

Gender and Age Differences in the Topics of Parent-Adolescent Conflict

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As part of an examination of topics of parent-adolescent conflict, 139 biological mother-father-adolescent triads reported the three most common topics of conflict in their relationships. Using χ^2 analyses, results indicated that, within the context of their gender and age, adolescents differed in the topics of conflict they listed for their mothers and fathers. When listed by mothers and fathers, frequencies of the topics of parent-adolescent conflict also differed significantly with the gender and age of adolescents. Using analyses of variance, agreement for topics selected by adolescents and their parents was not better for sons versus daughters or for adolescents of a particular age group. These results demonstrated the importance of examining topics of parent-adolescent conflict, in addition to its frequency of occurrence and intensity, as a first step to understanding the dynamics of such conflict. With complete information about parent-adolescent conflicts, clinical interventions can address such conflicts adequately.

Keywords: *parent; adolescent; conflict; relationships*

INTRODUCTION

The storm and stress of adolescence has been a focus of debate for many years. Should parents and adolescents experience storm and stress, it may be exhibited through parent-adolescent conflict, an interaction pattern that is characterized by mutual disagreement (Collins & Larsen, 1992). Although adolescents' conflict with their parents was thought initially to be normative, more recent research suggests that

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parent-adolescent conflict may be a sign of a more disturbed family situation, including troubled family relationships or adolescent behavior problems (see Smetana, 1996, for a review). Some researchers suggest further that conflictual interactions between adolescents and their parents may be conceptualized as the adolescents' attempt to reestablish their security needs within the family system (Caffery & Erdman, 2000).

Although adolescents and their parents may experience conflict over serious issues that affect each family member, a significant number of adolescents and their parents experience minor conflicts over the daily details of family life (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Because conflict, even when it is over everyday issues, has significance in the lives of adolescents and their parents (Smetana, 1996), it is important to examine issues that are contributing to conflict from the viewpoints of both adolescents and their parents. By establishing the normative and nonnormative topics involved in parent-adolescent conflict, clinicians may be better able to understand the normative basis for conflict over such issues and to intervene more expediently so that parents and their adolescents can resolve these conflicts successfully. For this reason, the current study examines the topics of parent-adolescent conflict in the context of the gender and age of adolescents and the gender of parents.

Conflict in Families With Adolescents

Research has emphasized the severity and the frequency of parent-adolescent conflict, with fewer studies examining the topics of this conflict. For example, Smetana (1996) grouped families into three categories based on the frequency and intensity of parent-adolescent conflicts. Placid families are found to be low in the intensity and frequency of conflict. In contrast, tumultuous families experience the highest intensity

and frequency of conflict, and frequent-squabblers families score moderately in intensity and frequency of conflict. The characteristics of families in these categories relate to the style of parenting and conflict resolution used in the families as well as to adolescent outcomes in addition to the number of conflicts they have (Smetana, 1996). Furthermore, increased parent-adolescent conflict over everyday matters within the household is one of the best predictors of poor adolescent adjustment (Barber & Delfabbro, 2000). Other research shows that parent-adolescent conflict correlates negatively with adolescent self-esteem (Dekovic, 1999) and family cohesiveness (Demo, 1991) and correlates positively with externalizing psychiatric diagnoses (Foster & Robin, 1997).

In addition, conflict may be important to the changing dynamics of families with adolescents. For example, conflict between adolescents and their parents can serve an adaptive function when it acts as an impetus to change, plays an information-providing role (Holmbeck & Hill, 1991), or decreases the discrepancies between adolescent and parent viewpoints (Holmbeck & O'Donnell, 1991). More important, however, parent-adolescent conflict may be needed as the adolescent individuates from the parent, so that adolescents may seek relationships outside of the family (Holmbeck & Hill, 1991). Thus, although parent-adolescent conflict has been related to poor outcomes for adolescents, it also may serve adaptive functions. Given the demonstrated relationship between parent-adolescent conflict and adolescent outcomes, it is important to examine the characteristics of parent-adolescent conflict further.

