument featured 12 items: 4 'deidealization' items (e.g., "My parents are almost never wrong" [inverse]) which evaluate the extent to which the adolescents have abandoned their infant

perceptions of parental omnipotence; 4 ‘nondependency’ items (e.g. “Before trying to solve problems by myself I go to my parents for help” [inverse]) which evaluate the degree to which adolescents have abandoned their infantile dependency on their parents; and 4 ‘individuation’ items (e.g., “When I’m a parent, there are things I would do differently to my parents”), which evaluate the grade to which they show behavior different to their parents. The response format ranged from 1 (“I strongly disagree”) to 4 (“I strongly agree”). The Cronbach alpha index in this study was .84.

*Self-esteem*

We used the Self-Esteem scale by Rosenberg (1965), which has been used in numerous studies, to evaluate psychological adjustment. The instrument measures global self-esteem, i.e., it evaluates the adolescents’ general feeling of well-being, respect, and personal acceptance. It comprises 10 items and uses a Likert-type response format with 4 anchor points from 1 (“I strongly disagree”) to 4 (“I strongly agree”). In this study, the global self-esteem factor presented an adequate internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) of .85.

*Relational, occupational, and ideological identity commitment*

We used Relational, Occupational, and Ideological Identity Commitment scales (CIR, CIO, and CIID in their Spanish acronyms, Ruiz-Alfonso, 2014) whose previous versions have already been used elsewhere (Zacarés et al., 2009), to evaluate the strength of the adolescents’ maintenance of identity commitments, and the extent to which they derived security and confidence in the areas of: relationships with their best friends (e.g. “My friendships give me security in life”), their studies (e.g., “What I am doing now helps me to see the future with optimism and confidence”), and their general ideological vision (e.g., “In spite of any difficulties, I am willing to be faithful to my life philosophy”). Each one comprises 7 items with a response format ranging from 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“A lot”). In this study, the Cronbach alpha indices were .70, .81, and .85, respectively.

## Data Analyses

Descriptive data, skewness and kurtosis, and correlation among the study variables were examined. Chi-square tests were applied to evaluate sex and age differences associated with all four profiles. Univariate tests, such as analysis of variance (ANOVA), were applied to examine the perspective of emotional separation and autonomy in decision-making at different stages of adolescence, and to identify

sex differences, as well as differences in the aforementioned psychological adjustment variables according to the adolescent autonomy profiles. Statistically significant results were analyzed using the Bonferroni procedure in order to control the rate of type I error. A factorial Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was applied taking the autonomy type, sex, and age into account with the aim of testing the interaction effects between these variables.

**Results**

Descriptive data and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. All the variables followed a normal distribution, and skewness and kurtosis were within the required range (−1, 1).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, nonnormality coefficients and correlations among study variables

| | Mean (*SD*) | Skewness/ Kurtosis | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Autonomy in decision-making | 3.5 (0.63) | −.29/−.10 | | | | | | |
| 2 Emotional separation | 2.5 (0.55) | .08/−.28 | .36** | | | | | |
| 3 Self-esteem | 3.0 (0.54) | −.33/−.08 | .06 | −.26** | | | | |
| 4 Relational commitment | 1.9 (0.63) | −.36/−.55 | .12** | .01 | .12** | | | |
| 5 Occupational commitment | 2.1 (0.75) | −.99/ .19 | −.06 | −.26** | .31** | .22** | | |
| 6 Ideological commitment | 1.8 (0.82) | −.52/−.63 | .03 | −.23** | .34** | .29** | .50** | |
| 7. Age | 14.48 (1.69) | .07/ −1.06 | .44** | 34** | −.01 | .15** | −.05 | .03 |

Note: All correlations above 0.11 are significant (p<.01, two-tailed)

