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The Scaffolding of Self- Determination: A Comparative Analysis of Parental Attachment and Autonomous Agency in Controlled versus Autonomy Supportive Child-Rearing Environments

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of child-rearing environments, specifically controlled and autonomy supportive climates, on the levels of parental attachment and autonomous agency among emerging adults. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Attachment Theory, this research utilized a quantitative-comparative design to analyze data from college students. Data were collected from a sample of 100 psychology students; 48 students were in the controlled child-rearing environment and 52 students were in autonomy-supported child-rearing environment. Standardized instruments were utilized to evaluate parental attachment (internal reliability, alpha = .884) and autonomous agency across different parenting climates. The data were analyzed via weighted means, independent samples t-tests, and Pearson product-moment correlation analysis. The descriptive analysis revealed a high level of attachment in controlled environments (weighted mean = 3.60) and a moderate level in autonomy-supportive environments (weighted mean = 3.33). However, the independent samples t-test indicated no statistically significant difference in attachment levels between the two groups ($t = 2.314$, $p = .023$, rejecting H0 at standard critical thresholds), suggesting that attachment bonds remain resilient despite restrictive parenting. Respondents from autonomy-supportive environments reported a Very High level of agency (weighted mean = 4.15), while those from controlled environments reported a High level (weighted mean = 3.71). A statistically significant difference was observed between the groups ($t = -3.482$, $p = .001$), confirming that autonomy-supportive climates meaningfully foster higher self-directed functioning. Pearson correlation revealed a weak, nonsignificant negative relationship between parental attachment and autonomous agency ($r = -0.188$, $p = .061$), a pattern that remained consistent across sub-group analyses for both maternal and paternal dimensions.

Keywords: *Autonomous Agency, Autonomy-Supportive Environment, Controlled Environment, Parental Attachment, Filipino Emerging Adults, Self-Determination Theory*

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INTRODUCTION

The family serves as the primary context in which children first develop a sense of self, motivation, and agency. In developmental psychology, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) is widely recognized as a leading, evidence-based model for explaining how parental influence affects the mental well-being of adolescents. SDT proposes that three basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be satisfied for healthy psychological growth and well-being, and that this principle holds across different developmental periods, including adolescence (Ma et al., 2022; Van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2022) Studies frequently identify two opposing parental styles relevant to these needs: autonomy-supportive environment and controlling environment. In an autonomy-supportive environment, parents acknowledge and value their children's perspectives, explain the reasons behind rules, and foster independence. However, parents in controlling environments use emotional manipulation, such as guilt induction, conditional regard, and psychological pressure to dictate behavior.

Longitudinal evidence indicates that controlling parenting undermines adolescents' basic psychological needs and elevates the risk of psychopathology, while supportive parenting contributes to positive academic and psychological development by encouraging self-initiating activities, acknowledging the child's view, and using minimal controlling strategies (Tueber et al., 2022). In addition, longitudinal data confirms that psychological control by both mothers and fathers consistently predicts adolescent behavioral and emotional maladjustment (Liu & Tang, 2025).

Delgado et al., (2022) highlighted that alongside parenting style, the quality of the parent-child attachment bond has been identified as a critical factor in adolescent development. Autonomy development in adolescence is an extension of a child's natural urge to explore, framed by their bond with parents. It involves finding a balance between the desire for new types of relationships and the continued need for security from their caregivers. Securely attached adolescents demonstrate greater confidence in expressing their views and navigating conflict, knowing the relationship remains stable, whereas insecurely attached adolescents tend toward emotional distancing and maladaptive conflict strategies. Research grounded in Bowlby's Internal Working Models theory further shows that securely attached individuals develop positive representations of both themselves and others, viewing the self as worthy of support and others as trustworthy and responsive which in turn fosters warmer and more supportive relational functioning across the lifespan (Richardson & Boag, 2024; Kovács et al., 2022). Despite the strength of both bodies of literature, the interaction between attachment quality and parenting style in shaping autonomous agency among adolescents remains underexplored, particularly the question of whether attachment security can buffer the developmental costs of a controlling environment. This gap is especially relevant in the context of the Philippines, where parental psychological control may be shaped by cultural values related to family obligation, with Filipino adolescents navigating the tension between valuing familial cohesion and developing personal autonomy (Dizon & Alampay, 2024).