To address parent-adolescent conflict effectively in clinical service settings, mental health professionals need more information about the characteristics of such conflict. Although studies have focused traditionally on the severity and frequency of parent-adolescent conflict, more information regarding the topics of this conflict is needed. The assessment of the content of family conflict can serve as a starting point for understanding the processes that promote and maintain family difficulties (Foster & Robin, 1997). By identifying the topics of conflict that occur in families in relation to the characteristics of the family members themselves, a more thorough understanding of family dynamics can be gained. This understanding then could be used to design more effective clinical interventions to assist families in resolving their difficulties. In particular, it is still unclear how the topics of parent-adolescent conflict may differ in the context of the gender and age of adolescents and the gender of parents.

The topics of parent-adolescent conflict should be examined within the context of the gender and age of adolescents as well as the gender of parents involved in the conflict.

Topics of Parent-Adolescent Conflict

Although Foster and Robin (1997) suggested that a comprehensive assessment of parent-adolescent conflict would require a clinician to begin with a description of the topics and process of parent-adolescent conflict, topics of parent-adolescent conflict have been examined less frequently relative to other characteristics of such conflict. In the studies that have been completed, the majority of conflict between adolescents and their parents is about normal, mundane family matters (Montemayor, 1983). These matters may include household responsibilities, privileges, social life and friends, disobedience, and intrafamilial relationships (Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995;

Montemayor, 1983). Conflicts over matters such as responsibilities, privileges, and relationships are indicative of adolescents' desire for increased autonomy and independence from their parents (Arnett, 1999; Barber & Delfabbro, 2000; Montemayor, 1983; Riesch et al., 2000; Smetana, 1996; Smetana & Gaines, 1999). Conflicts over religious, political, or social issues occur less frequently (Steinberg, 1990), as do conflicts concerning other potentially sensitive topics (e.g., substance use, dating, sexual relationships; Riesch et al., 2000). In contrast, Gehring, Wentzel, Feldman, and Munson (1990) suggested that deviance issues, such as lying and substance abuse, are mentioned almost as often as any other issue.

Gender and Age of Adolescents as a Context for Parent-Adolescent Conflict

Although some topics of parent-adolescent conflict have been suggested, these topics may vary considerably with regard to the gender and age of adolescents. For example, Ellis-Schwabe and Thornburg (1986), using a measure composed of 10 general areas of conflict, found that differences in the most common areas of conflict exist based on both the gender and age of adolescents. In addition, parents may respond differently to their sons and daughters. For example, parents exhibit more intense surveillance of their daughters' whereabouts relative to their sons (Berk, 1991). In contrast, ratings of boys' behavior suggest that they experience more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems than girls (Thurber & Osborn, 1993). Furthermore, conflicts over chores decrease with adolescent age, whereas reports of autonomy-related issues, homework, and academic achievement increase with adolescent age (Gehring et al., 1990;

Smetana & Gaines, 1999). Given these differences based on the gender and age of adolescents, conflicts between adolescents and their parents regarding these matters also may differ with the gender and age of adolescents.

Other findings suggest that the age of adolescents may be an important consideration for parent-adolescent conflict. As families adapt to adolescents' increasing expectations of individuation from their parents, adolescents and their parents experience an increase in relational conflict and negativity and a decrease in positive affect (Flannery, Montemayor, Eberly, & Torquati, 1993). Through maturation in adolescents' cognitive processing and moral reasoning, adolescents and their parents can effectively renegotiate their roles and the level of conflict experienced between them (Comstock, 1994). These findings are supported by a meta-analysis conducted by Laursen, Coy, and Collins (1998). Laursen and colleagues report that the rate of parent-adolescent conflict decreases from early to late adolescence and that affective levels experienced during parent-adolescent conflict increase from early to late adolescence. Overall, adolescent age appears to be the most potent predictor of the timing of developmental tasks, with both parents and adolescents expecting that adolescents will engage in developmental tasks in a sequential manner (Dekovic, Noom, & Meeus, 1997). Given these findings, parent-adolescent conflict should be examined further within the context of the gender and age of adolescents.

