

Development of emotional autonomy from adolescence to young adulthood in Spain



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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to learn whether emotional autonomy is truly part of a developmental stage for Spanish adolescents and young adults or if it is an indicator of difficult family relationships. Using a longitudinal design, a sample of ninety young people was followed for ten years, from their initial adolescence until their first years of adulthood. At four observation points, the participants completed various questionnaires to evaluate their emotional autonomy, the cohesion in their family relationships and their life satisfaction. There were no gender differences in the development of emotional autonomy. Family cohesion and life satisfaction showed significant negative associations with emotional autonomy and these associations became more pronounced as participants moved from adolescence into adulthood. Based on our results, emotional autonomy from parents does not seem to be a developmental stage taking place during adolescence, but rather, an indicator of difficult family relationships.

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In recent decades, a large body of research has been focused on analysing the process by which girls and boys acquire autonomy from their parents. In this case, autonomy is understood as a developmental stage during adolescence, which marks entrance into the adult world (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). Autonomy within the framework of family relationships during adolescence appears to be composed of at least three dimensions (Noom, Deković, & Meeus, 1999). The first of these dimensions is behavioural as it refers to a young person's ability to act independently. The second dimension is cognitive as implies the acquisition of a sense of competence and agency, through which the person knows how to take control of his or her own life. The third dimension is emotional as it refers to the perception of independence through self-confidence and individuality, plus the establishment of emotional bonds that are more symmetrical than those seen in their relationship during childhood.

The last of these aspects, emotional autonomy, which involves individuation and relinquishing dependence on parents (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), has sparked a great deal of interest among researchers to the extent that it has generated a certain degree of controversy. On the one hand, there are authors who understand the emotional distancing from parents as a fundamental requirement for healthy development during adolescence (Blos, 1979; Freud, 1958). According to this perspective, emotional autonomy would be positively related to adjustment and health during adolescence and would tend to increase during these years (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). In contrast, there are authors who question the need for separation from parents during adolescence (Fuhrman & Holmbeck, 1995; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). For them, a high level of emotional autonomy would stem from unsatisfactory family relationships and would be related to a series of indices that imply poor adolescent adjustment (Fuhrman & Holmbeck, 1995; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Furthermore, this emotional autonomy would remain stable through adolescence, thus appearing as a characteristic aspect of how certain families function rather than a feature of the normal state of the relationships between parents and adolescents.

Part of the controversy regarding the Emotional Autonomy concept comes from the Emotional Autonomy Scale (EAS Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). EAS is the most commonly used measure of emotional autonomy, however, some authors (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003; Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Schmitz & Baer, 2001; Turner, Irwin, Tschann, & Millstein, 1993) claim that this instrument really measures detachment from parents, and not adolescent autonomy.

Upon delving into the meaning of emotional autonomy, some authors find that the relationship between emotional autonomy and adjustment is moderated by age (Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993; Silverberg & Gondoli, 1996). Thus, some authors state that emotional autonomy would be more positive in later adolescence and in early adulthood than in earlier years (Beyers & Goossens, 2003; Frank, Pirsch, & Wright, 1990). According to these authors, as the extent that children consolidate a coherent vision of themselves and the family system adjusts after the initial years of adolescence, their emotional autonomy from their parents may have a more positive effect. Nevertheless, research into the development and meaning of emotional autonomy during early adulthood is scarce (Arnett, 2000, 2006; Beyers & Goossens, 2003; Kins, Beyers, & Soenens, 2013; Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011).

Research **analyzing analysing** family relationships during young adulthood highlights the existence of continuity between these and previous years. Parent-child relationships during young adulthood are in part a function of the history of their family relationship, so, family interactions during young adulthood depend, to a great extent, on the previous patterns of interaction (Rodríguez & Rodrigo, 2011; Thornton, Orbuch, & Axinn, 1995; Tubman & Lerner, 1994). It is important to indicate that this continuity tends to weaken with the passing of time (Belsky, Jafee, Hsieh, & Silva, 2001). In other words, the evidence of continuity appears to be greater when comparing the emerging adult-parent relationships with those of adolescent-parent relationships, than when going back to the years prior to childhood. Research also indicates that young adults increase their relative power in relationships with parents during their third decade of life, and that the family relationships usually improve during these years, with a lower conflict rate (Noack & Buhl, 2005).