The present study addresses this gap by examining the comparative relationship between parental attachment and autonomous agency among Filipino adolescents raised in controlled

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versus autonomy-supportive child-rearing environments. Specifically, it seeks to: 1.) determine the level of parental attachment in a controlled child- rearing environment and autonomy-supported child- rearing environment; 2.) determine the level of autonomous agency among individuals from each environment; 3.) assess whether significant differences exist between the two groups in these variables; 4.) and determine whether a significant relationship exists between parental attachment and autonomous agency.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a quantitative, comparative research design to examine differences in parental attachment and autonomous agency among individuals raised in controlled and autonomy supportive child-rearing environments. Researchers have used standardized quantitative tools to measure variables and a comparative design to identify significant differences in how parenting environments are perceived across groups.

The participants of the study consisted of 100 Bachelor of Science in Psychology students from Lemery Colleges in Lemery, Batangas. The purposive sampling method was used to select participants on the basis of specific inclusion criteria, which required respondents to be currently enrolled Psychology students aged between 18 and 25. The sample size was determined by computing the median score from the population, which was then computed such that the number of respondents in the controlled child-rearing environment was 48, whereas the number of respondents in the autonomy-supported child-rearing environment was 52.

The purposive sampling method allowed the researchers to select participants who were capable of providing relevant information regarding their perceived parenting experiences, attachment to parents, and level of self-determination.

The study utilized three standardized instruments to measure the variables. The Perception of Parents Scale (POPS) was used to assess participants' perceptions of their parents' behavior, particularly in terms of autonomy support and control, allowing the classification of parenting environments as either controlled or autonomy-supportive.

The Inventory of Parents and Peer Attachment-Revised (IPPA-R) was used to measure the quality of parental attachment. It assesses key dimensions such as trust, communication, and alienation which reflect participants' perceived emotional bonds with their parents. Although it was originally developed for younger populations, it has been widely used among late adolescents and young adults, making it appropriate for the present study.

Finally, the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS) was employed to assess self-determination through the dimensions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, including both need satisfaction and need frustration. This scale is anchored in Self - Determination Theory and provides a comprehensive measure of participants' psychological functioning.

Prior to data collection, permission was secured from the appropriate authorities of Lemery Colleges. The participants were approached and informed about the purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained before administering the questionnaires.

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Data were collected through paper-and-pencil surveys. The instruments were distributed to the selected participants and were completed within approximately 10–15 minutes. The researchers ensured that instructions were clearly explained and were available to address any questions during the process.

All completed questionnaires were collected immediately after administration to ensure data completeness and integrity.

All the data gathered were encoded and analyzed via appropriate statistical tools. Descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation were used to determine the levels of parental attachment and autonomous agency. To determine significant differences between individuals raised in controlled and autonomy supportive environments, an independent samples t-test was utilized. The researchers also used the Pearson product-moment correlation to examine the relationship between parental attachment and autonomous agency. All statistical analyses were conducted at the 0.05 level of significance.

The study adhered to ethical standards for conducting research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and the respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. As such, no personally identifiable information was collected. All the data were handled in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, ensuring that the information was securely stored and accessed only by the researchers.

The data collected were used solely for academic purposes and were disposed of properly after the completion of the study.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Level of Parental Attachments

Table 1

Level of Parental Attachments of Psychology Students

Sub-Variables	N	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Controlled Child-Rearing Environment	48	3.60	High
Autonomy-Supportive Child-Rearing Environment	52	3.33	Moderate

The findings revealed the level of parental attachment among individuals raised in controlled and autonomy-supportive child-rearing environments. A total of 48 respondents were raised in controlled child-rearing environments, whereas 52 were raised in autonomy-supportive environments. The highest mean score was observed in controlled child-rearing environments (WM = 3.60) which was interpreted as high, ranking first place. Those raised in autonomy-supportive environments (WM = 3.33) were interpreted as moderate.

These results suggest that attachment bonds may remain strong despite the presence of controlling parenting behaviors. In the context of the Philippines, strong family cohesion and parental involvement may contribute to adolescents' continued emotional closeness with parents even under restrictive parenting conditions. However, according to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), attachment alone does not guarantee healthy psychological functioning if autonomy needs are not sufficiently supported. Deci and Ryan (2000) emphasized that relatedness and autonomy must coexist for optimal development. While adolescents in controlled environments may maintain emotional ties with their parents, excessive parental control may limit independent decision-making and self-expression.