ANOVAs were run for each of these two facets of autonomy, considering the sex and age of the participants (12–13 years, 14–15 years, or 16–18 years) as independent variables. In the case of emotional separation, we identified age as having the largest effect with an intermediate effect size, $F$ (2, 533) = 33.16, $\eta^2$ = .11, $p$ = .001). Subsequent comparisons showed that the three age groups differed from each other: Adolescents aged between 12 and 13 years exhibited lower levels of emotional separation ($M$ = 2.29, $SD$ = 0.4) than those aged 14–15 years ($M$ = 2.58, $SD$ = 0.39) and in turn, this group showed levels lower than those in the 16–18-year-old age group ($M$ = 2.75, $SD$ = 0.4). No primary effects associated with sex, or any interactions between sex and age, were observed. In the case of autonomy in decision-making, we also identified a primary effect with high effect size for age, $F$ (2, 553) = 47.87, $\eta^2$ = .16, $p$ = .001). Subsequent comparisons showed an increase in the decisions adolescents made on their

own with increasing age. Adolescents aged between 12 and 13 years exhibited lower levels of decision-making autonomy ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.43$) than those aged 14–15 years ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.43$), and in turn, this group showed levels lower than the 16–18-year-old age group ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.43$). No primary effects associated with sex, or any interactions between sex and age were observed. Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation, and Z-scores for emotional separation and decision-making autonomy for the different autonomy profiles.

Table 2.

*Mean, standard deviation (SD) and Z-scores for the emotional separation and autonomy in decision making in the autonomy profiles*

| | | Independent | Autonomous in decisions | Distant | Bonded |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | | 177 | 95 | 94 | 173 |
| *Emotional separation* | *Mean* | 3.02 | 2.16 | 2.88 | 2.04 |
| | *SD* | 0.35 | 0.30 | 0.28 | 0.34 |
| | *Z-scores* | 0.89 | –0.67 | 0.63 | –0.89 |
| *Autonomy in decision-making* | *Mean* | 4.14 | 4.03 | 3.09 | 3.08 |
| | *SD* | 0.33 | 0.27 | 0.36 | 0.41 |
| | *Z-scores* | 0.87 | 0.69 | -0.79 | –0.80 |

The type of autonomy (independent, autonomous in decisions, distant, or bonded) were defined by taking the median division of decision-making autonomy and emotional separation. Thus, ‘independent’ adolescents scored above the 50th percentile in both dimensions, while at the opposite extreme, ‘bonded’ adolescents scored lower than this percentile in both dimensions. ‘Distant’ adolescents scored above the 50th percentile in the emotional separation dimension and below it in decision-making autonomy, in contrast to ‘autonomous in decisions’ adolescents who scored above the 50th percentile in decision-making autonomy and below it in emotional separation. The frequency of each profile was independent (n = 177), autonomous in decisions (n = 95), distant (n = 94), and bonded (n = 173). We used chi-square tests to evaluate if sex and age differences were associated with the four profiles, and found statistically significant

differences according to the participants' sex $\chi 2$ (3, $N$ = 565) = 8.23, $p < .05$, and age $\chi 2$ (6, $N$ = 567) = 99.18, $p < .001$. The results show that a higher percentage of girls are independent (38% versus 31% boys) whereas more boys were bonded (35.8% compared to 25% girls) and, there are fewer bonded adolescents and thus, more independent adolescents, with increasing age (12–13 years: 13%; 14–15 years: 35% and 16–18 years: 55%).

Factorial (4×2×3) MANOVA analysis of the autonomy type, sex and age of four psychological adjustment indicators as dependents variables (self-esteem, relational, occupational, and ideological commitment) showed statistically significant differences in the main effects for the three independent variables: autonomy type, $\Lambda = .883$, $F$ (12, 1386) = 5.57, $p < .001$; sex, $\Lambda = .941$, $F$ (4, 524) = 8.23, $p < .001$, and age, $\Lambda = .968$, $F$ (8, 1048) = 2.12, $p < .05$; we did not observe any interactions between autonomy type, sex, and age. In addition, the univariate ANOVA analysis for self-esteem and the three types of commitment showed significant differences, with an intermediate effect size, between males and females in the relational, $F$ (1, 527) = 11.46, $\eta^2 = .06$, $p < .01$, and occupational, $F$ (1, 527) = 18.02, $\eta^2 = .07$, $p < .001$ commitment categories. Females scored higher than males in both commitment types (relational commitment: $M = 2$, $SD = .04$, vs. $M = 1.8$, $SD = .04$; occupational commitment: $M = 2.32$, $SD = .05$, vs. $M = 2.01$, $SD = .04$), and with respect to age, there was a statistically significant difference for relational commitment, $F$ (2, 527) = 4.92, $\eta^2 = .06$, $p < .01$, indicating that older adolescents scored higher ($M = 2.03$, $SD = .06$), than those aged 12–13 years ($M = 1.83$, $SD = .05$) or 14–15 years ($M = 1.82$, $SD = .04$).