The well-being of young people during emerging adulthood is highly related to the quality of their family relationships (Roberts & Bengtson, 1993). The quality of these relationships continues to be essential for adjustment during this developmental stage (Powers, Hauser, & Kilner, 1989; Umberson, 1992). Levels of involvement, warmth and support in the parent-child relationship influence the emerging adult's psychological adjustment (Tubman & Lerner, 1994). According to Aquilino (2006), "The family of origin functions as a base of operations for the explorations of emerging adulthood" (p. 203). The family aid young adults in different ways: through material support such as co-residence in a parental household or parental financial subsidies, but also through the availability of parents as a source of comfort and guidance for young adults.

High perception of family cohesion, defined as the emotional bonding that family members have towards one another, is associated with higher levels of adolescent and young adult well-being (e.g., Barber & Buehler, 1996; Crespo, Kielikowski, Pryor, & Jose, 2011; Fosco, Caruthers, & Dishion, 2012; Johnson, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2001). The focus of family cohesion is how family systems balance the separation of their members versus togetherness (Olson, 2000), and includes warmth and affection, closeness, and support in family relationships. Extensive literature documents that adolescents' perceptions of low cohesion within their families is associated with heightened feelings of depression and reduced social acceptance (e.g. Cumsille & Epstein, 1994; Wentzel & Feldman, 1996). Family cohesion leads to improvements in adolescent social problem-solving skills and social self-efficacy (Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010), while low levels of family cohesion result in an earlier onset of romantic and sexual experience (De Graaf, van de Schoot, Woertman, Hawk, & Meeus, 2012). Family cohesion is also related to young adults' well-being (Crespo et al.; Fosco et al., 2012) and lower levels of stress and depression (Fosco et al., 2012; Johnson, Gans, Kerr, & Deegan, 2008; Reinherz, Paradis, Giaconia, Stashwick, & Fitzmaurice, 2003) during early adulthood. Family cohesion, especially during late adolescence and young adulthood, may support young adults' need to redefine family relationships, and to then establish a sense of separation in order to explore their own identity while maintaining a sense of connection with their family (Minuchin, 1974; Mullis, Brailsford, & Mullis, 2003).

In western **industrialized industrialised** societies, young adulthood implies readjustment in the family system during which a more symmetrical relationship between parents and children is established. This new reality demands that many aspects of family relationships be rethought, including the establishment of a new balance between the autonomy of young adults and their needs for dependence (Aquilino, 2006). In this regard, we understand that it is essential to delve into the meaning of emotional autonomy during the initial years of adulthood. This must be carried out while bearing in mind that a variety of transition to adulthood models can be found depending on the country (Scabini, 2000).

The situation in Spain would be represented by the *Mediterranean model* (Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006, p. 21), which is a model characterised by living in the family home until well over the age of twenty and leaving that home, generally, to live with a partner. EUROSTAT data from 1983, 1994 and 2008 showed that the percentage of young adults (ages 24–29) in southern Europe who were still living with their parents was up to three times greater than the percentages in Northern and Central European Countries. Iacovou and Berthoud (2001) have identified two behavioural models in young European adults – one that include nations of Southern Europe such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece; and the northern European model, composed of Germany, Denmark, Scandinavia, Holland, UK, France, Belgium and Luxembourg. In northern Europe, youngsters leave home earlier and more commonly live alone or in cohabiting unions. The same Northern European pattern was found in Australia, Canada and the United States. By contrast, in southern Europe, young people remain in the parental home for extended periods and tend to make direct transitions from living at home to marriage and parenthood. Most young Spanish adults share housing with their parents until the time when they start their own families. The presence of two adult generations (or three if a grandparent is also living in the family home) under the same roof is quite common. For young adults in Southern Europe, there are different social and cultural norms about when young adults should physically, economically, and emotionally separate from their parents (Schnaiberg & Goldenberg, 1989). Moreover, there is greater connection and family orientation in Southern European countries (Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). This increased connection and family orientation could mean that the negative relationship between emotional autonomy and family relationships is even greater in Southern European countries such as Spain.

As pointed out by Fuhrman and Holmbeck (1995), emotional autonomy may be less positive in cultures which stress interpersonal connection than in cultures which stress interpersonal separation, self-direction, initiative or independence. These differences in values and norms may affect the development of autonomy during adolescence and young adulthood and appear as cultural differences in patterns of interactions between children and others, particularly parents (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003). Manzi, Regalia, Pelucchi, and Finchman (2012) show that young adults' perception of physical separation from parents had a direct negative impact on depression in a Belgian, Chinese and US

sample. However, this was not the case in an Italian sample, in which youths' perception of physical separation from parents was associated with higher level of depressive symptomatology. Despite the fact that Manzi and her colleagues don't exactly analyse emotional autonomy, this result could indicate that culture moderates the impact of autonomy on adolescent and young adults' well-being, and highlights the need for studying autonomy from parents in different cultural contexts.