These findings may also be related to the findings of Delgado et al. (2022), who reported that parental attachment plays a critical role in adolescent development. Securely attached adolescents tend to feel emotionally connected and supported by caregivers. Furthermore, Richardson and Boag (2024) and Kovács et al. (2022) explained that secure attachment fosters

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positive internal working models, allowing adolescents to perceive themselves as worthy of care and others as trustworthy. Nevertheless, the present findings imply that emotional attachment can still exist within controlling parenting environments, although such environments may not fully promote autonomy and self-determination.

2. Level of Autonomous Agency

Table 2

Level of Autonomous Agency of Psychology Students

Sub-Variables	N	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Autonomy-Supportive Child-Rearing Environment	52	4.15	Very High
Controlled Child-Rearing Environment	48	3.71	High

The findings revealed that among the 52 respondents raised in autonomy-supportive environments, the highest weighted mean was obtained (WM = 4.15), verbally interpreted as very High, ranking first among the two groups. In contrast, the 48 respondents from the controlled environments obtained (WM = 3.71), were interpreted as high, placing second.

These results are consistent with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; 2023), which holds that children raised in environments where perspectives are acknowledged and independence are encouraged develop a stronger sense of agency. The Very High scores in the autonomy-supportive group reflect this: when autonomy needs are consistently met, individuals carry that self-directedness into adulthood, a pattern supported by Teuber et al. (2022), who reported that adolescents under autonomy-supportive parenting presented better self-regulation outcomes longitudinally.

Respondents from controlled environments also scored high in autonomous agency, although their lower mean may reflect introjected regulation, compliance driven by internalized pressure rather than genuine self-endorsement. Luo et al. (2023) described this as the "hollow achiever" profile, where outward behavioral conformity coexists with diminished intrinsic motivation. Grolnick and Pomerantz (2022) further noted that autonomy-supportive parenting specifically

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fosters self-initiating behavior and intrinsic goal pursuit, reinforcing the view that child-rearing environments shape the trajectory of autonomous agency well into emerging adulthood.

3. Parental Attachment and Autonomous Agency

Table 3

Significant Difference between Parental Attachment and Autonomous Agency

Variables	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	DF	CI	Cohen's *d*	Decision	Interpretation
Parental Attachment	3.6	0.73	2.314	0.023	98	.51664	0.463	Reject H_0	No Significant Difference
Autonomous Agency	3.71	0.62	-3.482	0.001	98	-.18828	-0.697	Reject H_0	Significant Difference

The findings present the results of the independent samples t-test conducted to determine whether significant differences exist between respondents raised in controlled and autonomy-supportive child-rearing environments in terms of parental attachment and autonomous agency. The results indicated no significant difference in parental attachment between groups (t = 2.314, p = .023, CI = .517, d = 0.46), leading to a failure to reject the null hypothesis. Notably, the control group reported a slightly higher mean attachment score (M = 3.60, SD = 0.73) than did the autonomy-supportive group (M = 3.30, SD = 0.45). In contrast, autonomous agency yielded a statistically significant difference (t = -3.482, p = .001, CI = -.188, d = -0.70), with a medium effect size, indicating that the child-rearing environment had a meaningful practical impact on the development of autonomous agency beyond statistical significance. The autonomy-supportive group scored meaningfully higher (M = 4.15, SD = 0.63) than did the control group (M = 3.71, SD = 0.62), resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis.

The absence of group differences in attachment is notable. Contrary to what one might expect, controlling parenting did not appear to weaken the parent-child bond. This may reflect a cultural dynamic particular to Filipino families, where parental authority, even when perceived as controlling, tends to be interpreted as care and sacrifice rather than as a threat to autonomy. Dizon and Alampay (2024) reported that family obligation moderates the relationship between psychological control and adjustment among Filipino adolescents, suggesting that filial piety may buffer the emotional costs of control. Ainsworth and Bowlby's attachment framework

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similarly supports this: when parents are consistently present and responsive, children can develop strong bonds regardless of parenting style (Richardson & Boag, 2024).

The significant group difference in autonomous agency, by contrast, confirms that the child-rearing environment meaningfully shapes self-determined functioning. Van der Kaap-Deeder et al. (2023) showed that even momentary autonomy support positively affects adolescents' psychological states, and Barber and Xia (2022) demonstrated longitudinally that psychological control decreases adolescent agency over time. Overall, these findings illustrate that attachment and autonomous agency follow different developmental pathways, attachment appears resilient to control, whereas autonomous agency is sensitive to whether the parenting climate fosters or suppresses self-direction. This distinction aligns with SDT's differentiation between relatedness, which can be satisfied even in controlling environments, and autonomy, which requires genuine volitional support (Vansteenkiste et al., 2023).

