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# PARENTAL AUTHORITY IN ADOLESCENT-PARENTS RELATIONSHIPS

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The study sets out to shed light on ways in which parents (communicatively) assert authority vis-à-vis their adolescent children in situations challenging parental authority, the perceived most probable outcomes of these situations, and attitudes towards ideal outcomes. To this aim four (situationally specific) vignettes are analyzed. The sample consisted of 194 first born children aged 11 to 18, and both of their parents living in Slovenia. The relevance of findings is generalized beyond the existing sample.

Keywords: authority, adolescents, parents, communication

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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Patterns of child-rearing and related (positive and negative) developmental outcomes have received considerable attention within the developmental research framework (for a more comprehensive review, see, for example, Darling & Steinberg, 1993). On the one hand, very diverse theoretical-empirical approaches emphasize the importance and co-existence of instrumental/regulating/controlling and affective/supportive/responsive parental practices for positive youth outcomes. On the other hand, these approaches explicitly or implicitly view parental behavior along the control-autonomy continuum which theoretically ranges from parents' total control over the child's behavior to parents ceding complete autonomy to the child. A wide array of studies indicates that these significant changes gradually occur during adolescence. The pattern of uni-

lateral, asymmetrical adolescent-parent relationships is claimed to develop into more equal, mutual and reciprocal relationships established toward the end of adolescence (Youniss & Smollar, 1985; Smetana, 1989, 1995; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Peterson et al., 1999; Smetana & Daddis, 2002; Smetana et al., 2005).

But social theorists, for example, Giddens (2000) and Beck (1997), claim that parent-children relationships in general have become 'more' democratic, i.e. they are more and more marked by equality, mutual respect, autonomy, and decision-making through communication (Giddens, 2000, 97-98). However, Beck (1997, 165-166) has warned that in a very central sense, it is not quite possible (yet?) to speak of a 'democratization of the family': "The old authority structures may indeed be weakened, and certainly their paint is scuffed; negotiation is becoming the dominant pattern, as a demand. ... However, the elements of a dialogue, of virtual exchange of roles, of listening and taking responsibility for one another remain underdeveloped."

Sociologically oriented research evidence confirms that parents and adolescent children subscribe to the ideals of democracy and negotiation (du Bois-Reymond et al., 1993; Solomon et al., 2002) but, on the other hand, it is highlighted that they still do not enter into the kind of dialogue that Beck is concerned with. Solomon et al. (2002) showed that under the apparent democratic openness of conversations between parents and adolescents, struggles for power between them take place, mostly through adolescents' eliciting and withholding of information, or threatening to do so. Differences in power between parents and adolescents remained in spite of the tendencies of horizontal ways of communicating.

A study of the development of rights and duties on the sample of post-adolescent girls in Slovenia showed that a large proportion of parents maintained their decision-making power even in personal issues, such as the girls' choice of haircut (Kuhar, 2008). This surprising finding could be explained by the prolongation of young people's cohabitation with their parents,<sup>1</sup> which should not be interpreted as merely a necessary survival strategy, but as the result of personal determinants such as exceptionally supportive and relatively high quality relationships between parents and young people (Ule & Kuhar, 2002; Ule & Kuhar, 2008). More than four fifths of Slovenian young people report of supportive and relatively high quality relationships with parents (Rener, 2006). Beside the positive function of family as buffer against the dangers, conflicts and stresses stemming from the outer world that is more and more demanding and risky for the young people, the research on postponement of child-bearing in Slovenia

among 23- to 33-olders (Ule & Kuhar, 2008) has pointed out self-perception of psychological immaturity and 'feeling of still being child' as possible implications of prolongation of youth under the parental guardianship.

On one hand, long lasting material and psychological dependency of Slovenian youth from parents suggests that adolescence is not the period when presupposed changes from asymmetric and constraining authority parents-children relationships to reciprocal and cooperative relationships take place. On the other hand, the relatively favorable perception of relationships between parents and children implies that parents and children have found (at least communicative) ways for working out tensions, connected with growing up youngsters' desire for decreasing parental surveillance and increasing the degree of autonomy. Against this background, the study of authority patterns in the developmental phase of adolescence seems to be all the more relevant. *The aim of the study is therefore to find out in what ways do parents assert their authority and how do adolescents react to their parents' authority demands.*

In the developmental-psychological studies, the term (*parental*) *authority* is often used, but without being further theoretically defined by the authors (e.g. in a special issue of the publication *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, edited by Smetana, 2005, the word *authority* is used even in the title without being more explicitly defined). Parental authority, for instance, tends to be equated with the distribution of decision-making power between parents and adolescents (e.g. Dornbusch et al., 1990; Bosma et al., 1996), or the parental legitimacy to set rules in different domains (e.g. Smetana, 1989, 1995; Smetana et al., 2005) – i.e. it is functionally equated with "the vehicle" for asserting the parental will.

