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## PERSONAL AUTONOMY IN THE EMERGING ADULT

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### Abstract

*This article presents the results of the process of increasing personal autonomy for emerging adults through group psychological interventions techniques. We presented, synthetically, some theoretical-conceptual aspects of the psychological construct of personal autonomy.*

*The research is part of a larger study that investigated the optimization of emerging adult behavior by improving maladaptive mental schemas. One of these schemas refers to the belief that the individual has a limited personal autonomy, and this belief materializes in behavioral self-limitations in a socio-professional context. Thus, 24 young people participated in a longitudinal experiment that aimed to demonstrate the effectiveness of psychological intervention programs in the development of autonomy and its dimensions, as conceptualized in the development of the Autonomy Assessment Questionnaire (Berar and Albu, 2006).*

*The research results have shown that participation in-group cognitive-behavioral psychological interventions can develop the levels of cognitive, behavioral, emotional and value autonomy. The research was conducted in the context in which one in four young people in Romania belong to the NEET category (neither in employment nor in education and training).*

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**Keywords:** *personal autonomy, emerging adult, personal development*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of personal autonomy has undergone over time several definitions that appeal to different constructs in psychology: personality trait, decision-making ability, free from influences self-government competence of the individual,

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cognitive skills congruent with one's personal values, or personal freedom. Reviewing the literature on personal autonomy, most references are the ones related to people with disabilities. The theoretical framework circumscribed to the concept of personal autonomy relates to heterogeneous domains and notions, which refer to choices and decision, freedom, independence versus separation, cause and determination, intentionality, and conditioning (Fischer, 2017), motivation, responsibility (Fisher, 2015), control versus self-control (Oshana, 2015), will and purpose (Darwall, 2006), or self against others.

Briefly, the autonomy refers to the individual's ability to act according to his own values and interests. The etymology of the word leads to the meaning of self-government in ancient Greek. Modern theories and practices strongly argue that individual autonomy is a desideratum, an individual value that must be promoted and respected. Psychologically, autonomy is made up of skills, abilities and attitudes that allow a person to govern itself. Relevant competencies refer to the abilities to reason, to evaluate different points of view, to debate with others various issues of interest to the person, having as result the freely manifesting of person's resolving ability (Buss and Westlung, 2018). In order to govern itself, the self-employed person must have a healthy sense of importance and self-worthiness, doubled by a good self-knowledge that can guarantee the quality and adequacy to reality of its personal decisions and actions (Radoilska, 2012).

The personal autonomy consists in the ability to control one's own life together with the feeling that there is the possibility to exercise this control. The definition integrates this way the concept of autonomy with cognitive and socio-emotional abilities. Berar and Albu (2006) also consider that personal autonomy is formed in ontogenesis through structural and functional assimilations and accommodations of the subject to the models and particularities of his living environment and which, as it is constituted, are expressed in attitudes and behaviors based on laws, rules, and values of their own.

Being theorized in this way, autonomy becomes an essential construct for developmental psychology. To be able to develop personal autonomy, the individual needs opportunities to consider significant alternatives for action, as well as the ways of thinking about what matters to himself. Oppressive or overly protective socio-familial attitudes, rigid hierarchies, and lack of meaningful choices makes the development of the autonomy difficult to develop, as well as the ways of acting and thinking in accordance with one's own interests and values.

Given these assumptions, we can say that while some circumstances support the development of autonomy, some others may undermine it. Without entering the similar controversies in the philosophical field related to the intellectual culture of ideas within contemporary liberal societies, the present research aims to investigate the extent to which autonomy and its dimensions can be developed by participating in a psychological intervention program to optimize self-behavior.

## 2. OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

### 2.1. OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this research is to determine whether a psychological intervention program can develop the global personal autonomy and its various dimensions: cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and valuable.

### 2.2. HYPOTHESE

The group psychological interventions with cognitive-behavioral methods and techniques can develop personal autonomy in emerging adults.

## 3. METHOD

The formative research was carried out with the participation of 24 people, aged between 23 and 26 years. Participants were divided into two homogeneous groups, Experimental Group (EG) consisting in 12 participants, 6 females and 6 males, and the Control Group (CG) consisting in 6 males and 6 females.

The selection criteria for participation in the group were: 1. an age between 23 and 26 years; 2. unoccupied for at least 12 months; 3. living together with and maintained by their parents or others (family, friends); 4. unmarried, no children; 5. students who have dropped out of 2 or more faculties in the past and attend another or students who have extended their studies by more than 2 years; 6. willingness to participate in the group intervention for 12 months, one weekend per month.