Table 4

Relationship between Parental Attachment and Autonomous Agency

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	r Value	p-Value	Cronbach's Alpha	Decision	Interpretation
Parental Attachment	Autonomous Agency	-0.188	0.061	0.884	Fail to Reject H_2	No Significant Relationship

The findings present the results of the Pearson correlation analysis conducted to determine the nature and significance of the relationship between parental attachment and autonomous agency. The overall correlation was weak and nonsignificant ($r = -0.188$, $p = .061$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.884$), indicating a highly reliable and consistent instrument, and leading to a failure to reject the null hypothesis. Subgroup analyses further confirmed this pattern: within the control environment group, mother attachment ($r = -0.08$) and father attachment ($r = -0.25$) showed negligible to weak negative associations with agency; within the autonomy-supportive group, mother attachment ($r = -0.12$) and father attachment ($r = -0.04$) yielded similarly negligible correlations.

From an SDT perspective, these findings reinforce the conceptual distinction between relatedness and autonomy; emotional closeness to parents does not directly cultivate autonomous motivation. The weak negative direction of these correlations, while not statistically significant, is theoretically worth noting. In the Filipino context, strong family ties often come with expectations of deference, and when attachment is paired with controlling expectations, the

emotional bond may reinforce conformity rather than self-initiated behavior (Howard et al., 2024).

Koehn and Kerns (2021) reported that the link between attachment and agency is mediated by how actively parents scaffold independent functioning, suggesting that attachment alone cannot explain variance in autonomous agency. By emerging adulthood, this bond appears consolidated to the point where it no longer actively drives or constrains agency; peer relationships, academic contexts, and identity formation become stronger influences. Similarly, Mikulincer and Shaver (2025) noted that in adulthood, early attachment experiences become internalized schemas rather than active relational influences. These near-zero correlations ultimately affirm that parental attachment, while emotionally foundational, is not a reliable predictor of autonomous agency in late adolescence, a finding that points to the distinct and complementary roles of relatedness and autonomy in the psychological development of Filipino emerging adults.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the relationship between parental attachment and the development of self-determination among individuals raised in controlled and autonomy-supportive child-rearing environments. The findings revealed that participants from both environments reported generally moderate to high levels of parental attachment, with slightly higher maternal attachment observed in the controlled environments. Notably, the results indicated no significant difference in parental attachment whereas there was significant difference in autonomous agency between the two groups. Furthermore, correlation analysis revealed weak to negligible negative relationships between parental attachment and autonomous agency, suggesting that attachment does not significantly predict autonomy in late adolescence.

These findings highlight an important developmental insight: attachment and autonomy function as distinct psychological constructs. While strong emotional bonds with parents, particularly mothers remain evident even in controlled environments, these bonds do not necessarily translate into higher levels of autonomous functioning. Consistent with the Self-Determination Theory, the results suggest that autonomous agency may develop through broader contextual influences beyond parental attachment, especially during late adolescence when individuals begin transitioning toward self-directed regulation. Overall, the study underscores the complexity of self-determination, emphasizing that parental scaffolding alone is not sufficient to account for variations in autonomous agency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed. Parents are encouraged to adopt autonomy-supportive practices by providing children with meaningful choices, acknowledging their perspectives, and offering clear rationales for rules and expectations. While maintaining strong emotional bonds remains crucial, fostering independence and self-initiation is essential to promote long-term self-determination. Educators and academic

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administrators are likewise encouraged to create learning environments that promote student voice, decision-making, and leadership opportunities, allowing learners to actively participate in their own development. For emerging adults, it is recommended that they engage in self-reflection, goal-setting, and independent decision-making to strengthen their sense of personal agency and responsibility.

Additionally, guidance counselors and mental health practitioners should design interventions that focus on strengthening autonomous functioning, such as programs centered on self-awareness, goal-setting, and value clarification. These initiatives can help individuals internalize motivation and develop a stronger sense of personal agency. Future researchers are encouraged to explore additional variables that may influence autonomous agency, including peer relationships, cultural context, and personality factors, while utilizing larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs for deeper analysis. Finally, an intervention program could be developed that integrates parenting seminars and student-centered workshops to balance

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