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**IDENTITY AND
PARENTS–CHILDREN'S
RELATIONSHIP IN THE
TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD**

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The aim of this study is to discuss identity construction and the development of the self in the transition to adulthood, including parents’ participation in this process. To understand those processes, we must consider that socialization is a universal process, but that follows distinct trajectories (Keller, 2007). Three main tendencies or trajectories can be observed, leading to diverse directions in the development of the self: interdependent self; independent self; and autonomous relational self. The last mode is characterized by Kagitçibasi (2007), taking into account the dimensions of agency and personal distance. In terms of agency, the self is autonomous, but the relation with others, especially the family, is preserved. The development of the autonomous / independent self is typical of urban, western educated middle class families. In the trajectory of development of interdependent selves heteronomy and relation to others are privileged, characterizing a proximal mode of relationship, characteristic of rural families with low educational and socio-economic levels. The development of autonomous-relational selves is typical of middle class urban educated families from societies traditionally interdependent.

The literature on parental beliefs and ethno-theories of Brazilian mothers (Seidl-de-Moura et al., 2009; Vieira et al., 2010) has indicated that mothers of Rio de Janeiro share a model of autonomy for their children, but they also believe in the importance of their relationship with others. A model of relational autonomy seems to be present. Thus, we can think that those trajectories will be reflected in identity construction across the life cycle, including the transition to adulthood.

Most of the studies discussing this topic are from western contexts, European or North American. In those contexts, with trajectories oriented mostly to the development of autonomous / independent selves, at this stage of transition to adulthood, the relationship between parents and their children is more oriented to equality than to hierarchy, modifying parental authority. Nowadays, the entrance in adult life is not linear or predictable. Love relationships, based on more fragile ties, the job market situation and the demands of an extended professional preparation do not offer guarantees of total independence from the parents.

Affective and work relations can be dissolved much easier than at the times of the parents of the youngster of today. Now there is the acceptance of the diversity and of the fluctuations present at all stages of the life cycle, especially at the transition to adulthood (Camarano; Leitão; Pasinato & Kanso, 2004; Camarano, 2006; Féres-Carneiro, 2005; Mitchell, 2006). This transition is marked by uncertainty, absence of definition and complexity.

Parents' role and responsibility change, faced by the unpredictability of their children's behavior and the time necessary to definite entrance in adulthood. This new situation, questions the traditional perspective of the family's life cycle of children leaving their parents' house, marrying and having their own children at the beginning of their youth, (Macgoldrick & Carter, 1995). Children's adolescence comes to end, but the parents continue to help the development of their emotional and financial autonomy. From adolescence to adulthood, parents maintain an important role in their children's development, influencing the transition period (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Sampaio, 2004). Choices about life style can be limited or eased by different factors, such as personal and family resources, economic conditions, public policies, religion and cultural ideologies. Put together those factors can amplify the scope of behaviors that have to be restricted or freed (Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2005; Pais; Cairns & Pappámikail, 2005). At the same time, youngsters can be seen as active agents, capable to adapt or to change an institutionalized pattern. Thus, they have an important role in the process of changing the course of transitional behaviors. As social innovators, youngsters can redefine individual and social expectancies, planning the events and altering their behaviors and, as consequence, their own future (Arnett, 2000).

We should forget that there are differences between social classes and cultural groups, varying the duration and the way that young people live the transition to adulthood (Camarano et al, 2004; Camarano, 2006; Cervený, 1997; Gitelson & McDermott, 2006; Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2005; Pais; Cairns & Pappámikail, 2005). Anyway, it is more cautious to conceive the transition as flexible, related to the singular answers and to the creation of solutions that transform the conditioning that comes from the context (social, economical and cultural).

Thus, changes in behavior characteristic of a transitional phase occur as answers to the adaptations and modifications both in the public realm (economy, education, work and technology) and in the private (emergence of new forms of family and transformation of gender roles). Those changes are also affected by demographic transformations (rising of life expectancy and reduction of fertility) and by the cultural contexts. The influence of all those factors confirms the absence of a stable picture, previously established, for the transition to adult age.

As a result of a historical-social transition that produces effects in subject formation, the children live a period of more autonomy, and, at the same time, they get nearer of their parents. As a consequence, the youngsters can adopt their parents' life styles and/or establish a relationship of more reciprocity and support exchange at various levels. A relationship more oriented to equality than to hierarchy, thus, developed, and this modifies the understanding of parental authority and/or parents' control of their children. However, things were not always this way. To understand what is happening today, a historical perspective allows the observation of the transformation of family and of the role of authority in its interior. In the history of modern western society, parental authority is transformed in affective authority.