Even though some features of the parent-offspring relationships during young adulthood in the Spanish context are known (Fierro & Moreno, 2007; Rodriguez & Rodrigo, 2010), there are no studies into the meaning of emotional autonomy during these years and there are no studies using longitudinal designs. Nevertheless, longitudinal studies are essential to understand the development of emotional autonomy throughout adolescence and early adulthood. These designs are the only types of studies that allow intra-individual change to be taken into account; such studies allow us to understand better and more clearly the meaning of emotional autonomy during adolescence and young adulthood, as well as its relationship with other family and personal adjustment variables.

The present study

The main objective of this study was to learn whether emotional autonomy is truly part of a developmental stage for Spanish adolescents and young adults or if it is an indicator of difficult family relationships. For this, we proposed three partial objectives. First, we longitudinally analysed the development of emotional autonomy during adolescence and young adulthood in a sample of young Spaniards. We expected that their emotional autonomy would remain stable throughout time, which is coherent with the findings of some authors (Fuhrman & Holmbeck, 1995; Parra & Oliva, 2009; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Secondly, we analysed the relationship between emotional autonomy and adjustment in young adults, and more specifically how it was related to their life satisfaction. We expected a negative correlation between emotional autonomy of young adults and their life satisfaction. Our third objective was to analyse the relationship between emotional autonomy and family cohesion throughout adolescence and during early adulthood. Considering the importance of family in the Mediterranean model for the transition to adulthood, we hypothesised that emotional autonomy was negatively related to family cohesion. Finally, we expected that family cohesion would lead to changes in emotional autonomy throughout adolescence and young adulthood.

Method

Participants

This work is a longitudinal study of a specific group of adolescents. It all begins with a cross-sectional research on a sample made up of 513 adolescents between 12 and 19 years of age, from 10 different schools in the city of Seville (southern Spain) and its province. The choice of primary and secondary schools where the adolescents were recruited took into account criteria such as whether they were rural or urban, public or charter school and the socioeconomic level of the families. For further information about the sampling procedure, see Oliva and Parra (2001) and Parra and Oliva (2002).

Of the initial sample of 513 adolescents, 136 were early adolescents between 12 and 14 years of age who were followed for ten years, until the participants reached 21 or 23 years of age. Specifically, all participants completed the assessment instruments at four different stages: early adolescences (Wave 1), mid adolescence (Wave 2), late adolescence (Wave 3), and during early adulthood (Wave 4). There were 136 adolescents for W1, 114 for Wave 2, 101 for Wave 3 and 90 for Wave 4 (see Table 1). The final sample included 90 adolescents, 35 boys and 55 girls. Of the 136 participants for W1, 90 continued until W4, which is more than two-thirds of the initial sample. The average ages in early (W1), mid (W2), late (W3) adolescence and early adulthood (W4) were: W1 ($Mage = 13.11$; $SD = .44$); W2 ($Mage = 15.38$; $SD = .56$); W3 ($Mage = 17.85$; $SD = .52$); W4 ($Mage = 21.73$; $SD = .61$).

Table 1 Frequencies and percentages of participants in each wave of the study.

	W1 <i>n</i> (%)	W2 <i>n</i> (%)	W3 <i>n</i> (%)	W4 <i>n</i> (%)
Boys	58 (42.6%)	46 (40.4%)	38 (37.6%)	35 (38.9%)
Girls	78 (57.4%)	68 (59.6%)	63 (62.4%)	55 (61.1%)
Total	136	114	101	90

At the last data collection, most of the young people lived with their parents (77% of the boys and 96.4% of the girls). 40% of the boys were studying, 43.3% of the boys were working full time and 16.7% were working and studying at the same time. The percentage of girls who were studying was greater, 50% were dedicated exclusively to their university studies or vocational education and training (VET) and almost 21% were also employed. Only one of the boys in the sample had his own children, but continued studying, living with his parents and generally leading a life similar to the rest of the boys in the sample. None of the girls had been mothers when the data was collected.