Gender of Parents as a Context for Parent-Adolescent Conflict

Given the differential activities and roles that mothers and fathers have with their children and adolescents, it is likely that the topics of parent-adolescent conflict differ for mothers versus fathers. In general, mothers tend to spend more time with their adolescents and are more likely to be involved with caretaking activities (Collins & Russell, 1991), with their communications including personal as well as impersonal issues (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). On the contrary, fathers tend to be engaged more in leisure activities with their adolescents (Collins & Russell, 1991), with their interactions covering a small range of topic areas and their communications including mostly practical or objective social issues (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). As a result, closeness and perturbations appear to be more representative of mother-adolescent relationships than father-adolescent relationships (Collins & Russell, 1991; Holmbeck & Hill, 1991). Furthermore, Comstock (1994) suggested that there are different patterns of conflict among mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, and father-son dyads. Some of these differences in patterns of conflict may be related to mothers and fathers having different topics of conflict with regard to their adolescents. As a result, topics of parent-adolescent conflict should be examined within the context of parent gender as well.

The Current Study

Demo (1991) identified a need to examine the interactions of both adolescent and parent gender in relation to topics of conflict, to examine the differences in topics of conflict in different stages of adolescence (i.e., early, middle, and late adolescence), and to evaluate the levels of actual congruence between parents and adolescents versus the perceived levels of congruence. Therefore, the current study examines the topics of parent-adolescent conflict in the context of the gender and age of adolescents and the gender of the parent involved in the conflict. In particular, differences in the topics of parent-adolescent conflict are examined in male versus female adolescents, across the different stages of adolescence (i.e., early, middle, and late adolescence), and in mothers versus fathers. Finally, the level of agreement between adolescents and their parents in the selection of topics is examined.

Based on the previous research (Comstock, 1994; Ellis-Schwabe & Thornburg, 1986; Laursen et al., 1998), it was expected that male and female adolescents would report different topics of conflict for their mothers versus fathers, as would early, middle, and late adolescents. It also was expected that mothers and fathers would report different topics of conflict for sons versus daughters and for adolescents of different ages. Based on research indicating the differing roles and relationships of mothers and fathers with regard to their adolescents (Collins & Russell, 1991; Holmbeck & Hill, 1991; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), it was expected that male and female adolescents would exhibit different levels of agreement with their mothers and fathers for the topics of conflict that were reported.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred fifty biologically related mother-father-adolescent triads from a southeastern suburban tri-county area participated in this study. There were an equal number of families with male and female adolescents (75 male adolescents and 75 female adolescents) participating in the study. Adolescent participants ranged in age from 11 to 18 years ($M = 13.65$ years, $SD = 1.98$ years). Mothers ranged in age from 27 to 55 years ($M = 40.23$ years, $SD = 5.12$ years), whereas fathers ranged in age from 25 to 70 years ($M = 42.45$ years, $SD = 6.44$ years). Mothers had completed from 7 to 20 years of formal education ($M = 13.45$ years, $SD = 2.24$ years), whereas fathers had completed from 9 to 20 years of formal education ($M = 13.3$ years, $SD = 2.19$ years).

The majority of the sample was Caucasian (82.7%), with the remainder of the sample varying in their racial identification (African American, 8.0%; Latino/Latina, 5.3%; Asian American, 0.7%). Racial information was unavailable for 3.3% of the families. The majority of parents reported being married to the adolescent's other biological parent (81.3%),

constituting intact families. The remainder of the families had experienced divorce and remarriage (5.3%), divorce without remarriage (11.3%), single parenting without marriage (0.7%), and widowhood (0.7%). Information regarding marital status was unavailable for one of the families. Because 11 families had missing data with regard to their topics of parent-adolescent conflict, these families were deleted from further analyses, resulting in a final sample of 139 families.