Since the century XVIII, young people in western cultures, mainly European and North American, began to consider the sentiments in partner choice, devaluing aspects such as property and parents' desire. Affection becomes necessary between the couple and between parents and their children. Nuclear family takes on a moral and spiritual function (Ariès, 1986). According to Shorter (1995), this is the first sexual revolution, producing a "wave of sentiment" that makes the traditional family disappears, modifying the conjugal relation.

Solidarity sentiment emerges between the members of the family and it begins to be seen as a refuge from the public world (Lasch, 1991; Sennett, 1993; Shorter, 1995).

Based in this new social configuration, the modern model of family appears, characterized by emotional intensity and by the reduction of the number of members (being composed by parents and children only), and of the influence of the extended family and of the community. With the diffusion of equalitarian relationships, patriarchal authority, reinforced by the community, becomes intolerable, diminishes and it is transformed. Father authority is in opposition to freedom and to the autonomy of the individual. Besides, despite the power it confers to the father, it also restricts his freedom (Horkheimer, 1983; Romanelli, 1995).

Another transformation is the influence of the individualistic ideology on the family. The relationship between parents and children becomes a paradox, the parents submitting to the children's autonomy, frequently in conflict with their own authority. Respect is seen as a right for everyone and it is recognition that the individual, child or adult is a person. Children change their status, becoming partners of their parents, since it is acknowledged their negotiation ability and knowledge. The advance in the transformation of intimacy produces more proximity and interaction between parents and children, based on the understanding of the rights and emotions of each other. Construction of personality finds a place in the democratic experience of continuous negotiations of rights and obligations of (Giddens, 1993; Lasch, 1991; Singly, 1993; 2000).

The democratization of the family favors the ones that previously were dominated by the father's authority. Faced with the exacerbation of individualism that leads to the fluctuation of roles and of the personal identities, the fathers are lost. They lose space and see the legitimacy of their authority questioned (Hurstel, 1999; Romanelli, 1995; Roudinesco, 2003). The women are more prepared for this transformation and take on an authority role based on affection and on mutual understanding. Thus, they conquest more proximity of their children, and they become able to be a source of orientation to them.

Those historical transformations in those contexts mentioned above reflect in the situation observed today in urban contexts of western societies. From adolescence to transition to adulthood, parents are not seen as the ones who oppose to freedom and are seen as persons. Parents and children are close and see each other as friends. A more intimate and open relationship is established, with a sentiment of mutual respect, in which the information about life itself can be dosed, avoiding conflict. To maintain an intimate relation with their children, who become more independent, parents give up their hierarchical position and are a reference for their children's identity construction. Of course, becoming a reference which diminishes the power over their children does not mean that they have no influence over them.

Based on the historical transformations described, this study aims to discuss the distinction between the parents and children perspectives, and to understand how this relationship contributes to the construction of an adult identity. The members of this relation are closer and mutually influencing to each other, but they are in different positions. Most of the parents interviewed in a previous research (Ponciano, 2010), mention in a hesitant way this difference when they describe their children as friends. In the stories they narrate, however, they describe a situation in which there is a differentiated position of being counselors or advisors of their children, having an active participation on their decisions, offering emotional and financial support. To study the of interpersonal and intra-psychic process identity construction and the development of the self, we interviewed young people, highlighting the influence of the parents over them in their transition to adulthood.

We consider the dimensions of autonomy and interdependency and how they are

constructed along the ontogenesis and we assume that “healthy” development can take different forms of balance between those two dimensions in different cultural contexts. (Kagitçibasi, 2007). We try to understand identity construction as a phenomenon both individual and contextual. The model or trajectory of development that permeates our contemporary western urban societies is one of individualism and of valuing independence and autonomy over interdependency and relation with others. However, even in those societies, we can find the contribution of interdependency in subject formation. The socialization process is based in a paradox: the association of individuality and collectivity, of the self and the other. It leads to individuation and also to belonging and association with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The perspective of person-in-context puts together both directions, understanding that individuals construct themselves in a context of relationships with the others, and beyond those relations, invent themselves in a unique way (Adams & Marshall, 1996).

