

THE LACK OF AGE-APPROPRIATE AUTONOMY AND AUTHORITY AS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN ADOLESCENT REBELLIOUS BEHAVIOR

By William Kiadii

As an adolescent growing up in my native country Liberia, I was not permitted to associate with people older than me, except my peers. I was required to be in the company of my peers at all times including social gatherings. Ironically, I was assigned duties and expected to perform them as an adult. However, I was not given the autonomy or authority as an adult. I was not allowed to leave home for any reason without the knowledge of my parents, except when I was going to school. If for any reason I had to leave home, I was to tell them where I was going and when I would return. The only exception was if I were to be under the supervision of an approved adult.

In addition, I was not allowed to choose the clothes I wanted to wear, decide the haircut I preferred or determine or negotiate my bedtime. My room door was not allowed to be locked for any reason because my parents wanted access to the room. When I was angry with my parents or siblings, I was not allowed to withdraw to my bedroom. Expressing my emotion in this way is characteristic of a timid person. Therefore, I was to pretend as though nothing was wrong. My parents would quote an old parable, “the okra plant can never grow taller than the one who planted it.” In other words, a child, no matter what age, is answerable to its parents and needs to be nurtured and under control, and for this reason it is deemed unsafe to give autonomy and authority to adolescents. This did not deter me from contemplating one night to rebel and break my curfew rule. Why did I contemplate demonstrating rebellious behavior?

Based on my experiences as an adolescent and as an adult working with young people, I have strong feelings about the significance of supporting autonomy and authority in youth development, and I suspect the absence of appropriate autonomy can be a factor influencing adolescents to rebel against authority. This paper calls upon research, literature, my life experience, and the opinions of young people to explore this issue.

RELEVANT DEFINITIONS AND RESEARCH

Autonomy originates from two Greek words: *auto* meaning self and *nomos* meaning law or legal rule. This means that an autonomous person is able to decide, behave or think without relying on anyone. It also means personal freedom. Autonomy implies distancing oneself from others, being unique and separate (Chirkov, Kim, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2003). For the purpose of this paper, autonomy refers to the increasing desire of adolescents to think, feel, choose, act and make decisions on their own.

Authority comes from the Latin word *auctoritas* which literally means production, invention and cause. *Auctoritas* originates from *auctor* which means producer, father, progenitor, creator, maker, inventor, founder and so on. In the English language, the Latin words *auctor* and *auctoritas* have become corrupted to “author” and “authority.” In other words, to have authority means to have the right and permission to act. It comes from someone who has the right to author, create or make. The period of adolescence is a pivotal

developmental stage in which adolescents feel a powerful desire to “author” or “create” their life (Morselli & Passini, 2011).

There remains a debate as to whether the causes of rebellious behaviors in adolescents can be ascribed to the lack of autonomy and authority. Researchers and theorists have propounded various theories on the risk factors that contribute to rebellious behaviors in adolescents. Each theory is based on a different set of assumptions that attempt to explain the rebellious behaviors of adolescents. No one single theory claims to explain all aspects of why adolescents engage in rebellious behaviors. However, by examining the unique contributions from these different theories, one can more clearly see the multiple factors underlying a well-balanced understanding of the rebellious behaviors of adolescents. Because an exhaustive review of all known arguments and counterarguments is beyond the scope of this paper, I have chosen to highlight the four most common theories for discussion.

POSITION 1

Hutchinson (1993) hypothesized that adolescents who experience difficulty with school success and have poor self-esteem problems may express rebellious behavior. Sung Joon Jang (1998), an assistant professor of Sociology at Ohio State University, disagrees with Hutchinson that poor self-esteem may be blamed for rebellious behaviors of adolescents as is generally believed in the United States. I agree with Jang that poor self-esteem victims suffer from self-destructive and self-defeating behavior. But because those who lack self-esteem are critical about themselves, they may be less likely to express rebellious behaviors as Hutchinson stated. It is not clear to what degree the lack of self-esteem is a contributing factor to rebellious behaviors.

POSITION 2

Keilitz and Dunivant (1986) argue that adolescents’ inability to process all that is going on around them and to restrain themselves from giving in to impulse and temptation predispose them to rebellious behavior. Decision-making skills or abilities can be learned and must be practiced, but it does not mean that adolescents are incapable of making good decisions and are predisposed to rebellious behaviors. The brain differences of adults and adolescents don’t mean that adolescents cannot make good decisions or cannot distinguish between right and wrong. To imply this would mean they should not be held responsible for their actions.