To know whether the subjects who continued participating in the research until young adulthood showed differential demographic characteristics when compared to those who decided not to participate, an *attrition analysis* was carried out. To do so, in the matrix with the subjects until ~~W3~~W4, a new variable was generated in which the subject was coded as 1 if they had participated in the data collections up to W4 and 2 if they did not participate in the last data collection process. The results indicated that those adolescents who continued participating in the W4 research and those who decided not to do so were similar with regards to gender ($\chi^2 = .55$, $p = .46$) and their rural or urban habitat ($\chi^2 = .80$, $p = .37$). However, among those who continued, there were somewhat

more young people who had attended charter schools compared with those who had attended public schools ($\chi^2 = 4.11, p = .043$). Adolescents who participated in data collections up to W4 and those who did not participate were similar in emotional autonomy $F(1, 127) = .11, p = .75$; life satisfaction $F(1, 130) = 2.60, p = .11$ and family cohesion $F(1, 124) = 4.89, p = .08$.

Measures

Background variables

At the start of the questionnaire, all research participants responded to questions about their age, gender and the educational/professional level of their parents. In the last collection of data (W4), the young people also reported on what they were currently doing (working and/or studying), with whom they lived (with parents, with a partner, with flatmates, alone ...) and whether they had children.

Emotional autonomy

Emotional Autonomy Scale (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). We used a translation made by the research team following the back translation method. The EAS comprises 20 items answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. A high score on the scale is thought to be indicative of greater emotional autonomy. The scale comprises four subscales, two measuring affective aspects of autonomy (*Nondependency on parents* and *Individuation from parents*), and two measuring cognitive aspects (*Perceives parents as people* and *Parental deidealization*). Sample items are: "I go to my parents for help before trying to solve a problem myself" (reverse-coded; Nondependency on Parents), "My parents know everything there is to know about me" (reverse-coded; Individuation), "I have often wondered how my parents act when I'm not around" (Perceives Parents as People), "My parents and I agree on everything" (reverse-coded; Deidealization). The Spanish version of the scale has demonstrated concurrent and predictive validity in earlier research (Oliva & Parra, 2001). Bearing in mind the debate about the factorial structure of the instrument, we took the conservative approach, using its global score, also considering that this demonstrated an improved reliability and validity indicator than the 4 sub-scales separately. The scale's reliability for each of the measuring times was as follows: Cronbach's alpha = .66, .75, .79, and .81, in W1, W2, W3 and W4 respectively.

Family cohesion

We used the Cohesion sub-scale of the *Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale* (FACES II, Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985). We used the Spanish version of FACES II. This is a Likert-type scale with 16 items ranging from 1 to 5 ("almost never" to "almost always") to analyse the degree of emotional bonding between family members. Sample items are: "Family members know each other's close friends" and "our family does things together". A high score on the scale is thought to be indicative of greater family cohesion. The Spanish version of FACES II and III has been validated and widely used with Spanish and South American samples (López, 2002; Martínez-Pampliega, Iraurgi, Galíndez, & Sanz, 2006). The scale's reliability for each of the measuring times was as follows: Cronbach's alpha = .69, .84, .87, and .89, in W1, W2, W3 and W4 respectively.

Life satisfaction

We used 5 items from Huebner's (1991) instrument, *Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS)*. We used a translation made by the research team members using the back translation method. These are Likert-type items that evaluate the boys' and girls' satisfaction with their lives, on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always). Sample items are: "I have what I want in life" and "I would like to change many things in my life (reverse-coded)". A high score on the scale is thought to be indicative of greater life satisfaction. The Spanish language version of the scale has demonstrated concurrent and predictive validity in earlier research (Parra & Oliva, 2006). In the present study, the alpha reliability coefficient was .83, .83, .77, and .82, in W1, W2, W3 and W4 respectively.

Procedure

As is usual in longitudinal research, the data collection procedure was long and costly, extending over 10 years. The first data collection (W1) took place during the 1998–1999 academic year, from September to June. The second (W2) took place from September 2000 to June 2001, the third (W3) from September 2002 to June 2003 and the fourth (W4) between the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008.

The first step in W1 was to select the schools. Once the Board of Directors agreed to participate, the classrooms where the data would be collected were selected. Once parental permission was obtained, members of the research team applied the questionnaires anonymously and collectively. To facilitate the subsequent follow-up, each participant was given a numeric identifier.

