

“DADDY’S GIRL” AND “BIG MAN ON CAMPUS:” TURNING POINTS IN THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

Both the overall quality of parent-adolescent relationships and the changes that occur in parent-child relationships during adolescence have implications for adolescents' overall adjustment and well-being. Developing autonomy from their parents is one outcome that children negotiate during adolescence. The focus of this study is how parent-adolescent communication functions to optimize adolescent individuation from their parents.

The Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) was used with 31 adolescents to explore the types of turning points they reported experiencing and the developmental trajectories of their relationships with their parents. Participants were also asked to describe how different turning points influenced changes in their autonomy with their parents and how communication with their parents was associated with various turning points. Participants reported 12 categories of turning points, of which 'moving away from home,' 'realizations about parents,' and 'new relationships' were the most frequent. Seven trajectory types emerged from the data, with the stagnating-linear trajectory reported by most participants. Previous studies have defined autonomy development as a linear process in that adolescents gain more autonomy as they age. In the current study, autonomy followed different pathways. Some of those pathways were linear, but some were not linear. The turning points that participants discussed were both turning points they negotiated with their parents and turning points that happened to them.

These findings are discussed from a multiple goals perspective. A multiple goals perspective highlights the idea that as parents and adolescents move towards more autonomy, that task is made challenging by other salient identity and relationship goals.

From a normative perspective, it is useful to know about the likelihood for identity and relational goals to conflict with autonomy development negotiations because it provides an example of the kinds of challenges that parents and adolescents face.

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## CHAPTER 1:

### Significance and Overview

Adolescence is a time that many families approach with uncertainty and trepidation. Despite the fact that the “storm and stress” description of adolescence has been abandoned by current research (Grotevant, 1998; Steinberg & Silk, 2002), the transition from childhood to adulthood is still a stressful time. Adolescence can be a difficult time for children as they face new choices for social opportunities and changes in their relationships with their parents. Adolescents also face frustration because their rate of cognitive development differs substantially from their rate of physical development (Steinmetz, 1999). The following provides an overview of the significant literature related to adolescent development, including the evidence showing that adolescents are at risk for multiple problems, the role that the parent-adolescent relationship plays in important adolescent outcomes, and an overview of the literature concerning adolescent autonomy development.

#### *Adolescent Risky Behaviors*

Being an adolescent is viewed as a risk factor for multiple problems including substance abuse, delinquency, mental illness, suicide, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases (Aspy et al., 2007; Grotevant, 1998; Steinmetz, 1999). Some adolescents engage in risk-taking behaviors as a means of testing parental boundaries and gaining acceptance from new peer groups. Most adolescents weather this time successfully and mature into competent and productive adults. A majority of adolescents who experiment with risky behaviors do not develop chronic dysfunctional patterns (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). For example, an adolescent might experiment with drinking

alcohol but not become an alcoholic as an adult. Dysfunctional behaviors that get carried into adulthood are often the result of issues that existed prior to the onset of adolescence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Given that the transition to adulthood can be stressful yet most adolescents develop into competent adults, it is important to consider what factors influence variations in adolescent development. One factor that is of particular import for this project is the parent-adolescent relationship. The parent-adolescent relationship is the best predictor of adolescent mental health and well-being (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Both the overall quality of parent-adolescent relationships and the changes that occur in parent-child relationships during adolescence have implications for adolescents' overall adjustment and well-being (Leung et al., 2009; Nomaguchi, 2008; Repinski & Zook, 2005; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). In particular, variations in how parents interact with adolescents have implications for adolescents' well-being.

#### *Parent-adolescent Relationships and Important Adolescent Outcomes*

The parent-adolescent relationship is crucial in terms of adolescents exhibiting certain outcomes. In the extant literature, these outcomes are usually parsed into two groups: emotional health and competence. Emotional health is a broad category that includes issues related to adolescent psychological well-being, feelings of self-worth, depression, and suicidal ideation. Competence encompasses issues related to conduct disorders, academic performance, delinquency, drug use, and sexual acting out (Grotevant, 1998).

Evidence has pointed to a close connection between parental behaviors and adolescent emotional health (Hillaker, Brophy-Herb, Villarruel, & Haas, 2008). For

example, parent-adolescent interaction seems to mediate the connections between parents' relationships and adolescent well-being. Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, and Wierson (1990) noted that the link between spousal conflict and adolescent internalizing behaviors was mediated by parents' psychological control with, and rejection of, the adolescent. Barber (1994) found that parental divorce predicted higher levels of depression in twelfth grade males and females, but this effect was mediated by fathers' advice about educational, occupational, and family plans, and adolescents' satisfaction with that advice.

Research has also examined the association between parental behavior and adolescents behaving in competent ways. For example, higher grades in school are associated with parents' involving adolescents in family decision making, whereas lower grades are associated with parents who dominate the family decision making processes (Dornbusch, 1989). According to Garber and Little (1999), junior high students experiencing difficulties in school demonstrated more competent functioning if they rated their familial relationships as high quality. Parental support has also been found to help adolescents adjust to middle school, in particular, with making new friends (Dwyer et al., 2010; Shomaker & Furman, 2009) and adjusting to higher academic standards (Schneider, Tomada, Normand, Tonci, & de Domini, 2008). Parents' engagement with adolescents has been found to be inversely related to the degree of adolescents' disaffected behavior with school (Connell, Spencer, Aber, 1994). As parents' involvement with adolescents lessened, the more likely adolescents were disaffected with school.

Connell and colleagues (1994) argued that the relationship between parental noninvolvement and adolescents' behavior is a result of an association between lack of

parental support and adolescent negative self-appraisals. Patterson and colleagues (Patterson, Chamberlain, & Reid, 1982; Patterson, Crosby, & Vuchinich, 1992; Patterson, Forgatch, Yoerger, & Stoolmiller, 1998) have examined the relationship between parental behavior and antisocial behavior in adolescents. According to Patterson and colleagues (1998), ineffective parental discipline is associated with antisocial behaviors in adolescents. Patterson and colleagues (1998) noted that parents who fail to punish their children and those who use excessive negative reinforcement train their children for more serious forms of aggression. Youths raised in these types of environments become resistant to punishment and progress to more serious behaviors. This contributes to adolescent antisocial behavior, problematic peer relationships, and poor academic progress (Peterson & Hann, 1999). The research summarized here points to the importance of the parent-adolescent relationship and how parents play a crucial role in adolescents' overall emotional health and social competence. Parents are also important in other domains of adolescent development.

#### *Autonomy Development*

Parents are particularly important to adolescent autonomy development. The way parents regard adolescents' opinions and give them opportunities to make important decisions influences adolescents' sense of self-worth and esteem (Noller, 1995; Steinmetz, 1999).

Although scholars generally agree on the importance of adolescent autonomy, the construct has been used in different ways. For example, Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) viewed autonomy as a multidimensional construct. They developed a 20-item measure that assessed four components of emotional autonomy: perceiving parents as people,

parental idealization, nondependency on parents, and individuation. With this measure, the authors found age-related increases in emotional autonomy for boys and girls from fifth to ninth grades and linked this increase in emotional autonomy with decreasing reliance on parents and increasing involvement with peers (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Ryan and Lynch (1989) presented a contrasting view of autonomy using the Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) measure. These researchers conducted three studies concerning parent-adolescent relationships with seventh graders, ninth through twelfth graders, and college undergraduates. According to Ryan and Lynch (1989), higher degrees of emotional autonomy are related to less felt security in younger adolescents, greater perceived parental rejection, and less experienced family cohesion and parental acceptance. These authors concluded that the emotional autonomy measure was less an index of autonomy and more a measure of emotional detachment from parents.

Even though both sets of authors had different interpretations of the emotional autonomy measure, all of the authors agreed that it is important to understand how parent-adolescent relationships function to optimize adolescent individuation from their parents.

Two additional conceptualizations of autonomy are behavioral autonomy, which is the ability to behave competently when on one's own, and cognitive autonomy, which is the ability to make decisions without conforming to others' viewpoints (Steinmetz, 1999). For the purposes of this study, independence from parents was a defining feature of autonomy development. This independence was described in different ways by different participants. Some participants described autonomy development as relying less on their parents for tangible resources, like money and transportation whereas other

participants described autonomy development as relying less on their parents to help them cope with emotional upheavals.

These aspects of autonomy are important predictors of adolescents' susceptibility for engaging in risk-taking behaviors and their abilities to grow into competent adults. For example, adolescents who are given too much freedom at an early age are more likely to experiment with drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity. Conversely, adolescents who are restricted by their parents too long often have difficulties making decisions and developing their own opinions (Noller, 1995).

Optimal autonomy development occurs in the context of family relationships in which adolescents feel secure to explore their own interests while still feeling close to their parents (Grotevant, 1998; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). According to Steinberg and Silk (2002), “healthy individuation and positive mental health are fostered by close, not distant, family relationships” (p. 121). Because autonomy development can protect adolescents from multiple problems and is connected to competent adult functioning, it is important to understand how adolescents develop autonomy. Research has recognized certain behavioral predictors of autonomy development including family decision making, parental monitoring, and conflict. According to Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, and Dornbusch (1991), when parents allow adolescents to be involved in family decision making, adolescents exhibit more social competence. In regards to parental monitoring, parents who are able to remain in their children’s lives without constraining them are more likely to have adolescents who are positively adjusted and succeeding academically. Adolescents who have parents who are overly intrusive or overprotective may have

difficulty individuating from their parent, which in turn is related to depression, anxiety, and diminished social competence (Lamborn et al., 1991).

The discussion to this point has focused on broad links between parent-adolescent relationships and adolescent outcomes. One particular type of parent-adolescent interaction, conflict, is so important that it bears a more specific discussion. Parents and adolescents discuss important developmental issues during the course of a conflict, but usually not overtly. It is well-documented that parents and adolescents typically argue over seemingly insignificant issues (Collins & Laursen, 2004). According to Smetana (1988), conflicts over mundane issues provide a context for debating the extent of the adolescents' developing autonomy. The extent to which certain issues are seen to be under adolescents' personal jurisdiction (rather than under the parents' authority) increases with age during adolescence (Smetana, 1988; Smetana & Asquith, 1994). Such conflicts implicitly entail a renegotiation of the boundaries between parental authority over the adolescent and the adolescent's authority over him or herself (Smetana, 1988). Successful negotiation of adolescents' greater demands for autonomy mean that family relationships are restructured to allow adolescent growth while maintaining close ties with parents.

Given that a close relationship with parents is important for autonomy development and that parents and adolescents negotiate the boundaries of autonomy through communication, the current study seeks to look at the different ways in which parents and adolescents negotiate autonomy. Most research on autonomy development treats autonomy as something that is achieved over time, but how that achievement happens is less well understood. Developmental work in the aggregate level explains, in

part, how autonomy is achieved. The dominant theoretical perspectives on adolescent development often conceptualize autonomy development as unfolding linearly as adolescents age. Theories of individual development propose that relationships between parents and adolescents go through a period of disruption and discontinuity before resuming more harmonious interactions.

One shortcoming of these developmental perspectives is that they do not take into account possible variations in adolescent autonomy development. Some adolescents could develop autonomy from their parents in linear ways whereas others might have a different experience. Indeed, there is some evidence that variations exist in the “typical” autonomy development process. For instance, the gender of the parent, the gender of the child, and variations in the family structure may influence the course of autonomy development (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Also, patterns of family interaction that are established prior to the onset of adolescence appear to predict the extent to which autonomy development occurs smoothly (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Grotevant (1998) argued that whereas some features of adolescence are universal, namely physical and sexual maturation, other aspects of development are shaped by family context.

Moreover, some scholars explicitly argue that autonomy development is not always linear. Rutter (1996) maintained that relationship development between parents and adolescents is often marked by both continuity and discontinuity. Similarly, Allen and Land (1999) noted that an adolescent’s journey to independence from his or her parents is marked with “twists, detours, dead ends, and difficulties” (p. 324). The likelihood that not all adolescents develop autonomy in a linear fashion suggests that it is important to explore multiple possible experiences of adolescents and to understand how

autonomy is negotiated in families who do not follow a linear trajectory. Theories of individual development that treat autonomy development as a linear process also ignore how communication is related to the multiple pathways of autonomy development. This gap in the current literature points to the importance of examining autonomy development as a process that can vary across adolescents.

#### Overview of Current Study

The current study examines the multiple pathways of adolescent autonomy development and the connections between those pathways and parent-adolescent communication. Describing various trajectories toward autonomy adds to our understanding of how adolescents achieve autonomy, and examining the connections between various potential trajectories and communication contributes to our understanding of why some adolescents progress in some ways and others progress in different ways. This theoretical contribution has important potential for practical application because understanding how communication is related to various pathways of development could imply normatively better and worse ways for parents and adolescents to navigate the adolescent period.

## CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Considerations

This study seeks to uncover adolescents' diverse pathways towards autonomy from their parents. A second purpose of this study is to understand how talk with parents during and about these times facilitates change in adolescent autonomy development. In order to convey the utility of the current study, it is important to first describe several related research areas, including theories of adolescent development and family relationships, parent-adolescent conflict, and family diversity. Although an introductory description is provided for each research area, given the focus on relational development in the current dissertation, particular attention is given to the implications that each theory or perspective has for our understanding of development and change in families.

### *Theories of Adolescent Development and Family Relationships*

Different theoretical perspectives highlight different aspects of adolescent development and focus on various aspects of the parent-adolescent relationship. Theories like interdependence and attachment focus on the bonds that endure between parents and adolescents as adolescents mature, whereas theories of individual and family development highlight change in parent-adolescent relationships (Collins & Madsen, 2006). Family development, systems theory, individual development, attachment, and interdependence are reviewed here. Each of these theories provides a perspective on family development and change.

### *Family Development Theory*

The focus of family development theory is family time and developmental change (Mattessich & Hill, 1987; Rodgers & White, 1993). Instead of looking at how families

change over historical time periods, this perspective focuses on how families change as they go through certain stages (Aldous, 1990). This perspective emphasizes that families experience change as a unit as opposed to examining the timing of events in individuals' lives and how those changes affect families (Aldous, 1990).

This perspective has guided research as a conceptual framework and as a set of theoretical propositions, and some scholars have debated as to whether or not family development is a theory (Rodgers & White, 1993). Regardless of how scholars have used this perspective to guide their research, certain concepts are important for understanding the theory.

An important part of family development theory is the notion of family time. Family time, according to this perspective, is constituted as the family moving through a sequence of stages. This movement is prompted by the changes in family members (i.e., biological, psychological, social) and the demands of the larger society (i.e., social expectations) (Mattessich & Hill, 1987; Rodgers & White, 1993).

Other important concepts are position, role, and norms. A position is a location within a certain social group with assigned obligations and rights (Aldous, 1978, 1996; Mattessich & Hill, 1987). Examples of positions include husband, father, wife, and mother. Attached to every position are roles. Roles are sets of norms that specify behaviors for people who occupy the positions. Family members have multiple roles. For example, the position of mother might include the roles of teacher, disciplinarian, and affection-giver (Aldous, 1978, 1996; Mattessich & Hill, 1987). Each role consists of a set of norms, which are a set of expectations (Aldous, 1978, 1996; Mattessich & Hill, 1987). The role of disciplinarian contains the norms of providing children with a set of rules to

guide their behavior and making sure they follow those rules by using certain sanctions (Aldous, 1978).

The notion of change is crucial to family development theories. Family time is connected to the concepts of position, role, and norm. Namely, this perspective takes into account that as families move through certain stages their roles and associated norms could change. For example, the role of disciplinarian may be attached to the position of mother and father for many years, but the norms associated with that role could change as children grow older.

Family development has a set of underlying assumptions. According to Aldous (1978), these assumptions tie the aforementioned concepts together. Aldous (1978, 1996) and Mattessich and Hill (1987) advanced the primary assumptions of the family development perspective: (a) Family behavior is seen as a function of past and present experiences of the family members and their expectations for the future, (b) family behavior can be understood in the context of development, (c) humans initiate actions with others and react to environment pressures, (d) the family and its individual members must perform certain tasks set by them and based on broader societal expectations, and (e) in social settings, individuals are autonomous.

The family life cycle perspective is one application of the family development perspective that has been used to describe family change (Aldous, 1978, 1996; Mattessich & Hill, 1987). The changes emphasized in the family life cycle are those that are expectable and that many families experience (Aldous, 1978). The utility of the family life cycle has been debated (Nock, 1979; Schram, 1979; Spanier, Sauer, & Larzelere, 1979), and some scholars have criticized whether or not certain family life cycle stages

apply to all types of families (e.g., single parent families) and families from non-Western cultures (Mattessich & Hill, 1987).

Scholars who have used the family life cycle in their research have noted that it is mostly a descriptive tool used to categorize families according to similar life events and stressors. The implication is that it is useful to describe families at the aggregate level, but the families at each stage are not identical to each other (Aldous, 1978, 1996; Mattessich & Hill, 1987). Mattessich and Hill (1987) further argued that patterns of development can be identified in families who do not fit the family life cycle stages. For example, Aldous (1978) explicated the stages of development for single-parent families headed by divorced women. In short, no one “correct” family life cycle model exists. However, one general model was proposed by Aldous (1978, 1996): (a) newly established couples, (b) families with infants and preschool children, (c) families with school-aged children, (d) families with adolescents, (e) families with young adults, (f) families in the middle years (children launched from parental home), and (g) aging families (parents in retirement).

Regardless of how a researcher divides up the stages in the family life cycle, transitions are useful in determining where to divide the stages (Aldous, 1978, 1996). Aldous (1978, 1996) argued that transitions are discontinuities in individuals’ and families’ behaviors that cause alterations in the family structure. Aldous (1996) also noted that transitions are used to delineate family stages for two reasons. First, many family members are directly involved in the transitions. Second, because families consist of interdependent members, those who do not directly experience the transition are soon involved in the restructuring of the family that is prompted because of the transition.

The family development framework makes a distinction between family events and family transitions. Unlike transitions, events do not separate one family stage from another. Instead, events influence change in the family. In turn, change represents a time of transition in which families develop new routines to replace the old routines that were disrupted by the event (Aldous, 1978, 1996). For example, the birth of a child is an event that prompts change in a couple. The couple is in a time of transition as they try to establish new patterns of interaction as a couple with a baby. This transition time links the previous stage (a couple without children) to the new stage (parents with an infant). Over time, families experience many critical transitions that force them to modify their organization (Aldous, 1996).

#### *Family Systems Theory*

As a theoretical lens, family systems theory views a family as a set of interdependent elements that influence each other in a reciprocal fashion. According to the theory, individual family members are embedded in the larger family system and can never be fully understood apart from the family system. Individuals are considered part of interaction patterns and these patterns often take precedence over individuals (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Authors writing about family systems emphasize different sets of characteristics (e.g., Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1988; Robin & Foster, 1989; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993), but certain characteristics are commonly stressed for describing social systems like the family. The first characteristic that is commonly used to describe family systems is interdependence. Interdependence captures the idea that change in one part of the system or family member impacts the whole family. A second characteristic is

wholeness. This characteristic involves the notion that the entire family unit is unique and cannot be understood from the combined characteristics of individual family members. Families, as a social system, also exhibit hierarchical structure. Families are composed of various subsystems (e.g., parental, marital, sibling) and are also embedded in the larger community system. According to Minuchin (1988), family subsystems are defined by metaphorical boundaries. Family members learn implicit rules for interacting with each other across subsystem boundaries (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1988). Cox and Paley (1997) argued that optimal family functioning occurs when boundaries are clear but flexible. Family members should be able to interact within subsystems without interference from other family members but “be able to access resources from the larger family unit as well” (Cox & Paley, 1997, p. 246).

How families change and develop is an important part of family system theory. Systems theories posit that families are generally homeostatic in that they seek to maintain stability. The family needs growth and change, but its patterns of stability are often privileged over change. As they move through time, stability and change become part of the same process for family systems (Cox & Paley, 1997). Families have homeostatic characteristics and are motivated to maintain the stability of their patterns, but at the same time they are often met by events that necessitate a reorganization of those patterns (Minuchin, 1988). Feedback loops serve to regulate family behavior as they try to maintain stability while adapting to change. Positive feedback loops function to accept deviations in the system, whereas negative feedback loops serve to resist change in the system (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993).

A final characteristic that is important to understand family systems is circular causality. According to Whitchurch and Constantine (1993), systems theory implies recursion and mutual influence. This means that families interact in complex circular patterns with no beginning or end. Any given behavior in the family system could be cause or effect (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993).

### *Theories of Individual Development*

A number of specific theories assume that individual developments in adolescents bring about changes in parent-adolescent relationships. I refer to this broad perspective as the individual development perspective, which typically is more focused on adolescent outcomes rather than outcomes for the parent-adolescent dyad. This group of theories proposes that relationships between parents and adolescents go through a period of disruption and discontinuity before resuming more harmonious interactions after adolescence. Collectively, these theories represent the dominant theoretical perspectives in the study of parent-adolescent relationships and conflict (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Steinberg, 1990). Theories of individual development can be broken down into psychoanalytic perspectives, evolutionary perspectives, and cognitive-developmental perspectives.

