

Developmental Milestones- Parental Attachment and Intervention in Late Adolescence: A Case Study in Debre Markos University

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Abstract

Adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by rapid physical, cognitive, and psychosocial transformations that influence a person's journey into adulthood. This qualitative case study explored the developmental milestones and parental attachment of a 21-year-old female university student (pseudonym: Genet) at Debre Markos University. The case study participant was selected using purposive sampling technique. This study used interview, participant observation and document analysis to explore the physical, cognitive and psychosocial development including the emotional relationship with her parents. In order to analyze these qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed. The research findings showed that the participant reached physical and emotional maturity similar with the ideal characteristics of late adolescence; however, the participant also revealed low academic self-efficacy, inadequate assertiveness, and a blurred sense of future goals. Peer influence and romantic relationships emerged as dominant socialization factors, while the parental emotional ties became low as a result of the physical detachment that may strengthen a sense of independence. To address the identified academic and psychological problems, Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and study skills training were applied, leading to improved self-efficacy and time management skills. The study recommends the importance of supportive parental relationships and academic guidance for specific and similar cases during the late adolescent stage in university settings. Implications for developmental psychologists and educators are discussed.

Keywords: late adolescence, developmental milestones, parental attachment, psychosocial development, academic self-efficacy

Introduction

Adolescence is widely recognized as a dynamic and transitional phase of human development marked by profound physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial transformations (Arnett, 2012; Santrock et al., 2023). In this way, developmental milestones are cognitive, psychosocial and physical skills that can be achieved within a specific age range, serving as an indicator of growth and development across the lifespan (Berk, 2018; Santrock, 2021). Adolescence is a bridge between childhood and

adulthood with heightened sense of autonomy, identity formation, emotional regulation, and the establishment of interpersonal relationships. However, the onset, duration, and experiences of adolescence vary considerably across cultures and contexts. In developing nations like Ethiopia, adolescents often face accelerated transitions to adulthood due to economic pressures, educational access, and cultural expectations (Megquier & Belohlav, 2014).

Western theorists such as Erikson and Bandura have long examined adolescence as a period of identity exploration, cognitive expansion, and psychosocial adjustment (Bandura, 1995; Erikson, 1968). Late adolescence, often defined as ages 18–22, is associated with the consolidation of identity, emotional regulation, and increased autonomy (Shaffer & Kipp, 2024). Individuals in this stage typically explore intimate relationships and make crucial decisions regarding careers and adult roles independently (Papalia et al., 2023). However, these tasks can be hindered by low academic self-efficacy, peer pressure, and insufficient parental support that directly affect psychological adjustment and academic success (Bandura, 1995; Miller, 2016).

University students frequently experience psychological and academic stressors due to limited support systems and adjustment challenges (Patterson, 2009). Many late adolescents, particularly females, encounter difficulties in balancing academic responsibilities, social expectations, and emotional well-being (Shaffer & Kipp, 2024). Consequently, the study of individual developmental trajectories in such contexts can offer insights into broader psychosocial patterns. This case study investigated the physical, cognitive, and psychosocial developmental milestones, as well as the parental attachment of a late adolescent female university student in Debre Markos University. The study also explores how contextual factors such as peer relationships, academic experiences, and cultural background shape her developmental outcomes. Moreover, interventions using Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) were implemented to enhance her academic self-efficacy and coping strategies.

Cognitive development during late adolescence expands beyond abstract reasoning to include self-regulation, critical thinking, and goal-directed planning. University settings provide contexts for intellectual growth but also introduce challenges such as academic anxiety, low self-efficacy, and uncertainty about future goals (Bandura, 1995). Studies in African higher education contexts show that students' cognitive development is influenced not only by curriculum and teaching methods but also by emotional well-being and perceived academic competence (Nsamenang, 1995). When

adolescents internalize negative self-statements such as “I can’t succeed academically,” their cognitive and motivational functioning declines. Cognitive-behavioral interventions, such as Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT), can effectively challenge these irrational beliefs (Thompson, 2015).