For W2, the collection of data was similar, since most of the girls and boys continued to be enrolled at the same school as in W1. In the third and fourth data collection (W3 and W4), once contact had been made with the adolescents, and they had agreed to continue collaborating in the research project, an appointment was made to complete the questionnaire. In W3 and W4 active consent was obtained from the adolescents, and their anonymity was ensured. In W3 and W4 participants completed the questionnaires individually or collectively in the researchers' office.

Plan of data analysis

Our first aim in this study was to analyse emotional autonomy from a longitudinal perspective and, with this in mind, we will present our results distinguishing between its absolute and relative stability. This distinction is a cornerstone of longitudinal

studies which take into account the effect of the time factor on the variables of a single group of subjects (Stoolmiller & Bank, 1995). The absolute stability of a variable entails analysing how its average value reacts in the different measuring times. Being based on average scores, this analysis does not provide us with information on the possible different paths followed by subjects. To go deeper into this aspect, we analysed relative stability. Relative stability provides information on the consistency of subjects' placement regarding their reference group. The procedure most commonly used to measure relative stability is based on the Pearson correlation coefficients between different measuring times (Alder & Scher, 1994).

To analyse absolute stability of Emotional Autonomy we carried out an ANOVA for repeated measures with one between-subjects factor (gender) and one within-subject factor (waves).

In order to achieve our second and third objectives we analysed the correlations between Emotional Autonomy and Life Satisfaction, as well as between Emotional Autonomy and Family Cohesion. To delve deeper into the relationship between Family Cohesion and Emotional autonomy and to find out to what extent Family Cohesion contributed to explain the change in Emotional Autonomy throughout adolescence and between adolescence and early adulthood, we carried out a regression analysis.

Results

Mean, standard deviation and range of variables of the study for each of the measurement points appear in Table 2.

Table 2 Means and standard deviation of the study variables in wave 1, 2, 3, and 4.

	Emotional autonomy	Cohesion	Life satisfaction
Wave 1			
Mean (SD)	51.65 (6.1)	52.37 (6.39)	19.2 (3.6)
Range	35–69	38–68	9–25
Wave 2			
Mean (SD)	52.32 (6.7)	56.75 (9.88)	18.1 (4.2)
Range	34–75	24–77	5–25
Wave 3			
Mean (SD)	53.4 (7.3)	55.61 (10.46)	17.96 (3.96)
Range	36–76	29–79	6–25
Wave 4			
Mean (SD)	49.8 (7.5)	57.89 (10.15)	19.55 (3.55)
Range	29–64	27–79	8–25

Absolute stability of emotional autonomy

Emotional Autonomy experienced a slight increase throughout adolescence, then decreased during early adulthood (*Pillai Multivariate analysis*, $F(3,83) = 8.20, p = .000, \eta^2 = .23$). This trajectory was similar in the case of boys and girls, and it showed a large effect size according to the eta squared (Cohen, 1988). Specifically, the post-hoc tests indicated that the most significant changes took place between W2–W4 and W3–W4; therefore, the most significant aspect, according to the data collected, was a decrease in the levels of Emotional Autonomy at the end of adolescence.

Regarding differences between girls and boys, the results indicated that there were no differences between them, $F(1,85) = .195, p = .660$ at any point of measurement (see Fig. 1). As there were no significant gender differences, and due to the small size of the sample, the following analyses were carried out without differentiating between boys and girls.

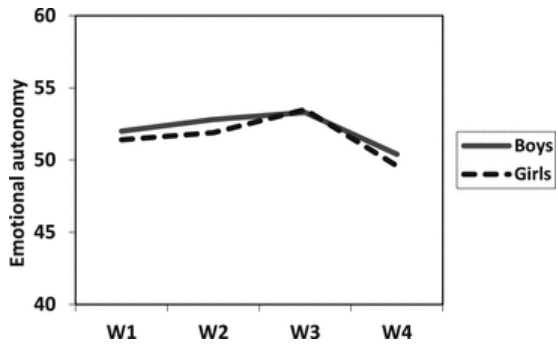


Fig. 1 Means of emotional autonomy from early adolescence to early adulthood by sex.

Relative stability of emotional autonomy

Pearson correlation coefficients between Emotional Autonomy at different measuring times indicated a medium-high relative stability of Emotional Autonomy (see Table 3). This means that the subjects tend to maintain their relative positions when compared with the average at a different point of the observations.

Table 3 Relative stability of emotional autonomy.

