

The Level of Autonomy in Middle Age Individuals

Elizabeth G. Yex & Kathleen S. Chitty

University of Georgia

Author Note

Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia

HDFS 2300: Science of Studying Human Development

Dr. Jennifer George

November 16, 2021

The Level of Autonomy in Middle Age Individuals

Introduction

There are a plethora of studies pointing towards the theory that autonomy increases with age (Sheldon, Kasser, Houser-Marko, Jones, & Turban 2005), but the research in this area tends to focus on autonomy in terms of completing tasks independently rather than relying on others. The lifestyle of Nell Upshaw Gannon, revealed by her 1958 diaries, raises the question of whether or not autonomy is directly revealed through the circumstances that are necessary to make a middle-age individual happy. These diaries were picked from a collection over the duration of her lifetime, year by year. For example, Nell is a socialite living in the Athens, Georgia area who seems to depend on social events to maintain overall happiness. What does this insertion show about Nell's overall autonomy? This inquiry led to the theory that will be presented in the next few paragraphs.

The Study

Aim

The overall goal of this study was to generate a theory to answer the question of why Nell, or individuals with similar family life and socioeconomic status, operate the way they do through life. The overarching question is whether or not this lifestyle of relying on others and society indicates overall autonomy and whether alternative ways of living promote higher levels of autonomy. This theory serves to help others to understand the level of dependence in their lives and what exactly they are dependent upon.

Design

The study uses a year in Nell Upshaw Gannon's diary (1958) to collect data. This theory was developed using themes derived from line by line coding (Glaser & Strauss), in which each line was assigned a code word in order for the reader to understand what was important to Nell. After the themes were collected through line by line coding, grounded theory, a qualitative approach of collecting data through analysis and research (Glaser & Strauss), was used to analyze and develop a theory from the data collected. The theory is titled "The Level of Autonomy in Middle Age Individuals".

Sample

The sampling method used is convenience sampling-- due to the fact that the year of 1958 was chosen by the researchers and the data was obtained by simply visiting the Special Collection Library to retrieve the specific diary. The sample population is Nell Upshaw Gannon herself, as her lifestyle was analyzed and placed into a category for the respective theory.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to collect and categorize the data presented in Nell's diary, each page of the entirety of the year 1958 was scanned and organized into PDF format. The document was then split in half, with one half being read by one researcher and the other half being read by the other. Once the data was thoroughly analyzed, the findings were compared amongst the researchers. Constant comparison was implemented in order to discover what was truly important in Nell Upshaw Gannon's life. Constant comparison, also discovered by Glaser & Strauss, combines line-by-line coding and comparison of social situations (Goetz & LeCompte). Once Nell's priorities were established, grounded theory (Glaser & LeCompte) was used to develop a generalized theory that could be applied to a large sample of middle-age individuals.

Findings

“The Level of Autonomy in Middle-Aged Individual” is a model that separates those in the age range of 40-60 into two categories: Type A and Type B. The category that an individual is placed in, is supposed to reveal the aspects of life that bring them joy and, in turn, highlight their overall autonomy. Based on the findings in Nell’s diary, it is evident that Nell falls under the Type A category which is defined in detail below.

Type A

The type A category can also be called the dependent category, due to the fact that it requires a certain level of dependence on outside sources in order to obtain overall happiness. A person who falls under Type A is highly dependent on achieving societal standards in order to feel important. Someone in this category tends to “live through” their children (if they have any) and/or social events. Even so, a Type A individual usually puts their own needs over the needs of their family and cares more about their families’ appearance than its actual health. Lastly, a person in this category is likely always striving for more, rather than being content with where life currently is. This last point was evident in Nell’s personality when she complains of being unable to “find anything” in the entirety of Athens when casually shopping. (Gannon, 1958).

Type B

The Type B category, on the contrary, can also be called the independent category because overall happiness comes from the individual and the product of their own success or standards. The source of a Type B individual’s worth tends to be family or work, but it does not have to be one of those two sources. An individual categorized as Type B does not prioritize societal standards in their own life. They tend to categorize social events such as club meetings,

luncheons or grand parties as trivial in their life and allow them to have minimal effects in their life and self esteem. Their main source of self esteem derives from their own accomplishments and the happiness they find through a life partner and children, if applicable.