*Psychoanalytic perspectives.* Early psychoanalytic perspectives of individual development stressed that adolescents detach themselves from their parents (Steinberg, 1990). Conflict with parents was seen to stimulate this process and was also viewed as a manifestation of the process of detachment. According to this early conception of the perspective, conflict and detachment were believed to be normative whereas parent-adolescent harmony was seen as a developmental delay (Steinberg, 1990). Later

extensions of this perspective focused on the process of adolescent individuation from parents instead of detachment.

One legacy of the psychoanalytic view of development is the notion that adolescence is a time of “storm and stress” (Hill & Holmbeck, 1987). According to this perspective, adolescent maturity can only be achieved through conflictive relationships with parents. Although it is a common characterization of adolescence, storm and stress is no longer considered typical of parent-adolescent relationships (Montemayor & Flannery, 1990). Instead, more recent versions of the psychoanalytic view embrace the idea that hormonal changes and the increase in sexual excitement at puberty generates an increased need for adolescents to individuate themselves from their parents and to seek greater involvement with friends (Collins & Madsen, 2006). This account of parent-adolescent relationships implies that heightened conflict and less closeness follow maturational changes. This view also assumes that relationship closeness between parents and adolescents can be re-established in young adulthood (Collins & Madsen, 2006).

*Evolutionary perspectives.* Psychoanalytic and evolutionary perspectives share an assumption about adolescent behavior: both focus on pubertal maturation as a cause of increased conflict and distance in parent-adolescent relationships along with increased engagement with relationships outside the family (Collins & Madsen, 2006). Historically, this distancing from parents happened during puberty. Currently, it is difficult for adolescents to physically distance themselves from their parents because they are dependent on them for food and shelter. Instead, adolescents attempt to psychologically distance themselves from their parents, resulting in increased conflict and autonomy strivings and decreased cohesion (Steinberg, 1990). Steinberg (1990) argued that

adolescents' attempts at psychologically distancing "may be an atavism related to a pattern of behavior that at one time protected the genetic integrity of the species" (p. 128). According to evolutionary perspectives, conflict between parents and adolescents is important so that adolescents will be forced to look for sexual partners outside of their family of origin (Steinberg, 1989, 1990). In fact, Steinberg (1989) claimed that "closeness in the family of origin might actually impede sexual maturation somewhat" (p. 94).

*Cognitive-developmental perspectives.* Cognitive-developmental perspectives also posit that changes in the parent-adolescent relationship are a function of adolescent maturation. In particular, cognitive-developmental models focus on adolescents' intellectual maturation. These models predict that adolescents' new understanding of themselves and their parents changes their behavior towards their parents, resulting in increased conflict (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Laursen & Collins, 1994). These models also predict that conflict would decrease as familial roles get renegotiated (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Laursen & Collins, 1994). For example, Selman (1980) and Youniss and Smollar (1985) argued that cognitive advances in adolescence mean that adolescents begin to see their parents in more egalitarian terms. Parental reluctance to transform their relationship results in conflict until the family roles are renegotiated from vertical affiliations to more horizontal ones.

Smetana (1988) offered a cognitive-developmental perspective in which conflict is related to adolescents' advanced levels of social reasoning. Smetana (1988) argued that parents and adolescents differ in how they define conflict. According to Smetana (1988), parents often define issues in terms of social convention (e.g., in this family we keep our

house clean) whereas adolescents treat conflicts as personal (e.g., it's my room so I will decide how often I clean it). Smetana (1988) argued that conflict ensues not so much over the issue but instead over the definition of the dispute (i.e., a matter of personal taste versus social conventions).

Smetana (1988) also argued that “children develop qualitatively different modes of thinking about social conventions that are reorganized with age” (p. 115). According to Smetana (1988), as children enter adolescence they begin to see social conventions as arbitrary. In turn, any rule pertaining to social convention is also considered arbitrary. In other words, even if parents and adolescents define their issue in conventional terms, adolescents still may be unlikely to adapt to their parents' convention. For example, parents might have a rule that children should clean their room, but their adolescent children might reject that rule because according to their current level of reasoning, rules about cleaning rooms are arbitrary.

### *Attachment Theory*

Attachment refers to the affectional bond that forms between parents and their children that has continuity over time (Cummings & Cummings, 2002). Within the attachment relationship, working models of attachment form as a result of interactions between a child and his or her caregiver (Feeney, Noller, & Roberts, 2000). According to Bowlby (1988), during childhood and adolescence individuals gradually build expectations about the responsiveness of their caregivers. These expectations and the associated memories about early interactions with attachment figures are incorporated into working models of attachment. Working models contain conceptualizations of self

and of the attachment figure (Bartholomew, 1990) and shape behavior in later relationships (Feeney et al., 2000).

Individual differences in attachment were highlighted by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) when studying infant-mother behavior in the Strange Situation. Based on infants' behavior towards their mothers in this experiment, Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) formulated three attachment patterns: secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent. Secure infants were upset when separated from their mothers but were comforted when they returned to her. The mothers of secure infants were observed to be warm and responsive (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In adulthood, this pattern manifests itself as trusting others, being open emotionally, and feeling confident about the goodwill of others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Avoidant infants were detached and avoided contact with their mothers. Their mothers were distant and rigid (Ainsworth et al., 1978). As adults, avoidant individuals are comfortable relying on themselves and do not seek support from others even if it is necessary for their health and well-being (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) observed that anxious-ambivalent infants showed distress when separated from their mothers but were angry when reunited. The mothers of these infants were observed to be engaging in insensitive or inconsistent behaviors. According to Hazan and Shaver (1987), anxious-ambivalent adults are uncertain about being loved, being worthy of love, and being supported by their partner. They are unusually dependent on their partner and are intrusive (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Feeney and colleagues (2000) noted that attachment relationships are formed and negotiated through communication, and conflict and conflict avoidance have been examined in relationship to attachment style. The attachment system is not always

activated but instead evolved so that individuals felt security in times of distress. Conflict activates the attachment system (Rholes, Simpson, & Stevens, 1998; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Conflict is one threat to the relationship and the availability of the attachment figure (Pistole, 1989; Rholes et al., 1998; Simpson et al., 1996). In short, conflict is perceived as a threat of separation from the attachment figure, and the attachment system is activated to preserve the relationship bond.

Some research suggests that attachment styles likely influence how parent-adolescent relationships change as parents and adolescents negotiate increased adolescent autonomy. Adolescents' attachment, for example, appears to influence conflict behaviors, which in turn influence how parent-adolescent relationships are renegotiated. Insecurely attached adolescents (i.e., avoidant and anxious-ambivalent ones) exhibit higher levels of disengagement and withdrawal during conflict (Allen & Land, 1999; Kobak et al., 1993; Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Parents of insecurely attached adolescents often use pressuring tactics during conflicts, which undermine the autonomy of adolescents (Allen & Land, 1999).

Allen and Land (1999) provided three reasons why parents and adolescents in insecure dyads have difficulties negotiating the adolescent transitions. One reason they presented is that adolescent autonomy strivings are manifested in disagreements with parents and are perceived as a real threat to the parent-adolescent relationship (Allen & Land, 1999). A second reason was that insecure parent-adolescent dyads react more strongly to disagreements. These dyads are more likely to have a relational history in which needs and feelings are not validated. This could leave both relationship parties vulnerable to hurt feelings and anger and to engage in disagreements that “move rapidly

from reasoned discussion to ‘fight or flight’ stance” (Allen & Land, 1999, p. 324). A third reason is that a family with an insecurely attached adolescent might be ill-equipped to renegotiate the relationship brought on by adolescent autonomy strivings (Allen & Land, 1999). On one hand, adolescents are frustrated because they do not expect to be understood by their parents. On the other hand, their parents’ insecurity makes it difficult to attend to the adolescents’ perspectives and feelings. The insecurity of both adolescents and their parents coupled with the adolescents’ growing independence conspires to create a chronic state of activation of the attachment system (Allen & Land, 1999). This constant activation of the attachment system increases “the impact of an insecure parental relationship on the adolescent” (Allen & Land, 1999, p. 324).

#### *Interdependence Theory*

A key assumption of interdependence theory is that relationships are defined in terms of the causal interactions that exist between two people (Berscheid, 1983; Kelly et al., 1983). Furthermore, the theory posits that individuals develop a close relationship when they interact with each other frequently in a variety of settings, and each partner’s behavior influences the other partner’s behavior (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000).

These interactions have outcomes or consequences for the people involved and for how their relationships develop. The outcomes of interactions can be expressed in terms of rewards and costs (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). According to the theory, rewards are interpersonal resources that people find enjoyable or useful in achieving their goals. Costs represent limitations or drawbacks that individuals perceive as obstacles to meeting their goals. When perceived rewards outweigh costs, a positive outcome results.

On the other hand, when perceived costs outweigh rewards a negative outcome results (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Interdependence theory assumes that individuals seek to maximize their rewards, but the theory is not an account of how people pursue rewards (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). Instead, the theory predicts that people develop preferences for interactions that are rewarding, but individuals also incur costs if they are in service to achieving broader goals, like the well-being of their interaction partner (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996).

The standards for evaluating the outcomes experienced in relationships are called an individual's comparison level and their comparison level of alternatives. The comparison level represents the rewards and costs that a person expects in a relationship. According to the theory, individuals compare their relational outcomes with their comparison level. This means that individuals' satisfaction with a relationship is based on a positive outcome value that also meets or exceeds their expectations (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The theory also posits that a person's satisfaction with a relationship is not enough to determine if the relationship will continue or not. People also consider their comparison level of alternatives. The comparison level of alternatives represents the perceived quality of the best available alternative to the relationship. This means that when individuals perceive that their alternatives are greater than their current outcome or greater than their expectations (comparison level), they will seek to end the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

According to Reis et al. (1996), in order to predict and understand behavior, scholars need to understand the relationship context in which the behavior occurs. A strength of interdependence theory is that it provides an explanation of how that

relationship context gets created through the interactions of two individuals. As applied to parent-adolescent relationships, interdependence theory predicts that changes must be made in the parent-child relationship during adolescence in order to maintain interdependence (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Laursen & Collins, 2004). Conflict between parents and adolescents helps to facilitate that change. Overall, interdependence theory predicts that conflict in parent-adolescent dyads aids in the renegotiation of existing patterns of interdependence, which helps accommodate the changes in the adolescent and potentially the parent as well (Laursen & Collins, 2004). An interdependence perspective is distinct in that it highlights the mutual influence existing in relationships; thus, the changing parent-adolescent relationship may influence parents as well as adolescents (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Conflict also provides revised expectations for the parent-adolescent relationship (Collins, 1990; Laursen & Collins, 1994).

#### *Parent-adolescent Conflict*

Conflict serves an important function in parent-adolescent relationships because it is a major vehicle through which parent-adolescent relationships are renegotiated (Noller, 1995; Steinberg, 1981). Conflict is pervasive in parent-adolescent relationships. Adolescents report that about 40 percent of their conflicts are with a parent (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2000). Recalling their childhood, adults and their parents report that as a developmental period there was a lot of conflict during adolescence (Fingerman, 1997; Riesch, Jackson, & Chanchong, 2003). Conflicts typically do not hurt family relationships, but chronic fighting is associated with adolescent maladjustment (Smetana, 1996).

Mothers report the most negative repercussions (e.g., depression) from chronic conflict (Silverberg & Steinberg, 1990). According to Vuchinich (1987), conflicts often make mothers feel defeated because conflicts represent their inability to perform as peacemakers and family conciliators. Steinberg (1981) also explained that conflicts with adolescents could diminish maternal authority. Another negative consequence of conflict is that parents and adolescents could say hurtful things to each other during a conflict, potentially changing their feelings towards one another and their self-perceptions (Mills, Nazar, & Farrell, 2002).

Adolescents appear to have a different view of family conflicts than parents do. Studies involving videotaped interactions of parents and adolescents have found that reports from independent observers match adolescent reports, but adolescent and observer reports do not match parental reports of the same conflict (Cook & Goldstein, 1993; Gonzales, Cauce, & Mason, 1996; Noller & Callan, 1988). Compared to adolescents, mothers tend to underestimate the incidence of parent-adolescent conflict and overestimate its severity (Steinberg, 2001). Parents and adolescents also have different interpretations of conflicts. Parents often see disagreements arising from issues associated with morality, personal safety, and conformity whereas adolescents view the same issues as matters of personal choice (Smetana, 1988).

Conflicts can also escalate into physically abusive episodes (Roloff, 1996). Such potential consequences point to the practical importance of studying conflict, which could explain why so much research has been devoted to it. The following sections focus on the primary research questions and major findings associated with research conducted on

parent-adolescent conflict. Developmental trends and the adaptive importance of parent-adolescent conflict will be highlighted.

### *Developmental Trends in Parent-Adolescent Conflict*

Scholars studying parent-adolescent relationships are often concerned with developmental issues related to parent-adolescent conflict. To begin, some researchers have reported a general curvilinear trend for conflict during adolescence (Selman, 1980). According to these findings, conflict increases during early adolescence, peaks during mid-adolescence, and subsides during late adolescence (Montemayor, 1983). Paikoff and Brooks-Gunn (1991) argued that hormonal and physical changes during puberty account, in part, for this trend. Other research, however, does not support this trend (e.g., Smetana, 1989). Results of a meta-analytic review (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998) found that this trend was actually an artifact of the failure to distinguish quantity of conflict from the affect during conflict. Evidence from this meta-analysis indicated a decline in the frequency of conflicts from early adolescence to mid-adolescence and again from mid-adolescence to late-adolescence. Anger in these conflicts increases from early adolescence to mid-adolescence with little change after that (Laursen et al., 1998). According to Galambos and Almeida (1992), conflicts over chores, appearance, and politeness as well as overall conflict decreased between the ages of 11 and 13 years. Rueter and Conger (1995) contended that conflict increased between parents and adolescents in hostile and coercive families but decreased in warm and supportive families.

These conflict patterns and behaviors are moderated by individual differences. Two important moderators are gender and puberty (Canary & Messman, 2000; Laursen

& Collins, 2004). In general, mothers have more conflicts with their adolescent children than fathers do (Galambos & Almeida, 1992). Examining shifts in family power during the transition to adolescence, Jacob (1974) found that adolescent boys became more assertive and influential at the expense of their mothers, whereas fathers maintained their relative power status. Rates and levels of negative affect are higher in mother-daughter dyads than in any other dyad (Laursen & Collins, 2004).

Variations in conflict behaviors and patterns attributed to puberty are parsed into two sources: pubertal status and pubertal timing (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Pubertal status is a child's level of physical maturation. Meta-analytic comparisons reveal a small, positive linear association between pubertal status and conflict (Laursen et al, 1998). Observational studies (Hill, 1988; Steinberg, 1981) also reveal how patterns are re-organized during conflict at puberty. When children are at the height of pubertal change, fathers interrupt them more during a conflict (Hill, 1988). According to Steinberg (1981), fathers' interruptions of their children maintain their dominant role in the family. At the height of pubertal change, mothers and children also interrupt each other more and this reflects an attempt to challenge maternal authority (Steinberg, 1981). According to Steinberg (1981), mothers lose decision-making authority with their sons and to a lesser extent with their daughters at the apex of pubertal development.

Pubertal timing is the level of maturation that a child has achieved at a particular age. Early maturing adolescents have more frequent and intense conflicts with parents than adolescents who mature along with their cohort. One explanation for this finding is that parents do not agree with adolescents that physical maturity is a basis for more independence (Steinberg, 1989). The effects for pubertal timing on conflict are larger and

more robust than effects for pubertal status (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Powers and colleagues (1989) argued that the influences of pubertal timing on conflict are independent of effects that are associated with an adolescent's chronological age.

### *Conflict and Adaptive Importance*

Scholars also have posed questions about the functions that conflict serves in parent-adolescent relationships. Conflict with parents can help adolescents complete important developmental tasks. One of those tasks is for adolescents to begin the process of de-idealizing their parents (Smollar & Youniss, 1989; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). It is important for adolescents to begin to see their parents in a more realistic way and to realize that they are people beyond their roles as parents. Conflict helps to facilitate that process (Robin & Foster, 1989; Smollar & Youniss, 1989; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; White, Speisman, & Costos, 1983).

According to Hill (1988) and Cooper (1988), conflict that is worked out in a supportive environment is beneficial and transforms the parent-adolescent relationship in positive ways. Steinberg (1990) maintained that conflicts worked out in these conditions help adolescents develop a more realistic view of their parents, assert their own ideas, and become more autonomous. This view assumes that the adaptive value of conflict will happen only if parents and adolescents engage in open, verbal and direct give and take. It is important to note here that some scholars have argued that a majority of conflicts between parents and adolescents end with withdrawing from the scene and few involve discussion and negotiation (Montemayor & Hanson, 1985; Vuchinich, 1999). This could mean that by ending conflicts in this manner parents are missing important opportunities to facilitate adolescent development (Steinberg, 1990).

Whereas conflict in warm and supportive environments is functional for development, conflict in hostile, defensive environments is problematic for relationships and development. Families that resist making adaptations by discouraging greater symmetry in the parent-adolescent relationship and developing hostility around old patterns are more like to involve a delinquent adolescent (Alexander, 1973). Turmoil characterizes a small minority of families with adolescents (Dornbusch, 1989; Rutter et al., 1976). Relationship difficulties in families with more tumultuous exchanges have less to do with adolescent development and more with family dysfunction or individual mental illness (Offer & Offer, 1975).

#### *Family Diversity*

Up to this point, the focus of this paper has been on families in general, but diversity among families likely influences parent-adolescent relationships and adolescent autonomy development. Thus, a consideration of issues related to family diversity is important for understanding the utility of the current project. Families may experience variations in their experiences. Although some experiences in adolescence are universal (e.g., physical maturation), other issues (e.g., autonomy development) depend on family context (Grotevant, 1998). Such variations among families provide a context for the expectation that there may be a variety of pathways through which parent-adolescent relationships develop. Some particularly important dimensions of family diversity include family structure, work and socioeconomic status, and ethnic and cultural variations and contexts of adolescent development.

### *Family Structure*

Family structure has implications for adolescent well-being. Adolescents' membership in divorced, single-parent, and blended families has been associated with poor academic performance and depression (Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008) and unsuccessful romantic relationships (Cavanagh, Crissy, & Raley, 2008). Research on divorced, single-parent, and blended families is extensive in part because of the number of children and adults involved in these various family forms. Based on current trends, demographers predict that more than one-half of children born in the 1990s will spend time in single-parent families (Amato, 2000). About half of the marriages in the United States are remarriages for one or both partners and an estimated one-third of US children will spend time in blended families (Ganong & Coleman, 2000). The pathways that families travel toward single-parenthood and blended family-hood also have changed. Historically, single-parent and blended families were formed after the death of a spouse, but recent increases in single-parent and blended families is attributed largely to divorce and, for single parents, a growth in the percentage of children born outside of a marital relationship (Amato, 2000).

For this reason, research on single parent and blended families has become a social issue and has prompted some scholars to debate whether or not the American family is in a state of crisis (Cowan, 1993; Glenn, 1993; Stacey, 1993; Popenoe, 1993). Despite changes in family structure, the nuclear family headed by a heterosexual couple with dependent children is still considered an ideal in American culture (Coontz, 1992). An assumption of many studies focusing on blended families in particular is that they should act like first-married nuclear families (Ganong & Coleman, 2000). Nuclear family

processes are the standard by which blended family processes are compared. When compared to nuclear families, stepfamily processes are often viewed as problematic, especially when it comes to reports of cohesion and emotional closeness (Ganong & Coleman, 2000). In short, some research portrays single-parent and blended families as operating at a deficit when, in fact, it would be unrealistic for these families to function like first-married nuclear families (Ganong & Coleman, 2000). Some evidence suggests that blended family members feel anger, resentment, and a lack of satisfaction when they try to model their behavior after first-married nuclear families (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2004). Thus, one general conclusion about family diversity is that the functional processes in one family form are not necessarily the same as what is functional in other types of families. Given the diversity exists among divorced, single-parent, and blended families, it is important to review some of the research involving communication in these various family forms with the understanding that most of what is known about divorced, single-parent, and blended families comes from studies that were not specifically designed to investigate communication patterns (Coleman et al., 2004).

*Divorced and single-parent families.* As mentioned previously, one of the primary routes to single-parent and blended families is divorce. The frequency of marital conflict has been one of the most studied variables in association with predicting divorce (Lewis, Wallerstein, & Johnson-Reitz, 2004). For example, the presence of negative affect including criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling predicted couples who would divorce within the first seven years of marriage and the absence of positive affect was a predictor of later divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Marital discord also has been associated with dysfunctional parenting practices and a decrease in the quality of

parent-child relationships (Emery, 1982; Lewis et al., 2004). Parenting styles in divorced couples were found to be cold, unresponsive, angry, low in limit setting, and associated with anger and noncompliance in their children (Gottman & Katz, 1989). Spousal hostility has also been associated with externalizing behavior in children (Katz & Gottman, 1993).