Families were recruited via advertisements throughout the community as part of a larger study. The purpose of this larger study was to examine the characteristics (e.g., psychological symptoms, perceptions family members have of each other, relationships among family members) of mothers, fathers, and adolescents from families in a southeastern metropolitan community. To meet eligibility for participation, both mothers and fathers had to be related biologically to the adolescent in their family, and the adolescent had to be between the ages of 11 and 18 years. Adolescents were required to have at least monthly face-to-face contact with their noncustodial parent if both biological parents were not living in the same household. All families who met these criteria were allowed to participate in this study. Parents with more than one adolescent were asked to select one of their adolescents for participation. Thus, parents had complete control over which adolescent was brought to the research session. Family participants were then invited to attend a 3-hour data collection session at a southeastern university and were subsequently given \$60 for their family's participation.

Procedure

After obtaining informed consent from both parents and assent from the adolescent, adolescents completed a questionnaire in which they listed the topics of conflict about which they and their mothers and fathers disagreed most frequently, followed by other measures included in the larger study but not examined here. The parents also completed a questionnaire in which they listed the topics of conflict about which they and their adolescent disagreed most frequently, followed by additional measures not examined in this study. Given that adolescents and their mothers and fathers completed the questionnaire assessing their topics of conflict first, it is unlikely that subsequent measures influenced their responses regarding their topics of conflict. Participants were provided with a brief explanation of the study and were given the opportunity to ask questions pertaining to the purpose of the study following the completion of their participation.

Measure of Parent-Adolescent Conflict

Information pertaining to parent-adolescent conflict was gathered through an open-ended questionnaire that was generated by the last author (Phares) for this study. The instructions for this questionnaire asked that each adolescent list the three most common topics of conflict about which he or she disagrees with his or her mother and father, respectively.

TABLE 1
Topics of Conflict Categorical System

Categories for Topics Selected by Adolescents, Mothers, and Fathers

0. No response provided
1. Separation-individuation (Ways in which adolescents attempt to differentiate themselves from their parents; examples: clothes, music, appearance)
2. Teen independence (examples: privacy, time with family, autonomy issues)
3. Peer group (examples: friends, dating, sexuality)
4. School and school-related conflicts (examples: grades, study time)
5. Teen behavior problems (examples: acting out, withdrawal, substance abuse, hygiene)
6. Household rules and responsibilities (examples: chores, curfew, allowance)
7. Intrafamilial relationships (examples: siblings, parent-child, talking back, other interactions)
8. Extracurricular activities (examples: after-school job, sports team, piano lessons)
9. Values (global traits; examples: personality traits, life lessons)
10. Parental behavior (Mom and Dad; examples: complaints about parent behavior)
11. Material possessions (examples: money, television, modem, toys)
12. Other
13. Illegible response
14. Missing data

Mothers and fathers also completed this questionnaire individually and listed the three most common topics of conflict with their adolescent.

The qualitative answers given by each family member were evaluated and sorted independently into categories obtained from the parent-adolescent conflict literature by the first two authors (Renk and Liljequist). These preexisting categories were used to provide initial structure to the data. As the responses were sorted into these categories, it became evident that new categories were required to classify all the responses. These new categories were separation-individuation, teen independence, extracurricular activities, and material possessions. After adding these new categories, the final 11 content categories, with an additional "other" category, the option of "no response," and an "illegible" category, were used to categorize all topics of conflict (see Table 1 for the topics and examples). In general, "no response" was coded when the adolescent, the mother, or the father indicated that they could not think of a topic of conflict that was pertinent to the parent-adolescent relationship, and "illegible" was coded when the topics that the participants provided could not be interpreted clearly by the authors due to handwriting or other clarity issues.

During the coding of the responses, the authors were unaware of the gender and age of the adolescents. In the inde-

pendent coding of the topics, the authors had an acceptable level of interrater reliability, with a kappa value of 0.85. When a difference in coding did occur between the authors, the particular topic was discussed and then recoded.