This study draws on "functional" definitions of parental authority, while trying to broaden its conceptualization. A vignettes method was used to determine differences/similarities between parents' (mothers' and fathers') and adolescents' perceptions of their interactions in authority-challenging situations and the projected and ideal outcomes of such interactions. In contrast to past approaches, in addition to examining the distribution of power within the family (in this case established on the basis of the difference between real outcomes and adolescents' and parents' accounts of ideal outcomes), the study also focuses on the manner of parental enforcement of power and provides a more detailed insight into adolescents' reactions respecting the final outcomes of the situations.

## MEASURES

### Study Design

The study employs the vignette method which has been rarely used in the studies on parenting/family relationships (exceptions are, for example Phinney et al., 2005). The vignettes topics have been selected with the help of a preliminary study conducted in November 2007, involving 24 families with 11-18 year old first-born adolescents living in Slovenia. The adolescents, in an open-ended interview, were asked to list the four most common situations which could potentially trigger an argument between them and their mother and/or father regarding the adolescent's rights and duties or family rules. Mothers and fathers responded to the analogous questionnaire. Vignettes were generated on this basis of four most frequent topics. The vignettes used in the final study exemplify disagreements ensuing from adolescents' disregard for parental authority, which displays itself in adolescents' violation of parental (explicit or implicit) norms, rules or convictions. The disagreements concerned the priority of homework within adolescent's free time, an appropriate appearance, adolescents' contribution to household chores, and curfews (see Table 1).

☛ TABLE 1  
The vignettes used in studying the parent-adolescent authority relationships – the adolescents' version of the vignettes

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*Homework.* It is Wednesday afternoon. You are sitting in front of a computer screen. Your parents come home and realize that you are playing games (or something similar) before doing your homework and preparing for the next day. Your parents want you to do all your homework immediately.

*Piercing.* Your parents notice that you have had part of your body pierced. They are against piercing and want you to remove it immediately.

*Curfew.* It is Friday evening and you are going out. Your parents want you to come home at a certain hour. You come home one hour later without phoning your parents to say that you'd be late.

*Household chores.* Your parents ask you to vacuum the apartment on Saturday. You do not want to do it, so you tell your parents that you will not do it. They insist that you do the chore.

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Each vignette was followed by open-ended questions that stimulated respondents to complete the imaginary story by suggesting 1) how the situation would unfold in their concrete family situations, 2) what the outcome would be, and 3) how the situation would unfold ideally. The situations described presumed the presence of both parents (one parent in the case of a single-parent family) and the adolescent. The adolescents were answering for both parents (or for one parent in the case of a single-parent family).

## Data Gathering and the Sample

The study was conducted in Slovenia in January 2008. The sample comprised 194 families, i.e. 558 respondents (194 first-born adolescents, 191 mothers and 173 fathers). The data collection method was the non-probability snowball sampling technique. To qualify for participation, the firstborn child had to be between 11 and 18 years old, this being the age range which is most often considered as the adolescence period. The families were recruited by 22 trained interviewers. The data collection took place at the subject's homes. The respondents were guided by interviewers. The interviewers were alone with the individual respondents. Interviews with family members were immediately following one another.

In the adolescent sample, 90 girls and 104 boys were interviewed with three age groups being represented: early adolescence (24 girls and 26 boys aged 11-13), middle adolescence (31 girls and 35 boys aged 14-15), and late adolescence (35 girls and 43 boys aged 16-18). 22% of the children were the only child in the family, 60.1% were the elder of the two children and 17.9% the oldest in a family with three children. The parent sample consisted of 191 mothers (the mean age of the mothers was 39.8 and the standard deviation was 4.2) and 173 fathers (the mean age of the fathers was 42.7 and the standard deviation was 4.5).

All variables point to the conclusion that the sample represented a wide range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Most families (87.6%) were intact families (with both biological parents), and 12.4% were single-parent or reorganized families.<sup>2</sup> 45.4% of the interviewed families live in the countryside and 54.6% in urban areas.<sup>3</sup> The standard of living was (indirectly) assessed based on the question about parental education and individual respondent's estimation of the family's material resources (on a 5-point-scale ranging from "barely make ends meet" to "live very comfortably").<sup>4</sup>

As regards parental education (reported by the parents themselves), 8.3% of mothers and 7.5% of fathers had primary school education, 61.4% of mothers and 65.9% of fathers had secondary school education, while 30.2% of mothers and 26.6% of fathers had university education. The estimations of family's material resources differed among individual family members. Children had a more favorable perception than parents. Only 22.7% of adolescents compared to 41.2% of mothers and 39% of fathers described their standard as low; 60.3% of adolescents, 54% of mothers and 50.6% of fathers assessed it as medium, while 16.5% of adolescents and only 4.8% of mothers and 10.5% of fathers thought that it was high.