	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional autonomy W1	—	.44**	.44**	.30**
2. Emotional autonomy W2		—	.70**	.54**
3. Emotional autonomy W3			—	.65**
4. Emotional autonomy W4				—

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

As expected, the highest correlations were found between the closest times of measurement. Thus, the lowest correlations were found between W1 and W4, the beginning and end of the study, with 10 years between these points. Even so, between W1 and W4 the correlations were statistically significant. According to our results, the period of greatest uncertainty was found between initial and mid-adolescence (W1-W2).

Emotional autonomy and life satisfaction

Our second objective was to analyse the relationship between Emotional Autonomy and adjustment in the young adults, and more specifically with their Life Satisfaction. As shown in Table 4, Emotional Autonomy related significantly to Life Satisfaction, but in negative terms. The correlations increased over time, and the correlation between both variables in W1 was much less than in W3 or W4. However, this difference was not statistically significant, $z = 1.64, p = .10$ (Preacher, 2002).

Table 4 Correlations among emotional autonomy and life satisfaction.

	Life satisfaction			
	W1	W2	W3	W4
Emotional autonomy W1	-.15	-.07	-.11	-.16
Emotional autonomy W2		-.25*	-.18*	-.32**
Emotional autonomy W3			-.35**	-.40**
Emotional autonomy W4				-.38**

Note. [†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Life Satisfaction during early adulthood not only correlated with the levels of Emotional Autonomy measured at the same time, but also with prior levels of Emotional Autonomy. Thus, Life Satisfaction at W4 correlated negatively with Emotional Autonomy at W4, W3 and W2.

Emotional autonomy and family cohesion

Our third objective was to analyse the relationship between Emotional Autonomy and Family Cohesion throughout adolescence and during young adulthood. As indicated in Table 5, Emotional Autonomy was significantly and negatively related to Family Cohesion. Similarly to the description for Life Satisfaction, correlations increased over time. Following the test of the difference between two independent correlation coefficients (Preacher, 2002), correlation between Emotional Autonomy and Family Cohesion in wave 1 was statistically lower than the correlation between these two variables in wave 3 ($z = 2.14, p = .03$) and wave 4 ($z = 2.47, p = .01$). Emotional Autonomy at W3 and W4 also demonstrated a relationship with the levels of Family Cohesion at previous times (W2, W3, W4).

Table 5 Correlations among emotional autonomy and family cohesion.

	Emotional autonomy			
	W1	W2	W3	W4
Cohesion W1	-.38**	-.14	-.06	-.08
Cohesion W2		-.55**	-.43**	-.35**
Cohesion W3			-.62**	-.53**
Cohesion W4				-.65**

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

One of the most interesting aspects of this work and its longitudinal design is that it allowed us to learn to what degree the variables of the study contributed to predicting changes in Emotional Autonomy throughout adolescence and early adulthood. The influence of a given variable on itself at a later time may be contemplated in a variety of manners. We employed an autoregressive model (Stoolmiller & Bank, 1995) by means of hierarchical regressions. This model converted the dependent variable into a residual change variable, and tested whether Family Cohesion predicted an adolescent's changes in rank for Emotional Autonomy from W1 to W2. The same procedure was followed to analyse changes from W2 to W3 and from W3 to W4. We carried out 43 regression equations. These equations included Emotional Autonomy as dependent variable (DV) at W2, W3 and W4 respectively. The independent variable (IV) included was Emotional Autonomy and Family Cohesion at a previous time.

According to our data, Emotional Autonomy at W1 was the only variable that predicted a change in Emotional Autonomy between W1 and W2 ($Beta = .51, t = 4.61, p < .001$), since Cohesion at W1 did not contribute to explaining the values of Emotional Autonomy at W2 ($Beta = .03, t = .26, p = .797$) once the Emotional Autonomy at W1 was included in the equation (R^2 of the model = .20).

A similar situation appeared between W2 and W3. Emotional Autonomy at W2 was the variable that best predicted the change between mid and late adolescence ($Beta = .72, t = 8.93, p < .001$). Family Cohesion at W2, although related to Emotional Autonomy at W3 (Table 6), did not contribute to explaining the change between W2 and W3 ($Beta = -.08, t = -.86, p = .390$). R^2 of the model = .48.

Table 6 Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting change in emotional autonomy from W1 to W4.