Another related research concern revolves around children's adjustment to divorce. In general, some evidence suggests that in adulthood, children with divorced parents compared to children with continuously married parents have lower levels of psychological well-being, more discordant marriages, and are more likely to dissolve their marriages and have weaker ties to their parents (Amato, 1996, 2001, 2003; Amato & Keith, 1991a; Emery, 1982). Yet Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1995) noted that in the long run most children from divorced and single-parent families are competent and well-adjusted adults. Remarriage to a well-adjusted spouse eliminates some of the adverse effects of parental instability for children from divorced families (Hetherington, 2003). Moreover, results of a meta-analysis reveal that long-term differences between people with divorced and non-divorced parents are small (Amato & Keith, 1991a).

Given the modest overall effects of divorce, it is important to consider conditions when divorce is more or less harmful with respect to children's well-being and adjustment (Amato, 2000). One such condition that has implications for communication scholars is marital discord. Vandewater and Lansford (1988) found that parental conflict may be a more important influence on children's well-being than family structure alone. One theoretical perspective that explains this finding is the family conflict perspective (Amato & Keith, 1991b). According to this perspective, children from divorced parents

experience problems not because their parents divorced but because of the accompanying conflict. Amato and Keith (1991b) posit that children from intact homes with high parental conflict exhibit similar problems to those of children of divorce. This perspective also suggests that children in harmonious single-parent homes are better adjusted than children in high-conflict intact homes. Because poor child adjustment is believed to be a reaction to marital discord, this perspective predicts that adjustment will improve when parents get divorced (Amato & Keith, 1991b). Results of subsequent studies have supported this perspective and have found that when children are exposed to chronic interparental conflict they are no worse off and maybe even better off if their parents divorce (Amato, 1993, 2003; Booth & Amato, 2001).

*Blended families.* Due to changes in divorce and remarriages rates, blended families are becoming a more visible family form. Reflecting these changing trends, one out of every six children under the age of 18 is a stepchild (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). Scholars have begun turning their attention to this family form. In studies focusing on stepfamilies, communication is often treated as a process variable in which blended families negotiate their new rules and roles.

Based on interviews with stepparents, parents, and children in stepfamilies, Coleman, Ganong, Downs, and Pauk (2001) found four distinct conflict issues that revolved around boundary issues: (a) disagreements over resources; (b) loyalty conflicts; (c) individuals holding a “guard and protect” ideology with respect to their biological family members; and (d) conflict with extended family members. Coleman and colleagues (2001) also found that mothers and stepfathers engaged in specific conflict resolution strategies. These strategies included compromising, presenting united front on

rules and discipline, reframing the conflict as less serious, and avoiding the conflict through withdrawal. According to Coleman and colleagues (2004), a family systems perspective provides some insight into how communication facilitates stepfamily development. Stepfamilies can use communication to manage boundaries, including who is and who is not a member of the family and who is considered a member of various subsystems within families.

#### *Work and socioeconomic status*

Research on socioeconomic status and parent-adolescent interaction is often combined with other research topics. According to Hoff-Ginsberg and Tardiff (1995) socioeconomic status is often subsumed under other variables like single-parenting and race. Early claims about parents from lower SES often had racist implications or implied that single parents, particularly mothers, were deficient when it came to outcomes related to child development and school achievement (Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardiff, 1995). In terms of parent-adolescent communication, work-related stressors exacerbate marital and parent-adolescent conflict. Parents in dual earner families, for example, are likely to experience tense interactions with adolescents when overloaded with work concerns and stress (Collins & Laursen, 2004).

Hoff-Ginsberg and Tardiff (1995) argued that parents in different socioeconomic strata rear their children differently. In general, parents from lower socioeconomic strata are concerned that their children conform to societal expectations. They exert their authority to ensure that their children conform. Parents from higher socioeconomic strata are more concerned that children develop initiative and independent thought (Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardiff, 1995). According to Burleson, Delia, and Applegate (1995), coming

from different socioeconomic backgrounds shapes the way that parents communicate with their children, particularly when it comes to discipline. For example, parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to use commands when disciplining their children whereas parents from middle-class backgrounds are more likely to use “reasoning, induction, and personal appeals” (Burleson et al., 1995, p. 57). Middle-class parents are also more likely to communicate support for their children’s autonomy (Burleson et al., 1995).

Economic loss and long-term hardship take their toll on parent-adolescent relationships. Family relationships that experience an economic loss or hardship experience high levels of rejection and conflict and lower levels of warmth and responsiveness (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Worries about finances and jobs distract parents from their adolescents’ problems (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Such worries can lead to neglecting and inconsistent parenting (Collins & Laursen, 2004).

#### *Ethnic and cultural variations*

Parenting practices are related to cultural values and beliefs (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Garcia-Coll, Meyer, & Brillon, 1995; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Historically, scholarship often assumed that the attitudes and practices of European American culture are optimal for child development. These “dominant culture” practices have served as the standard for which other parenting practices have been compared and contrasted. This means that historically minority and ethnic families were viewed as deviant, and their differences from the dominant culture were viewed as deficits (Garcia-Coll et al., 1995). Current research does compare family members from European American culture to

family members from other groups but usually does not assume that families from other ethnic or cultural backgrounds are deviant.

There are many specific findings pertaining to ethnic and cultural differences among families. Korean adolescents, for instance, view strict parental control as a signal of parental warmth whereas middle-class North American adolescents would view the same behavior as repressive (Juan, Syed, & Takagi, 2007; Rochner & Pettengrill, 1985). Asian American adolescents in California reported using more formal language with parents than did Hispanic American or European American adolescents. This behavior reflects an emphasis on respect and duty towards parents (Cooper, 1994). In regards to conflict, parent-adolescent conflict is more common in North American and European countries than in Asian countries (Fuligni, 1998). In comparing white, black, and Hispanic families, Barber (1994) reported that conflict was more frequent in white families but the topics of disagreement were similar across the three groups. Smetana and Gaines (1999) found that African American and European American families evinced similar patterns in regards to reasoning about conflicts. Adolescents reasoned that conflicts were about their personal choices while parents reasoned they were about safety and morality. A similar pattern was found for Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong (Yau & Smetana, 1996). Overall, patterns of parental behavior may vary across cultures but certain behaviors such as emphasizing mutuality, respecting the child's opinion, and training children for adulthood seem to be important across cultural groups to ensure that adolescents develop (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Laursen & Collins, 2004).

The aforementioned cultural differences reflect more than just differences in language or belief systems. Of particular relevance to communication scholars is the

notion that culture is constructed through talk and reflected in the talk of members of a particular community (Fitch, 1998). Essentially, culture is enacted and constituted in talk (Fitch, 1998). Fitch (1998) also argued that culture and relationships are not separate. This means that relationships cannot be enacted outside of a cultural context, and culture is enacted and sustained in relationships.

### *Turning Points Perspective*

Thus far, the literature reviewed here has focused on various theories of adolescent development, how conflict with parents plays a role in adolescent autonomy development, and how diversity among families provides a context for parents and adolescents to negotiate autonomy development in different ways. In general, autonomy development is linked to adolescent mental health and well-being. For example, parents who are able to be involved in their children's lives without constraining them are more likely to have adolescents who are successful academically (Lamborn et al., 1991). Parental intrusiveness has been linked to adolescent depression, anxiety, and decreased social competence (Lamborn et al., 1991).

Conflict plays a role in autonomy negotiations. According to Smetana (1988), conflict provides a context for debating the extent of adolescents' growing autonomy. Conflict implicitly entails a renegotiation of boundaries between parental authority over the adolescent and adolescents' authority over themselves (Smetana, 1988).

Various theoretical perspectives provide different ways of looking at how these negotiations unfold. Perspectives like family development theory and theories of individual development would posit that changes in parent-adolescent relationships are somewhat predictable ebbs and flows based on role configurations. That is, as

adolescents age, change in the family also increases. In particular, families see an increase in conflict as children approach mid-adolescence (Montemayor, 1983).

However, research has found that conflict between parents and adolescents is moderated by gender and puberty (Canary & Messman, 2000; Laursen & Collins, 2004). This means that for some parent-adolescent relationships development may unfold in varying ways.

Other perspectives shed some light on variations in adolescent development. For example, attachment theory focuses on individual differences, and these differences could influence variations in paths of adolescent development. Tenets of family systems theory also support the view of variations in adolescent development. In particular, factors like first and second order change could affect the path of parent-adolescent relationships. Interdependence theory provides an explanation of how a relationship context is created through the interactions of individuals. Interdependence theory predicts that in order to maintain interdependence during adolescence, changes must be made in the parent-adolescent relationship. Different relationship contexts created prior to adolescence could affect how negotiations are made in the parent-adolescent relationship. A discussion of family diversity implies that it is important to consider that adolescents could have different experiences associated with their autonomy development and that various pathways towards autonomy could exist. Thus, treating autonomy development only in the aggregate could overlook the experience of some families.

Examining these various theories of development together implies the need for a perspective that could shed light on different kinds of adolescent development, both linear and non-linear, and could include the experiences of adolescents from various kinds of backgrounds. A turning points analysis takes into account these kinds of issues.

Although a turning points analysis is a particular method, it also implies a theoretical perspective about how to describe relational change. Although not previously applied to parent-adolescent relationships, the turning points perspective appears to have potential for describing how some adolescents develop autonomy sooner or more fully than others.

A turning point analysis captures how relationships change and evolve (Graham, 1997) and how that change creates meaning for relationship parties (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Graham, 1997). One advantage of the turning points perspective is that it offers a way of viewing relationship change and development as potentially moving in a non-linear fashion. Another advantage is that a turning point analysis accounts for the possibility that trajectories of relationship development can vary.

These advantages of the turning points perspective make it a promising approach for understanding the variation in adolescents' autonomy development. Although previous research on changes in parent-adolescent relationships has tended to focus on group-level linear changes, there are many reasons to believe that the development of autonomy from parents can vary. For example, compared to children in two-parent households, adolescents who are raised by a single-parent are granted more autonomy at an earlier age (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Such findings suggest that the pathway to autonomy for a child from a single-parent home could differ from that of a child from a two-parent home. Similarly, past research suggests that male and female adolescents experience autonomy strivings differently (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Taken together, such findings suggest that there is not one pathway to the development of autonomy from parents; different adolescents negotiate their autonomy development with parents in different ways. A turning points perspective can capture those important variations, and

turning points can account for a diversity of experiences. Individuals' responses to turning points could vary, for example, which would suggest different pathways for relationship development (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007).

Another advantage of the turning points perspective is that it captures how communication is related to multiple pathways of development. Communication episodes (e.g., a major conflict) can constitute turning points, and communication can also be the means through which parents and adolescents negotiate the meaning of other events. For example, a parent and an adolescent may have a conflict over the adolescent's curfew. Not only could this conflict be a turning point in their relationship but the parent and adolescents' communication about this conflict (both during and after its occurrence) may shape what that conflict means and its effect on the relationship (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006).

In general, turning points have been defined as any event or occurrence that is associated with change, good or bad, in a relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Rutter, 1996). The label "turning point" may be somewhat misleading because it implies a specific event, but researchers include a wide variety of events (and even the absence of events) as turning points so long as they are viewed as connected to changes in the relationship.

In her program of research for example, Surra and colleagues (Surra, 1985, 1987; Surra, Arizzi, & Asmussen, 1988; Surra, Batchelder, & Hughes, 1995; Surra & Hughes, 1997; Surra, Hughes, & Jacquet, 1999) defined a turning point as a period of time between two events. In her research, Surra was interested in reasons why couples progressed to more commitment. Many participants in her studies noted that the turning

points that moved them towards more commitment to their partners included spending more time together and getting closer, rather than particular defining moments (Surra & Hughes, 1997). For example, one participant mentioned that as he spent more time with his girlfriend they got closer to one another, and Surra and Hughes (1997) considered the increased time together to be the turning point.

Other scholars have defined turning points as a series of singular events in the development of a relationship rather than the period of time between two events (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter et al., 1999; Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Some of these events include conflict (Baxter & Erbert, 1999), expressing physical affection (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Erbert, 1999), and becoming exclusive (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Other definitions of turning points include conceptualizing a turning point as an isolated event that prompts permanent change in a relationship (Chang, Dado, Ashton, Hawker, Cluss, Buranosky, & Schoule, 2006). For example, Campbell, Rose, Kub, and Nedd (1998) noted that an escalation of abuse was a turning point that propelled women to leave abusive relationships. Baxter and Bullis (1986) argued that defining turning points as an isolated event glosses over how these events may fit into the broader progress of a relationship's development.

Baxter and Bullis's (1986) conception of turning points is somewhat different from the definition of turning points laid out by the program of research conducted by Surra and colleagues. As mentioned previously, Baxter and Bullis focused mainly on singular events that prompted change in a relationship whereas Surra included longer periods of time (e.g., participants got closer as they spent more time together) as turning points. These periods of time are turning points in the sense that they are associated with

change in a relationship even though they are not specific points in time. To be inclusive of the various possible pathways of change, in the current study, various types of turning were examined.

Turning points are useful to identify common pathways of development. Turning points are linked in trajectories, which are pathways between turning points and reflect the diversity of experience of participants (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). Whereas each relationship may have a unique trajectory, trajectories can be grouped into types. For example, Surra (1985) presented four courtship groups based on trajectories of commitment development. Surra (1985) labeled these four types accelerated, accelerated-arrested, intermediate, and prolonged courtship types. Participants in the accelerated type had trajectories that reflected a steady progression towards marriage. During their courtship, these participants spent less time with their social network and more time with their romantic partners (Surra, 1985). Participants in the accelerated-arrested type started out with a progression towards marriage and then experienced a drop in certainty of marriage at the time of engagement. This change often coincided with a change in how much time participants were spending with their romantic partners (Surra, 1985). Participants in the intermediate type spent more time with members of their social network and less time together during their courtship (Surra, 1985). According to Surra (1985), participants in the prolonged trajectory type spent a large portion of time seriously dating but spent less time engaged. The significance of these types is that they reflect that relationships move to marriage in different ways and have different impetuses for such movement.

Another example of grouping trajectories comes from research on blended families. Based on stepparent and stepchildren's retrospective descriptions of turning points and levels of feeling like a family, Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) identified five trajectories of development for blended families. Families with an accelerated trajectory started out with low levels of feeling like a family then experienced rapidly increasing levels of closeness. Some families who started out with low levels of cohesion and only gradually increased had a prolonged trajectory. Families with a declining trajectory started out with high levels of cohesion that faded to the point that participants had little sense of feeling like a family. Families that started and ended with low levels of cohesion had a stagnating trajectory, and families that experienced both rapid increases and decreases in closeness had high-amplitude turbulent trajectories. Other studies have examined trajectory types in post-divorce relationships (Graham, 1997) and terminated friendships (Johnson et al., 2004).

As mentioned previously, families vary in terms of structure, socioeconomic status, and cultural and ethnic background, which provide a diversity of contexts for adolescent development. One domain of development where scholars can expect adolescents to have different experiences depending on their family context is autonomy development. Given the likelihood that adolescents vary in their development of autonomy, a turning point perspective promises to provide a useful understanding of this important developmental period. With this in mind, the following research questions are put forth:

RQ1: What do adolescents perceive to be the turning points in the development of autonomy from their parents?

RQ2: What are the primary types of trajectories for adolescent autonomy development?

A turning points perspective also provides a means for looking at how interaction plays a role in relationship development. Baxter and Bullis (1986) noted that when defining turning points it is useful to distinguish capstone or marker events from causal events. Whereas both types of events bring about felt change in a relationship, capstone events often prompt relationship parties to talk about the changes in their relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). This could have important implications for parent-adolescent relationships because these relationships are experiencing change as adolescents develop. Revisiting the example of the conflict over curfew as a turning point, this turning point could be viewed as a capstone event particularly if the conflict is the means through which some other change is enacted (e.g., the parent and adolescent negotiate a new agreement allowing the adolescent staying out later). The turning points perspective also takes into account what these important events mean to the relationship parties. Because adolescents act differently in response to their circumstances and have different developmental outcomes as a result, it is important to understand the meanings adolescents make of their experiences and circumstances (Grotevant, 1998). Given that it takes into account multiple pathways of development and considers the role interaction plays in development, turning points analysis provides a useful theoretical perspective to guide the current project.

### *Multiple Goals Perspective*

While adolescents are striving for a more equitable relationship with their parents and a sense of self that is unique from their parents, they might also be trying to maintain the bond that they have with their parents. These different desires might operate as adolescents talk to their parents. The way adolescents talk (or avoiding talking) to their parents implies something about their ability to manage multiple goals or purposes (e.g., Dillard, 1990; Goldsmith, 2004; O’Keefe, 1988; Wilson, 2002). Thus, a multiple goals perspective of communication is a useful approach for understanding the variations in adolescents’ talk with their parents.

Clark and Delia (1979) proposed that people use communication to pursue goals. According to Wilson (2002), goals are desired end states that people hope to achieve or maintain. These desires become interaction goals when individuals must coordinate and interact with others to achieve their desired end state (Wilson, 2002). Many situations have competing interaction goals (O’Keefe, 1988). The significance of multiple goals perspectives is that they provide an explanation for how individuals produce messages that attend to the multiple purposes of the situation as well as explain how individuals respond to messages (Goldsmith, 2004). Individuals differ in their ability to recognize and form multiple goals (Goldsmith, 2004; O’Keefe, 1988). Wilson (2002) noted that “people’s concerns about multiple goals vary across individuals, situations, relationships, and cultures” (p. 167). It can be mentally taxing to attend to multiple goals (Greene, 1995), but perceptions of communication competence come from the ability to manage multiple goals (Wilson & Sabee, 2003).

The multiple goals that are relevant in conversations can be distinguished in different ways. One way to describe goals is by the classification of task, identity, and relationship goals (Clark & Delia, 1979; Goldsmith, 2004). In any interaction it is possible to identify an instrumental (task) issue that is the focus of the interaction as well as the goals that define the identities of the interactants and goals that relate to their relationship (Clark & Delia, 1979). Similarly, O'Keefe (1988) argued that effective communication not only accomplishes a task but also maintains the desired identities and relational qualities of the parties involved.

A consideration of multiple goals has important implications for parent-adolescent relationships. A multiple goals perspective suggests that interactions between parents and adolescents could be changing as the result of parents and adolescents managing the goals within their relationship. As adolescents develop cognitively, they need to manage a certain set of goals with their parents. Talking with parents is not just about an issue of task or content goals but also concerns issues related to identity and relationship meanings. Although the specific identity and relational goals may differ across parent-adolescent dyads and across interactions, the literature on adolescence suggests some particularly salient identity goals for adolescents.

#### *Identity Meanings and Autonomy Development*

It is important for adolescents to develop a sense of identity that is separate from their parents. This includes developing diverging opinions from parents, feeling confident in asserting those opinions, and being comfortable making choices related to their occupational and educational goals (Grotevant, 1998). Adolescents higher in identity exploration typically grew up in families in which they had opportunities to develop their

own points of view in a supportive environment (Cooper, Grotevant, & Condon, 1983; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). The importance of identity exploration for the current project is that adolescents wishing to explore and redefine their identity do so, at least in part, through talk with their parents. Indeed, adolescents higher in identity exploration demonstrated higher frequencies of disagreements with parents than adolescents lower in identity exploration (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). It seems that talk with parents, including disagreements, is part of adolescents developing their own sense of self.

### *Relational Meanings and Autonomy Development*

Despite the fact that adolescents begin to seek more independence from their parents, it is also important developmentally for adolescents to maintain a close relationship with their parents. Feeling certain of the close relationship with their parents gives adolescents the security to explore the possibility of close friendships and romantic relationships with their peers (Rueter & Conger, 1995). Adolescents who are given too much freedom and who do not feel their parents are there for them in times of need are more likely to be influenced to engage in risky behaviors, like abusing drugs and alcohol and engaging in unsafe sex practices (Grotevant, 1998; Noller, 1995).

Parents and adolescents in Europe and North America perceive that their relationships with each other are close (Collins, 1995), and early surveys of parents and adolescents reported that closeness in parent-adolescent relationships is the norm. In an epidemiological study of 14-year-olds in the United Kingdom, both parents and adolescents reported high levels of positive interactions with each other and low levels of negative interactions (Rutter, Graham, Chadwick, & Yule, 1976). Similarly, a study of a birth cohort in Sweden found that across age periods parents and adolescents reported

that their relationships were mostly close and harmonious (Stattin & Klackenberg, 1992). Taken together, the results of these two large-scale studies indicate that throughout adolescence parents and adolescents typically perceive that their relationships are close and satisfactory.

Communication is one of the ways that families express their closeness, but disruptions in old patterns of interaction mean that parent-adolescent communication of closeness will differ in frequency, content, and affect when compared to earlier age periods (Collins, 1995). As adolescents mature, they spend less time engaging in activities with their parents and cuddling with their parents, but at the same time, adolescents spend more time expressing their ideas, opinions, and emotions with their parents (Laursen & Collins, 2004). It is important to note that although perceptions in parent-adolescent relationships stay generally warm and supportive, parents and adolescents report less frequent expressions of positive emotions and more frequent expressions of negative emotions when compared to parents and pre-adolescents (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Laursen and Collins (2004) argued that most families are able to adapt to these changes by promoting “a psychological closeness that is less dependent on frequent interaction” (p. 340). This means that most families are able to adjust their prior levels of closeness and interdependency to meet the needs of their more autonomous adolescent (Steinberg & Silk, 2002).