## The Coding of Vignettes

The sample of 558 respondents altogether resulted in 2232 vignettes (four vignettes per participant, with three open-ended questions per vignette). First, a sample of 60 questionnaires was randomly selected (questionnaires for adolescents representing one-third of this sample and parental answers two-thirds). Second, categories were constructed by three different coders – by the author and by two other skilled researchers.

The coding procedure in the study has followed the constant comparative method of data processing originally described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further elaborated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Mesec (1998). Although informed by different studies on parental socialization behaviors, the two coders have not followed any a priori analytical scheme. The intercoder reliability coefficients for courses of interactions, projected and ideal results were, respectively,  $kappa = 0.85$ , 0.73 and 0.78. The final typologies of answers are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2  
Coding criteria for situations (individual categories will be presented in more detail under Results)

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### *Courses of the interactions in situations challenging parental authority*

1. Situation not relevant (due to parental tolerance, negotiation space allowed by the parents, or the congruity of parental and adolescent's viewpoints)
2. Dialogical communication
3. Parental reminder
4. Non-reciprocal communication

### *Results of the interactions in situations challenging parental authority*

1. Situation not relevant due to parental tolerance or negotiation space allowed by parents
2. Situation not relevant because the adolescent holds the same viewpoints regarding the issue as his/her parents, i.e. would not behave in the way described by the situation; s/he is self-responsible
3. Agreement
4. Adolescent's compliance
5. Adolescent's disobedience

### *Ideal results of the interactions in situations challenging parental authority*

1. Parental tolerance – parents do not oppose the adolescent's choices/behaviors
  2. Adolescent's self-responsibility
  3. Agreement
  4. Adolescent's compliance
- 

## RESULTS

First the percentages of individual answers to the three groups of questions and for each vignette have been calculated. Variations among vignettes are illustrated by graphs; parents' and adolescents' answers about the most probable courses and results are shown together because t-tests (see Table 3) showed that there was only one statistically significant difference be-

TABLE 3  
Significance of differences between proportions of answers for different categories – a comparison of adolescents' and parents' results (t-tests)

	Adolescent-mother		Adolescent-father		Mother-father	
	t	sig	t	sig	t	sig
Courses homework	-1.866	0.064	-1.078	0.309	0.325	0.746
Courses piercing	-1.352	0.178	0.071	0.943	-1.475	0.142
Courses curfew	-1.037	0.301	-1.613	0.108	0.824	0.411
Courses chores	-1.133	0.200	-1.208	0.200	0.000	1.000
Results homework	-1.032	0.404	-1.393	0.110	2.078	0.039*
Results piercing	-1.515	0.130	-1.560	0.120	1.139	0.256
Results curfew	-1.237	0.101	-1.853	0.065	-1.595	0.112
Results chores	-0.862	0.390	-1.204	0.209	1.214	0.226
Ideal results homework	-3.457	0.047*	-2.392	0.018*	0.899	0.370
Ideal results piercing	-7.347	0.000**	-9.009	0.000**	1.349	0.202
Ideal results curfew	-17.538	0.000**	-15.029	0.000**	-1.251	0.206
Ideal results chores	-16.489	0.000**	-14.069	0.000**	-1.344	0.180

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (T-test is significant at these levels)

tween the answers of individual parents and children as well as between mothers' and fathers' answers in these two examples – namely mothers' and fathers' answers about the most probable results of the homework situation. Similarly, there were no statistically significant differences among parents' answers regarding ideal results (see Table 3), but parents' answers did differ from those of adolescents. Adolescents' ideal conceptions are shown separately from those of their parents.

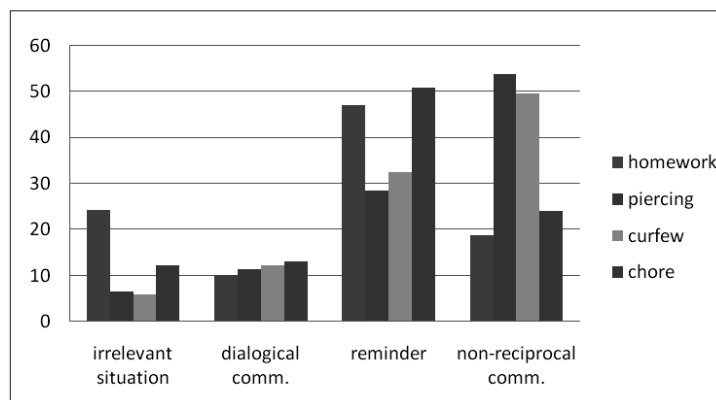
### Projected Courses of the Interactions in Situations Challenging Parental Authority