	Emotional autonomy W4		
	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1		.42	.42
Emotional autonomy W3	.65**		
Step 2		.44	.03
Emotional autonomy W3	.52**		

Family cohesion W3	-0.15*		
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Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Nevertheless, Family Cohesion at W3 did contribute to explaining the change that took place in Emotional Autonomy between W3 and W4 (Table 6). Family cohesion in late adolescence was significantly related to Emotional Autonomy during early adulthood, once the previous levels of Emotional Autonomy had been controlled. Specifically, Family Cohesion at W3 contributed to explaining the decrease observed in Emotional Autonomy between W3 and W4. Thus, the boys and girls whose Emotional Autonomy decreased most between late adolescence and young adulthood were those who showed a greater Family Cohesion in late adolescence.

Discussion

The general objective of our work was to learn whether the achieving of Emotional Autonomy represents a developmental task for Spanish adolescents and young adults, or if it is the result of difficult family relationships. Our results point to the second option for various reasons.

First, it may be due to the high absolute stability of Emotional Autonomy during adolescence and its later decrease. If achieving Emotional Autonomy were a real developmental task, one would expect a general increase in Emotional Autonomy scores with age. But that is not the case. Moreover, the high stability did not appear to be due to different and compensating trajectories, but rather to similar tendencies, since the relative stability of the variable was also high. The high relative stability indicated that the young people in our sample maintained their relative positions compared to the average, throughout the different measurement periods, being located at a similar level when compared with their peers. We found that the moment of least stability was between initial and mid-adolescence. This is not surprising when bearing in mind that the first years of adolescence are times of major changes and readjustments within the family system (Steinberg, 1989), which could cause fluctuations in the relative scores of the subjects when asked about their relationships with their parents.

Secondly, the fact that the correlation between Emotional Autonomy and Life Satisfaction was negative does not seem to indicate that attaining Emotional Autonomy is a developmental task that is characteristic of adolescence and early adulthood. It would be difficult to consider lower Life Satisfaction as an achievement or the resolution of a developmental task. In this sense, it is interesting to point out that the correlation increased with the passing of time, reaching its highest values in the latter years of adolescence and young adulthood. These results question the idea of Steinberg and Silverberg (1986), according to which, although Emotional Autonomy is a necessary developmental task for the individuation process to take place, it could, at first, leave the boy or girl emotionally vulnerable and empty, which would generate a certain degree of maladjustment. Our results indicate the opposite tendency; the negative correlation between Life Satisfaction and Emotional Autonomy, far from diminishing, increased with the passing of time.

Thirdly, the negative relationship between Emotional Autonomy and Family Cohesion once again sparked the question of whether Emotional Autonomy is a developmental task for Spanish adolescents and young adults. Our results revealed that the most autonomous adolescents and young people were those that presented lower levels of Family Cohesion; the relationship reaching its highest values in late adolescence and early adulthood. Furthermore, the regression analyses showed that high levels of Cohesion during late adolescence predict a greater decrease in Emotional Autonomy between this period and young adulthood. In other words, it seems that Emotional Autonomy decreases between late adolescence and early adulthood, especially in those young people with more cohesive relationships with their parents. In those who have colder and more distant relationships, the decrease in emotional autonomy was less. These results help us understand the lower relative stability in Emotional Autonomy observed between initial and mid-adolescence. The high Emotional Autonomy of some young people during the first years of adolescence may indicate problematic family relationships. To the extent that the family system was able to reach a new balance, these young people, who demonstrated high Emotional Autonomy as a consequence of complicated relationships with their parents, were able to decrease their levels of Emotional Autonomy until they reached the group average. However, there may always be adolescents and young adults with difficult family relationships, who also manifest a greater Emotional Autonomy.

Returning to the main objective of this work, we can state that based on our results, we doubt that Emotional Autonomy is a necessary requirement for becoming an independent adult. These results coincide with those of Ryan and Lynch (1989) and Beyers et al. (2003). Thus, in our sample, high levels of Emotional Autonomy indicated difficult and rather unaffectionate family relationships that have little to do with adaptation and well-being during early adulthood.

What promotes optimum development is autonomy combined with the establishment of positive interpersonal bonds. Thus, what boys and girls should achieve during adolescence and youth is to develop as autonomous individuals being capable of maintaining positive relationships with others, especially with their parents (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Smollar & Youniss, 1989; Umberson, 1992).