RESULTS

Overview of Data Analyses

The frequencies of common topics of parent-adolescent conflict were examined using χ^2 analyses. This nonparametric statistic is used to examine frequencies of occurrence in categorical data. Significant overall χ^2 analyses were examined further by conducting post hoc χ^2 analyses within each topic of conflict. In particular, the topics of conflict with mothers and fathers reported by the adolescent participants were examined across adolescent gender and age. Each adolescent was assigned to one age group composed of early (11 to 13 years), middle (14 to 15 years), or late (16 to 18 years) adolescents. In addition, the topics of conflict reported by mothers and fathers were examined across adolescent gender and age.

The agreement in the topics chosen by adolescents and those chosen by their mothers and fathers also was examined. This variable was analyzed by calculating the proportion of agreement among topics reported by the adolescent and each parent, respectively. For example, if an adolescent and his or her mother reported three topics each and agreed on only one of these topics, a value of 0.33 was assigned for agreement. ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether there were differences in agreement for the topics of conflict listed by adolescents and their mothers and fathers across adolescent gender and age.

Adolescent Gender

Adolescent report. Using χ^2 analyses, it was determined that sons and daughters differed in their frequencies across topics of conflict reported for their mothers ($\chi^2 = 25.94, p < .05$) and their fathers ($\chi^2 = 26.96, p < .05$). Post hoc analyses suggested that there were two significant differences for sons versus daughters in their topics of conflict with their mothers and in their topics of conflict with their fathers. For conflicts with their mothers, sons listed behavior problems more frequently and had more illegible responses than did daughters. For conflicts with their fathers, sons listed the topics of behavior problems and material possessions more frequently than did daughters. These results are listed in Table 2.

Parent report. The topics of conflict listed by mothers ($\chi^2 = 28.62, p < .05$) and fathers ($\chi^2 = 30.12, p < .05$) also differed significantly for sons and daughters. Post hoc analyses suggested that mothers listed no responses more frequently for daughters than for sons, whereas they listed the topic of behavior problems more frequently for sons than daughters.

Fathers, however, listed the topic of peer group issues more frequently for daughters than sons. These results are shown in Table 3.

Adolescent Age

Adolescent report. Significant differences were found across the adolescent age groups with regard to the topics of conflict reported by adolescents for mothers ($\chi^2 = 48.04, p < .05$). Post hoc analyses suggested that, with regard to mothers, early adolescents listed no responses, the topic of household rules and responsibilities, and illegible responses more frequently than did middle adolescents or late adolescents. In addition, separation-individuation was listed as a topic more frequently by early adolescents and middle adolescents than late adolescents. Further, middle adolescents listed the topic of peer group issues more frequently than late adolescents. Finally, the topic of parental behaviors was listed more frequently by late adolescents than early adolescents or middle adolescents. These results are shown in Table 4.

Significant differences across age groups also were found for the topics of conflict reported by adolescents for fathers ($\chi^2 = 46.63, p < .05$). Post hoc analyses suggested that, with regard to fathers, early adolescents listed no responses more frequently than did middle adolescents and late adolescents. In addition, the topic of separation-individuation and the topic of household rules and responsibilities were listed more frequently by early adolescents and middle adolescents than late adolescents. Finally, "other" topics were listed more frequently by early adolescents than late adolescents. See Table 4 for these results.

Parent report. Mothers selected significantly different topics for adolescents across different age groups ($\chi^2 = 51.0, p < .01$). Mothers listed the topics of school issues, teen behavior problems, household rules and responsibilities, and intrafamilial relationships more frequently for early adolescents than for middle adolescents or late adolescents. In addition, mothers were more likely to list separation-individuation issues for early adolescents and middle adolescents than for late adolescents. Furthermore, mothers were more likely to list the topic of values for middle adolescents than for late adolescents. Finally, mothers were more likely to not list responses for late adolescents than for early adolescents or for middle adolescents. Please refer to Table 5 for these results.