Descriptive analysis showed that parental reminder was the most common category of answers regarding the course of interactions in the homework and chores situations, while in the curfew and piercing situations the most common category of answers was non-reciprocal communication (see Figure 1). The proportion of dialogical communication was relatively low in all four situations. The two least frequent categories of answers implied that the description of situation was irrelevant due to the perceived same viewpoints of parents and adolescents or due to parental tolerance.

Despite the positive or neutral tone, the interactions under the *parental reminder* category are mostly controlled by parents and they do not give the adolescent the opportunity to negotiate. Such interactions usually confirm the "wrongness" of the adolescent's act and aim for an *agreement* on the improvement of the situation. Examples are: 'I explain to my child that it is wrong to stay in front of the computer if they have other duties which are more important. You need to be responsible about the school.' – mother 55, the homework

vignette; 'I give advice to my child that she should first do the homework and then she will be able to play computer games.' – father 60, the homework vignette; 'We agree on why it is wrong to do this and how I should act in the future – if I am being late I should at least call so that my parents would not worry.' – adolescent son 53, the curfew vignette.

➔ FIGURE 1  
 Courses of interactions  
 in situations  
 challenging parental  
 authority – the  
 percentages of all  
 family members



*Non-reciprocal communication* labels those types of communication where parents tend to pursue their own agenda without taking into account the needs or requirements of the adolescent, by employing a coercive style and explicitly taking away from the adolescent the opportunity to negotiate. Such communication was expressed as a parental command, a threat, a warning, a reproach, a critique, lecturing, setting of conditions, a parental (emotional) outburst, irritation, shouting, exacerbation, blaming, threats of implementing sanctions etc. For example: 'When I would come home, I would go directly to my room, then my mother would enter and she would tell me that if I do not call the next time, I will no longer be allowed to go out.' – son 8, curfew vignette; 'We argue for an hour or so, but I do not withdraw my decision.' – father 54, homework vignette; 'She would have to do the work immediately, no excuses. The child has to obey.' – mother 70, chores vignette; 'We start to argue, which means that I raise my voice at my child because she does not obey my repeated warnings to stop playing the computer game.' – mother 60, the homework vignette.

The answers categorized as *dialogical communication* imply that parents and children listen to each other, respect each other's point of view and/or attempt to reach agreement on the basis of genuine involvement in communication (comp. Kuhar, 2006). In this case, the respondents reported on types of communication such as negotiation about the adolescent's rights/duties/rules, debate, discussion, compromise-seeking, consensus-seeking, agreement-seeking, analysis of the ado-



lescent's wishes, analysis of advantages and disadvantages/dangers of a certain act etc. For example: 'It would surprise me, but I would try to obtain information from my child about why he/she decided to have a piercing and what it means to them.' – father 155, the piercing vignette; 'First my parents give their opinion about piercing, and then I get to express my opinion. Then we try to reach an agreement.' – son 58, the piercing vignette; 'My parents would want to know why I did not stick to our agreement, why I did not call, they would tell me that they were worried.' – adolescent daughter 21, the curfew vignette.

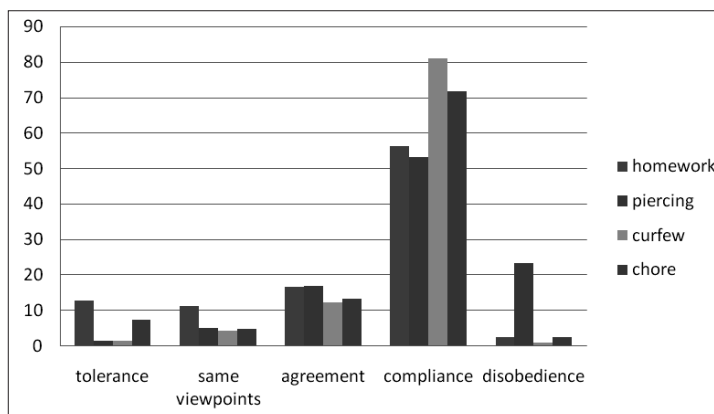
The *parental tolerance* category (under irrelevant situation in Figure 1, exact percentages in Figure 2) includes answers implying that parents do not oppose the adolescent's behavior/acts ('I don't think I should further complicate the matter, as I know that in this case he will have the final word.' – mother 70, the piercing vignette; 'Since my child is so obedient, good at school, I let her have the piercing, although I do mind' – father 17, the piercing vignette) or that they allow the adolescent at least some negotiation space or allow the adolescent some manoeuvring space, the latter most often in the homework vignette ('I let the child stay behind the computer for a while and then make her do her homework' – mother 135, the homework vignette). Parental tolerance was often conditioned on school success. The answers under *the same viewpoints* category (also under irrelevant situation in Figure 1, exact percentages in Figure 2) meant that the adolescent would act according to parents' expectations, or was self-responsible ('My daughter knows how many duties she has and if she can carry them out. Therefore I only ask her whether she can afford to stay in front of the computer' – father 65, the homework vignette; 'My daughter likes to help with chores.' – mother 67, chores vignette; 'In our family a piercing is out of the question because the child knows that her body rejects it, so this is irrelevant to us.' – mother 99, the piercing vignette; 'I would not do this without first consulting my parents. Although they probably would not let me do it.' – daughter 62, the piercing vignette). This category implied the highest level of adolescent's internalization of parental views.