Since identity construction has been predominantly discussed from the psychological development of the adolescent, it is necessary to create a comparative framework for understanding of the transition to adulthood, as a new stage of the life cycle. Erikson defines the development of identity during adolescence as a process of interactions of persons in a context, highlighting the important role of the people who surround the adolescents, recognizing, supporting and helping them to construct their identity (Erikson, 1987; 1998). Although the importance of context is recognized, it has been neglected by research in this area. More recently, however, there is a crescent interest, mainly in the importance of the family, especially the parents (Beyers & Goossens, 2008). The communication process in the family can support and stimulate the development of different points of view (individuality), facilitating the exploration of identity. Friends, school and work are also considered important contexts that offer diverse models and opportunities. Thus, the context influences and it is continuously influenced by the person development. Conflicts can emerge from the interactions, with the possibility of assimilation or transformation of identity (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001).

Emphasizing the family context, we consider that trough the life cycle, parents take on different roles in the care of their children. Parents’ tasks are modified according to children’s transformations. One of the decisive factors is the increase of autonomy, starting in adolescence and culminating at adult age (Garey; Hansen; Hertz & Macdonald, 2002; Macgoldrick & Carter, 1995). Quality of parents’ work changes, but, in many aspects, after the end of adolescence, not the intensity, especially considering the extension of the period of transition to adult age.

In Developmental psychology there is a vast discussion of role of parents since birth, but, the discussion is reduced in the stage of transition to adulthood. Theoretical discussion and research are necessary to change this picture (Arnett, 2004; Gitelson & McDermott, 2006; Gower & Dowling, 2008; Sneed; Cohen; Chen; Johnson; Gilligan; Crawford & Kasen, 2006).

A distinction needs to be made between the transition to adulthood studied by sociology and emergence of adult life, in which the psychological aspects are focused, less tangible than the demographic and social phenomena that contribute to transform an adolescent in an adult (Arnett, 2000; 2004). Such aspects are: to accept the responsibility of their own acts, to make decisions in an autonomous way and to be financially independent. Arnett (2000; 2004), delimitating the transition age range between 18 and 25 years, considers that the sociological aspects are not sufficient to the understanding of what occurs this moment, addressing the need of specifying the intrinsic psychological characteristics of this stage. To answer the question “What makes the emergence to adulthood different from adolescence and adulthood

themselves?” Arnett (2000; 2004) describes five characteristics:

- 1) The age of exploration of identities – the process of exploration of identities both in love and in work begins in adolescence and is intensified during the emergence of the adult, since in this period young people feel freer than they have ever been;
- 2) The age of instability – at the end of adolescence youngsters have a plan to follow until reaching adulthood. This plan, however, it is subject to several revisions as a consequence of various explorations. With each revision, the young person learns a little more about him/herself and He/she can clarify the type of future He/she desires. The lived instability generates some ruptures.
- 3) The age of self-centeredness – before assuming the responsibilities of an adult, the youngsters, because they have few obligations, take the opportunity to center in themselves learning to be alone as an self sufficient person. This is a necessary moment before commitments with others in love and work lives.
- 4) The age of feeling in transition – exploration and instability give this period the quality of transition between adolescence and adulthood. At this moment, the most important thing is to be in a gradual process toward adult life, trusting that one day he/she will be capable to assume responsibility for him/herself, make his/her own decisions and be financially independent.
- 5) The age of possibilities – this is a phase of much hope and of great expectations, even if the youngster has experienced many difficulties in his prior history with this family of origin. Carrying the legacy of his family, the youngsters have the opportunity to self construction, transforming their future.

The phase of adult emergence is the moment to explore identities and change the course of choices at any moment that new directions present themselves. The instability is part of his process and a price to pay while the decisions about the desired form one wants adult life to take. During this period, the youngsters center themselves on their personal objectives and in self development, maintaining intense relations with their parents and, frequently, still living with them. It is the occasion in which their own rules are constructed, going from parental to personal authority, at the same time that the influence of parents about the life style to be adopted is elaborated.

We have investigated the period of emergence of adulthood aiming to understanding and comparing the experience of identity construction of women and men and how they see their parents’ participation in this process. We did interviews with participants between 18 and 25 years old. Besides the age criterion, we selected Young people with a project of academic/professional development. Our goal is to have a group of 24 participants, equally divided by gender, from different regions of the city of Rio de Janeiro. We are aware that we are focusing a specific group of subjects and, thus, we are going to identify a particular kind of trajectory. Rio de Janeiro is a big city, a urban contexts of a western post industrial society. To emerge as an adult in this context does not represent a universal trajectory.