Analysis

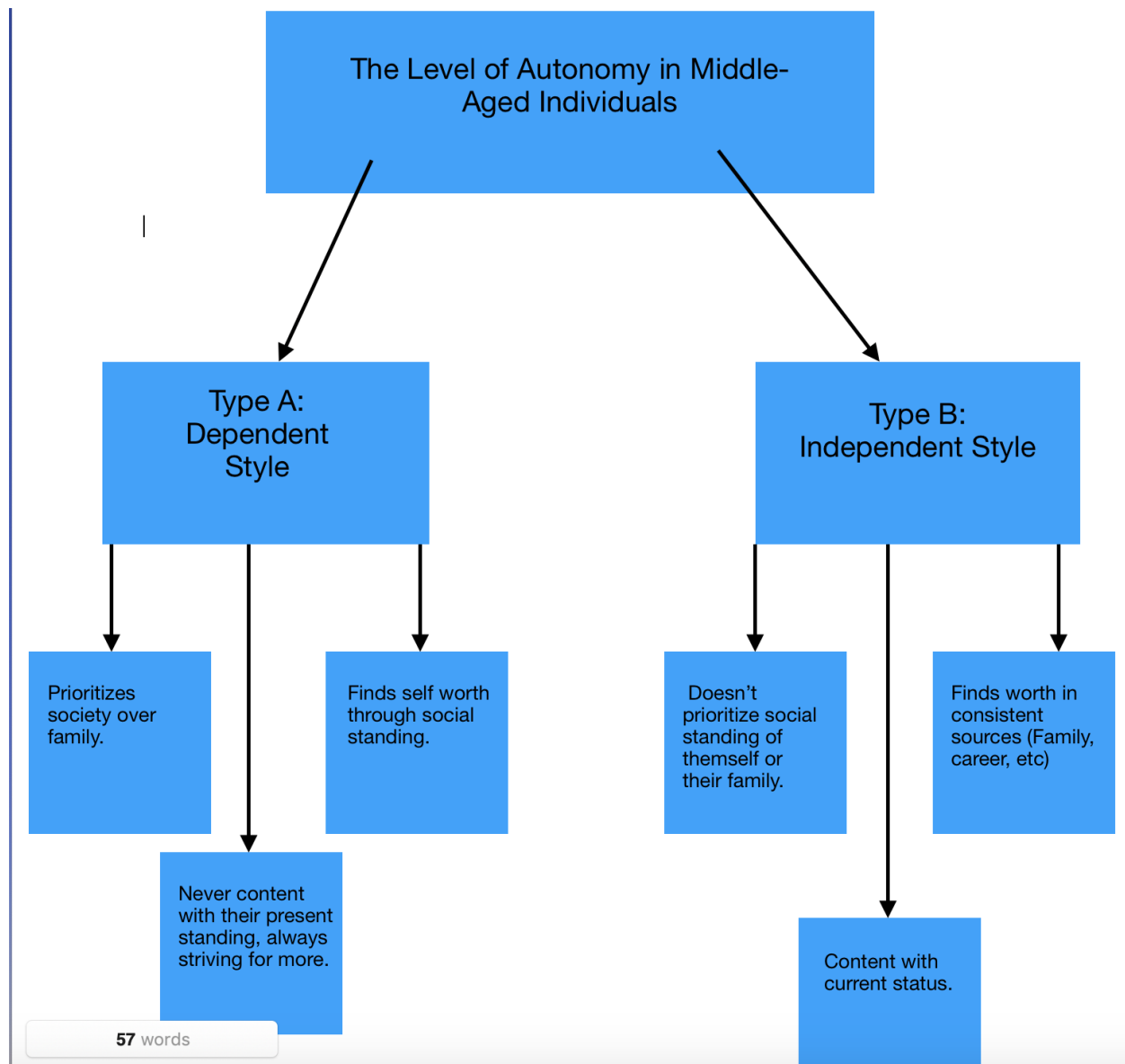
Throughout Nell's diary from 1958, it is apparent she fits into the Type A categorization. She writes continuous lines about which social events she attends, who all attended the party and even describes the various foods that were served at the party, while she only dedicates one or two lines occasionally when referring to her husband or daughter, Eleanor (Gannon, 1958). After receiving an unsettling phone call from her daughter, Nell writes "she seems nervous." (Gannon, 1958). Her writing leads the reader to believe she is not worried and even disinterested in her daughter's well being. Instead, she dedicates half a page writing about a man in town that was in a car accident and is now in the hospital. While this man is not a complete stranger, her writing indicates that they are only acquaintances, and she still spends more energy writing and visiting this man in the hospital for an afternoon rather than expending this energy on her own daughter. This clearly exemplifies Type A, in the way she is more concerned about her peers and fellow townspeople thinking highly of her rather than showing her own daughter she cares.

Conclusion

Individuals have the ability to choose their level of autonomy in their own lives depending on socioeconomic standing, some choosing to be dependent on material things and societal standards and some being fulfilled with themselves and their personal successes. The data collected from Nell's 1958 diary shows she lives her lifestyle in the latter style described

above. There is no right or wrong way to live, but choosing the certain things that fulfill you can affect your overall happiness levels in life.

Figure 1. The Level of Autonomy in Middle Age Individuals Theory



References

- Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory. In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Retrieved from ` http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Glaser_1967.pdf
- Goetz, J.P., & LeCompte, M.D. (1981). Ethnographic research and the problem of data reduction. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 12(1), 51–70.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1981.12.1.05x1283i>
- Sheldon, K.M., Kasser, T., Houser-Marko, L., Jones, T., & Turban, D. (2005). Doing one's duty: Chronological age, felt autonomy, and subjective well-being. *European Journal of Personality*, 19(2):97-115. doi:[10.1002/per.535](https://doi.org/10.1002/per.535)
- Upshaw, Gannon Nell (1958). *Nell Upshaw Gannon Diaries* (Box 3, Item 8). Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Special Collections Library, University of Georgia, Athens, GA.