These criteria were established following the previous research and according to the principle of similarity of the problem area, in this case the difficulty of adaptation and social integration of the emerging adult.

The autonomy was investigated with the *Questionnaire for Assessing Personal Autonomy* (Berar and Albu, 2006).

To validate the working hypothesis, we performed statistical analysis in the IBM SPSS program.

The study is an experimental study, descriptive-inferential, conducted in a longitudinal manner and involved the following steps: initial application of the test of Autonomy, conducting group psychological interventions, reapplying the test of Autonomy to determine the effects produced by this emerging adult autonomy development program.

The obtained investigation was performed by comparing and highlighting the differences between: the young people in the control/retest group and the young people in the experimental/retest group; between the young people of the

experimental/test group and the young people of the experimental/retest group; between the adolescents of the control/test group and the adolescents of the control/retest group, thus following in parallel the evolution of the experimental group compared to the evolution of the control group.

#### 4. RESULTS

The overall goal of the intervention group was to provide each member with support in emotional growth and personal problem solving, helping individuals to better understand the psycho-social context in which they find themselves, in conclusion to be able to make smarter, healthier, and more adaptive choices based on a deeper awareness of feelings, behaviors, reactions, and interpersonal patterns.

We assumed that these interventions would result, among other things, in the development of the level of autonomy and its dimensions conceptualized as follows:

- a. Cognitive autonomy materialized in the ability to reason independently, to think critically, to acquire knowledge and information, the ability to self-evaluate, the feeling of self-confidence, the belief in freedom of choice.
- b. Behavioral autonomy represented by the individual's ability to direct his behavior and to act according to his own decisions and choices.
- c. Emotional autonomy reflected in the individual's ability to form and express feelings independently.
- d. The value autonomy revealed by the individual's capacity to constitute his own set of beliefs, thoughts, and principles resistant to external pressures (exercised by people, cultural environment, and society in general).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for Autonomy for research groups

Autonomy	MEAN (SD) EG N=12		MEAN (SD) CG N=12	
	test	retest	test	retest
Global	61.17 (10.2)	74.58 (10.5)	64.33 (10.5)	64.46 (10.7)
Cognitive	14.83 (3.9)	18.58 (3.8)	16.08 (3.8)	16.25 (4.09)
Behavioral	15.42 (2.3)	18.33 (2.4)	15.83 (2.1)	15.58 (2.5)
Emotional	16.34 (2.4)	19.42 (1.7)	16.5 (2.8)	16.8 (2.9)
Value	14.58 (2.6)	18.25 (2.3)	15.92 (3.6)	15.83 (3.8)

*EG retest/CG retest.* The Mann-Whitney U test shows that the level of Global Autonomy investigated with the Autonomy Scale is significantly lower in young people who participated in psychological intervention (EG) than in those who did not participate in intervention (CG) ( $U = 28.5$ ,  $N_1 = 12$ ,  $N_2 = 12$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ).

For the dimensions of Autonomy, we found significant differences between the results EG/retest and CG/retest for Cognitive Autonomy ( $U = 29$ ,  $N_1 = 12$ ,  $N_2 = 12$ ,

$p = 0.012$ ), Behavioral Autonomy ( $U = 20.5$ ,  $N1 = 12$ ,  $N2 = 12$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) and Emotional Autonomy ( $U = 33$ ,  $N1 = 12$ ,  $N2 = 12$ ,  $p = 0.024$ ).

For Value Autonomy, the difference between EG / retest and CG / retest is insignificant ( $p > 0.05 = 0.347$ ), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Wilcoxon test for autonomy and its dimensions, GE/retest, and GC/retest

	Global Autonomy	Cognitive Autonomy	Behavioral Autonomy	Emotional Autonomy	Value Autonomy
Mann-Whitney U	28.500	29.000	20.500	33.000	55.000
Z	-2.518	-2.509	-2.996	-2.271	-.988
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	.012	.003	.023	.323
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.010 <sup>b</sup>	.012 <sup>b</sup>	.002 <sup>b</sup>	.024 <sup>b</sup>	.347 <sup>b</sup>

*EG test/retest.* The Wilcoxon test (difference in ranks for two pairs of samples) shows that the levels of manifestation of Autonomy and its size are significantly higher in young people who participated in the psychological intervention compared to the initial stage, as shown in Table 3 below.