Adolescents’ goal of redefining their relationship with their parents could also influence the way that they talk to their parents. Framing parent-adolescent relationships as defined by talk and proposing that adolescents' identity and relationship goals shape their talk with their parents is consistent with the idea that communication is the

embodiment or enactment of a relationship, rather than simply an indicator of relational functioning (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996).

Most research conducted on parent-adolescent relationships treats communication as a process variable in which various family states, like satisfaction and cohesion, are achieved. Studies taking this approach also are concerned with the association between parent-adolescent interaction and child outcomes, like school achievement, delinquency, and self-esteem. Although it is important to identify processes that are associated with prosocial development in adolescence, studies that treat communication as merely a variable may not demonstrate the adaptation and coordination processes that occur when parents and adolescents talk (Goldsmith, 2004). A perspective that conceptualizes relationships as being constituted in everyday talk and co-constructed by relationship parties (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996) could be an important contribution to the existing literature on parent-adolescent relationships.

Knowing that communication can have a constitutive function also is important because it suggests that the "renegotiations" between parents and adolescents are creating the new parent-adolescent relationship. Thus, while researchers often make broad statements about how conflict can help redefine the parent-adolescent relationship, taking the view that talk (including conflict) can be constitutive highlights the process by which that negotiation happens. This implies that examining the communication correlates of the changes that occur throughout adolescence can provide insights into the specifics ways in which parent-adolescent relationships are renegotiated.

Moreover, since the relationship is (at least partly) constructed by the talk in that particular relationship, a communication perspective can highlight the potential for this

renegotiation to happen in various ways. The first step may be simply describing different ways that this negotiation might happen, but it may turn out that there are more and less effective processes of negotiation, and these processes may be driving change along different trajectories of adolescent autonomy development. With such possibilities in mind, the following research questions are put forth:

RQ3: Which turning points are associated with the upturns and downturns in the trajectories of adolescent autonomy development?

RQ4: What communication processes are associated with turning points?

## CHAPTER 3:

### Methods

The following sections outline the methods for the current study. Given the goals of the current investigation, a guided interview approach was used with turning points as a way of structuring the interviews and making sense of the data. A description of the participants follows along with a general discussion of interviews, including their advantages and disadvantages. A discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of turning points as a method for guiding an interview and making sense of data is also included, along with the procedure for collecting and analyzing the data.

#### *Participants*

Participants for this study were recruited from undergraduate communication courses at a large Midwestern university. In order to participate in this study, participants needed to be at least 18 years old, no more than 20 years old, and fluent in English. Participants were asked to remember their relationship with their parents or primary caregivers when they were 13 years old; thus, it was appropriate to recruit late adolescents for participation in this study to get an understanding of how autonomy development unfolds during the course of adolescence. Although family configurations could differ and children entered the family at different ages (i.e., through foster care, adoption, re-marriage), participants needed to have had a relationship with their parent whether biological, adopted, foster, or surrogate (e.g., grandparent who raised child), starting no later than age one. This selection criterion ensured that participants had a long relationship history with their parents prior to them having entered adolescence. Considerations were made for participants who were members of blended and/or single-

parent families. Given that about half of the marriages in the United States are remarriages for one for both partners, and an estimated one-third of US children will spend time in blended families (Ganong & Coleman, 2000), it was important to include people who had a single parent or a step-parent or step-parents. Because of the variations in family forms within the sample, it was important to specify for participants which family relationships they were describing when they talked about their relational turning points. Evidence points to the fact that in some blended families step-parents are relatively uninvolved when it comes to negotiations about rules and discipline (Coleman et al., 2001), yet in other blended families step-parents take an active role in raising children, especially if the blended family was formed when the children were young. Given this complexity and variation, the researcher had participants define for themselves who they considered to be their “parents.”

Because evidence suggests that autonomy negotiation and topics of talk between parents and adolescents may differ depending on the gender composition of the parent-child dyad (Steinberg & Silk, 2002) and because some scholars recommend studying parent-child dyads separately (Margolin et al, 1998), half the participants were asked to first describe their relationship with the parent they defined as their mother and then describe their relationship with their father, and the others were asked to discuss their relationship with their father first, then their mother. In the case of participants with only one custodial primary care-giver, these participants were asked to report on their relationship with that primary caregiver. Thirty-one respondents between the ages of 18 and 20, with a mean age of 19.51, participated in the current study. Twenty-one of the participants were female and 10 were male. Twenty-three participants identified

themselves as Caucasian, five identified themselves as African-American, two described themselves as Latino, and one participant reported an Indian ethnicity. Twenty-five participants described their relationship with married parents. One participant noted that her parents were not married, but lived in the same house and had been committed to each other for over 20 years. Three participants described their relationship with a single custodial parent. Of those participants, one was raised by a single mother, one by a grandmother, and one participant was adopted by a single mother. Two participants discussed their relationships with divorced parents.

### *Interviews*

Interviews are particularly useful when a researcher wants to understand the perspective of a participant (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). It is important to understand how people assign meaning to their experiences because the meanings influence the nature of the experience and how they respond to it. Through interviews, researchers can understand the meaning that people assign to their experiences (Seidman, 2006). Interviews are also useful to help an investigator learn information that cannot be observed directly, including participants' thoughts, feelings, intentions, as well as their involvement with past events (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Patton, 2002).

Interviews can vary in terms of the structure imposed by the researcher (Noller & Feeney, 2004; Patton, 2002). Some interview protocols have very little structure and resemble an informal conversation (Patton, 2002). In these types of interviews, questions emerge as part of the interview context, and the researcher does not predetermine the wording of the questions or the order in which they are asked (Patton, 2002). These interviews can be more spontaneous and easily adaptable to different people and

circumstances. Because different information is collected from different people, organizing and analyzing data from these types of interviews can be difficult (Patton, 2002).

An interviewer can impose a bit more structure by using an interview guide approach (Patton, 2002). Using this approach, interviewers specify the topics they will cover in advance but decide on the sequence of the questions and the wording during the interview (Patton, 2002). Compared to more informal interviews, this approach makes data collection more systematic for each participant, but because the sequencing and wording the questions might vary across participants, it can be difficult to compare responses (Patton, 2002).

According to Patton (2002), in a “standardized open-ended interview” (p. 349) the wording and sequence of the interview questions is chosen in advance by the researcher. All the interviewees are asked the same questions in the same order (Patton, 2002). With this approach, it is easy to compare the respondents’ answers, but this approach is limited in its adaptability to different people (Patton, 2002).

Some interview protocols are highly structured and not much different from a questionnaire (Noller & Feeney, 2004). With this approach, participants choose their responses from a set of fixed categories. This approach simplifies data collection and analysis but can distort participants’ meanings and experiences because their response choices have been limited (Patton, 2002).

In general, interviews have advantages and disadvantages. As mentioned previously, interviews allow a researcher access to information that cannot be observed directly, like participants' thoughts about their experiences (Seidman, 2006). Interviews

are also useful in investigating past events (Crano & Brewer, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Another advantage of interviews is that an interviewer can use probes or follow-up questions to get more detail from participants than would be possible with a fixed questionnaire (Noller & Feeney, 2004).

Investigators also need to be aware of the challenges associated with interviews. One such challenge is that participants may be unwilling or unable to articulate information about themselves (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Second, researchers need to be aware that an interview is a particular kind of social situation. A researcher cannot be sure if what a participant says during the course of an interview is what that participant believes or will do in other social situations (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Another challenge involves the issue of the interviewer's own motives and biases. Some interviewers have an agenda and ask questions that could reflect a personal bias (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Noller & Feeney, 2004). An interviewer's responses to a participant could influence the participant's subsequent answers. If the interviewer's behaviors suggest negative opinions about the responses, the participant might not continue to be truthful or may answer in ways that he or she thinks are socially desirable (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Noller & Feeney, 2004). Lastly, interviews can be labor intensive, particularly if the researcher is doing all the interviews and transcriptions.

Interviews also have related ethical concerns. According to Patton (2002), interviews can affect participants because they get them to think about issues that they might not normally think about or talk about things they might not normally talk about. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) also argued that knowledge is constructed during the interview process and by virtue of being interviewed people develop insights into their

experience. Researchers have to be aware how the interview might influence how their participants make sense of sensitive information. Finally, researchers have to be aware that an interview context can garner a quasi-therapeutic relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. It can be helpful and cathartic for some participants to talk about sensitive issues, but offering advice and other assistance to participants might affect how the researcher analyzes and later reports the interview data (Seidman, 2006).

This investigation was focused on how participants make sense and assign meaning to past events in their adolescence. The research questions posed were concerned with how talk with parents facilitates change in levels of autonomy. Interviews were appropriate to answer these research questions because they allowed participants to discuss their experiences. Interviews also allowed participants to discuss conversations that they had with their parents when they were younger.

### *Turning points*

Turning point data are often gathered with the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981). Early studies employing the RIT were concerned with mapping participants' progress towards marriage (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Huston et al., 1981). In these studies, participants were asked to identify all the turning points that occurred in their relationship from the time they first met their partner until the time of the interview. The turning points were plotted on a graph whose horizontal axis represented time and whose vertical axis represented some type of relational commitment, usually measured from 0% to 100% (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Huston et al., 1981). During the course of the RIT, participants were asked to connect their turning points and to explain the nature of the lines connecting them.

Later turning point studies have involved the development of blended family relationships (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999), the relationship between turning points and feelings of closeness between parents and adult children (Golish, 2000), and the evolution of post-divorce relationships (Graham, 1997). In these studies, the vertical axis of the turning point graph differed from measuring commitment to measuring some other relationship characteristic. For example, Baxter et al. (1999) used “feeling like a family” as representing their vertical axis.

According to Baxter and Bullis (1986), as a unit of analysis, turning points “potentially affords a rich understanding of relationship processes” (p. 470). One important feature of turning points is they shed light on the events that are associated with positive and negative change in relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Turning points have other important advantages as well as disadvantages.

One important advantage of turning points is that they allow for flexibility and diversity in how respondents talk about their relationships and for describing relationship development. Some models of relationship development assume that all relationships move through the same stages or chapters of development, but turning points allow for differences in relationship development (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). In fact, these different developmental trajectories are what might interest some scholars. Another advantage of using turning points to guide an interview is that turning points can help participants focus their memory. Asking participants to reflect on the past could be a daunting task, but asking participants to talk about specific past events makes the past more concrete and accessible. Similarly, asking participants to describe the talk that characterizes their relationship could be a difficult question to answer. Participants might have an easier job

recalling important conversations if those conversations are in association with particular events.

One feature of turning points that could be of particular advantage to communication scholars is that turning points provide one way of understanding how relationships are constituted in the talk between relationship parties. According to Baxter and Pittman (2001), people remember important relationship events by talking about those events. This has implications for constructing their relationship culture and strengthening their bond. Furthermore, the turning point unit of analysis affords researchers the opportunity to find out occasions when specific talk about the relationship is important to personal or relational development (Baxter & Bullis, 1986).

Turning point research can also be time efficient and cost effective. Usually, research assessing relational turning points is cross-sectional. Participants are interviewed at one point in time yet these interviews yield information about processes over time. Researchers get some of the benefits of longitudinal data without the cost or time commitment.

In terms of making sense of data, turning points can be used descriptively or to make causal associations. Some scholars have used turning points as a way of describing the events that seem to be important in particular kinds of relationships, but work by Surra and colleagues (Surra, 1985; Surra, Arizzi, & Asmussen, 1988; Surra, Batchelder, & Hughes, 1995; Surra & Hughes, 1997; Surra, Hughes, & Jacquet, 1999) is more predictive. Surra's work focuses on how certain events are associated with certain (more or less functional) trajectories of commitment.

One disadvantage of using the data that comes from turning point interviews is the researcher is getting an overall impression of what happened in the past. Turning point research does not yield actual interactions but instead yields recollections of conversations that occurred in relation to turning points. Researchers must also be aware that the account of the past they get is only from the perspective of the participant.

Another challenge is that even if participants are asked to focus on particular events, they still might find it difficult to remember the past. An associated issue is that participants might find it difficult to assign meaning to past events and behavior. According to Duck and Sants (1983), people are not that self-aware and might not know why they did certain behaviors.

Moreover, researchers need to be aware that the current state of a relationship serves as a lens for how turning points might be interpreted (Miell, 1987). For example, participants who currently have a positive relationship with their parents might interpret their relational turning points with their parents as positive events. For participants who are not on good terms their parents, their interpretation of past events will be colored by that negative perception.

Additionally, asking participants to focus on turning points might be constraining. According to Seidman (2006), the purpose of an interview is to learn about the experiences of others. Essentially, an interview allows participants to tell the story of their life's experience (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Talking about turning points might limit how participants talk about their experiences.

Lastly, the Retrospective Interview Technique (Huston et al., 1981) is used to assess turning points, and interviews are often considered part of qualitative

methodology. Qualitative research has been criticized for being a-theoretical (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), but turning points can provide a theoretical perspective for making sense of data. For instance, researchers can use a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Charmaz, 2005).

Given the purposes of the current study, the advantages of a turning point analysis outweigh the disadvantages. Turning points provide a resource for participants to remember their relationships with their parents. Participants can think about their past experiences via the turning points framework. The RIT does impose a structure on participants' responses, but in the current study I tried to mitigate this by allowing participants to explain their relationship trajectories and reflect on their assessments of their autonomy levels.

#### *Procedure*

This study was guided by the ethical practices and guidelines specified by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving approval from the IRB to recruit participants, the researcher gained permission from various instructors of undergraduate communication courses to recruit students for participation in this study. The recruitment script appears in Appendix A. Participants received a small amount of extra credit in the course from which they were recruited. Upon volunteering and consenting to participate in the study (see Appendix B), participants were told that as part of their participation they will be asked to provide some demographic information about themselves as well as participate in an in-depth interview. Interviews were conducted in a private office to ensure confidentiality.

At the start of the interview session, participants were told that the purpose of this study is to gain more knowledge about parent-adolescent relationships. Participants were assured that the answers they gave would be confidential. Participants were told that their interview would be transcribed but the transcript would be seen only by the researcher and her research associates (e.g., her advisor). Participants were also assured that when their transcript was not being used for purposes of analysis, it would be kept in a locked file in the researcher's office. The researcher also gained permission from the participants to audio record the interviews. Participants were encouraged to share as much information as they wished. The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to an hour and twenty-five minutes with most interviews lastly approximately 45 minutes.

During the interview, participants were asked to identify their turning points using the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) (Huston et al., 1981). Early studies employing the RIT were concerned with mapping participants' progress towards marriage (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Huston et al., 1981). In these studies, participants were asked to identify all the turning points that occurred in their relationship from the time they first met their partner until the time of the interview. The turning points were plotted on a graph whose horizontal axis represented time, usually monthly intervals from the time of the first meeting to the time of the interview, and whose vertical axis represented some type of relational commitment, usually measured from 0% to 100% (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Huston et al., 1981). During the course of the RIT, participants are also asked to connect their turning points and to explain the nature of the lines connecting them.

For the purposes of the current study, the RIT was adapted so that participants were asked to identify turning points in their relationships with their parents, with autonomy development as the focal construct in that relationship. These turning points were graphed with the Y-axis representing degree of autonomy from parents. The Y-axis of the graph indicated degree of autonomy on a 0 to 100% scale with zero representing no autonomy and 100% representing complete autonomy. The X-axis of the graph represented the participants' age. The researcher defined autonomy for the participants as zero percent representing no independence from their parents and 100% representing complete independence from their parents. Defining autonomy in this manner for participants (i.e., independence from parents) is consistent with definitions of emotional autonomy (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

At the start of the interview, participants were asked to identify on the graph the amount of independence they currently felt in their relationship with their mother or father using the 0-100% scale. Participants were then asked to indicate on the same scale the amount of independence they experienced in their relationship with their mother or father when they were 13 years old. Thirteen was the age selected because most lay individuals conceptualize adolescence as beginning around age 13 (Grotevant, 1998). These two points then served as visual anchor points for the participants. Participants were then asked to go back to the first point on their RIT graph and plot all of the times when there were changes in their levels of autonomy. For some participants, their perceived turning points in their relationships with their parents were associated with change in autonomy development, but other participants reported turning points that were not associated with changes in autonomy level from their parents. After each turning

point and level of autonomy was indicated, the researcher asked the participants to characterize their communication with their parent at that particular point in time (see Appendix C). After participants identified as many turning points as they felt were relevant and their levels of autonomy at these points were graphed, the points were connected to create a visual depiction of the development of autonomy throughout adolescence. Consistent with Huston et al. (1981), participants were given the opportunity to make any changes to the graph that they felt were necessary. This procedure was repeated by asking participants to consider their relationship with their other parent, if applicable. These procedures were pilot tested to ensure that participants were able to remember their relationships with their parents during adolescence and to ensure that it was not overly burdensome to go through the interview with both a mother and a father.

#### *Coding and Data Analysis*

To answer the first research question (“what are perceived to be turning points in the development of adolescent autonomy from their parents?”), the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) was used to identify turning point categories that emerged from the RIT. This method has been used to identify turning points in previous research (Baxter et al, 1999; Graham, 1997). The constant comparative method is a strategy proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for developing grounded theory. A grounded theory approach is a method for uncovering theories and propositions directly from the data (Charmaz, 1983). The constant comparative method allows the researcher to simultaneously code and analyze the data in order to develop concepts. In answering the first research question, the researcher and a colleague first coded the

turning points. Each turning point was compared to previous ones to see if they were similar or different. Each time a new turning point emerged from the data, it began a new category.

To answer the second research question (“what are the primary types of trajectories for adolescent autonomy development?”), respondents’ graphs were grouped according to visual similarity (Graham, 1997). The researcher and a colleague again used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) to look for similarities among the trajectory graphs. Categories were formed based on the similarities of the trajectories of the graphs. Any disagreements between the two coders were discussed until a consensus is reached.

The third research question concerned the types of turning points that evinced changes in autonomy. I was interested in finding out how different turning points were associated with increases in autonomy, decreases in autonomy, and the ones that were associated with both increases and decreases in autonomy. To answer this research question, I reviewed participants’ interview transcripts and their turning point trajectories to look for changes in autonomy and recorded how participants described these changes. When reviewing participants’ trajectories, I recorded the turning points that were associated with increases in autonomy, decreases in autonomy, and the ones that were associated with both upturns and downturns in autonomy.

The fourth research question was concerned with how communication with parents was associated with various turning points. Addressing the fourth research question required first developing a schema for categorizing the various communication practices that were mentioned. Again, the data were coded by the researcher and a

colleague for communication patterns and behaviors using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). A communication behavior was compared to previous categories of behavior to determine if it was similar or different. Each time a new behavior emerged from the data, it began a new category. The constant comparative method showed how participants characterized the communication that was happening in their families at critical moments.

## CHAPTER 4:

### Results

#### *Identification of Turning Points*

The first research question concerned the identification of turning points in parent-adolescent relationships. A total of 149 turning points were reported with a mean of 4.81 turning points per respondent and a range of 2-9 turning points. Twelve categories of turning points emerged from the analysis of the from the RIT data. The frequencies of the various turning point categories are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*Identification and Distribution of Turning Points*

| Turning Points                           | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Changing Schools                         | 15        |
| Driving                                  | 15        |
| Individual Development of the Adolescent | 11        |
| Making Decisions                         | 10        |
| Time Passing                             | 9         |
| Parental Changes                         | 8         |
| Realizations about Parents               | 25        |
| New Relationships                        | 18        |
| Conversations                            | 3         |
| Culture                                  | 2         |
| Participant Changes                      | 4         |
| Moving Away                              | 29        |

The first turning point, *changing schools*, represented a time of uncertainty over making new friends and adjusting to new surroundings for the participants who described it as a turning point their relationship with their parents. Participants discussed changing schools as a result of a family move or improved academic or extra-curricular opportunities. Many participants discussed the change from attending a private elementary or middle school to attending a larger public school.

It was a lot bigger. It seemed like no one cared about what you did. When I went to my other school, I guess the teachers were more strict. They cared more about what you did and if you were successful. There were less behavior problems. At public school, I think the teachers had less control over students. My dad kept telling me there was more opportunities at my new school, but I really didn't like it at first.

For other participants, the adjustment meant going from being home-schooled by a parent to attending a more traditional school setting:

This was a very tough time for me—going from being home schooled to going to a more traditional school. I was close to my mom and I missed her. I was used to being with her and my sister. I knew some people there from church, but I am shy, and it was hard to make friends. So, I depended a lot on my mom during this time just because I needed her support.

Participants described how changing schools meant a time of less autonomy from their parents. A lack of social networks and less involvement in extra-curricular activities meant that participants often spent more time with their parents and needed to depend on their parents for emotional support as they began to adjust to their new school. One participant described how going to a new school was such a difficult experience for her that she made herself sick so she would not have to go to school. This participant described how her father helped her through this difficult time:

I would lay in bed and pretend to be sick. I would make myself sick actually.

