ADOLESCENTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

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Adolescents' relationships with parents are examined in this article. The perspective taken here is in terms of communication negotiations centering around three main dialectical forces at work in the parent-adolescent relationship. These forces are autonomy versus connection, privacy versus open boundaries, and an interindividual versus intergroup dimension. It is suggested that conceptualizing parent-adolescent communication as dynamic and processual across the short and long term may be more useful than focusing on the parent-as-agent or issuing recipes for successful communication with adolescents.

Keywords: *intergenerational communication; adolescence; parenting; relationships*

In the popular imagination as well as in the academic literature, adolescence is associated with major life changes. Whereas developing attachments with peers in preparation for increased independence from the family of origin is an important developmental process, parents remain important to adolescents and to adults throughout their lives (e.g., Williams & Nussbaum, 2001).

The importance of relationships between adolescents and parents or parental adults is discussed in this article. Parental styles are discussed briefly, but the emphasis is on more interactive processes that define these relationships. Thus, it is proposed that a useful way to conceptualize the parent-adolescent relationship might be through its inherent dialectical pushes and pulls.

PARENTAL STYLES

In contrast to popular stereotypes, most scholars agree that the adolescent-parent relationship is generally fulfilling and continuous over time (Grotevant, 1998; Noller, 1995). Most dissatisfaction is temporary and transient (Montemayer & Brownlee, 1987; Silverberg & Steinberg,

1990). Where more permanent difficulties arise, it is likely that there is a history of conflict reflected and reiterated by current problems. Generally speaking, adolescents and parents tend to perceive their relationship as warm and pleasant (Grotevant, 1998), although their perspectives differ and parents usually report the relationship more positively than do adolescents (Noller, 1995; Thornton, Orbuch, & Axinn, 1995). There are age and gender differences too (Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, & Bosma, 1998; Noller & Callan, 1991). Perhaps more important, neither parents nor children typically recognize the fact that this one relationship has two perceived realities. These different perceptions of the very nature of the relationship can lead to miscommunication and tension at times (Noller & Callan, 1991).

A number of researchers have focused on the parent as an agent in the parent-adolescent relationship in an attempt to associate parenting with various adolescent emotional and behavioral outcomes (Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Noller, 1995). At the most basic level, four parental styles or types are distinguished and associated with different outcomes (Holmbeck et al., 1995)

Authoritarian-autocratic parents tend to be power-assertive, using physical punishment, verbal aggression, and threatening styles of control communication. At the other extreme, indulgent-permissive parents seem to let go of control, being fairly ineffectual at communicating consistent expectations and boundaries for behavior. Indifferent and uninvolved parents appear to take little interest in their teenagers and are neglectful of their emotional and other needs.

Authoritative-reciprocal parent styles are associated with the most positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for adolescents. However, according to Holmbeck et al. (1995), to determine good outcomes, one needs a mix of authority and democracy where decisions are explained and justified for youngsters. This is best combined with low power assertion (Holmbeck et al., 1995; Smith, 1988). In addition, monitoring and knowledge of the child's whereabouts has been related to low levels of delinquency and antisocial behavior (Holmbeck et al., 1995).

According to Holmbeck et al. (1995), nurturant parenting and expression of warmth and love are distinguished from "control" aspects of parenting because parents must gradually relinquish control, but warmth and love should not be modified (although see Larson & Lowe, 1990; Leigh & Peterson, 1986). Although the amount of love and warmth should not change, the modes of expression of love and warmth perhaps should change as the relationship gradually moves from relative dependency to relative equality.

Communication styles as fixed characteristics of one interlocutor can be a rather problematic device for characterizing the dynamic, interactive, and negotiable nature of relationships. It might be argued that families evolve a predominant pattern of communication that has

the flavor of one style more than the others. But parent-adolescent communication changes contextually over the short term as well as over the long term, as both parties are developing and learning to adjust their relationship through their communication at this time (see also Saphir & Chaffee, 2002).

THE PARENT-ADOLESCENT BOND

Originally derived from studies of babies and small children, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980) has had a wide influence on research and theorizing in family relationships. Attachment figures are particularly important for providing young children and adolescents with the material and emotional resources to thrive (Collins & Laurson, 2000). As we grow older, we form more balanced attachments with our loved ones such that each provides safety and security for the other. Attachment is continuous, but its nature and expression typically changes throughout the life span (Bengtson, Marti, & Roberts, 1991; Cicirelli, 1991).