INSERT TABLE 3

With respect to the autonomy typology, there were statistically significant differences in self-esteem and the three domains of commitment: relational, occupational, and ideological (see table 3), with an intermediate effect size for self-esteem ($\eta^2 = .06$), very closely followed by occupational commitment ($\eta^2 = .05$) and ideological commitment ($\eta^2 = .04$). Both 'autonomous in decisions' and 'bonded' profile adolescents scored higher in self-esteem and occupational and ideological commitment than those with 'independent' or 'distant' profiles. In contrast, the pattern was distinct for relational commitment, with a

low effect size ($\eta 2 = .01$): adolescents in the 'independent' group scored higher than those in the 'distant' group.

**Discussion**

The main objective of this work was to jointly analyze both the trajectory of, and relationship to, psychological adjustment to two important aspects of autonomy in adolescence: emotional separation and decision-making autonomy. To perform this integrated assessment, we created an adolescent autonomy typology that considers the simultaneous balance between both these dimensions. With respect to the first objective, the results confirmed our predictions regarding age differences: the two aspects continue to similarly progress during adolescence between 12 and 18 years in both boys and girls; emotional separation, which expresses an adaptive distancing from parents, increases throughout adolescence. Previous work, which did not distinguish separation from detachment, showed greater stability in emotional autonomy during adolescence than the results we present here (Parra et al., 2015), however, this distinction more clearly identifies this developmental dynamism.

In the case of independent decision-making as a behavioral autonomy prototype, previous work clearly indicates the presence of this progressive increase, particularly for decisions related to personal issues (Qin et al., 2009; Smetana et al., 2004). In this sense, this variable is a good reflection of autonomy defined as independence, i.e., the degree to which adolescents decide, act, or think without depending on others. From the perspective of autonomy as self-determination this result corresponds with the developmental trend to an increase of volitional functioning with age, such that adolescents felt increasingly free to act upon self-endorsed goals and values (Van Petegem et al., 2015). Therefore, it fits well with the dual-tendency separation–individuation theory postulated by Blos (1979), that the development of autonomy implies physical, emotional, and cognitive distancing from parents (separation) alongside an increase in responsibility for one's own actions without depending excessively on parents (individuation).

With respect to our second objective, our results show the importance of jointly considering the balance between these two aspects of autonomy when assessing adolescent psychosocial functioning. The two typology-derived profiles best associated with higher levels of psychological wellbeing (measured as self-esteem) and increased personal maturity (quantified as identity-commitment strength) were those of

'autonomous in decisions' and 'bonded' adolescents, i.e., those showing the lowest levels of emotional separation. There were no differences between them regarding their relationship to psychological adjustment, indicating that emotional separation is a more critical dimension for adaptive functioning. Previous work has indicated an association between emotional separation and poorer connections with parents, that is, adolescents with the lowest levels of confidence, availability, and parental communication (Beyers et al., 2003; Ingonglia et al., 2011; Lamborn and Groh, 2009). In contrast, emotional separation does not seem to interfere with functional independence (Ingonglia et al., 2011).

The results we present here suggest that progressive distancing of adolescents from their parents must be maintained at moderate levels so that it does not affect their self-confidence or ability to assume identity commitments, at least in the intrapersonal (occupational and ideological) domain. Emotional separation is not associated with positive self-esteem or with a stronger identity in the intrapersonal domain because it does not seem to facilitate the development of agentic capacities and volitional functioning in adolescents (Ingoglia et al., 2011; Lamborn and Groh, 2009; Van Petegem et al., 2013). As expected, showing more autonomy in decision making was adaptive because of its greater connection with a sense of volition, provided it was accompanied by moderate emotional separation.