My dad was there for me. He would talk to me. He would talk over what I would do that day. He would take me to school. He would really talk to me about why

I didn't like school and what he and I could do to make it better.

Many participants discussed how changing schools was, at the time, a traumatic experience that meant being less autonomous in their relationship with their parents. In contrast, one participant noted that her experience in going to a new high school was "exciting."

I mean, it was high school. There was more to do and more people to meet.

I think my mom understood that the high school experience was important and she gave me some more freedom to do more in high school.

For this participant, changing schools meant a time of more autonomy from her mother.

The second category, *driving*, included turning points related to learning how to drive and being trusted to drive places without parents. For many respondents, this category of turning points meant an increase in adolescents' autonomy from their parents. Driving often meant being able to come and go with more ease and not relying on parents to drive to and from social functions with their friends. One participant explained, "instead of being, like, when will you be home to take me to X or Y? I could just say, I have practice tonight or is it okay if I drive over to so-and-so's? So much easier once I could drive!"

Other participants, in contrast, discussed the fact that with driving came more constraints on their autonomy. For example, one participant noted that "Once I could drive, I had to run errands and take my brother places. I wasn't as carefree as I expected." Another participant commented that "I actually had an earlier curfew when I drove myself." A third participant shared her parental reactions as she started driving:

My parents, my mom especially, were so freaked out when I started driving.

there was so much discussion: ‘could I have the car? Where was I going? With who, Would I go anywhere else? When would I come home?’ I almost preferred not to drive. It was so much trouble. Not what I thought it would be at all.

The third category, *individual development of the adolescent*, refers to turning points that reflect participants’ attempts to develop interests different from their family’s and trying to be thought of as an individual apart from their family. Participants reported that increasing preferences of spending time with their friends rather than their family became important. Also, some participants began to see their parents’ rules as arbitrary. Some participants reported times in which they tried to differentiate themselves from their parents and siblings. For example, one participant described how she began to “push away” from her father:

He wanted me to do the things that he wanted, but I knew those things weren’t for me...He wanted me to be a nurse and join the CNA club at school. I just didn’t want that. I really began to push away from my dad at that point because I felt he didn’t want to know who I was.

Another participant described how she tried to differentiate herself from her older sister:

It was about that this time that I started to branch out from my sister. I started doing my own thing and making my own decisions. I realized my parents were treating us like we were the same person and we aren’t. She always told my mom everything and since I was always with her I never had any privacy. It was hard for my family but good for me that I was trying to be more of my own person.

The fourth category, *making decisions*, included turning points related to choosing a college or university and making choices regarding spending participants' own money earned from part-time jobs. For example:

My mom wanted me to go to a good school, but she let me know that the choice was mine. She put me on a bus to come here [large Midwestern university] and visit and was like 'let me know what you find out.'

Another participant discussed how getting a part-time job and asserting how she would spend the money she earned contributed to her autonomy development:

I would have to ask my parents for money and they would be all like 'what are you going to buy?' and if they didn't like it then I couldn't have the money. Once I got a job, I was like 'whatever, you can't say I can't buy something if it is my money.'

The next category, *time passing*, included participants' recollections of getting more autonomy from their parents as time passed and the participants got older. For example: "I guess time passed. I was getting older. I think I had more autonomy from my dad because I was getting older and could handle it." In explaining his autonomy development, another participant noted "I was getting older and my parents just gave me more autonomy."

The next category, *parental changes*, captures events that happened to participants' parents that had an influence on the participants' autonomy. Most of these turning points were unique to a particular participant's circumstances yet they still represented changes in autonomy. Turning points in this category included parents' marital difficulties and divorce. One participant talked about the results of her father

seeking treatment for alcohol abuse, and another discussed how it seemed like her father was “always angry” when she started high school. Two participants commented that their mothers were more “controlling” and “sneaky,” respectively, as the participants got older.

Some participants discussed how they felt when one of their parents, usually their mother, either went back to work or school after staying home as a full-time parent.

These participants experienced more autonomy from their mothers but did not embrace it.

For example:

My mom started working part-time when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I hated it because I was used to her being home when I got home. If I had had a bad day, she would be there. Once she went to work, I missed that support.

Another participant described the changes in her relationship with her father as a result of her father changing religions. In this example, the participant had to adjust from her father’s noninvolvement in the family to his new role as “head of the family.” This participant explained: “He went from being basically absent from our family and our faith to be the spiritual head of our family.”

A third participant discussed how her father losing his job meant she had more autonomy in her relationship with him. She discussed how helping her family during a difficult time gave her a sense of pride and accomplishment:

My dad was laid off right around my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. That was huge thing in our family because my parents couldn’t afford to throw me a big party. Usually that was kind of our custom at 16. I remember them sitting down and telling me that money would be tight until my dad found another job. They had also planned on buying me a car when I could drive and then they couldn’t. Actually, I got a part-

time job and was able to buy my own car. It made me feel good about myself. I bought a lot of things for myself and it made me feel good.

The next category, *realizations about parents*, concerned turning points that changed how participants viewed their parents. Turning points in this category included participants realizing their parents had an unhealthy relationship, realizing one parent had a substance abuse problem, and feeling “betrayed” when parents did not purchase a car that they had promised. One participant discussed how he came to the realization that he could get his parents to argue with each other in an effort to get what he wanted. Another participant began to resent his mother after she made him see a therapist for depression, even though he did not believe he was depressed. Participants also reported that as they got older they began to enjoy spending time with their parents and seeing them as individuals beyond their roles as mother and father. For example:

I started deer hunting with my dad. I know that isn't typical, but I like that it is something he and I can do together. I really don't have meaningful conversations with him anywhere else.

Another participant reported:

Here is when I remember realizing that my mom is a nice person. I was always a Daddy's Girl, but I began to see that my mom really looked out for me and wanted the best for me. I really liked and wanted to spend time with my mom.

The next category of turning points, *new relationships*, concerned relationships with non-family members, particularly friends and romantic partners. Participants reported that making new friends and dating were important in increasing their levels of autonomy.

I was finally making friends, and I love my parents, but I needed to get out of the house. I needed to spend time with someone other than my mom and dad. It was a relief to have plans for the weekend with people other than my parents and brother.

Other participants discussed how dating and starting to date were related to increases in their autonomy, and others recounted how dating someone their parents did not approve of was related to changes in autonomy. For instance, one participant recalled “I did things that I wouldn’t normally do when I dated him. Like, drive into a corn field. I think my parents figured he wasn’t a good influence on me.” Another participant explained that “my boyfriend’s brother had gotten into a lot of trouble and my mom assumed that my boyfriend would be the same way.”

The next category, *conversations*, was comprised of turning points that reflected specific conversations with parents that participants perceived to have changed their autonomy. One participant noted a time when she had to talk to her father about a car accident she was in.

I remember I had to tell him that I had totaled the car. I knew by his tone of voice that he was trying to not lose his temper, but he was angry and upset with me. In fact, he wouldn’t look at me for almost a week and pretended I wasn’t even in the room after that accident.

A participant described a conversation she had with her father in which he told her that she had to start walking home from school:

So, this was when my dad told me that I needed to start walking home from school. Usually, he would pick me up from school and take me home. But,

it was a short walk from school to his business, and he thought I should walk from school to his business and then he would take me home from there. But, this is [large Midwestern city] and I would be walking through a bad neighborhood. I would beg him to not make me do it, but he was like ‘you live a sheltered life. You need to learn about what the world is like.’

Another participant described a time when her mother took her out to breakfast to talk about sex:

When I had my first serious boyfriend in high school, actually he is still my boyfriend, I think my mom got worried about me having sex. She took me out to breakfast one Sunday morning, just me and her, and we had the “Sex Talk.” We ordered and then she jumped right in. It wasn’t spontaneous either. It was planned. She had an agenda. The whole point of going out to breakfast was to talk about sex. For the next two Sundays, she took each of my sisters out to breakfast for the same reason. After that though, we never talked about sex again. It was like it was off her to-do list after that.

The next category, *culture*, reflected turning points in participants’ relationships with their parents in which participants began to identify with elements of American culture rather than their parents’ culture of origin. For participants who discussed culture as a turning point in their relationship with a parent, it meant encountering clashing views of autonomy. Being raised in America, these participants identified with American notions of autonomy development, but this was often in contrast to their parents’ expectations for how autonomy should develop. One participant explained “I think in Latino culture families are more close-knit, and that is why my dad didn’t always

understand why I wanted to do things, like go away to school or have an internship.” Another participant explained that she felt she never quite fit in with either Indian or American culture. This participant explained that she “wasn’t Indian enough” for her friends from India nor was she “American enough” for her non-Indian friends but ultimately she felt her experiences culminated in an increasing sense of autonomy. She reflected on her relationship with her father, who was especially wedded to Indian culture, even after living in the Midwest for over 20 years:

My dad is still all about India. Indian food, Indian movies and I hate it. Do you know *The Namesake*? That’s me. I’m like, ‘hey this is [large Midwestern city]. We live in the suburbs. You can’t get any more American than that. In India, kids do what their father says, especially if you are a girl. My American friends are like, ‘wow, your dad is kind of strict,’ but my Indian friends are like, ‘I can’t believe you say stuff like that to your dad.’ So, like I said, I don’t really fit it. I have developed autonomy from my dad, but I don’t think it is the same as my Indian friends’ autonomy from their dads or my American friends’ autonomy from their dads.

The next category, *participant changes*, involved turning points that concerned changes in how parents viewed participants. This category had the lowest frequency of turning points but the changes left a lasting impression on the participants. One participant discussed how getting a tattoo changed her relationship with her mother:

My mom got so mad when I got a tattoo last fall. She said she was mad because I didn’t discuss it with her first, but why would I do that? She would have told me not to do it. The whole weekend I was home she didn’t speak to me.

And, after she found out about my tattoo initially she locked herself in her bedroom. I think she is still mad about me, but oh well. For her it is about the fact that she can't control my behavior anymore. It drives her nuts.

Two other participants discussed how their decision to change religions influenced change in their relationships with their parents:

I guess it [autonomy] went up but with a price. I think my mom was hurt for a long time. She saw going to church as something we did as a family, something we all believed in. My dad was willing to listen to my reasons why I didn't want to be Catholic anymore, but my mom couldn't even stand to have the discussion. It's like she couldn't stomach it. She didn't even want to entertain the notion that I didn't believe in the Catholic Church.

Another participant also discussed her decision to change religion and the influence it had on her relationship with her father:

I really started to question church and why we did what we did. I felt like a hypocrite and that I was just giving lip-service to church because I just didn't believe it. My dad took my decision to not be Catholic anymore as something really personal. He is Irish, and we have family who still live in Ireland. He took it as a personal blow to our family and heritage. To him, I was turning my back on what my family members had died for over the years.

The final category, *moving away*, included turning points that reflected participants leaving home for the first time. Most of the participants discussed how living on their own influenced a change in their autonomy. Participants shared how moving away from home allowed them the opportunity to arrange their schedule and be

responsible for more of their day-to-day routines. One participant explained “I know it sounds silly considering how old I am, but it was kind of an adjustment to have to decide what time I should get up or to decide how to pay my bills.” Another participant noted “I like being on my own for the most part, but when I first got here [school] I missed the structure my mom gave me. It was kind of crazy that I missed that.”

### *Identification of Turning Point Trajectories*

The RIT produces a depiction of parent-adolescent relationships that is visually informative. Participants illustrated the trajectories of their relationships with each of their parents by connecting the points they identified in terms of age (the X axis) and level of autonomy (the Y axis). The RIT procedure provided the participants the opportunity to visually portray their relationship with their parents.

Respondents’ graphs were grouped according to visual similarity. Grouping the graphs in this manner showed distinctly different patterns associated with how participants experienced autonomy development from their parents. Categories were formed based on the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987), which helped identify similarities among the RIT graphs for the purpose of finding patterns that depicted the processes of autonomy development in parent-adolescent relationships. Seven categories were induced from the RIT graphs provided by the participants. Participants who discussed relationships with two parents had two trajectory graphs as part of the analysis.

The first autonomy pattern, “*Stagnating-Linear*” ( $n=15$ ), was characterized by lower, constant levels of autonomy early in adolescence, followed by a linear increase in autonomy levels around age 15 or 16. Participants with these types of graphs reported

relatively lower levels of autonomy with their parents when they were younger. For the participants in this group, their autonomy levels did not change until a certain point. Then, they experienced a steady increase in autonomy. Representative descriptions of these trajectories included participants saying they were given more responsibility or realized they could be more autonomous. For many participants in this group, their progression towards autonomy began with starting high school or learning to drive. Figure 1 represents a typical progression of autonomy for those reporting a stagnating-linear trajectory.

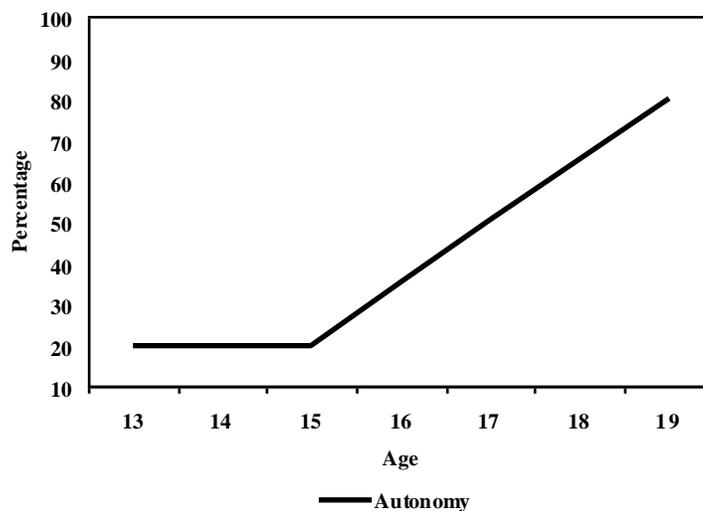


Figure 1. Stagnating-linear trajectory.

The second pattern, “*Linear Progress*” ( $n=14$ ), refers to a pattern in which participants described a relationship with their parents that was marked by increasing levels of autonomy as they got older. Participants in this group often noted that they gained more autonomy as time passed. For these participants, increasing autonomy was expected as they aged, regardless of the turning point they described. Some participants

in this group noted that their autonomy should increase. For example, one participant remarked, “I mean, I should get more autonomous, right? This one [turning point] should be higher than the other one [previous turning point]. That’s the point of growing up.”

Figure 2 depicts the “Linear Progress” trajectory.

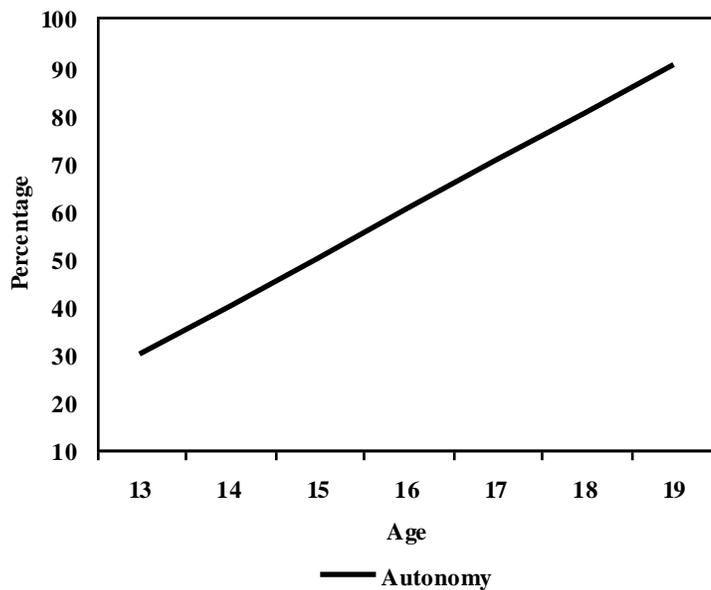
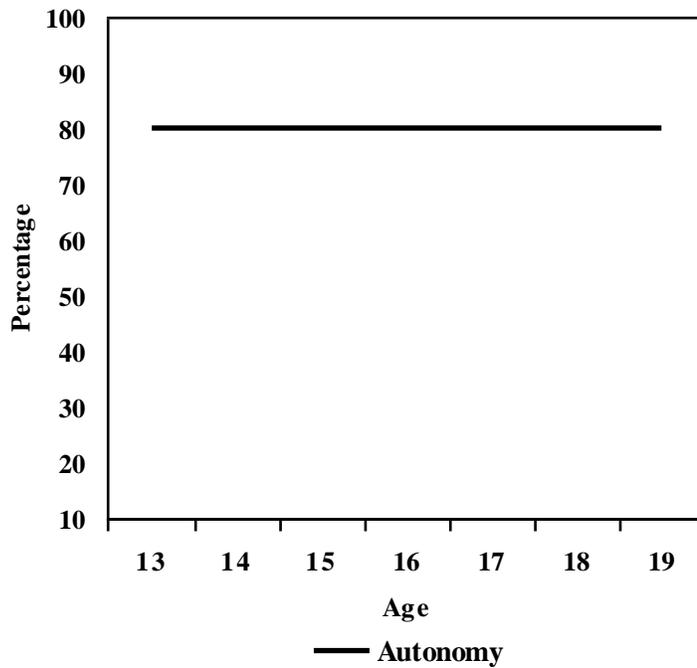


Figure 2. Linear progress trajectory.

In the third category, “*Stagnating Progress*” ( $n=7$ ), participants described little or no change in their levels of autonomy as they aged. Most participants with this type of pattern reported either consistently high levels of autonomy (above 80 percent), or consistently low levels of autonomy (no higher than 30 percent). For participants who reported high levels of autonomy, this pattern seemed to characterize a relationship in which the participants perceived that their parent was relatively uninvolved in their lives.

Some respondents shared that this pattern characterized a relationship with a non-custodial parent, a parent who traveled, or worked long hours. A characteristic response of participants who reported low levels of autonomy was “Regardless of how old I get, I need my mom. She is my best friend. I rely on her to be there for me no matter what. I will always need my mom to help me.” Figures 3 and 4 are examples of these types of trajectories.



*Figure 3.* Stagnating progress-high autonomy.

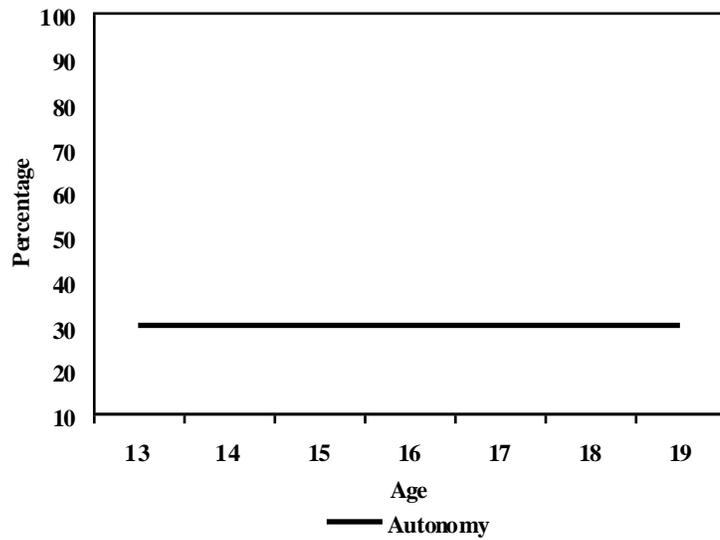


Figure 4. Stagnating progress-low autonomy.

“Stagnating-Declining Progress” ( $n=6$ ) was the fourth category of trajectories. Relationships in this category were marked by little or no change in autonomy until a certain point in which autonomy began to decline. Participants with this type of pattern often discussed the fact that when they were younger they pushed away from their parents, but as they got older they realized they needed to rely on their parents. Figure 5 provides a visual description of this trajectory type.

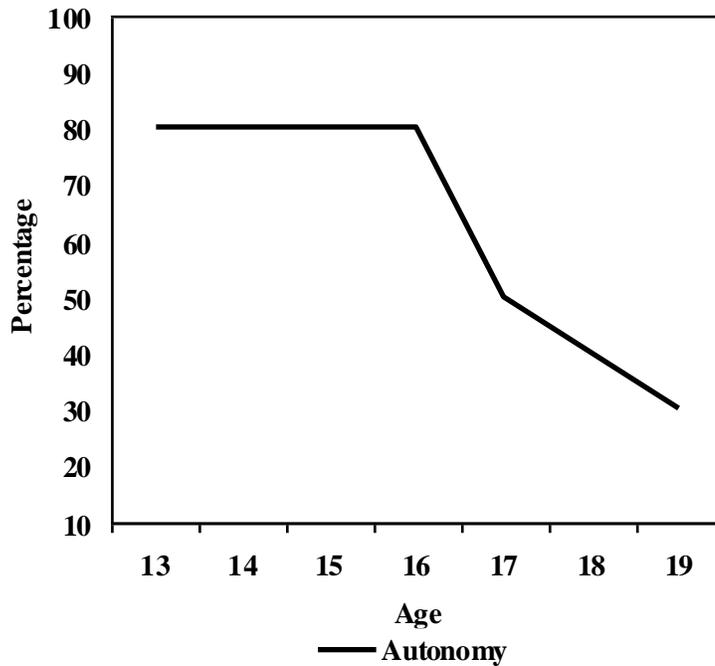


Figure 5. Stagnating-declining progress.