Separation-individuation is about the resolution of a complex dialectical interaction between independence and relatedness (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986), which takes place during adolescence and young adulthood. When this process is inadequately resolved, psycho-social development and adjustment are affected. In fact, and as Kins et al. (2013) concluded, when an adequate balance between separation and individuation is not achieved, two patterns of non-successful separation-individuation could appear: "*Dysfunctional Dependence*", a tendency to excessively seek closeness to others, or "*Dysfunctional Independence*", a tendency to be strongly preoccupied with individuality and to avoid any kind of closeness. It could very well be that the young people in this study, who show greater levels of Emotional Autonomy with regards to their families, have failed to adequately resolve this balance between separation-individuation, thus showing reduced Life Satisfaction and colder relationships with their parents. This, perhaps, would place them in the category of "Dysfunctional Independence" as described by Kins et al. (2013).

As Kagitcibasi pointed out (1996), considering autonomy as the result of an individuation process or affective separation from the family may make sense only in very individualistic cultures. In more collectivist cultures, as is the case of Spain, maintaining close affective ties with parents is, very probably, a requirement for healthy development. These differences in values and norms may affect the development of autonomy during adolescence and young adulthood and appear as cultural differences in patterns of interactions between adolescents and others, particularly parents (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003).

Some authors have pondered the question of whether autonomy is being overestimated as something to achieve during adolescence, in detriment of another basic necessity: closeness and relationships with others (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Kagitcibasi, 1996; Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995). During adolescence and adulthood, both aspects are of vital importance; harmonious development cannot be understood if they are not both taken into consideration. According to the aforementioned studies, although individualistic societies have highlighted the role of autonomy, ignoring the importance of establishing bonds with others, collectivist societies have done exactly the opposite. Both societies have failed to understand this development without paying attention to the flip side of the coin: connection with others and autonomy. There is a lack of studies of autonomy as manifested in diverse cultures. As Kins et al. (2011) indicated, cross-cultural comparison studies are needed to help to clarify the role of the family process in the prediction of the adolescent and young adult autonomy process.

To go further in the concept of Emotional Autonomy, some research presents a more complex view of the Emotional Autonomy construct by including separation and detachment as dimensions (Beyers et al., 2003; Beyers, Goossens, VanCalster, & Duriez, 2005; Ingoglia, Lo Coco, Liga, & Cricchio, 2011; Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Pace & Zappulla, 2010). For them, Emotional Separation and Detachment from parents are two separate constructs, each related to different dimensions of the functioning of the parent-adolescent relationship and related in a different way with adolescent well-being. They understand that ties with parents and the feeling of personal agency are essential indicators to understand autonomy from parents.

In our work, we have used the classic EAS instrument by Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) to evaluate Emotional Autonomy. We are aware that there is a debate about the instrument, in the sense that some authors question whether or not it really assesses Emotional Autonomy (Beyers et al., 2003, 2005; Ingoglia et al., 2011; Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Schmitz & Baer, 2001). However, alternative measurement models for the EAS, such as those suggested by the authors above (Beyers et al., 2005), could not be confirmed through factor analysis on our own data. Furthermore, EAS, continues to be a tool widely used by investigators as a measure of Emotional Autonomy from parents (e.g. Garber & Little, 2001; Kenyon & Koerner, 2008; Mullis, Graf, & Mullis, 2009; Sandhu & Tung, 2006), using the global factor *Emotional Autonomy* or analysing separately the four components: *Perceives Parents as People, Parental Deidealization, Non-Dependency on Parents and Individuation*. For future work, we are aware of the need to include additional measures that take account of various aspects concerning the autonomy of adolescents and young adults.

One of the limitations of this work is the size of the sample. A sample of 90 subjects has conditioned, in part, the statistical analyses carried out and makes it difficult to generalize the results obtained. Moreover, using questionnaires exclusively and the young people and adolescents themselves as the source of information, also limits our results to a certain degree. For future studies, it would be important to also consider the perspective of the parents with regards to the separation-individuation process of their children. As Kins et al. (2011) has shown, parent feelings of separation anxiety are related to a pathological way of dealing with the separation-individuation process among young adults.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, we would like to highlight that this work is the only longitudinal study carried out in Spain over a ten-year period to analyse the development of Emotional Autonomy throughout adolescence and early adulthood. Its longitudinal perspective has allowed us to obtain a more in depth view of the meaning of Emotional Autonomy within the context of a Mediterranean country such as Spain. More than in other western countries, Spanish young adults live the transition to adulthood within the family of origin, and family economical and emotional support is a key for young people's well-being (Requena, 2002). Certainly, studies of this nature and that contribute information about family relationships beyond adolescence are necessary, especially in non-Anglo-Saxon countries (Aquilino, 2006).

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