The psychosocial domain of adolescence encompasses identity formation, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships. Erikson’s (1968) stage of identity vs. role confusion captures the essence of late adolescent exploration. Peer relationships gain prominence as adolescents seek social validation and emotional intimacy (Santrock et al., 2023). However, excessive peer conformity can hinder autonomy and assertiveness (Deshmukh & Sharma, 2024).

Attachment theory posits that the quality of early parent–child relationships influences later emotional regulation and interpersonal behavior (Bowlby, 1988). Although late adolescents strive for autonomy, continued parental support remains essential for emotional security and adaptive functioning (Miller, 2016). Secure attachment fosters confidence, self-regulation, and resilience in navigating new social and academic environments. In contrast, weak or distant parental bonds may lead to emotional distress and increased reliance on peers for validation. For university students living away from home, maintaining meaningful parental communication is crucial for psychosocial balance (Patterson, 2009).

Despite extensive theoretical frameworks, limited research has examined how developmental milestones and parental attachment manifest among Ethiopian university students. Existing studies often generalize adolescence based on Western norms, overlooking cultural variations in family structures, gender roles, and educational experiences. This case study contributes to filling this gap by offering an in-depth exploration of a late adolescent’s developmental trajectory, attachment patterns, and interventions in a local context.

The general objective of this case study was to explore the physical, cognitive, psychosocial developmental milestones and parental attachment of a female student in late adolescence.

The specific objectives of this case study were to:

- Explore the physical, cognitive and psychosocial developmental milestones of an adolescent girl during late adolescence period.
- Examine the attachment of the adolescent girl with her parents considering attachment theories.

- Conduct psychological interventions in order to reduce the social, academic and psychological problems of the study participant

Method

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory case study design to explore the developmental milestones and parental attachment of a late adolescent female university student. Because this design allowed for an in-depth understanding of the participant's lived experiences, emotions, and developmental patterns in her academic and social contexts. A case study was particularly suitable because it enabled the study to investigate the complex interplay among physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and attachment factors within a real-life setting (Yin, 2018). The study also included an intervention component based on Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) to address the participant's low academic self-efficacy and related psychosocial issues.

Participants

The participant, given the pseudonym *Genet* to protect confidentiality, was a 21-year-old female university student enrolled in the Department of English at Debre Markos University. She was selected purposively because she had social, academic, and psychological problems and volunteered to participate in this study while attending her higher education. Genet was the fourth child in a family of eight children. Her father, a priest in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and her mother, who completed basic literacy education, both provided moderate emotional support but limited financial resources. The family's monthly income was approximately 2,500 Ethiopian birr, placing them within a low socioeconomic category by local standards. At the time of data collection, Genet was in her third year of study, with an overall grade point average (GPA) of 2.3, lower than her classmates' mean GPA of 2.9. She reported difficulties in academic engagement, social interaction, and emotional stability, which motivated this research to examine her developmental characteristics comprehensively

Data gathering Instruments

The primary data gathering instruments employed to collect the qualitative data were observation checklist, Interview guidelines, and document analysis.

Observation Checklist - A structured observation checklist was prepared from developmental psychology literature (Papalia et al., 2023; Santrock, 2011). The checklist contained items assessing physical, cognitive, and psychosocial milestones,

including maturity indicators, academic engagement, emotional regulation, and peer interactions.

Interview Guides - Four sets of semi-structured interview guides were prepared and applied to collect the qualitative data. For the participant: 5 questions on physical development, 5 on cognitive development, 6 on psychosocial development, and 4 on parental attachment. For the participant's intimate friend: 4 questions on physical development, 4 on cognitive development, and 5 on psychosocial development. Questions were designed to elicit open-ended responses to allow rich qualitative data.