In the fifth category, “*Peaked Progress*” ( $n=6$ ), participants experienced a sharp jump in autonomy levels at one point, and then levels of autonomy began to go down. For some participants, this “peak” in autonomy meant leaving home for the summer, getting a part-time job, or making an important decision on their own. For one participant, this peak moment was when she decided to move in with her non-custodial parent. A characteristic of this pattern was that after a heightened level of autonomy participants reported their autonomy going back down. Figure 6 shows an example of this type of trajectory.

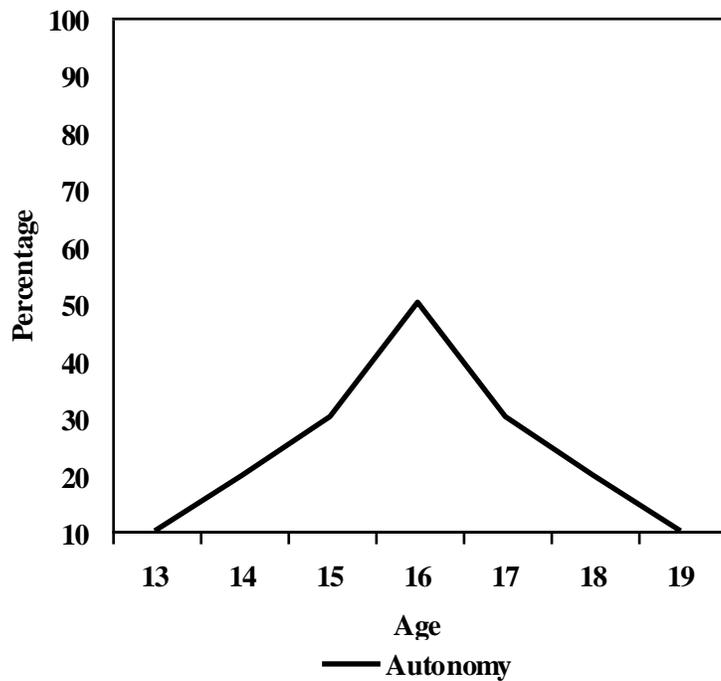


Figure 6. Peaked progress trajectory.

Three participants described a “*Valley*” trajectory, in which their relationship with their parents experienced a low point in autonomy. Essentially, these participants experienced a point in their relationship with their parents in which their level of autonomy “bottomed out.” A common theme with these participants was that this low point coincided with relying on their parents in place of a social network. Participants with this pattern found themselves in a situation where they needed to make new friends, and their parents filled a void at that time. Figure 7 provides a representation of that trajectory.

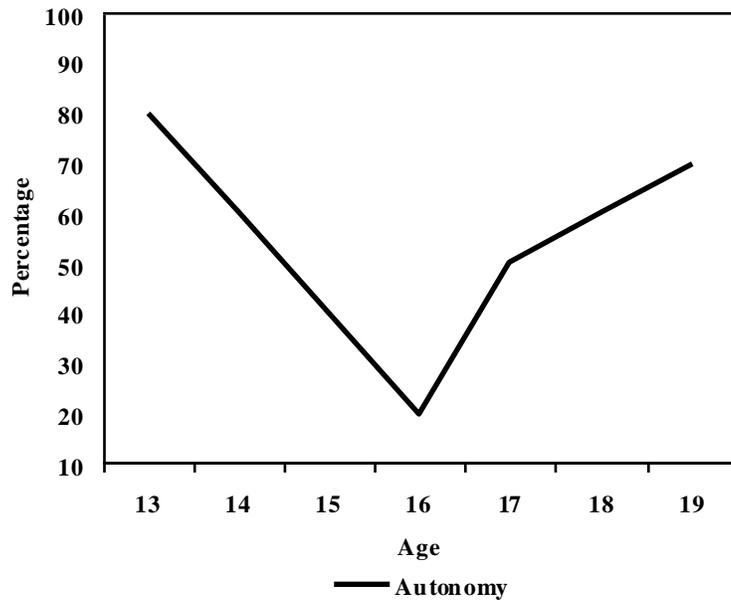
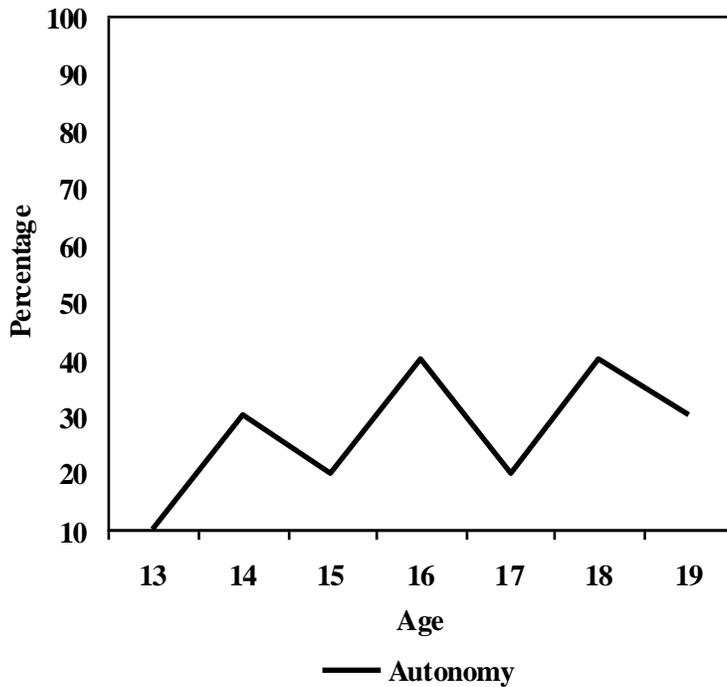


Figure 7. Valley trajectory.

Participants whose trajectories fit in the final category, “*Turbulent Progress*” ( $n=2$ ), experienced many ups and downs in their levels of autonomy. Figure 8 depicts an example of this type of trajectory.



*Figure 8.* Turbulent progress trajectory.

The third research question was concerned with the types of turning points that were associated with changes in autonomy. To answer this research question, I reviewed participants' interview transcripts and their turning point trajectories to look for changes in autonomy and took note of how participants described these changes. When reviewing participants' trajectories, I recorded the turning points that were associated with increases in autonomy, ones that were associated with decreases in autonomy, and the ones that were associated with both upturns and downturns in autonomy.

Seven turning point categories were associated only with increases in autonomy: time passing, parental changes, realizations about parents, dating, conversations, culture, and participant changes. Although these seven turning points were associated with

increased autonomy, the various turning points appeared to have different meanings for participants. For example, some of the turning points appeared to be invariably associated with autonomy increases that the adolescent welcomed, but other turning points were sometimes associated with increased autonomy that adolescents did not desire and sometimes even found distressing. For example, the time passing category was consistently associated with increases in autonomy, and this increase in autonomy was usually described as a positive experience by participants. Many participants discussed how their parents acknowledged their increasing responsibility and the ability to be seen as trustworthy. These verbal acknowledgements by parents influenced participants' perceptions that gaining more autonomy as time passed was positive. One participant said, "they treated me like an adult. As time went on, they let me know they respected my decision."

The turning point of parental changes, in contrast, was sometimes seen as a positive but also was commonly undesired; for instance, the participant who experienced an increase in autonomy when her mother when back to work was troubled by the increased autonomy because she missed the time that she and her mother used to spend together. In this example, the participant experienced an increase in autonomy, but it was not desired. She explained, "I hated it. She was never home. I didn't talk to her as much. I did more for myself but I just hated that she wasn't around."

For other participants, parental changes and the subsequent increase in autonomy was viewed as a positive experience. When her father lost his job, one participant decided to get a part-time job to help take some of the financial burden off her family. She felt

that ultimately this influenced an increase in her autonomy because “they were so proud of me.”

A third category, realizations about parents, was associated with increases in autonomy but this increase was perceived differently by different participants. One participant noted that her mother’s “betrayal” influenced an increase in her autonomy. This participant described how she had been told that she would get a car but later her mother decided she and her sister could share a car. This participant said “it [autonomy] went up at this point because I realized I couldn’t trust her.” Two other participants described how seeing their parents as people beyond their roles as mother and father led to increases in autonomy, but they enjoyed this change. One participant commented, “We can be friends too. I’m her daughter but we can be friends now too.” A second participant explained how now she enjoys spending time with her father doing activities that he enjoys, like deer hunting, and that by spending time with each other it provides them a way to talk about issues that they might not always talk about.

The next category of turning points that was associated with an increase in autonomy was new relationships. For participants who cited new relationships as a turning point with their parents, this meant an opportunity for staying out later and developing new interests. Some participants discussed how dating someone their parents did not approve of was associated with increases in their autonomy. For example, one participant said “It [autonomy] went up when I started dating him because I was not letting my parents’ opinions of him influence me.”

Some participants recalled specific conversations that influenced increases in their autonomy. For these participants, the fact that one of their parents brought up a particular

topic of conversation meant a change in their autonomy trajectory. For example, one participant discussed how one day her father told her that she had led a sheltered life and she needed “to learn what the world is like.” Culture was also a category that influenced increases in autonomy. Participants talked about how identifying with American culture rather than their parents’ culture of origin was important in shaping their autonomy. One participant described her experience:

“My mom understood because she likes American stuff. She knew that it was important. My dad was more difficult. He was all about India. We fought about it, But since he traveled so much I really didn’t care.”

The final turning point category that was always associated with increases in autonomy was participant changes. For participants who talked about these turning points, the change prompted the increase in autonomy, but that change also made the relationship with their parents vulnerable. In particular, two participants discussed how they decided to change religions. One participant explained that he experienced an increase in his autonomy when he changed religions because “I had to do what was right for me.” This participant explained that his father “understood” his choice but “my mom was hurt for a long time.” Similarly, a second participant explained that changing religions contributed to an increase in her autonomy because “I had to be true to myself,” but at the same time she hurt her father, partly because religion was associated with his Irish-Catholic background. She noted “he [father] was very angry with me. He believed I was turning my back on him and what his family had fought for.”

The next set of turning point categories: changing schools, driving, individual development, making decisions, and moving away were associated with various changes

in autonomy including increases, decreases, and no changes in autonomy. In regards to changing schools, participants discussed how their autonomy went up, down, or in some instances, did not change in level. In the case of participants experiencing no change in autonomy, these instances occurred because participants were reporting consistent levels of autonomy. For example, one participant reported consistently low levels autonomy regarding the turning points in her relationship with her mother. This participant noted “this [changing schools] was a really tough time for me...I needed her support.” Another participant who reported consistently high levels of autonomy from his father explained “he [father] was pretty un-involved so regardless of what I was experiencing with school I felt pretty independent from him.” This was in contrast to another participant who explained how changing schools was associated with an increase in autonomy for her: “I mean, I was high school. There was new people and new stuff to do. My mom was like, ‘go for it.’”

Other participants described how changing schools marked a decrease in their autonomy. For participants in this circumstance, getting used to a new environment and having fewer friends meant they felt less autonomy from their parents. For example, one participant discussed how he had less autonomy from his mother when he started a new high school: “I didn’t know anyone so I spent more of my time with her. She was the only one I had to talk to for awhile.” Similarly, another participant said “it sucked to start a new school. They [his parents] were like my only friends for awhile. I guess I say I had less autonomy because I spent all my time with them, and they were really the only ones I had to talk to.”

Driving also meant different changes in autonomy for participants. Participants who felt their autonomy increased when they began driving felt that not relying on their parents and having more freedom to come and go meant more autonomy. One participant said that she could “finally make my own schedule. I could decide what time I would go places instead of my mom.” Another participant acknowledged that her autonomy went up once she started driving because “I didn’t have to rely on everyone as much.” For other participants, driving meant less autonomy. Participants discussed how their parents had new rules and boundaries regarding driving and that they had to be more accountable for their behavior and whereabouts. One participant noted that driving was “not what I thought it would be at all. My parents became more protective when I was learning to drive. I think I had less freedom from before.”

The turning point category of participant individual development was associated with both no change in autonomy or increases in autonomy. For participants who reported no change, this usually meant they were reporting consistently high levels of autonomy. Examples of participants who reported increases in autonomy included “I started spending more time with my friends. I started talking to my friends about my life instead of my parents.” Another participant explained that “at this time I began to question my mom’s rules. I felt I should be trusted to do things rather than be told to do them.”

The category of making decisions also resulted in both upturns and downturns in autonomy. Decisions about spending own money were consistently rated by participants as increasing autonomy. Participants discussed how getting a part-time job and making decisions about the money they earned was associated with increases in autonomy. One

participant said “he [father] might give an opinion, but ultimately I bought what I wanted to buy and saved up for what I wanted as well. He [father] gave me the responsibility of spending my money wisely.” Decisions about choosing a college or university were associated with upturns and downturns in autonomy development. One participant said that her mother told her that when it came to choosing a college or university “the choice was mine.” Other participants discussed how choosing a university meant a decrease in their autonomy. For example, one participant noted that “I really wanted my dad’s opinion about my schools. We talked a lot about my options and where I should go.”

Another participant stated:

I had a hard time staying organized during this time. My mom had to keep track of deadlines for me, and when it came down to deciding between two two schools she was there to talk that over too.

Finally, moving away was associated with both increases and decreases in autonomy, as well as no change in autonomy. Participants reporting no change in autonomy associated with moving away reported consistently low or high levels of autonomy. Participants who discussed increases in their autonomy explained that moving away from home meant having a chance to take on more responsibilities and being able to rely more on their friends to help them through everyday hassles and stresses. In explaining her increase in autonomy, one participant said:

My life is up to me. My choices and the consequences are mine now. Now, my mom listens but doesn’t give as much advice. She might say, ‘you have a lot to think about’ or even ‘well, that is life honey, you have to deal with it,’ but now she doesn’t actually tell me what to do.

Participants reporting a decrease in autonomy associated with moving away from home revealed that they had a greater appreciation for their parents after they moved away from home:

I think I need my dad more now. My classes are harder and I have more decisions to make. I am always seeking his advice or opinion on something. We probably talk more now than we ever did when I lived at home.

Another participant described his experiences with moving away from home:

My senior year, I thought I was “Big Man on Campus.” But, when I got here [university] I was really homesick. Last semester, I pretty much called home every night because I missed my mom and her take on things. I never realized how non judgmental she was until I left home. I really miss how she is able to make things seem better, manageable.

The fourth research question was concerned with how communication with parents was associated with adolescents’ autonomy development. To answer this research question, I examined the participants’ autonomy trajectories and their interview transcripts. For each change in autonomy, I noted in their transcripts how they described their communication with their parents. Many participants were able to express how the talk with their parents related to their changes in autonomy.

I first looked at the turning point categories that were associated with increases in autonomy: time passing, parental changes, realizations about parents, new relationships, conversations, culture, and participant changes. I then went back to the participants’ transcripts and made note of how participants described their talk with their parents at these turning points. As mentioned previously, increases in autonomy were often

welcomed by adolescents but some of these turning points were associated with increases in autonomy that were distressing. The kinds of talk with parents that adolescents engaged in seemed to contribute to their perceptions of their increase in autonomy as either positive or negative. For example, as mentioned previously, autonomy increases as part of time passing was usually described as a positive experience for adolescents. These positive perceptions were influenced by parents' verbal acknowledgements that their children could handle more responsibility. One participant said "it made me feel good when my dad told me he trusted my judgment."

Parental changes were also associated with increases in autonomy but often the way parents and participants talked about these changes influenced how participants framed the event. For the participant who experienced some upheaval when her mother went back to work, she further described how her father would talk to her about how important it was for her mother to go back to work. This participant felt her father was not listening to how unhappy the other family members were about the situation. Moreover, the talk with her parents, particularly her father, influenced her perceptions of the turning point, exacerbating an undesired situation. Another participant described how her family's avoidance of her father's alcohol abuse influenced her ambivalence about his recent sobriety.

We didn't talk about it. We didn't talk about him being drunk all the time. So, when he got sober, we didn't talk about that either. I guess I was happy that he didn't drink anymore, but I couldn't say anything about it. And, because we didn't talk about his drinking in the first place I couldn't say that I hated that too.

This participant discussed how her father's sobriety was associated with an increase in her autonomy. For her, the avoidance of this issue made her feel more autonomous from her father. The way parents talked about changes also helped participants view the event as positive. Returning to the participant with the father who lost his job, she remarked that her parents "were very up-front and wanted us to ask questions and talk about it." Because her family was promoting an open discussion about her father's job loss, this participant viewed her father's job loss as an opportunity rather than a set-back.

The category realizations about parents also influenced an increase in autonomy. The way parents talked to their children about these realizations often contributed to how participants described the event. One participant discussed how as she got older she began to realize that her parents have an unhealthy relationship. She described how her mother's inability or desire to talk about the issue ultimately influenced her increase in autonomy:

We could always talk about anything. But when I would ask her 'why do you stay with him [father]? It's not good.' She would tell me to mind my own business or she would change the subject. It changed my opinion of her. She could be happy but she wouldn't do it. It [autonomy] went up then because my mom wasn't who I thought she was...I thought she was someone who could talk to me, but she wasn't.

For the participant who felt "betrayed" by her mother regarding a new car she stated that her mother "refused to hear me out or even talk this through so after that I just quit confiding in her." This participant also described how she and her mother "argued for, like, a week about this but she would not give in."

New relationships was also associated with increases in autonomy and participants typically described avoiding the topic of dating as contributing to their sense of more autonomy. One participant noted that her father did not talk to her about her boyfriend in hopes that “maybe it would all just go away.” This participant also discussed how she would avoid talking to her parents about her boyfriend: “I kept my answers short. When they asked me questions about him I would say, ‘I don’t know.’” Another participant said that when his parents brought up dating he would change the subject:

“They knew I dated. I guess I would bring girls home to meet them. But, I felt it was my business. With my dad, I could get him talking about sports, but with my mom I had to be like, ‘Look, if something happens, I’ll let you know.’”

For both of these participants, avoiding discussion of dating with their parents was part of maintaining some privacy about their new partners and activities. Avoiding topics surrounding dating also contributed to increases in autonomy for the participants.

For participants who cited the category of culture as increasing their autonomy, they also discussed how conflict, typically with their fathers, accompanied these increases. Two participants discussed how their fathers clung to their cultures of origin even after living in America for many years. For these participants, identifying with American culture meant an increase in autonomy but increased conflict with their fathers. One participant explained:

I don’t know if it was because my dad didn’t understand American culture or if he just didn’t like it, but he would get upset if on the weekends I did stuff with my friends or when I said I wanted to go away to school. In Mexico, you just do more

with your family than here. We fought when I started acting American. Even now, he would rather have conversations in Spanish and gets irritated with me when he calls or when I come visit and I don't speak Spanish with him right away.

Conflict was also associated with participant changes. One participant explained that when she got a tattoo her mother "blew up, totally overreacted and then didn't speak to me the rest of the weekend. Now, she pretends I don't even have it [tattoo]." For a participant who changed her religion from Roman Catholic to another religion, changing religions was a source of conflict with her father; also "during other conflicts we had, like, I don't know, respecting my mom or something he would call me 'Protestant' and that was like such a low blow."

As mentioned previously, changing schools, driving, individual development, making decisions, and moving away were associated with various changes in autonomy. In reviewing these changes, I examined the participants' transcripts to see how they described their communication with their parents at these different points. I looked for common themes in how participants described their communication with their parents and the changes in autonomy they described. For changing schools, driving, and moving away, the way that participants described their communication with their parents at particular turning points was associated with how they described their autonomy at that point.

In regards to changing schools, participants reported no change, increases, and decreases in their autonomy prompted by changing schools. For most of the participants who cited this turning point, autonomy usually decreased or did not change. Other relationship qualities seemed to contribute to the participants who reported no change in

autonomy, either participants reported a consistently enmeshed relationship with one of their parents or perceived one of their parents was relatively uninvolved in their lives. Participants who reported a decrease in their autonomy when they changed schools often described their talk with their parents in similar ways. Many participants discussed how one reason they were less autonomous when they changed schools was because they had fewer friends. One participant said that “I think I had less privacy from my mom at this point. She knew everything because she was the only one to talk to.”

Driving was associated with both increases and decreases in autonomy. Again, talk with parents seemed to be associated with participants’ levels of autonomy. One common theme with participants who reported a decrease in autonomy can be described by the following participant. “There was so much talk and questions. Where was I going, when was I coming home, blah, blah, blah. I felt all boxed in. It was so frustrating.” An illustrative example of a participant who reported an increase in autonomy when they started driving came from the following response:

I figured out what my dad wanted to know when I started driving. He wanted some essential information. Where I was going, who would be there, when was I coming home. If I was up-front about all that stuff then everything was fine. I could drive where I wanted. It was awesome.