POSITION 3

Nelson, Leone and Rutherford (2004) theorized that the predictors of rebellious behaviors in adolescents stem from racial disparity and socioeconomic problems in neighborhoods with substandard living conditions infested with drugs and alcohol. History is replete with accounts of adolescents of all races who migrate from poverty-stricken communities and drug-infested neighborhoods, and have endured without rebellious behavior. Impoverished countries around the world record lower adolescent crime rates than wealthy countries. Therefore I question whether race and poverty are the major factors that contribute to rebellious behaviors in adolescents.

POSITION 4

Brezina (2008) hypothesized that the strong demand of adolescents for autonomy and authority is a fundamental motivation for rebellious behavior. Given my own life experiences, I am inclined to agree with Brezina’s position that the adolescent search for autonomy and authority can be a major contributor to rebellious behavior in adolescents. One of the ways this is expressed is through chronic arguments with parents over dress code, household chores and curfew time. It is the process through which adolescents begin to express freedom and pull away from the norms of the society, and it is often rebellious. The search is often manifested through rebellion against parents and other authority. Rebellious behavior is often used

as a tool to express in unacceptable ways the way adolescents feel. When dealing with the rebellious behavior of adolescents, it is critical for parents to determine whether that behavior is an expression of a normal process of development or an indication of a serious problem. Some rebellious behavior can be a sign of depression or serious disorder that might require professional help.

EXPLORING YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

Because Brezina’s hypothesis makes the most sense to me, I set out to explore what meaning young people attach to the issue of authority and autonomy. Using a set of three questions, I collected responses from 20 adolescents in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. The youth ranged in age from 13 to 19 years of age and included both males and females. Using a content analysis method (Berelson, 1952), I determined the presence of concepts and certain words. This method, which examines the feedback from respondents to a set of questions, helped me to better understand the relationship between autonomy and authority and rebellious behaviors in adolescents from a youth perspective.

The three questions posed in my survey of 20 young people were as follows:

1. What is your understanding of autonomy and authority?
2. How important is autonomy and authority to you?
3. How do you react to the lack of autonomy and authority?

In the content analysis, I grouped the young people as follows: young teens (13-14 years of age) teenagers (15-17 years of age), and late adolescence (18-19 years of age). Each group consisted of males and females. The results (shown in Table 1) helped me to understand the relationship between autonomy and authority and rebellious behaviors of adolescents.

TABLE 1

Relationship between autonomy, authority and rebellious behaviors of adolescents at various ages.

Ages	Questions # 1 - Understanding	Question # 2 - Importance	Question # 3 – Reaction to Lack
Young Teens 13-14 years of age	Recognizing my needs	Listening	Break the rules
Teenagers 15-17 years of age	Empowerment	Respect my opinion	Disobey and Withdraw
Late adolescence 18-19	Having a voice in society	Making decisions	Rebel

The response to first question attested that adolescents perceive autonomy and authority as empowerment and having a voice. It is the ability and authority to personally choose and decide without interference. Strongly resonating in the response was the unwillingness of parents to share autonomy and authority with their adolescent children. The survey shows that empowering adolescents is good because it produces competence and minimizes the risk of rebellious behaviors. The responses concluded that an important task of adolescents is to develop a sense of who they are as an autonomous person.

Response to the second question on the importance of autonomy and authority indicated that it provides the opportunity for parents to listen and devote attention to what their adolescents have to say. Parents who do not take the time to listen deprive their adolescents of autonomy and authority. Being a good listener is a

way for a parent to demonstrate an environment supportive of autonomy and authority in which adolescents can grow and become independent. Listening is an investment strategy parents must practice to prevent their adolescents from acting rebellious. It affirms that adolescents have something important to say.

Some important observations from the survey pointed out that teenage adolescents view autonomy and authority simply as respect for the choices they make. On the other hand, older adolescents regard the importance of autonomy and authority as having the ability to make decisions. There is a thin line between what constitutes a decision versus a choice. However, younger and older adolescents underscored the importance of autonomy and authority to their success.