As attachment figures, parents "provide unique resources not provided by peers or other adults" (Collins & Laurson, 2000, p. 63). For example, parents act as information resources (Youniss & Smoller, 1985), and they provide valued support at times of stress (Collins & Laurson, 2000).

Therefore, one of the tasks that adolescents and their parents must achieve through the teenage years is a maintenance of bonds of attachment while the teenager and the parental figures negotiate autonomy (Baltes & Silverberg, 1994; Noller, 1994). This is a fundamental dialectic at the heart of this relationship that can be expressed in terms of a struggle between relational autonomy and connection (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996)

DIMENSIONS OF TRANSITION
AND NEGOTIATION

Scholars interested in adolescence recognize the importance of both autonomy and attachment for psychosocial adjustment (e.g., Baltes & Silverberg, 1994; Noller, 1994; Noom, Dekovic, & Meeus, 1999). Baltes and Silverberg (1994) suggest that "the developmental task of adolescence seems to be a complicated one that calls for a negotiated balance between an emerging sense of self as a competent individual on the one hand, and transformed, but continued, feeling of connection with significant others on the other" (p. 57). These theorists suggest that the best model for good adjustment is one where the adolescent feels autonomy but is embedded in a relational attachment system. Parents who encourage autonomy within the context of affective support and

connectedness provide the best environment for development of social skills, psychological and social health, and so forth. Early onset of adolescent behavioral autonomy (as distinguished from attitudinal and emotional autonomy) combined with strong peer relational identity and poor adolescent-parent relationships tend to be associated with various problems for adolescents (Beyers & Goossens, 1999; Noom et al., 1999).

Although researchers examine relationships between attachment and adjustment of various sorts, very little seems to be known about how this autonomy-connection transition is communicatively negotiated. As adolescents gain autonomy, parents must relinquish control by degrees and must allow the child to draw on his or her own resources. This relinquishing of control must be very difficult because parents must move from a state of fairly close monitoring and authority, discipline, boundary management, and so forth to a much more equitable relationship with the child. This is not one-sided, because youngsters typically put pressure on parents in a push for more autonomy (Noller, 1995). This illustrates the push and pull of the dialectic in the parent-adolescent relationship, but undoubtedly parents and youngsters experience an internal cognitive and emotional "push and pull" struggle too.

One of the key factors that may influence whether parents feel comfortable granting more autonomy is whether they feel that they can trust their teenager (Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999). Conceptualizing trust as parental knowledge of the child's feelings and concerns, past misdeeds (delinquency), and daily activities, Kerr et al. (1999) found that the type of trust most indicative of healthy adjustment was the child's spontaneous disclosure of his or her daily activities. This is an important interpretation of parental monitoring and seems to indicate that interrogative monitoring is not as helpful in the development of trust as may have been imagined previously.

It is likely that parents who let their children know that they have confidence in them build self-esteem and personal efficacy, leading to more spontaneous disclosure and a cycle of positive patterns. There are negative patterns too. Mistrust on either side can lead to a downward communication spiral (see Wilmott, 1996), as can the emotional withdrawal of some parents who feel they cannot trust their youngster (Kerr et al., 1999), perhaps promoting more dependence on peers, more emotionally unsupported autonomy, more stress, and so forth.

Thus, scholars interested in adolescent development discuss autonomy and connection (in terms of attachment), but they tend to uncouple the dialectic into its components and are less likely to characterize the experience as a struggle between these two opposing forces. Researchers interested in language and social interaction could potentially make a huge contribution to this area of study by tracing the development and resolution of such struggles through parent-child

interaction. In this way, the dynamic, fluid, and ever-changing processes of parent-adolescent development would be revealed.

Another fundamental dialectical tension inherent in personal relationships identified by Baxter and colleagues (e.g., see Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) is the tension between open communication and closed communication. We can recognize traces of this dialectic at work in recent research on trust (Kerr et al., 1999). It seems that open, disclosive relationships between parents and children where children freely volunteer information about themselves and their whereabouts and so forth are most likely to foster parent trust, which leads to further positive outcomes. On the other hand, interrogation and high monitoring represents a struggle between parents and children where the parents are demanding more disclosure than the child wants to volunteer. In some ways, this is representative of what seems like another fundamental struggle during the adolescent years when issues of privacy and personal boundaries for the teenager become more important (Petronio, 1994).