Moving away was also associated with upturns and downturns in autonomy. Participants who reported an increase in autonomy noted that moving away provided the opportunity to do more for themselves. For participants who cited a decrease in their autonomy, the way they talked to their parents seemed to contribute to that decrease. For example, one participant said:

I need my dad more now. I am always talking to him about what classes I should take and what I am doing. I ask him for a lot more advice now.

### *Supplemental Analysis*

While comparing participants' interview transcripts and turning point trajectories, I noticed that some participants had described similar trajectories for each of their relationships with their parents, whereas other participants described relationship trajectories for their parents that were more distinct from one another. Although this observation was not pertinent to one of the formal research questions, it seemed worth analyzing more systematically. Because past research suggests that adolescents develop autonomy in different ways from their mothers and fathers, this observation of the data warranted further exploration. As discussed previously, 31 respondents participated in this study. Three participants discussed their relationship with a single care-giver, and the remaining participants described relationships with their mothers and fathers. Among these 28 participants, nine described relationship trajectories that were markedly different for each parent.

For the 21 participants who described similar trajectories for both of their parents, I reviewed their interview transcripts as well as my field notes and data memos and compared those to their autonomy trajectories. Based on this review, it became clear that there were two reasons why participants had similar recollections about their relationships with both parents: some had difficulty seeing their relationships with their parents as distinct, and for others, talking about a relationship with their first parent seemed to prompt them to think about their relationship with their second parent in a similar way. As for the first issue, some participants had difficulty differentiating

between their relationship with their mother and their father. Many participants referenced “my parents” even when reminded that we were discussing a particular parent. One participant, for instance, stated, “My parents were pretty strict, especially about driving with other people in the car.” When asked to specify which parent it was, this respondent said, “Oh. Yeah, my mom was strict. My dad probably was too but, yeah, my mom wanted me to check in and stuff when I was driving.”

In respect to the second issue, for some participants the relationship and the turning points that they discussed with the first parent were salient as they discussed their second parent. Participants used their description of their relationship with their first parent as a frame of reference for talking about their second parent. For example, in beginning to describe her relationship with her father, one participant referenced what she had already said in regards to her relationship with her mother: “Well, my autonomy from my dad was... Wait, what did I say over here [referring to mother’s relationship trajectory]? Okay, probably pretty similar.”

Some of the participants, in contrast, described different relationship trajectories with their mothers and fathers. For these participants, one common reason for this difference seemed to be that one of their parents was not as involved in their lives as the other. For two of the participants, this meant describing a relationship with a non-custodial parent. One of these participants noted consistently high levels of autonomy from his father, who was his non-custodial parent. This participant shared how his father was never reliable and “my dad never gives good advice anyway.” He also shared how his father’s history of drug and alcohol abuse contributed to their distant relationship:

Whenever he asks me to do something I just say no. I know eventually that it will involve him getting drunk or high so if I want to see him, and that's rare, then I'll ask him to meet me for lunch or something.

This was in contrast to the linear trajectory that he described with his mother:

My mom couldn't rely on my dad for child support so she was basically supporting three kids on her own. I would do more for myself as I older and I told her, 'Mom, you don't have to worry about me. I got it.'

Similarly, another participant noted that the reason why her trajectory with her father was consistently high was because her father stayed relatively uninvolved in her life because the nature of his career meant that he worked long hours during the week and at least one day on the weekends. She explained that "if he was home, my dad wanted to be left alone." In describing her linear trajectory with her mother, this participant said that her mother "is super-smart but kind of scary too...but when I need her she is there."

In a third example, a participant also described trajectories in which her relationship with her mother was linear but her relationship with her father consisted of high levels of autonomy. This participant discussed how she did not remember much about her relationship with her father only that she "pushed away from my dad. I wanted to be my own person."

Two other participants described instances where their fathers were unavailable emotionally due to personal issues, and this was associated with high levels of autonomy from them, but they were very dependent on their mothers. One participant described her mother as her best friend and the other said "when I was younger, my mom was

everything to me. Even now, I would say she is the closest person to me. When I hurt, she hurts.”

Lastly, two participants described relationship trajectories with their parents in which certain turning points and talk about those turning points shaped the trajectories they described. For one participant, changing schools and driving were important turning points in his relationship with this father. He recalled how changing schools was significant because his father convinced him to attend his alma mater, an all-male Catholic school. Driving was also an important turning point for this participant. He described how his father would take him out driving, and he would negotiate rules about driving with his father. His trajectory with his father resembled the “valley” trajectory in which his autonomy reached a low point when he was driving:

My dad is pretty laid back except when it came to driving. If I stepped out of line at all, then the car and driving was the first thing to go. Also, if we were going to have a disagreement; it was probably about something to do with driving.

This was in contrast to the linear trajectory that he described with his mother. Changing schools and driving were not part of this trajectory, and the participant could not remember if he talked to his mother about these issues. Instead, his relationship trajectory consisted of turning points related to individual development:

I thought my mom was nit-picky. She’d be like, ‘run the vacuum’ or something and I’d be like, ‘I’ll get to it.’ And, then we would bicker about it. Yeah, we would just annoy each other because she would want me to do something like, right now and I thought that was stupid. I’d get to it when I could.

For the second participant, a turning point in her relationship with her mother also resulted in a change in her relationship with her father. This participant described a linear trajectory in her relationship with her mother. In particular, when her mother refused to buy her a car and the resulting conflicts surrounding what the participant perceived to be a broken promise, this participant began developing a closer relationship with her father. Her autonomy from her mother continued to increase, but she noted that she revealed less personal information to her mother after this turning point and was less likely to ask for advice. In contrast, the relationship trajectory she described with her father resembled the valley trajectory in which her lowest level of autonomy from him was during her conflicts with her mother:

Up until this point, I didn't really like my dad and I was kind of scared of him. but, after my mom betrayed me like that, I got closer to him. I was more likely to ask him for his advice and talk to him about my day.

## CHAPTER 5:

### Discussion

The current investigation explored autonomy development in parent-adolescent relationships. It examined how the context of the parent-adolescent relationship contributed to a variety of developmental pathways for adolescents. A turning points framework was used so that participants could describe their autonomy from their parents and how communication with their parents shaped their autonomy development.

#### *Summary of Findings*

*Types of turning points.* The first research question was focused on the types of turning points in the amount of autonomy participants identified in their relationships with their parents. A total of 149 turning points were reported and twelve categories of turning points emerged from the data. Of those twelve categories, changing schools, realizations about parents, new relationships, and driving were reported most frequently as turning points that influenced changes in autonomy. These turning point categories influenced both increases and decreases in autonomy. For instance, for some participants, changing schools meant more dependence on their parents for a period of time. Changing schools prompted a change in friends and social opportunities. Many participants recounted that until they made new friends and got involved in new activities that their parents were their main source of socialization. Some participants stated that they were less autonomous from their parents when they changed schools because they depended on their parents to provide them emotional support while they adjusted to a new school. In contrast, other participants reported that changing schools led to more autonomy. Some, for instance, described how changing schools was an exciting time and their parents

encouraged them to have new experiences. The excitement associated with going to a new school and the new opportunities contributed to participants' sense of increased autonomy.

The next category, realizations about parents, concerned turning points that changed how participants viewed their parents. Turning points in this category included participants realizing their parents had an unhealthy relationship, realizing one parent had a substance abuse problem, feeling "betrayed" when parents did not purchase a car that they had promised, and participant realizations that they enjoyed spending time with their parents. The significance of these turning points for autonomy development was that participants were realizing that their parents were individuals beyond their roles as parents.

The turning point category of new relationships concerned relationships with non-family members, particularly friends and romantic partners. Participants reported that making new friends and dating were important in increasing their levels of autonomy. One reason new relationships was an important turning point was because it meant that participants were spending less time with their parents and developing interests of their own. New relationships also meant that participants were beginning to form impressions of people that were independent of their parents' opinions. This was especially true for participants who began to date partners who did not meet their parents' approval.

Participants frequently cited driving as a turning point that contributed to autonomy development. Driving was associated with both upturns and downturns in autonomy. Participants who described an increase in autonomy as they started driving described how driving meant doing more on their own and relying less on their parents to

dictate their schedules. Participants who perceived that driving was associated with a decrease in their autonomy explained that driving came with increased rules and surveillance by their parents. These participants felt that driving constrained their autonomy rather than enhancing it.

*Types of trajectories.* The second research question asked about the different types of autonomy trajectories that participants described. Participants illustrated the trajectories of their relationships with their parents by connecting the turning points they identified. Respondents' graphs were grouped according visual similarity. Seven types of graphs were induced from the patterns provided by the participants. These patterns included both linear and non-linear depictions of autonomy development. This means that for some participants their autonomy unfolded in a linear fashion. They described their autonomy as increasing as they got older. Other participants described different types of patterns. For example, some participants described relatively high, unchanging levels of autonomy (i.e., stagnating high progress) in which one of their parents was unavailable during their adolescence. Other participants described consistently low levels of autonomy development (i.e., stagnating low progress). The other trajectory types were defined by events in the relationship. In the stagnating linear progress trajectory, participants experienced an increase in autonomy after a particular event, like driving or a change for one of their parents. The peak, valley, and turbulent progresses were also driven by events that changed the direction of the autonomy trajectory.

Identifying these various types of patterns supports Grotevant's (1998) assertion that the parent-adolescent relationship provides a context for adolescent development. Because parent-adolescent relationships are diverse and complex, scholars should expect

that adolescent development should reflect diverse pathways to adulthood (Grotevant, 1998). The various turning point trajectories in this study support that notion.

Typologies of commitment in romantic relationships (Surra & Gray, 2000) can also shed some light on the different types of autonomy patterns that participants described. Research by Surra and her colleagues (Surra & Gray, 2000; Surra, Gray, Cottle, & Boettcher, 2004) has pointed to relationship and event-driven commitment types. Similar parallels could be drawn within the trajectories of autonomy development found in the current investigation. For example, the linear, stagnating high, and stagnating low progress types were similar in that characteristics of the parent-adolescent relationship seemed to shape these patterns. The linear progress trajectory was defined by participants as being driven by time passing and their parents giving them more autonomy. Similarly, the stagnating low progress and stagnating high progress trajectories were defined by characteristics of the parent-adolescent relationship. In these types, the trajectory of autonomy remained consistent regardless of the turning points. Qualities of the parent-adolescent relationship shaped these trajectories rather than particular turning points. In contrast, the nonlinear autonomy trajectories were more event-driven. For instance, participants with the “valley” trajectory reported events that were associated with a decrease in their autonomy tended to be ones that happened to them in their relationship with their parents (rather than were ones caused by the internal dynamics of their relationship). A participant with the valley trajectory noted that changing schools and having no friends meant relying on his parents for friendship and support. The event, changing schools, prompted this decrease in his autonomy from both of his parents.

According to Surra (Surra & Gray, 2000; Surra & Hughes, 1997; Surra et al., 2004), relationship-driven courtships appear to be associated with more functional relationship development than event-driven courtships. Although the current study cannot examine whether a similar pattern would be found among parent-adolescent relationships, it is plausible to suspect that more turbulent trajectories would be more problematic. Having multiple upturns and downturns in parent-adolescent relationships may signal that the relational renegotiations have not gone entirely smoothly.

These findings also point to the importance of considering how parents influence change in autonomy. The extant literature frames autonomy development as a process that starts with the needs of the adolescent. Based on the experiences participants shared in this study, change in autonomy was also brought on by parental actions. Parental job loss, returning to school, marital difficulties, and parental substance abuse were all issues that participants described as changing their autonomy. These instances are distinct from research suggesting autonomy development is driven by adolescents in that they happened to the parents yet influenced the autonomy of the adolescents. These findings are congruent with the interdependence model explanations of relational change, which emphasize mutual influence between parents and adolescents (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). Yet, it is also worth noting that the apparent effects of the parents on the parent-adolescent relationship do not seem to be entirely due to interdependence processes. In the cases in which changes in the parents led to changes in the parent-adolescent relationship, the impetus for changes was not exchanges between parents and adolescents; instead, it was personal changes in the parent that occurred outside of the parent-adolescent relationship that affected the

relationship. Such examples shed new light on conceptions of autonomy development. In addition to seeing autonomy as a struggle between parents and adolescents or even as a process that parents begin granting as children age, autonomy can also develop in conjunction with parental changes. Instead of autonomy development being just about the adolescent, it becomes a process involving the entire family.

*Association between turning points and changes in autonomy.* The third research question was focused on the types of turning points that influenced change in autonomy development. Perhaps what is most noteworthy about these findings is that autonomy increases were not always welcome and for some participants these increases were distressing. For example, the category of parental changes was associated with increases in autonomy, but for some participants this increase was unwelcome. For the participant who experienced an autonomy increase when her mother when back to work, this increase was undesired because it meant she did not see her mother as often. This idea that adolescents would resist greater autonomy runs counter to existing descriptions of autonomy development (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Collins & Madsen, 2006), in which autonomy is described as a desirable state that adolescents hope to achieve, often through conflict with their parents. In the current study, autonomy was an important developmental outcome for participants, but, for some, acquiring autonomous functioning from their parents was difficult. Instead of feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment in making their own decisions and relying less on their parents, these participants felt a sense of loss because they did not spend as much time with their parents. This finding differs from current descriptions of autonomy development that frame it as a process in which adolescents fight for and welcome autonomy, even at the temporary expense of

their relationship with their parents (Steinberg, 1990). It is important to note that for many participants, autonomy development was a positive experience. For example, one participant experienced an increase in autonomy when her father lost his job. She decided to help her family by getting a part-time job and felt it was a positive experience because her parents were proud of her.

The importance of these findings is that they suggest autonomy development can be a time of growth and maturity for participants that some participants reflect on fondly, whereas others remember autonomy development as a time of distress and difficulty. The current literature frames autonomy as an outcome that adolescents desire to achieve (Collins & Madsen, 2006; Steinberg, 2001; Steinberg & Silk, 2002), but some participants in this study found autonomy development to be distressing and missed keenly the relationships they had with their parents earlier in their childhoods.

*Communication and relational trajectories.* The way that participants and their parents discussed these turning points was the focus of the fourth research question. The kinds of talk that parents and adolescents engaged in at a particular turning point contributed to their perceptions that their increases or decreases in autonomy were positive or negative. Parental changes was one category of turning points that was associated with increases in autonomy for participants but those increases were not always perceived as positive. Perspectives on the multiple goals of a conversation could explain this finding. Returning to the example of the participant who felt more autonomous after her mother got a part-time job, this participant expressed her dislike regarding the situation. She explained that she missed her mother and that talking to her father about it made her feel worse. Perspectives on multiple goals could explain this

participant's experience. This participant explained that she and her mother were "close, best friends. Nothing was off limits. I could tell her everything." In framing her conversations with her mother in this way, she was expressing her identity as not just a daughter but also a close friend to her mother. Maintaining this identity and relationship was difficult after her mother went back to work. She explained that:

She [mother] tried to still make time for me, but it seemed like once she started working she had a lot on her mind. She tried to still be there for me but it wasn't the same.

Up until her mother started working, their talk conveyed the identity and relationship meanings that they were close, like best friends. After she started working, her mother tried to fulfill the task goals of being there for her daughter, but the participant felt that her mother was more distant and preoccupied. This participant felt more autonomous but also missed the types of talk that defined them as close. "At the end of the day, I would want to pour my heart out to my mom, but she wasn't as home as much." Talking to her father only exacerbated the situation. She noted that her father "tried to explain that it was good for her [mother] and our family that she went back to work but he wasn't listening to us that we were unhappy." Her father's instrumental goal of explaining the situation only underscored the changing nature of her relationship with her mother.

Another participant viewed a parental change and the subsequent increase in her autonomy as a positive experience. Again, this participant experienced an increase in autonomy when her father lost his job and then she decided to get a part-time job to help out her parents. This participant discussed how proud her parents were and how they were "very up-front" about her father's job situation. In explaining her father's job

outlook and explaining their plans to save money in the short and long term, her parents were framing this participant as someone capable and on equal footing with them. This participant perceived this turning point as positive in part because her identity and relationship goals of being perceived as a capable equal to her parents were met.

The multiple reasons for avoiding an issue also influenced how participants perceived their increases in autonomy. One participant described how her family's avoidance of her father's alcohol abuse and recent sobriety contributed to her increase in autonomy and her ambivalence about it. This participant explained that because her family avoided talking about her father's alcoholism, they also avoided discussing his sobriety. This avoidance conflicted with her identity and relationship goals for the situation. She explained:

For awhile, all I remember was my dad being gone getting wasted or sleeping because he had been wasted earlier in the day. He wants to be involved in my life now but it is weird for me still. I want to tell him that I am glad that he doesn't drink, but he really sucked as a dad before and I am having a hard time getting used to this "New Dad"-thing he is trying. But, since we don't talk about that I guess I pull away a bit. I do more for myself and ask my friends for advice rather than him.

For this participant, avoiding the subject of her father's drinking and absent parenting fulfilled the task of gaining more autonomy. It also appeared to allow her father to enact the role of good parent without her undermining his new identity as the father. That is, this daughter's avoidance served to help create a working consensus (Goffman, 1967) about ostensive family identities, including her father's new one. Yet, at the same time,

engaging in such avoidance undermined other goals she had. She explicitly stated that she wanted to tell her father that ‘he really sucked as a dad,’ but her desire to maintain harmony and achieve a working consensus prevented that. Ultimately, because her actual impression of her father conflicted so much with the new identity that he enacted, it led her to seek more autonomy by focusing more on her friends than her family.

Avoidance also played a role in another participant’s increase in autonomy when she realized her parents had an unhealthy relationship. This participant explained that she and her mother were “very close,” but when she tried to broach the subject of her parents’ relationship, her mother told her “to mind my own business.” As mentioned previously, this participant felt her autonomy went up because “she [mother] wasn’t who I thought she was.” Again, the task goal of avoiding an unpleasant topic conflicted with the identity and relationship goals of this participant. She felt that because they were close, she and her mother could discuss anything. Her mother’s inability to see and discuss her parents’ unhealthy relationship changed her perceptions of her mother. This changed perception was associated in her mind with an increase in autonomy.

Communication with parents and the trajectories of autonomy were associated with one another. Some of the findings were not surprising given the existing literature on parent-adolescent relationships. For instance, consistent with the literature on adolescent autonomy development, several participants reported engaging in conflict with their parents during their adolescence (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Steinberg, 1990; Smetana, 1988). Conflicts relating to curfews, spending money, making career decisions, dating, and abiding by rules set by parents were reported by participants in this study as integral in their autonomy development. Previous research has also established that

parents and adolescents have conflicts over these types of issues (Smetana, 1996; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana & Gaines, 1999).

Also, consistent with previous research (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a; 1995b), topic avoidance was associated with autonomy development. Participants in this study reporting using topic avoidance to protect their parents from learning negative information and to gain a sense of privacy from their families. Selectively deciding what to talk about and what not to talk about with parents was associated with autonomy development in this study. Some examples suggested that topic avoidance was a strategy used to establish autonomy; for instance, the participant who did not want her parents to know about her boyfriend would answer all questions with ‘I don’t know.’ The idea that topic avoidance could be used to establish autonomy has been noted previously (Afifi, Caughlin, & Afifi, 2007; Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Yet, there was also some interesting evidence that sometimes experiences of autonomy and distance result from avoidance that was enacted for reasons other than trying to establish autonomy. The participant who avoided her father’s past substance abuse history, for example, described her avoidance in terms of not feeling like she could call attention to his past transgressions, but because of this avoidance, she ended up confiding more in her friends and less in her family. Overall, the findings suggest that adolescents’ avoidance and sense of autonomy tend to influence each other (rather than one always being the cause and the other the effect).

Parental topic avoidance was also associated with autonomy development. Participants discussed how their parents’ refusal to talk about certain issues (e.g., parent’s unhealthy relationship) after being fairly open in the past meant that they began to feel

more autonomous as their relationship with their parents changed. Often, it is the adolescents' topic avoidance that is associated with autonomy development (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000), but some research has demonstrated that parents withdraw from conversations with adolescents (Caughlin & Malis, 2004a; 2004b; Caughlin & Ramey, 2005).

Whereas conflict and topic avoidance have both been mentioned extensively in the parent-adolescent literature as catalysts of autonomy development, the current study also suggested some additional forms of communication that sometimes were related to increases in autonomy. Some participants reported that their parents began to ask more questions as their autonomy changed, as in the case of the participant who explained how her mother asked her a litany of questions related to driving. The intensive questioning led the participant to feel less connected to her mother. Another participant explained how her autonomy was associated with her decrease in confiding in her mother. It was not that she avoided her mother specifically; instead, she was less apt to make a point to disclose. As illustrated by the case of the participant who found a part-time job to help her family, some parents explicitly acknowledged that participants were becoming more autonomous. Such examples are interesting because the literature tends to portray autonomy development as a struggle with parents resisting greater autonomy (Smetana, 1988, 1989, 1996), but some of the participants in the current study reported that their parents actively encouraged them to become more autonomous. The importance of these findings is that conflict and avoidance are not the only way that adolescents achieve autonomy development and that parents can support their adolescents' autonomy in very explicit ways. These findings show that not only are there different pathways to

autonomy development, but there are also different communication processes between parents and adolescents that are related to those various pathways.