### **Projected Results of the Interactions in Situations Challenging Parental Authority**

The most frequent perceived result was that the adolescent would comply with the rule, especially in the curfew and chores situations (see Figure 2). Only a small share of respondents reported an agreement between the parents and the adolescent. The adolescent's non-conformity or disobedience was

FIGURE 2  
 Projected results of  
 interactions in  
 situations challenging  
 parental authority –  
 the percentages of all  
 family members

expressed more or less only in the piercing situation. Small numbers of answers were coded as *parental tolerance* or *same viewpoints*.



The most frequent answer was that the adolescent would comply with the rule, but different respondents laid different emphases on this answer. This category includes answers emphasising: the unquestionability of conformity (i.e. 'The child has to mention an excusable reason and do their homework immediately.' – mother 7, homework vignette; 'I obey because we have such an arrangement.' – daughter 5, chores vignette); involuntary conformity (i.e. 'I would be forced to remove the piercing.' – daughter 10, piercing vignette; 'The child respects that she has to remove the piercing because it is inappropriate for her age and environment, but she is sulking.' – mother 80, the piercing vignette); reflected, but only extrinsic conformity (i.e. 'I only obey to prevent quarrelling and to be left in peace.' – son 191, homework vignette); conformity after failed resistance ('I try to convince them to the contrary but I usually fail, so I submit.' – daughter 55, the chores vignette; 'At first there is rebellion and avoidance but, in the end, everything is done' – mother 105, the chores vignette); conformity due to parental arguments ('I would convince the child with arguments that her behavior does not have any sense.' – father 22, piercing vignette); or compliance in the form of the adolescent's apologising for their actions, and promises that they would not break the rule again in the curfew vignette ('My daughter would first look for excuses and finally she would admit her mistake.' – father 85, the curfew vignette; 'The child apologizes and gives reasons why they were late. We parents say this should never happen again because we were very worried.' – mother 62, the curfew vignette). The compliance category also includes the answer that the adolescent had to be subjected to a sanction (also physically), as this type of answer only emerged in the curfew vignette and for less than

5% of the respondents ('Probably my father would smack me. I would be forced to remove the piercing. I don't like my parents telling me what to do.' – daughter 10, piercing vignette).

In the homework and chores situations, the answers in the *agreement* category mostly expressed that the adolescent would do their task at another time ('The child has to have some time off, to relax after hard work at school. The child forces a prolongation of the time off. We both let go a bit.' – mother 98, the homework vignette; 'I vacuum clean a day or so later.' – adolescent son 68, the chores vignette). In the curfew situation, the answers classified under *agreement* meant that the adolescent only provided an explanation to the parents for being late ('I tell them the reason. If it seems realistic, everything is just fine.' – adolescent daughter 92, the curfew vignette). In the piercing situation, an answer of this type meant that the adolescent could keep piercing in agreement with their parents or that they reached the consensus that the adolescent would remove jewelry ('We would talk and make agreements for some time and in the end the parents would let me keep the piercing.' – adolescent son 100, the piercing vignette).

The least frequent answers were those expressing the adolescent's non-conformity or disobedience. As the curfew vignette as such presumes the adolescent's disobedience of the parental rule, in this case this answer was not used explicitly, while in the homework and the chores vignettes it was only given by less than 5% of the respondents ('I feel sad that my child does not want to help with the household chores and has no working habits. I show that I am upset but to no avail.' – mother 59, the chores vignette). Most often disobedience was expressed in the piercing vignette, yet still in under one-fifth of the cases ('It's my body – I am the one who decides what I'll do with it.' – son 191, piercing vignette).