Document Analysis - The participant's academic records (GPA across six semesters) and class average scores were obtained from the university registrar, with permission, to contextualize her cognitive and academic development.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process took place over three months, combining participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. Initially, the researcher established rapport with Genet and her intimate friend to create a comfortable environment for open communication and to collect the data. Observation was conducted for three consecutive days each week, for approximately 20–30 minutes per session in classroom settings. Notes were taken regarding Genet's physical presentation, interaction patterns, and emotional responses. Moreover, interviews with Genet and her friend were conducted separately, each lasting about 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded through detailed notetaking, as the participants declined audio or video recording. With regard to document analysis, academic performance data were collected to triangulate findings on cognitive and academic self-efficacy development.

Method of Data Analysis

In this case study, a thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses and observation notes were coded according to the major themes of physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and parental attachment development. In coding the data, meaningful words, phrases and sentences were identified and related codes grouped together in to categories based on their similarities and relevance. Finally, themes were developed by integrating related categories. Within each theme, recurring patterns were identified, and direct quotations were used to illustrate the participant's developmental experiences. In order to refine themes, each theme was checked against the original data. Still themes were refined by ensuring clarity, focus and alignment with the study objectives. Moreover, descriptive and concise names were assigned to each theme.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation were strictly observed. The researcher obtained a formal letter of cooperation from the Department of Psychology at Debre Markos University to access data and conduct interviews. Both Genet and her intimate friend were informed of the study's objectives, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of the data. Pseudonyms were used in all reporting processes. The registrar office's cooperation was also secured for obtaining academic records. Photographs and video recordings were not taken, following the participants' preferences.

Results

The results of this case study are presented according to the four major developmental dimensions such as physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and parental attachment development. Each theme was obtained from data collected through observation, interviews with the participant and her intimate friend, and supporting documentary evidence from academic records.

Physical Development

Observation and interview data indicated that Genet had reached full physical maturity typical of late adolescence. She reported being 1.60 meters tall and weighing 60 kilograms, with proportional body structure. Her physical appearance was described as "*neat and culturally appropriate*," that reflect her awareness of community customs and social expectations. Genet exhibited well-developed secondary sexual characteristics, and both she and her intimate friend confirmed that her sexual and physical maturation were completed during this stage.

On the other hand, Genet intermittently experienced mild psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches triggered by emotional tension and academic stress. This suggested a connection between her emotional state and physical well-being. While no chronic health issues were reported, emotional factors appeared to influence her physical comfort. In conclusion, the results demonstrated that Genet's physical development was age-appropriate and consistent with developmental expectations for late adolescence, yet slightly affected by stress-related symptoms.

Cognitive Development

In order to check how much Genet's academic score was deviated from the classroom total population mean, z-score analysis was conducted. Therefore, based on the population mean 2.8, standard deviation 0.2110 and Genet's score of 2.3 yielded a z score of -2.37. This implied that the score is more than two standard deviations below

the population mean. The result revealed a meaningful deviation from the population mean.

Analysis of Genet's responses revealed both strengths and limitations in her cognitive and academic functioning. Genet's academic records indicated a cumulative GPA of 2.3, lower than the classroom students' academic mean score of 2.8. This discrepancy suggested challenges in academic engagement and self-regulation. In her interview, Genet expressed low academic self-efficacy, stating:

I study only to get a passing mark because most concepts are not clear for me during and even after the classroom instruction. I fear to ask the teacher questions in class because I worry about what the teacher or classmates might think.

This statement reflects a belief system rooted in self-doubt and fear of evaluation, which aligns with Bandura's (1995) findings that low self-efficacy leads to reduced effort, avoidance of challenges, and poor academic performance. Further, Genet described limited motivation and a lack of future orientation as: *I don't want to think about the future at this moment. My goal is just to graduate. Sometimes I think about jobs and challenges ahead, but I don't have clear answers.*"

Observation data confirmed that Genet rarely participated in classroom discussions or group activities with reserved and non-assertive behavior. Her friend described her as "silent in class" and "reluctant to speak even when she knows the answer." Despite these limitations, Genet displayed elements of formal operational thought, including abstract reasoning about social and emotional issues. She expressed her understanding of moral principles and the importance of education but struggled to apply these reflections into consistent action as witness of partial attainment of higher-order cognitive processes.