### *Implications*

The current investigation has different theoretical and practical implications for the study of parent-adolescent relationships. The dominant theoretical perspectives on adolescent development propose that the parent-adolescent relationship undergoes a period of disruption in which adolescents strive for more autonomy from their parents (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Steinberg, 1990). These theories of adolescent individual development posit that as adolescents age they begin to distance themselves from their parents and seek greater involvement with their friends (Collins & Madsen, 2006). This distancing can be attributed to hormonal and physical changes (Montemayor & Flannery, 1990) and adolescents' cognitive development (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Laursen & Collins, 1994; Smetana, 1988). The legacy of these perspectives on adolescence is that development is often conceptualized as a linear experience for adolescents. That is, as adolescents age, they become more autonomous from their parents. This process is often depicted as one accompanied by increased conflict between parents and adolescents with harmonious interactions between parents and adolescents becoming re-established once adolescents reach young adulthood (Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Steinberg & Silk, 2002).

One theoretical implication of the current investigation is that different pathways to autonomous functioning exist. Rather than just thinking of autonomy as a linear process, this study illustrates the possibility for various pathways to autonomy. It is important to note that some participants did describe a linear trajectory for their autonomy from their parents, but other participants experienced different types of

pathways to autonomy, and some participants rated themselves as consistently autonomous from a parent, even at age 13.

Current perspectives on autonomy development also point out that adolescents strive for more autonomy from their parents, but some participants in this study rated themselves as having consistently low levels of autonomy from their parents and in particular their mothers. Other participants noted that their autonomy levels decreased when they moved away from home. Many theories point out that autonomy is an important outcome that adolescents strive to attain (Steinberg & Silk, 2002), but the findings from this study suggest that autonomy development is not a definitive achievement. Even many young adults are constantly striving for autonomy. Moreover, some adolescents and young adults do not necessarily view autonomous functioning as a desired state. Taken together, the results of this study paint a picture of autonomy developing with many different pathways for different participants. Asking young adults to reflect on their experiences as adolescents meant discovering pathways to autonomy that differed from the theoretical descriptions (Collins, 1995; Steinberg, 1990) of autonomy development.

The obvious implication of the various trajectories is a need to better understand why some parent-adolescent dyads take one course while others develop differently. The current study cannot provide definitive answers to this question, but it did provide some clues. For example, the family context, including culture and family structure mattered in how participants described their autonomy development (Grotevant, 1998). For example, participants described their autonomy with a non-custodial parent differently than those who lived with their parents. Other participants pointed out that the implications of

autonomy and what it means to be autonomous differs by culture (e.g, autonomous functioning might differ in Indian or Latino cultures).

Another implication of this study is that it opens up the possibility that autonomy is not a process that is prompted by the actions of the adolescent. In this study, change in parents and related external factors also contributed to autonomy development. The theoretical models of change discussed in the introduction of this dissertation tend to locate the cause of change within the parent-adolescent dyad. For instance, perspectives like family development (Aldous, 1978; 1990) and individual development (Steinberg, 1990) would predict that as adolescents age change in the family also increases. Attachment (Allen & Land, 1999), family systems theory (Minuchin, 1987), and interdependence theory (Reis, Collins, & Bercheid, 2000) highlight how family members influence one another. Each of these perspectives sheds light on how changes in adolescents influence change in the family. Whereas each perspective might highlight a different part of the process, these perspectives are similar in the assumption that autonomy development is prompted by changes in the adolescent. For example, family systems theory highlights the notion that families seek to maintain stability. Changes, like maturation and autonomy strivings, would influence the family to change to return to some sense of homeostasis. In contrast, interdependence theory would predict that in order for parents and adolescents to maintain interdependence, changes must be made in the parent-adolescent relationship. Both of these perspectives differ in their emphasis, but both are similar in that they predict that change in the family or parent-adolescent relationship is in a response to adolescent change.

In contrast, I found that many participants reported events external to their relationship with their parents prompted changes in their autonomy. In many cases, these events were related to changes in parents rather than changes in the participant. For instance, the turning point category of parental changes included different events that happened to participants' parents that led to change in participants' level of autonomy. These were events that adolescents did not necessarily welcome, but they were forced to adapt to them. As mentioned previously, parents losing jobs, returning to school or work, or pursuing sobriety prompted changes in adolescent autonomy even though they were not prompted by actions in the dyad. The turning points that participants discussed were both turning points they negotiated with their parents and turning points that happened to them. This finding differs from previous notions of autonomy development. Instead of being something that adolescents desire more of and strive to attain, it is also something that happens to adolescents due to external events.

Additionally, this study highlights the notion that increases in autonomy are not always a positive experience for adolescents. Research on adolescent development and parent-adolescent relationships frames autonomy development as a desired outcome (Steinberg, 1990). Indeed, making decisions about careers, managing money and schedules as well as developing and maintaining a separate household from parents are some of the markers of autonomous functioning (Steinberg, 1990). These are also qualities that are valued in American culture as being a functional adult. It would seem that gaining more autonomy from parents would be a welcome and desired experience for adolescents. Autonomy increases would be associated with being treated as an adult who is capable of making decisions and being treated as more of an equal with their parents.

Yet, some participants in the current study struggled with their new-found independence from their parents. Some of this struggle could be related to the fact that participants felt their autonomy was forced upon them rather than something that wanted and negotiated with their parents. For instance, it was mentioned previously that one participant struggled when her mother went back to work after staying home for most of the participant's childhood. This participant noted that her autonomy from her mother increased at this point because her mother was home less and the participant had to be more responsible for her own schedule. This participant also explained that she did not welcome the change. She missed the time that she and her mother used to spend together and felt that her mother no longer had the time to listen to her. This participant felt adrift because her mother was not around when she got home, and when her mother was home her attentions were divided among other members of the family and her household chores. For this participant, her autonomy increase was associated with a distress rather than a positive experience.

In other cases, increases in some aspect autonomy might have been something that adolescents desired or looked forward to, but the actual experience ended up having negative consequences as well. Another participant explained a similar reaction to driving. Some participants reveled in the freedom associated with driving; for example, participants reported that the responsibilities associated with driving were actually constraining. One participant stated that he actually preferred not to drive because of all of the rules, and another participant mentioned that driving was not what she expected. For these participants, the increase in autonomy that was associated with driving was

accompanied by more responsibilities. The burden of being accountable for their actions and being a safe driver was distressing for some participants.

For some participants, the toll that their autonomy development took on their relationship with their parents was distressing. It was mentioned previously that two participants made decisions to change their religion during their adolescence. For these participants, this decision was related to an increase in their autonomy because they viewed it as asserting their beliefs. This increase in autonomy caused some difficulty in their relationships with their parents. They had to manage their parents' new opinions of them. These participants achieved a sense of autonomy, but it was at the cost of a harmonious relationship with their parents. These participants were not expecting the turmoil that their decision caused in their relationship. The implication that these findings have for research on adolescent development is that it affirms that autonomous functioning is an important developmental outcome, but the events that mark it could be hard-won and even distressing for some adolescents. The extent of the costs of autonomy development can be surprising to the adolescents. Part of this distress could be related to the task of autonomy development conflicting with the identity and relationship goals that participants perceive in their conversations with their parents.

Practically, this study also provides some insight into how parents can talk to adolescents. For example, the multiples goals perspective highlights the fact that as parents and adolescents move toward the adolescent having greater autonomy (in most cases), that task is made challenging by other salient identity and relationship goals. Parents who were able to manage these additional goals successfully appeared to handle the changes associated with adolescence with less relational and personal difficulties. It

was mentioned previously that one participant described how her autonomy went up when her father lost his job and she decided to get a job to help out her family financially. This was a difficult time in her family, but she described it in a positive manner because her parents were able to express that they were proud of her for trying to contribute to the family. Her parents were able to affirm her identity as a mature individual and frame their relationship as equals trying to improve the family's situation. Moving towards adulthood can be stressful, yet adolescents need the space to be themselves. Based on the descriptions in this study, parents who are able to express that their children are capable and trustworthy seem to have children who view the events of their adolescence as positive. From a normative perspective (Goldsmith, 2004), it is useful to know about the likelihood for identity and relational goals to conflict with autonomy development negotiations because it provides an example of the kind of challenges that parents and adolescents face. Based on the normative assumptions, I would expect that people who are able to manage these conflicting communication purposes would have more successful communication and relationships.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

This study has limitations. One drawback is that I only interviewed adolescents about their relationship with their parents. Other studies have pointed to the fact that parents perceive events differently than adolescents (Callan & Noller, 1986; Noller & Callan, 1988). One factor that mitigates this limitation is evidence that adolescents tend to have more realistic perceptions of their relationships with parents than the parents do (Callan & Noller, 1986; Noller & Callan, 1988). In a study that included both participant reports and outside raters of communication, adolescents' reports correlated much more

strongly with the observers ratings than did the parents' reports (Noller & Feeney, 2004). Based on such findings, if it is practical to obtain only one report, the report of the child is more appropriate. Nevertheless, future studies could include interviews with parents to gain further understanding of autonomy development. Because parents and adolescents have different perspectives on the same events, it cannot be assumed that the adolescents' reports provide a full understanding of autonomy development processes. For instance, one obvious extension of the current investigation would be to see if parents and adolescents report the same kinds of turning points and whether or not the trajectories of development they describe are similar. It would also be informative to compare reports from multiple members of a single family to see if parents and adolescents report a discrepancy in terms of adolescents' autonomy trajectories.

Another limitation of the current study has to do with the turning points perspective. Although turning point research has made a substantial contribution to what scholars know about relationship development (Baxter & Erbert, 1999), one criticism of turning points perspective is that it is largely atheoretical and mainly descriptive (Rutter, 1996). For example, there is nothing inherently theoretical about groupings of turning point graphs. The results of turning point studies need not be atheoretical, however. Surra and colleagues, for example, initially developed an inductively-based perspective on the causes of development of commitment in romantic relationships. Based on their research, Surra and colleagues proposed a theoretical model for conceptualizing four causes of relationship change: interpersonal-normative, dyadic, social network, and circumstantial. According to Surra and Hughes (1997), partners who cite interpersonal-normative reasons for commitment change evaluate the relationship based on socialized beliefs

about how relationships should function. Dyadic reasons for commitment change include interaction between partners (e.g., doing things together) and attributions about the partner or relationship (e.g., how enjoyable the relationship is) (Surra & Hughes, 1997). Social network reasons involve interactions with third parties; for example, participants noted that how their dating partners got along with their families and friends facilitated progress in the level of commitment in the relationship (Surra & Hughes, 1997). According to Surra and Hughes (1997), circumstantial reasons included “references to the role played by timing (e.g., holidays), elements of the situation (e.g., differences in geographical location), and institutional or external events (e.g., “my grandmother died”) (p. 7). Surra’s work is useful in that it provides a way of conceptualizing the various turning points in romantic partners’ accounts of their relationship development.

With respect to the current study, the turning point analysis led to some new findings that have implications for our theoretical conceptions of adolescent development. As mentioned previously, autonomy development is often conceptualized of as a linear process in which adolescents gain more autonomy from their parents as they age. From examining parent-adolescent relationship trajectories in the current study, it became apparent that autonomy follows many different pathways. Some of those pathways were linear and some were not.

The RIT procedure also uncovered different types of events that constituted autonomy development. As discussed previously, current theories of adolescent development point out that the parent-adolescent dyad is the center of autonomy development, but the current study demonstrated that events external to the parent-adolescent dyad also prompt changes in autonomy. It was also noted that current notions

of autonomy development include thinking of autonomy development as a positive experience for adolescents as well as one they desire. Results from the RIT procedure found that autonomy development was a positive experience for some participants, but others found increases in their autonomy to be unwanted, distressing, or difficult for their relationship with their parents. These findings contribute to what scholars already know about theory and research regarding adolescent development and parent-adolescent relationships and suggest a need for some revisions to current theoretical assumptions.

A second limitation of the turning points perspective is that although it assumes that various turning points are associated with communication, it does not by itself provide an explanation about how communication is associated with various ups and downs in a relationship trajectory. One theoretical perspective that does promise to offer insight into how communication is related to parent-adolescent autonomy negotiations is a multiple goals perspective. Knowing that certain relationship trajectories exist is important, but this does not explain why adolescents develop autonomy in different ways. A multiple goals perspective did shed light on the process of how communication with parents could be driving adolescents' experiences. One issue that a multiple goals perspective helps explain is why different adolescents had different perspectives on similar experiences, particularly, why some adolescents viewed their experiences as positive and others rated them as difficult or negative. From a multiple goals perspective, when the purposes of the conversation they were having with their parents were at odds, participants seemed to view their experience as negative. Thinking about turning points using a multiple goals perspective allows for the possibility of exploring how communication is related to adolescents' upturns and downturns in autonomy how and

they view those changes in autonomy. Examining turning points from a multiple goals perspective adds to the possibility that not only do different trajectories of autonomy exist how also helps explain how autonomy develops in different ways. Using multiple goals to look at how communication is associated with changes in autonomy mitigates a major limitation of turning points analysis by providing an explanation of how communication is associated with changes in adolescent autonomy.

A third limitation of the current study is that the sample was fairly homogenous. Most of the participants came from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The recollections of some participants suggested that considering cultural and ethnic diversity would be important in future studies. As mentioned previously, family structure and culture were associated with participants' pathways of autonomy development. Unfortunately, the current study did not include enough diversity to fully explore how variations in autonomy development were related to such factors.

It is also important to note that in addition to being similar with respect to common demographic variables, the participants came from similar backgrounds in the sense that they all had the resources to attend a university that was some distance from their homes, necessitating that they live away from their parents during the school year. Similarly, most of the participants in this study had parents who encouraged them to attend a four-year university, even if they themselves did not have the opportunity to attend a college or university. Living apart from their parents creates a certain shared experience for the participants in this study that could influence how they reflect on and describe their autonomy development. Future studies should take care to recruit participants from various socioeconomic backgrounds, including people who never have

the change to leave their hometown and go away to college. Participants who live with their parents while attending college, who attend a trade school or associate's degree college, or who do not attend college, might describe their autonomy development in different ways than did the participants in this study. The turning points and trajectories reported here are unique to the participants in this study, but other possibilities could exist depending on the backgrounds of the participants. These possibilities would be important because they could extend what is known about adolescent development and how communication with parents relates to that development.

As discussed previously, one contribution of the current investigation is that different trajectories of autonomy development, beyond linear development, were found. There are good reasons to expect that some of these trajectories would be more functional than others (see Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Surra & Gray, 2000; Surra & Hughes, 1997). In previous research on turning points, the trajectories with few downturns tended to be associated with relational strength and stability. This kind of possibility needs to be examined with parents and adolescents. Future research could explore how certain trajectories of autonomy development are associated with different outcomes like family satisfaction, depression, and substance abuse. Research that connects autonomy trajectories with important outcomes could extend the practical applications of turning points and parent-adolescent relationships. Learning how adolescents perceive changes in their autonomy and how conversations with parents plays a role in those perceptions could help at-risk families.

Similarly, community-based interventions could be designed based on the results of this study. The ultimate aim of such interventions would be improving adolescent

well-being and educating individuals about the facilitative role that communication can play in parent-adolescent relationships. Based on the results of this study, interventions could be designed that help parents learn about the relationship between interacting with their adolescent and important behavioral outcomes. Parents could learn that the way they interact with their adolescent children plays a role in shaping their development. As part of this intervention, parents could learn how to choose to communicate with their children, using messages that nurture adolescents' needs to have their identity and relationship goals met in a conversation with their parents that pertain to autonomy negotiations.

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## APPENDIX A:

### Recruitment Script

Hello, my name is Mary Ramey and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Communication. I am conducting a study as part of my dissertation on parent-adolescent relationships, and I am hoping that you might be interested in participating. Basically, all you would need to do is be willing to be interviewed about your experiences as an adolescent and what your relationship was like with your parents during that time. It should take about an hour. Your responses to the interview questions will be kept confidential and whether or not you choose to participate in this study is completely voluntary. It won't effect your grades or standing at the university. If you think you would like to participate, please write your name and email address on this sign-up sheet, and I will contact you with more information.

## APPENDIX B:

### Informed Consent Document

#### **Who is conducting this research?**

This project is being conducted by Mary Ramey, a PhD student in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This research is being supervised by Dr. John Caughlin, an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois.

#### **What is this study about?**

The purpose of this study is to find out how individuals describe their experiences as adolescents. In particular, I am interested in the important events shape adolescents communication with their parents.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I choose to participate?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a face-to-face interview. Some of the topics we will discuss will include events that you remember from you adolescence and what your relationship with your parents was like at those particular moments. While we are talking, I will take brief notes about the information that you give me. This interview will take place at my office on the campus of the University of Illinois at a time that is convenient for you. This interview should take approximately one hour. I will respect your privacy during our discussion and make every effort to ensure your privacy during our talk.

#### **What will happen to the information I share?**

Your individual information will be kept confidential. After I have completed my study, the information will be summarized in my dissertation and presented to other researchers and written up for publication. My dissertation will not include any information that could identify you. I will not use your name in my dissertation.

#### **Are there any risks to being part of this project?**

The risks to participating in this research project are likely to be minimal, but you may experience some discomfort when talking about things that could be personal. Participating in this research is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate, decline to answer questions, or decide to stop participating at any time, without any consequence. Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participating will in no way have an effect on your grades at, status at, or future relations with the University of Illinois.

#### **Who do I contact if I have questions or concerns?**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you can contact me, Mary Ramey, at (217) 979-1906 or my advisor, Dr. John Caughlin at (217) 333-4340. If you have questions about the rights of research participants, you contact the University's Institutional Review Board at (217) 333-2670.

**Agreement:** I am 18 years of age or older. I understand this consent form and the meaning of this information. I have been provided a copy of this consent form. I understand what I am being asked to do and my rights as a study participant. I understand that I may stop my participating at any time.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (Participant's Name), agree to participate in the study as described.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

I, Mary Ramey, have explained the investigation to the participant above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

## APPENDIX C:

### Interview Guide

#### **Introduction:**

Hello, my name is Mary Ramey, and I am doing a project on parent-adolescent relationships for my doctoral dissertation project. In this interview I will be asking you questions about your experiences as an adolescent and your relationship with your parents, and it should only take about an hour of your time. As we go through the interview, if you have any questions about why I'm asking something, please feel free to ask. Or if there is anything you don't want to answer, just say so. If you are willing to participate in this interview, I would ask that you read over and sign the following consent form. After you do that, then we can get started on the interview.

[Wait]

Is it alright if I tape our conversation? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Transition Statement: I mentioned that I was interested in people's experiences as adolescents so I just want to get started with a couple of questions about you.

#### **Introductory Questions:**

Tell me what your family is like.

What does the term "adolescence" mean to you?

Describe for me what a typical day is like for you when you visit your parents.

Transition statement: Now that we have talked about your typical day and some of the activities you do with your family, I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences as an adolescent.

## **Turning points**

I am interested in all of your perceptions of the important events in your relationship with your parents that shaped who you are today and what your relationship is like today. In particular, I am interested in the events that brought you to the level of independence you feel today. Most people experience both positive and negative events in their relationships with their parents. I am interested in both kinds of events. All family relationships are different so there is no right or wrong answers.

Participants will be asked to plot the level of autonomy they felt at age 13 and the level of autonomy they feel from their parents currently. Respondents will then be asked to go back to the first point and plot in all of the times when there were changes in their levels of autonomy. Participants will be allowed to talk as much as they want about each turning point. Participants will be asked to describe their relationship with their mother and their father. Participants will define for themselves who they consider to be their mother and father. The researcher will change the order in which she asks participants about their relationship with their parents (i.e., some participants will be asked to talk about their mother first and then their father; others will be asked to talk about their father first).

### Follow-up questions to be asked at each turning point:

Can you describe for me what your relationship with your mother/father was like at this time?

How was your relationship with your mother/father similar to what it was at the previous point?

How was it different?

Can you describe what your communication with your mother/father was like at this time?

Possible probes:

Would you say your communication with your mother/father was positive or negative?

How so?

How was your communication with your mother/father at this point similar your communication at the previous point?

How was it different?

Were you avoiding any topics of conversation with your mother/father at this time?

Why were you avoiding this topic?

Could you describe how you avoided this topic?

Was your mother/father avoiding any topics?

How could you tell she/he was avoiding topics of conversation with you?

Why do you think she/he was avoiding this topic?

What did you do when your mother/father brought up a topic of conversation that you didn't want to talk about?

How did your mother/father react?

Were you having any conflict with your parents at this point?

Could you describe what you were having conflict about?

Why were you fighting with your mother/father?

How did the conflict make you feel?

How did your mother/father react?

What were you trying to accomplish at this time?

Transition Statement: We are just about done. I would just like to ask you some final questions to sum things up.

**Concluding questions**

How would you sum up your experiences as a young adult so far?

What advice would you give to parents and adolescents about having a smooth-sailing relationship?

**Closing Statement:**

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your responses shed new light on what we know about parent-adolescent relationships. That is all the questions I have for you. Do you have any for me before we end?