1. Global autonomy ( $Z = -3.069$ ,  $\Sigma R + = 0$ ,  $\Sigma R - = 66$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ).
2. Cognitive autonomy ( $Z = -3.075$ ,  $\Sigma R + = 78$ ,  $\Sigma R - = 0$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).
3. Behavioural autonomy ( $Z = -3.093$ ,  $\Sigma R + = 78$ ,  $\Sigma R - = 0$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ).
4. Emotional autonomy ( $Z = -3.07$ ,  $\Sigma R + = 78$ ,  $\Sigma R - = 0$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ).
5. Value autonomy ( $Z = -3.065$ ,  $\Sigma R + = 78$ ,  $\Sigma R - = 0$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ).

Table 3. Wilcoxon test for Autonomy and its dimensions, GE/test, and GE/retest

	Global Autonomy	Cognitive Autonomy	Behavioral Autonomy	Emotional Autonomy	Value Autonomy
Z	-3.069b	-3.075b	-3.093b	-3.070b	-3.065b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.001	.002	.002	.025

*CG test/retest.* The Wilcoxon test shows insignificant differences for CG in the test and retest stages, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Wilcoxon test for Autonomy and its dimensions, CG/test, and CG/retest

	Global Autonomy	Cognitive Autonomy	Behavioral Autonomy	Emotional Autonomy	Value Autonomy
Z	-.791 <sup>b</sup>	.000 <sup>c</sup>	-1.414 <sup>b</sup>	.000 <sup>c</sup>	-.378 <sup>b</sup>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.429	1.000	.157	1.000	.705

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we can say that the young people who participated in the intervention group registered an increase in the level of personal autonomy at global level and in its size, too.

In other words, the participants registered an increase in the capacity to act on their own behaviors, cognitions, feelings, and values. Thus, the participants significantly developed their set of skills and attitudes subsumed to the autonomy construct, as defined above.

Emerging adults who participated in the intervention program initially needed to increase their capacity for personal autonomy prior to make those decisions designed to decide for themselves a way forward in life, to embark on meaningful and valuable lives. One of the questions that the psychological intervention program had to answer was „*how can we support and improve the capacity to develop young people's autonomy?*”

Parents and educators obviously play an important role and we need to ask ourselves how they can be supported and activated. Reflecting on the significance of its root, autonomy is often seen as an individual matter. In fact, it develops in our relationships with others. Children and then young people are members of families, of schools and a part of a wider society. Everyone can play a role in encouraging the ability of children and young people to make good choices for themselves. Moreover, they all have a responsibility to challenge the factors that undermine their autonomy.

In its Greek etymology, autonomy means self-transcendence and is a term, which is synonymous with freedom, the individual freedom to make choices for himself and to go toward self-chosen direction. Paternalism is opposed to autonomy, understood as the refusal of the individual's autonomy for his own good.

Extrapolating and corroborating the research data gathered during the group psychological intervention, we can say that not only the autonomy of young people is a legitimate goal of them and society in general, but also the diminishing of the paternalistic attitudes of adults and awareness of the inherent damage must be an equally important desideratum.

Each generation has had its merits and shortcomings in social development, but the current figures are worrying. Against the background of the aging active population, we have a young generation that practically does not find its place in society.

Recent research suggests that psychological interventions in emerging age are more effective than those performed in the adolescence (Schuller et al., 2014). Antunes and Correia (2016) state the need for psychoeducational programs that encourage a sense of responsibility, autonomy and independent living. Arnett (2015) found significant results between well-being and autonomy, as did Joshanloo (2019), Jorgensen and Nelson (2018). Liga et al. (2018) states the role of the family in family development and support groups that can compensate families who have not encouraged families' efforts to develop autonomy. The study conducted by Boglut et. al (2016) confirmed the existence of bivariate correlation between personal development and positive relationship and personal development and self-acceptance.

Arnett and Tanner (2016), and Schoon and Lyons-Amos (2016) stated that there are three social institutions that mature young people through autonomous development: family, school and work. Munson et al. (2013), found, following the research, the need to study socially disadvantaged young people in order to understand the processes of emerging maturation, stating that studies were limited to students and people employed in the labor market.

In Romania, one in four young people does not have a job or study (so-called NEET - neither in employment nor in education and training). This trend was also registered at European level (with 8% in Sweden and 28.9% in Italy, according to Eurostat 2018). For the 25-29 age group, the general percentage is of 24.7%, but for the emerging adults in our study (20-24 years) the percentage is 68.4% (out of which 80% are female).

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