The data on how the vignettes situations would end show the same percentage of answers in the "irrelevant situation" category given by those adolescents who already in "the course of interactions" stated that their parents are a priori tolerant of their respective behaviors or that they would not act in the ways described in the vignettes because they are self-responsible with regard to the considered questions.

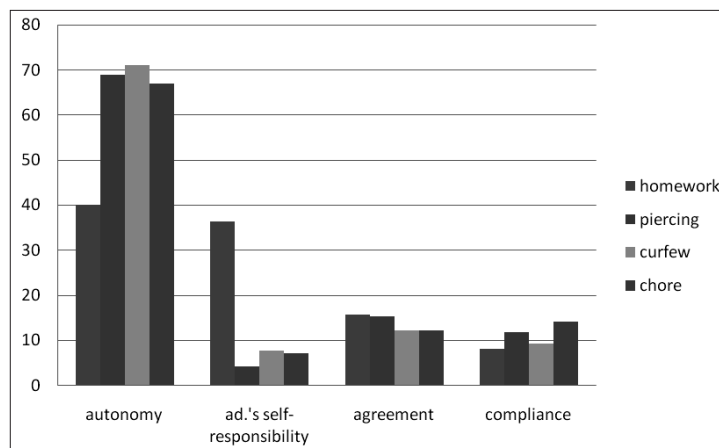
### **Ideal Results of Interactions in Situations Challenging Parental Authority**

As regards respondents' conceptions of ideal results, I have noted differences between parents' and adolescents' responses (Figures 3 and 4). The most frequent answer of the adolescents was that they wished to be allowed to have some negotiation space or decision-making autonomy ('It is my body – I would like to decide myself what to do with it.' – son 191, the

piercing vignette; 'I wish to be able to decide which household chores to do and when.' – adolescent daughter 99, the chores vignette). However, they often added that they were aware that their parents were right, which relativizes the adolescents' desire for parental tolerance ('I wish nobody would nag me, but I also know that they only wish me well.' – daughter 5, the homework vignette; 'Of course, I wish that an extra hour out would not be so fatal, although slowly one gets to know that our parents were right when they forbade us to do certain things or go to certain places. And yet every adolescent wishes to have limitless exits.' – daughter 1, the curfew vignette; 'Of course, I wished that I did not have to vacuum clean. Like ten years ago, when I was still too little to do it ... But inside I know this is wrong. I guess I will realize this when I have children, a house...' – daughter 1, the chores vignette).

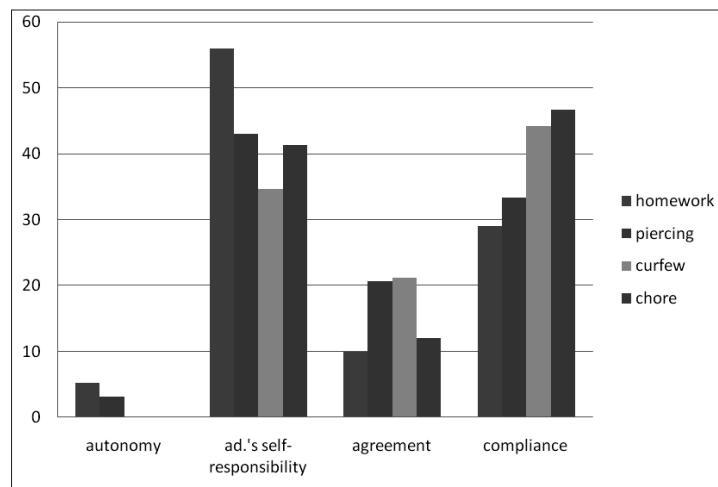
Parents underlined their wish for self-responsibility on the part of their children, and moreover, for their internalization of rules/values to prevent the situations suggested by this study, or they said that they expected their children to "obey" or fulfill their requirements ('I wish I would not have to tell my child that she needs to vacuum clean. She should know that the apartment needs to be vacuum cleaned' – mother 181, the chores vignette; 'I wish I wouldn't have to tell the child that homework comes first' – father 58, the homework vignette). The parents tend to lay more stress on compliance in the curfew and chores situations than in the homework and piercing situations.

➔ FIGURE 3  
 Ideal results of interactions in situations challenging parental authority – the percentages of adolescents



Relatively few adolescents expressed a wish for self-responsibility, except in the homework situation where they wished for self-responsibility nearly as often as for autonomy ('I wish I would not be attracted at all to the computer so much, and the described situation would not even occur.' – daughter 3, the homework vignette).