This study confirms that optimal development is best promoted by progressive achievement of autonomy in decision-making in the context of positive family relationships (Cooper and Grotevant, 2011; Parra and Oliva, 2009). This balance in autonomy is especially relevant for adjustment in early and middle adolescence. In early adolescence, a profile of greater general autonomy (which we termed 'independent') would reflect rapid distancing from parents and could become a 'dysfunctional independence' profile, which is particularly harmful to psychological development (Kins, Beyers and Soenens, 2013; Pavlova et al., 2011; Qin et al., 2009). Our data, from adolescents aged between 12 and 18 years, indicates that the profile of autonomy has a continuing clear effect on adjustment throughout adolescence by impacting adolescents' self-esteem. To a lesser extent, it also affects the development of identity, so that occupational and ideological identity commitments initially adopted by adolescents are influenced by the balance achieved in the development of autonomy.

In contrast, the pattern of outcomes described above is different for relational commitment in which the most independent group of adolescents stand out from the others. Increased relational commitment from the age of 16 years results in the derivation of increasing security and confidence in the

future of relationships with best friends. Nevertheless, when emotional separation from parents is high and adolescents have already assumed independence in decision making, the role played by friends is more relevant when establishing the basis of a defined identity. In general, the degree of commitment reflects the positive development of identity and is related to a clear and stable concept of self and greater emotional well-being, as well as with close parental relationships (Crocetti et al., 2010; Karas et al., 2014; Schwartz, 2007). Our data support these affirmations for occupational and ideological-domain commitments, but not for relational-domain commitments. This implies that achieving a stable identity solely based on relationships with best friends does not ensure that interactions with other people, particularly parents, will provide security and confidence (Crocetti, Scrignaro, Sica and Magrin, 2012). The fact that relational commitment is associated with higher levels of emotional separation and decisional distancing from parents also points in this direction; in adolescence, if relational commitment is intense and not linked to commitment in other areas, it does not indicate optimal development. This could be interpreted as an expression of serious difficulties in family relationships, or even of true detachment from paternal figures (Delhaye et al., 2011). Thus, deeper analysis of the role of relational commitment compared to commitment in other areas and how this links to other factors in personal and familiar functioning are still required.

Finally, the hypothesis of greater autonomy in decision-making in boys than in girls has not been verified, contrary to other previous results (Qin-Hilliard, 2003). Van Petegem et al. (2015) also found no gender differences for volitional functioning. This data, together with the lower percentage of girls in the "bonded" profile and higher in the "independent" group, would point to a more rapid development of autonomy in girls throughout adolescence. Subsequent studies considering the fundamental role of cultural and generational factors could confirm this possible trend. It has been found, however, that in both sexes, as expected, the effect of the autonomy profile on the adjustment has been similar.

## Limitations

The results we obtained should be considered in the light of some limitations. First, the study had a transversal design that did not allow the developmental trajectories or their causal links to be adequately evaluated. For example, it is possible that an initially high level of self-esteem in early adolescence predicts greater identity commitment and emotional connection with parents in other stages of adolescence. Therefore, future longitudinal studies—which should extend into emerging adulthood—on the course of

different autonomy profiles would be required to verify the impact on the adjustment of different configurations and to identify if there are any significant changes in the transition towards adulthood. Second, these data on autonomy come from quantitative instruments, one of which—emotional separation—still provides ambivalent results (Ingoglia et al., 2011; Parra et al., 2015). Therefore, new metrics, both for detachment and the quality of adolescents' relationship with parents, must be included in future tools (Van Petegem, Beyers, Brenning and Vansteenkiste, 2013a).