So far, nine participants have been interviewed, four boys and five girls. Two are finishing high school, two are finishing college this year, four halfway the undergraduate course, and two who have a complete college education. The first interviews are being submitted to content analysis (Bardin, 2008). Following we present part of those initial analyses.

The first question is “What do you think defines an adult person?” The answers,

corroborating other studies of the literature, do not indicate the traditional social markers (do not live with their parents, to marry and have children). The criteria presented are subjective, as the ones found by Arnett (2000; 2004). The terms that appear as illustrated below are: independence, make decisions, experience and attitude.

It is...I don't know, independence, a certain professional independence...having a job of my own, having a direction that you want to give to your professional life, like that, and ...a little of this professional freedom and also a certain possibility of making decisions without having to have this thing with the parents, this thing of permission, I don't know...somewhat like that. F2 (22years old)

What I think? It is...experience, isn't it? Dignity of the person...it is...for me, it is experience that makes that she is like that. It is (pauses) it is the experience...the time that she is experiencing each daily situation and she sees it is...facts that she is making wrong, getting it right and with time she follows a trajectory that makes her an adult. M4 (23years old)

I think that a person becomes an adult in the moment that she has attitudes of an adult person. Thus, she acts as an adult person, both in the manner...how can I say, she has attitude of an adult person. Thus, for example , with the others she is a responsible person, she is a person who imposes herself, who is not lead by the others, yes... she does not depend on others, she depends only of on herself. F3 (22 years old)

The second question was if the participant considers him/herself an adult and why. The answers indicate that they are not certain of their adult status.

I think that partially...I am not so autonomous, but I am very responsible. M1 (18 years old)

Well, in certain things yes, in other things not. I know that sometimes I think, Äh my mother is going to do it, so I live it aside. However, in other things, no, I do it. F5 (22 years old)

The relationship with the parents is treated when we ask about what the are accustomed or not to talk with the father and the mother. Independently of gender, the mother is predominant in relation to the father, exerting the affective, being near and orienting her children in regard to several aspects of their lives.

Yes, My parents are more my friends than any other thing. Because I have a very good dialog with my parents. I have more with my mother. My father is more reserved. But, if I have a talk He talks too, but He does not give his opinion much. My mother no, my mother talks and etc. (...) There is no restriction...We talk about everything. If I have a problem at college, I talk, If I have a problem with boyfriend, I talk. F3 (22 years old)

I have more affinity with my mother than with my father. My father talks too but my mother, we talk about everything, you get it? Sexuality, things like that, only with my mother, isn't it? With my father no (...) this does not mean that I do not love him. I like him, but with my mother I have a great affinity. M4 (23 years)

old)

Final considerations

Identity construction is a process that occurs in context and follows socialization trajectories. We have focused in specific western urban trajectories, the ones that have been studied in regard to the emergence of adulthood. Studies that have been developed in Brazilian contexts suggest that a trajectory in which autonomy and interdependency are equally valued is present. In this context, the development of autonomous-relational selves is favored in this trajectory. At the moment of transition, the conquest of autonomy and the relationship parents-children are important dimensions for the psychological development and transformation of the youngster in adult. Thus we believe that it is relevant to study those two phenomena, understanding them as parallel: the construction of identity and the influence of the parents in this process, although they have difficulties in defining themselves in a hierarchical position. Due to the proximity between parents and children, the idea of conflict between generations has weakened. Children as equals contribute with their perspectives, forming and maintaining in functioning the family rules. They look up to their parents as sources of help and support to make love and work related decisions that define their identity. There is no more a predictability of behaviors, and the rules are not dictated from top to bottom, coming from an unquestionable authority. The family, composed by equals, is a context of development in which young people construct their identity, without the establishment of rigid boundaries. The way this process has been occurring, based on the experience of youngsters must be investigated and understood.

The interviews done so far reflect the diversity found in Rio de Janeiro, with participants from popular to high classes, revealing a point in common: the investment of the parents in the formation of those youngsters, identified them as people with a promise/debt to be fulfilled, answering the expectations of their parents about the future. They remain at their parents' home, confirming the evidences in the western literature about a lack of definition about what it is to be an adult and the weak presence of social markers for the entrance in adulthood. While they are in this transition process, which is characterized by the investment in the formation and construction of identity, exploring possibilities, they establish a nearer relation with their parents, conquering autonomy in a context that also values interdependency.

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