➔ FIGURE 4  
Ideal results of  
interactions in  
situations challenging  
parental authority –  
the percentages of  
both parents



Relatively often the parents expressed their wish for the adolescent to 'obey' or fulfill their requirement ('I wish that my child would remove her piercing and take our advice and that we do not argue about it.' – mother 133, the piercing vignette; 'I wish that she respects the time to arrive home which we had agreed upon, without exception' – father 67, the curfew vignette; 'I wish he would apologize for being late, give the reason and promise that this would not happen again in the future. I wish that he would stick to our agreement, the rules and be aware that otherwise he makes me worry.' – mother 95, the curfew vignette). Only a small share of adolescents stated that they wished to be compliant ('In this case, ideally, I would comply and do it without further negotiations and problems. This makes our relations run better.' – adolescent daughter 91, the curfew vignette).

On average, the wish to reach an agreement was not expressed frequently by either group of respondents ('It seems right that the child says no if they have a sound reason. Whether it is sound remains to be discussed.' – father 34, the chores vignette; 'I wish I could reach an agreement with my parents to allow me to sit in front of my computer half an hour longer and then do my homework' – adolescent son 18, the homework vignette). Parents wished for agreement in the piercing and curfew situations more frequently than in the homework and chores situations, while adolescents' answers regarding agreement did not vary across situations.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the vignette study involving a few parental authority challenging situations this study attempted to primarily present patterns of the assertion of parental authority and the consequent reactions of adolescents in Slovenian families. All

the acquired data suggest that it is the parents who mainly control the 'rules of the game'. While the traditionally grounded demanding/commanding pattern in which children have to obey unequivocally and which only allows for narrow or non-existent negotiating margins is rarely present, the prevailing ways of the course and outcome of authority-challenging situations in Slovenian families with adolescents do not show that the balance of decision-making power between parents and adolescents is heading towards equality.

Furthermore, the very ways in which parental demands or rules are asserted and the types of adolescents' reactions do not reflect the prevalence of constructive authority patterns whereby parents would provide guidance and direction and, on occasion, exert control, but where they would, in general, progressively allow the increased autonomy and self-regulation of their children (Smetana & Daddis, 2002).

The findings suggest that Slovenian parents tend to maintain their authority over adolescents in different ways rather than voluntarily resigning from it, and that families with adolescents live in a pseudo-democratic environment because parents assert their will mainly through conversations, while the adolescents only comply with their parents' requests after a conversation or a protest or simply 'for the sake of peace'. The positive or neutral *parental reminders* that were on average the most frequent answer imply a special form of parental orders, which could be tentatively described as seemingly democratic despite their actual unilateral character. Instead of the parents really listening to the adolescent, allowing a difference in opinion and the adolescents' influence and giving arguments for their demands and rules, a mutual, open, egalitarian exchange of opinions or negotiation only formally takes place. At the same time, parents have to continuously assert their authority which they not only do in (more or less) deliberative but frequently also in – situation-specific – unilateral, non-reciprocal, even repressive ways.

The reported interaction results show that the adolescents have a relatively small manoeuvring space regarding their parents' demands. For example, they can only decide on their own whether they will do their homework before or after playing a computer game on the same day, although the parents would want them to do it immediately, and that they will do a household chore a little later than was initially agreed or at the most change it by doing another chore. Adolescents indeed choose to comply in response to their parents' enforcement of their own will (particularly following parental reminder or non-reciprocal communication), but the study demonstrated different forms of compliance, from internalized obedience to reflected, solely external compliance ("only for the

sake of peace"). On the one hand, this is a kind of voluntary, "autonomous" subjection, although adolescents do not subscribe to it. On the other hand, it represents "internalized" obedience *per se*, as is also suggested by their ideal conceptions of outcomes, with adolescents frequently asserting that their parents were right although they themselves would prefer to see the situation unfolding differently or having a different outcome.

One trait shared by all groups is a relatively low proportion of answers in the 'parental tolerance' category, meaning that only a tiny minority of adolescents have (at least some) negotiation space regarding their parents' demands. The level of dialogical communication and the level of reached agreement in the studied situations are also relatively low. While in reality adolescents would probably comply with parental demands (though they disagree with them), in an ideal case they wish to have more space for negotiation or decision-making jurisdiction. The perceived results are closer to parents' desires, although a large proportion of them wish that their children would internalize the rules instead of simply fulfilling concrete demands. The level of answers in the *same viewpoints* category, which *per se* implies (already internalized) parental authority is, in contrast to parents' ideal conceptions, very low.