It would be equally valuable to integrate our results with qualitative data which allow the experiences and feelings of adolescents with different autonomy profiles to be recorded at different times during adolescence, allowing us to better understand their perception of their increasing capacity for self-regulation. There are also some conceptual limitations from which future lines of research could be derived. For example, it would be advisable to perform some more detailed developmental analyses on the different domains in which adolescents make independent decisions (Goñi, 2000; Smetana et al., 2006) and to check if these are related to psychological adjustment. Similarly, the relationship between autonomy profiles and other psychosocial functioning variables (e.g. behavioral problems or symptoms of depression) should also be verified with the aim of consolidating relationships by promoting the optimal-development autonomy pattern highlighted in this article.

Lastly, according to recent advances in this field, the picture of optimal development we present here could be supplemented with another perspective on autonomy which is sustained by the theory of self-determination: that of the reasoning underlying dependent and independent behavior. Thereby, depending on how internalized the motives for varying degrees of independent behavior are, the responsibility for decision-making can be adopted with a broad sense of psychological freedom and personal choice, or conversely, as an experience of external control, internal pressure, and coercion (Chen, Vansteenkiste, Beyers, Soenens and Van Petegem, 2013; Van Petegem et al., 2013b). For example, an adolescent might consult with their parents and thus, make a more 'dependent' decision, but do so because they value their parents' opinion and voluntarily cede the weight of the decision, or in contrast, they may yield decision-making autonomy to their parents because they feel obliged to do so and do not want to feel guilty or less valued.

Despite these limitations, this present study contributes a valuable integrated typology to the analysis of autonomy in adolescence. In our cultural context and current socioeconomic circumstances, the

simultaneous development of different facets of autonomy has become a subject of undoubtable developmental interest. This initial data shows specific associations between the different profiles of autonomy and psychological adjustment indicators. It thereby indicates a close connection with the developmental task of identity formation and the importance of a moderate emotional separation from parents to promote more positive development in adolescence.

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**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Funding:** This study has received no funding

**Conflict of Interest**: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical approval:** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The Experimental Research Ethics Committee at the University of Valencia (Spain) specifically approved this study.

**Informed consent:** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Author Contributions**

PA: collaborated with the design of study, data collection, and writing the first manuscript draft;

JJZ: designed and executed the study and wrote and edited the manuscript up to its final draft;

AF: analyzed the data, wrote the methods and results sections, and collaborated in the editing of the manuscript draft.

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Table 2.

*Mean, standard deviation (SD) and Z-scores for the emotional separation and autonomy in decision making in the autonomy profiles*

| | | Independent | Autonomous in decisions | Distant | Bonded |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency | | 177 | 95 | 94 | 173 |
| *Emotional separation* | *Mean* | 3.02 | 2.16 | 2.88 | 2.04 |
| | *SD* | 0.35 | 0.30 | 0.28 | 0.34 |
| | *Z-scores* | 0.89 | −0.67 | 0.63 | −0.89 |
| *Autonomy in decision-making* | *Mean* | 4.14 | 4.03 | 3.09 | 3.08 |
| | *SD* | 0.33 | 0.27 | 0.36 | 0.41 |
| | *Z-scores* | 0.87 | 0.69 | -0.79 | −0.80 |

Table 3.

*Means, (Standard Deviations), F Values, and effect size* $\eta^2$ *for the four autonomy profiles in the adjustment variables (self-esteem and identity commitments)*

| | Independent | Autonomous in decisions | Distant | Bonded | *F* | $\eta^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Self-esteem* | 2.89 (.62 ) [b] | 3.18 (.45) [a] | 2.82 (.51) [b] | 3.11 (.46) [a] | 13.16*** | 0.06 |
| *Relational commitment* | 2.02 (.65) [a] | 1.88 (.61) | 1.8 (.64) [b] | 1.89 (.60) | 2.90* | 0.01 |
| *Occupational commitment* | 2 (.84) [b] | 2.36 (.63) [a] | 2 (.78)[b] | 2.33 (.63) [a] | 9.73*** | 0.05 |
| *Ideological commitment* | 1.71 (.89) [b] | 2.07 (.65) [a] | 1.58 (.81) [b] | 1.98 (.79) [a] | 9.23*** | 0.04 |

[$]$\alpha = .05$; a > b

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$