Psychosocial Development

Psychosocial development encompasses emotional regulation, autonomy, and social relationships. Genet's psychosocial profile reflected a mixture of progress and challenges across these domains. Genet demonstrated growing independence since joining the university, particularly in managing finances, daily routines, and personal decision-making. She stated, *"Being away from my parents helps me to manage my life - money, food, and other needs. But sometimes I miss their guidance when I face difficult situations."*

This description reflects an emerging sense of autonomy tempered by lingering dependence on parental support. Both Genet and her friend described her as emotionally stable in most situations but prone to anger and test anxiety during academic challenges. She reported headaches when stressed, indicating somatic responses to emotional tension. Her coping strategies included socializing with friends and seeking comfort from her boyfriend. While these strategies provided emotional relief, they occasionally reinforced dependence on peers rather than fostering self-regulation. Peer relationships played a central role in Genet's psychosocial development. After entering university, she became more peer-oriented than family-oriented, describing her friends as her "emotional support system." She stated, "*My family is important, but my friends understand my problems better because we live together and share similar experiences.*"

Genet's close friend supported this perception, stating that she was "*quiet in large groups but open and expressive with close friends.*" Though too much peer dependency may limit self-assertion and personal action. Genet had maintained a romantic relationship with her boyfriend for four years, beginning in high school. While she described the relationship as supportive, she expressed uncertainty about long-term commitment, saying that she was "*not sure about marriage or future plans.*" In general, Genet's psychosocial profile demonstrated emotional maturity and interpersonal sensitivity, but there are highlighted areas of vulnerability such as low assertiveness, peer dependence, and unclear life direction.

Parental Attachment

Genet's responses revealed a secure yet emotionally distant attachment pattern with her parents, influenced by physical separation and shifting social priorities. She reported: "*I love my parents and share my feelings with them when necessary, but when I have personal secrets, I prefer to tell my friends rather than my parents.*"

This indicates partial emotional detachment and growing reliance on peers for psychological support. However, she maintained respectful communication with her parents, visiting them during major holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Genet's father, as a religious leader, provided moral guidance but limited academic or emotional counseling. The mother offered affection but lacked the educational background to assist with university challenges.

Based on the qualitative data analysis, the following are the major findings in the different themes of the case study.

- **Physical Development-** Fully matured physically, with good personal hygiene and self-presentation; mild stress-related somatic symptoms.
- **Cognitive Development** -Demonstrated abstract thinking but low self-efficacy, poor academic performance, and lack of future orientation.
- **Psychosocial Development-** Developed independence and emotional stability but exhibited dependency on peers and limited assertiveness.
- **Parental Attachment** - Maintained loving but distant parental relationships; relied more on peers and romantic partner for emotional support.

Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to examine the physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and parental attachment development of a late adolescent university student in Debre Markos University and to interpret these developmental patterns through major theoretical perspectives. The findings reveal that Genet demonstrated developmental characteristics consistent with late adolescence but also faced challenges in academic self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and attachment. These findings are discussed below in relation to theories and research findings of development.

The results show that Genet had largely achieved emotional stability, aligning with Erikson's concept of ego strength emerging during the identity vs. role confusion stage. Her ability to manage daily routines independently and her moral awareness reflected a strengthened ego capable of balancing internal impulses and external expectations (Feldman, 2023).

However, intermittent expressions of anger, anxiety, and low self-esteem suggested incomplete resolution of internal conflicts between competence and inadequacy. The somatic symptoms such as headaches during stress indicate residual emotional tension often described in psychoanalytic literature as manifestations of ego defense mechanisms (Miller, 2016). Moreover, her romantic involvement without clear long-term commitment illustrated Erikson's subsequent stage of intimacy vs. isolation, where the individual begins to form close emotional ties while still consolidating self-identity. Genet's ambivalence about future marital plans highlights the transitional nature of intimacy development in late adolescence.

In this study, Genet's low academic self-efficacy and passive classroom participation were outcomes of negative reinforcement and repeated failure experiences. Over time, she internalized the belief; "I can't do well in academic tasks," which reflects a maladaptive learned response (Patterson, 2009).