Teenagers' have more need for privacy than younger children (Anderson, Tunaley, & Walker, 2000). As privacy needs increase, the parent may feel uneasy and begin to view their teenager as secretive. Parents may struggle with these issues and they want to honor their youngster's privacy needs, but they also want the disclosure and openness that builds trust. Parents may feel compelled to monitor their children in various ways, but it is likely that as monitoring increases so does the bid for privacy. The teenager's bedroom and telephone conversations may become important symbols in this struggle (e.g., note the relative exclusivity of text messaging).

According to youngsters, parents often violate privacy boundaries in subversive ways using eavesdropping tactics such as listening to telephone calls, opening children's mail, and listening to private conversations (Petronio, 1994). More active and direct boundary invasion may include interrogating, giving unsolicited advice, violating private space, and so forth. Overall, research suggests that boundary violations are regular occurrences in this relational transition. In response, youngsters may take defensive actions such as evading or confronting (Petronio, 1994; see also Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995), but a certain amount of boundary violation is tolerated. However, when boundary violation consistently exceeds a certain level, it is likely to communicate a lack of parental trust and respect for the child and the relationship will suffer (Petronio, 1994).

Interestingly enough, it is likely that parents who fail to trust adolescents are more likely to engage in boundary violations in the first place, which may precipitate evasive action by youngsters, fostering further failures of trust in the relationship more generally. Although Petronio's (1994) studies were conducted with college-age youngsters, it is likely that the seeds of trust violation and boundary invasion are

sown in earlier years and may have very wide-ranging consequences (see Kerr et al., 1999).

Other articles in this issue refer to common assumptions that we share about teenagers and their social groups and how this influences our communication with them (e.g., see Drury, Eckert, Fortman). Although intergroup behavior, stereotyping, and so forth does not immediately spring to mind when discussing parent-adolescent relationships, Williams and Harwood (in press) have recently argued that an intergroup-interindividual dialectic may be important in family relationships where one member can be defined as a member of a distinct social group. This may be particularly (but not exclusively) so for adolescents and older people because we—as a society—have clearly defined assumptions about these social groups and their members (e.g., see Williams & Garrett, 2002). It is entirely possible that there are times when the adolescent and the parent feel and act as members of different social groups, hence the intergroup end of an inter-individual-intergroup dialectic may be engaged. This may mean that stereotypes of teenagers (and adults) will be drawn on in interaction for various purposes, but the consequence will almost inevitably be psychologically distancing. In some cases, such communication may exacerbate tension and conflict, increase mistrust, and so forth.

Older adolescents (college students) are sensitive to stereotype-consistent expectations directed at them from older adults. College students' reports of patronizing communication behavior directed at them by nonfamily adults have been identified as overparenting, nonlistening, and disapproval (Giles & Williams, 1994). It seems reasonable to suggest that this type of communication can come from family as well as nonfamily adults. Overparenting matches with a view of youngsters as fairly incompetent to look after themselves and therefore in need of adult care and control. This is often benevolent behavior by the adult but may be perceived as overdoing it by the youngster. Nonlistening is related to the notion that young people's ideas and opinions may be undeveloped and naive and therefore not worthy of consideration. Disapproval relates to notions that the young person belongs to a social group that is feckless, reckless, and at risk.

Interestingly enough, at least two of these categories of patronization can be related to threats to autonomy in that behavioral and decisional autonomy may be threatened by overparenting and decisional and attitudinal autonomy may be threatened by nonlistening.

Thus, intergroup and social identity theory may provide a useful means of understanding how interaction between adolescents and parents may move between an interindividual and intergroup dialectic and may provide resources for tracing the consequences of this (see also Williams & Harwood, in press).

In conclusion, this article has sought to identify some key communication dialectics that might be at work in the parent-adolescent

relationship. In terms of applied issues, it seems that helping parents and teenagers become aware of the various dialectical struggles in their relational transition to equal adult status will help them realize the levels at which they may get drawn in—and can get out of—various patterns of communication. Ultimately, this may be more helpful than a list of "dos and don'ts" directed at parents.

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