As regards situational specificities, obviously the most controversial situations are represented by piercing and disregard for a curfew, as the parents here use non-reciprocal and even coercive ways of asserting their demands more readily than in the homework and chores vignettes. The controversy of items such as piercing and disregard for a curfew can be explained as follows: the former implies an intervention on the body, which is publicly visible and a sort of signal of the adolescent having decision-making power; the latter is related to parents' worries about their children's safety (regarding sexuality, substance use, road traffic). The comparatively milder enforcement of parental will in the homework and chores situations can be explained by both items being relatively unproblematic from the aspect of adolescent's execution of parental rules. Not surprisingly, the level of parental tolerance and of the same viewpoints answers, with the latter implying adolescents' self-responsibility, is the highest in the homework situation. As regards perceived outcomes, in addition to the homework situation, the piercing situation, too, has on average a lower share of adolescents' compliance but also a higher share of answers belonging in the *disobedience* category. The situational specificity of reported results is not surprising if the findings from the social-domains framework are taken into account, which point out that parental authority "is

neither perceived by adolescents and children, nor applied by parents in a uniform fashion across the range of children's behavior" (Nucci et al., 2005).

In the light of the existing data on the prolonged stay of young Slovenians in their original families and on the quality of parent-children relationships in Slovenia, it seems that some kind of long-term symbiosis has been established between young people and their parents allowing them the feeling of at least the fiction of egalitarianism, while in reality keeping them in an ever deeper, age-inappropriate dependence on their parents. Such relations leave young people with a feeling of certainty in today's risky and uncertain (post-socialist) world, while keeping them in a state of psychological immaturity and preventing them from even developing a wish to be independent.

As regards the contribution of this study to the conceptualization of authority, my approach seems to broaden the existing functional definitions by analyzing those aspects that seem to be absent from other similar studies. This study of the communicative ways of asserting parental demands in different situations and the (manners of) adolescents' reactions, exposed the less explicit aspects of authority-autonomy patterns to which Brannen et al. (1994), as well as Solomon et al. (2002) drew attention by examining self-disclosing in the parents – young people relationship and showing that parents made use of strategies of covert parental influence especially through communicative means. By also researching the outcomes of controversial communicative (concrete) events, a clearer picture of how communication is used as a means of control was provided. Nevertheless, rather than conceptualizing authority in a new manner, this study exposes the need for an in-depth and clear explication of the concept of parental authority as a theoretical term and not only as an (empirical) construct, and the need for an integral, culturally sensitive conceptual framework.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Slovenia even has one of the highest levels of young men and women aged 18-34 living in parental households – immediately following Italy and Malta, in spite of the relatively smooth transition from a planned to a market economy-based society and the relatively favorable economic situation (Mandič, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> According to the Census 2002 (of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia) 14.3% of 11-18-olds live in single-parent families, but there is no official data on reorganized families.

<sup>3</sup> According to official statistics, approximately half of the two million Slovenian population lives in urban areas and another half in non-urban areas (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2008), but



since the countryside is also relatively developed and mostly non-rural it is not a relevant discriminatory variable.

<sup>4</sup> The question on parental employment was not used as a discriminatory variable since Slovenia has a long tradition of female full-time employment and the official unemployment in Slovenia in 2008 was lower than 10% (5.5% for men and 8.1% for women) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2008).

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## Roditeljski autoritet u odnosima između roditelja i adolescenata

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Cilj je ove studije rasvijetliti načine na koje roditelji (komunikacijski) potvrđuju autoritet prema svojoj djeci adolescentske dobi u situacijama koje roditeljski autoritet stavljaju na kušnju, razmotriti najvjerojatnije percipirane ishode tih situacija i stavove prema idealnim ishodima. Stoga su analizirane četiri (situacijski specifične) vinjete. Uzorak se sastojao od 194 prvorodena djeteta od 11 do 18 godina i obaju njihovih roditelja koji žive u Sloveniji. Relevantnost dobivenih rezultata prelazi okvire ispitnog uzorka.

Ključne riječi: autoritet, adolescenti, roditelji, komunikacija

## Elterliche Autorität im Verhältnis zwischen Eltern und Adoleszenten

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Mit dieser Studie soll untersucht werden, auf welche Weise sich Eltern (auf dem Wege der Kommunikation) ihren adoleszenten Kindern gegenüber behaupten, zumal in Situationen, die die elterliche Autorität gefährden. Es sollen die wahrscheinlichsten Verlaufsweisen „brenzlicher“ Situationen ins Auge gefasst werden, ferner ideale Verlaufsweisen sowie die elterliche Einstellung dazu. Zu diesem Zweck wurden vier (situationsspezifische) Vignetten analysiert. Die Untersuchungsteilnehmer bestanden aus 194 erstgeborenen Kindern im Alter von 11 bis 18 Jahren sowie ihren Müttern und Vätern (alle in Slowenien wohnhaft). Die Relevanz der ermittelten Ergebnisse übersteigt den Rahmen der Probandengruppe.