Genet's capacity to reflect on her academic situation, moral issues, and social relationships indicated engagement in formal operational thought. She was capable of metacognition—thinking about her own thinking and of considering multiple perspectives. However, the results revealed an incomplete application of these cognitive abilities to real-life situations, particularly in goal setting and decision-making. Genet's uncertainty about her future career path and her hesitance in classroom discussions suggest limited executive functioning and weak metacognitive regulation, consistent with research indicating that not all individuals achieve full formal operational competence (Miller, 2016).

From a contextual viewpoint, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Papalia et al., 2023) provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting Genet's development. Her microsystem (family, peers, and university environment) and mesosystem (interactions among these systems) significantly shaped her growth. Her parents' limited educational background and low income constrained academic support, while peer networks within the university provided immediate emotional and social influence. The shift from parental attachment to peer-centered relationships exemplifies a natural but culturally intensified transition in Ethiopian university contexts, where students live far from their families and rely heavily on peer communities for guidance (Megquier & Belohlav, 2014).

Across all domains, the findings illustrate that Genet's development reflects both universal and culture-specific aspects of late adolescence. Physically and emotionally, she exhibited maturity and independence, while cognitively and psychosocially, she encountered challenges in self-confidence, future orientation, and assertiveness. Her developmental trajectory aligns with Arnett's (2012) concept of emerging adulthood, wherein individuals in their early twenties experience ambiguity between dependency and independence. For Genet, this ambiguity manifested in her attachment patterns, career uncertainty, and reliance on peer validation. The findings reinforce the argument that adolescence in developing contexts extends into early adulthood due to economic and cultural factors.

Intervention and Outcomes

Rationale for Intervention

The findings from the initial assessment identified low academic self-efficacy and poor study skills as central issues influencing the participant's cognitive and psychosocial functioning. Genet's belief that she "could not perform well academically" had become a self-defeating cognition, reinforcing avoidance

behaviors, poor motivation, and diminished participation. According to Bandura (1995), self-efficacy beliefs are among the strongest predictors of academic persistence and achievement.

In order to change these irrational beliefs and associated behavioral patterns, this research implemented an intervention combining Albert Ellis's Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and structured study skills training. This dual approach aimed to change irrational thoughts, develop problem-solving skills, and enhance academic engagement of the study participant. The counseling intervention was grounded in Albert Ellis's A–B–C–D–E model, which theorizes that emotional and behavioral outcomes stem not from activating events (A) themselves but from individuals' beliefs (B) about these events (Thompson,2015). The therapeutic process included five structured steps:

- **Activating Event (A)** - Repeated academic failures and classroom passivity triggered frustration and self-doubt.
- **Beliefs (B)** - The irrational belief identified was, *“I can't do well in academic tasks.”*
- **Consequences (C)** - This belief led to anxiety, headaches, low participation, and continued academic underachievement.
- **Disputation (D)** - The counselor challenged these irrational beliefs through Socratic questioning, encouraging Genet to consider evidence for and against her assumptions.
- **Effect (E)** - Genet gradually replaced her irrational belief with a rational one: *“If I work hard and prepare well, I can succeed academically.”*

The counseling sessions were conducted twice per week over two months (February–March), emphasizing both cognitive restructuring and behavioral reinforcement. In addition to REBT, the intervention incorporated academic skills training designed to strengthen practical learning habits and self-regulation. Topics for training included:

- **Time management and goal setting:** Genet created a daily study schedule and weekly performance targets.
- **Note-taking and review methods:** She practiced the SQ3R method (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review) to improve comprehension and retention.
- **Assertiveness training:** She learned communication techniques to ask questions in class and seek clarification from instructors.
- **Motivational reinforcement:** Positive self-talk and self-reward strategies were introduced to sustain progress.

The integration of cognitive-behavioral counseling with skills training reflects the recommendation of Santrock et al. (2023) and Miller (2016) that interventions for late adolescents should combine cognitive change with behavioral activation to achieve lasting outcomes.