Finally, the response to the third question presented a significant theme in the analysis. It was associated with the reactions of adolescents to the lack of autonomy and authority. Adolescents reported that they break rules, disobey and rebel in protest against the lack of autonomy and authority. They attributed rebellion to the lack of the sense of autonomy and authority. The overall results hinted that autonomy and authority function as an important role in the behavior and actions of adolescents.

Overall this small but informative data collection process suggests that giving adolescents age-appropriate autonomy and authority motivates independence and confidence. The opposite is also true: adolescents who lack age-appropriate autonomy and authority may lack confidence. One of the ways to give adolescents age-appropriate autonomy is for parents to make decisions with them. A key to curbing rebellious behaviors in adolescents is to understand that those behaviors are driven by the idea that in order to grow, you must take more control over your life. Rebellious behavior is typically a search to establish autonomy and authority, which is a normal developmental process.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

Adolescent rebellion is an important focus for parents and law enforcement. In response to recent serious rebellious behaviors of adolescents, techniques to prevent these and to intervene have received significant attention from parents and law enforcement. Intervening in the lives of adolescents is challenging. Youth work must always involve not just working with adolescents but also with their families, schools, and neighborhoods.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Even with adolescents, parents should participate in intervention programs when their young people display significant behavioral problems. Some parents contend that sharing autonomy and authority with their adolescents is synonymous to relinquishing control, supervision and parental roles. But this survey shows the opposite: that it is non-confrontational and motivational. A parent-focused curriculum that teaches family autonomy and authority is critical. The goal is to prevent rebellious behaviors. The essential core of parents giving or sharing autonomy and authority with their adolescents is the willingness to understand and appreciate them. Shared autonomy and authority is motivational, non-controlling, informational and supportive to the needs of adolescents.

AGE-APPROPRIATE AUTONOMY AND AUTHORITY

Adolescence is a period of seeking increased autonomy and authority. During this time, adolescents do not want to be treated like children. To treat adolescents like children makes them to feel inferior, and embarrassed. Adolescents desire to be treated as neither children nor adults. Thus, giving them age-appropriate autonomy and authority helps to build both independence and confidence in them. Some parents allow too much autonomy and authority before the adolescent is ready to accept it. Other parents

cling too tightly, denying their adolescent children both the responsibilities they require to mature and the opportunities they need to make choices and accept their consequences. It is beneficial to encourage autonomy at all levels that are comfortable for your adolescent. Making decisions with adolescents help them to recognize that having autonomy and authority comes with responsibilities.

TRAINING OF YOUTH WORKERS

Youth workers are critical to quality youth-serving agencies. They assist adolescents in developing the skills to make positive changes in their lives. Many programs attribute their success to effective youth workers. Training can enhance the skills of youth workers. The effectiveness and efficiency of youth workers is dependent upon the amount of knowledge and understanding they possess. The same is true with parents; the knowledge and understanding of adolescents will inspire parents and youth workers to use their skills to help their youth. The belief that adolescents participate in rebellious behavior because they intentionally and thoughtfully choose to do so undermines reaching out to them. Without understanding how and why adolescents develop rebellious behaviors parents and youth workers will function under a diminished capacity and make poor decisions. Rebellious behavior by adolescents is explainable as an attempt to meet or negotiate autonomy and authority needs.

The job of youth workers is to provide opportunities for adolescents to develop the competencies necessary to become successful contributing members of their communities. Allowing youth autonomy and authority is one of the most effective approaches for providing them with opportunities to develop competence. Therefore, this paper recommends that autonomy and authority be considered a core integral part of the training of youth workers. Training opportunities in the area of autonomy and authority will allow youth workers to develop “best practices,” which can then be incorporated in working with adolescents.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of this paper suggest important implications for future research. Future research is warranted to explore whether or not all adolescents are at risk because of the negative impact of the lack of autonomy and authority.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Kiadii is a native of Liberia and has lived in the United States since 2004, following a refugee resettlement program in Ghana. He has worked as a court appointed special advocate for children in the foster care system in Washington, DC and currently works at the Juvenile Supervision Center in Minneapolis as the overnight Lead Youth Specialist. His bicultural background and focus on community networks and collaboration has led him to earn his Bachelors in Theology and Masters in Public Administration. He and his wife Robertlyn Kiadii reside in Brooklyn Center.

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