Progress and Observed Outcomes - Following the intervention, significant behavioral and attitudinal improvements were observed in both academic and psychosocial domains. These changes were monitored through continued observation, follow-up interviews, and self-report.

Improved Academic Self-Efficacy - Genet reported feeling more confident in her academic abilities, stating as

“Now I believe that if I prepare well, I can understand and do better in class.”
She began to participate more actively in class discussions and group assignments. Her instructors noted increased engagement, and her exam performance improved modestly in subsequent assessments.

Enhanced Emotional Regulation - the frequency of stress-related headaches decreased. Genet described feeling calmer and less anxious before examinations, reflecting improved coping skills and emotional regulation consistent with REBT outcomes (Ellis & Joffe-Ellis, 2019).

Improved Study Habits and Time Management - Through consistent goal setting and scheduling, she reported studying regularly instead of only before examinations. She also practiced self-monitoring of progress and reflected on challenges weekly.

Enriched Assertiveness and Social Confidence - Genet gradually overcame her classroom shyness and began to communicate more openly with teachers and peers. Her intimate friend observed and stated: *“Genet became more confident in talking with friends, asking questions, answering questions, and sometimes, even she began to lead group discussions.”*

Shift in Cognitive Perspective - The transformation of her self-talk from negative “I can’t” to rational and positive “I can if I try” marked as a crucial cognitive turning point. This change aligns with Ellis’s proposition that disputing irrational beliefs enhances self-efficacy and resilience (Dryden, 2024).

Changes in Peer dependence - While peer influence remained significant, Genet began exercising greater independence in decision-making, particularly concerning academic priorities. Her reliance on peers for emotional reassurance decreased as self-confidence improved.

Evaluation of Intervention Effectiveness

The overall effectiveness of the intervention was evaluated based on behavioral observation, self-report, and informal feedback from peers and instructors. The combination of REBT and study skills training proved effective in promoting positive self-beliefs and adaptive learning behaviors. From a developmental psychology perspective, this progress reflects cognitive restructuring, enhanced metacognitive awareness, and emotional maturation, which are essential outcomes of late adolescent development (Takdir et al., 2025). Moreover, the results provide practical evidence that university-based counseling services can significantly enhance students' academic and psychosocial functioning through structured cognitive-behavioral interventions.

Conclusion

The case study of Genet illustrates that late adolescence is a pivotal stage requiring multidimensional support such as academic, emotional, and social. While developmental theories offer valuable frameworks, their practical application must recognize local cultural contexts. The intervention outcomes confirm that rational thinking, self-efficacy, and guided skill-building are central to promoting adaptive functioning and successful transitions into adulthood. In sum, focusing on practical empowerment is more essential for adolescents not only understand who they are but also believe in what they can become.

Implications

The results of this case study have several theoretical and practical implications for developmental researchers, educators, and related disciplines.

Theoretical Implications

This study supports Erikson's notion of identity formation and Piaget's cognitive development theory, while demonstrating how socio-cultural factors modify developmental trajectories. The integration of Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory further underscores that adolescent development is both individually and contextually driven. These theories, when applied in non-Western contexts like Ethiopia, must account for cultural norms, gender roles, and institutional structures that shape developmental outcomes. As a result of this, these findings are crucial to develop culture or context-based developmental theory of adolescents.

Practical Implications

From a practical standpoint, the study highlights the necessity of counseling interventions for specific and similar cases in universities. Incorporating structured cognitive-behavioral interventions such as REBT within university guidance services can minimize similar problems and challenges. Furthermore, enhancing parental communication and mentorship programs can strengthen students' emotional support systems in a similar context.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this case study provided rich qualitative insights, it was limited by its single-participant focus, which restricts generalizability. Future studies should employ mixed-method designs with larger samples to examine developmental milestones across gender, socioeconomic, and institutional contexts. Another limitation concerns the self-report nature of data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Future research could include parent and instructor perspectives to provide more balanced triangulation.

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