Finally, fathers selected significantly different topics for adolescents across different age groups ($\chi^2 = 45.78, p < .05$). Fathers were more likely to list school-related topics for early adolescents than for late adolescents and listed the topic of teen behavior problems more frequently for early adolescents than for middle adolescents. Furthermore, fathers were more likely to list the topic of household rules and responsibilities and the topic of intrafamilial relationships for early adolescents than for middle adolescents or late adolescents. Finally,

TABLE 2
Frequencies of Topics Selected by Sons and Daughters for Mothers and Fathers

Topic	Frequencies—Sons	Frequencies—Daughters	χ^2
<i>For mothers</i>			
No response	48 (21.3%)	41 (18.2%)	.56
Separation-individuation	22 (9.8%)	35 (15.6%)	2.96
Teen independence	16 (7.1%)	19 (8.4%)	.26
Peer group	10 (4.4%)	20 (8.9%)	3.34
School	18 (8.0%)	12 (5.3%)	1.20
Teen behavior problems	10 (4.4%)	1 (0.4%)	7.36**
Household rules	36 (16.0%)	33 (14.7%)	.14
Intrafamilial relationships	11 (4.9%)	16 (7.1%)	.92
Extracurricular activities	10 (4.4%)	8 (3.6%)	.22
Values	3 (1.3%)	1 (0.4%)	1.00
Parental behavior	8 (3.6%)	9 (4.0%)	.06
Material possessions	8 (3.6%)	5 (2.2%)	.70
Other	8 (3.6%)	4 (1.8%)	1.34
Illegible responses	4 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)	4.00*
Missing data	13 (5.8%)	21 (9.3%)	1.88
<i>For fathers</i>			
No response	60 (26.7%)	56 (24.9%)	.14
Separation-individuation	19 (8.4%)	33 (14.7%)	3.77
Teen independence	13 (5.8%)	10 (4.4%)	.40
Peer group	11 (4.9%)	20 (8.9%)	2.62
School	13 (5.8%)	9 (4.0%)	.72
Teen behavior problems	9 (4.0%)	1 (0.4%)	6.40*
Household rules	27 (12.0%)	32 (14.2%)	.42
Intrafamilial relationships	10 (4.4%)	13 (5.8%)	.40
Extracurricular activities	12 (5.3%)	8 (3.6%)	.80
Values	4 (1.8%)	4 (1.8%)	.00
Parental behavior	10 (4.4%)	5 (2.2%)	1.67
Material possessions	11 (4.9%)	3 (1.3%)	4.58*
Other	9 (4.0%)	9 (4.0%)	.00
Illegible responses	5 (2.2%)	1 (0.4%)	2.66
Missing data	12 (5.3%)	21 (9.3%)	2.46

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

fathers were more likely to list no responses for late adolescents than for early adolescents or middle adolescents. Refer to Table 5 for these results.

Agreement for Topics Chosen

No significant differences in the agreement between adolescents and their mothers and fathers across the gender of the adolescent (mother-adolescent: $F[1, 137] = 2.29, ns$; father-adolescent: $F[1, 137] = 2.07, ns$) or the age of the adolescent (mother-adolescent: $F[2, 136] = .72, ns$; father-adolescent: $F[2, 136] = 1.11, ns$) were noted.

DISCUSSION

For mental health professionals to understand the processes that promote and maintain family difficulties, the assessment of the content of family conflict, or the topics of parent-adolescent conflict, can serve as a starting point (Fos-

ter & Robin, 1997). Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that the topics of parent-adolescent conflict should be examined within the context of the gender and age of adolescents as well as the gender of parents involved in the conflict. It is likely that other characteristics of the family, such as the cultural background of the family, are important in determining the topics of conflict that transpire between adolescents and their mothers and fathers as well. Overall, the results of this study are consistent with those of Comstock (1994), which suggest that there are different patterns of conflict among mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, and father-son dyads. The results of this study suggest that these differential patterns of conflict extend to the topics about which adolescents and their mothers and fathers disagree.

First, results of this study demonstrate that gender differences exist with regard to the topics of conflict reported by adolescent sons and daughters for their mothers and fathers. In this sample, relative to daughters, sons reported that their

TABLE 3

Frequencies of Topics Selected for Sons and Daughters by Mothers and Fathers

Topic	Frequencies—Sons	Frequencies—Daughters	χ^2
<i>By mothers</i>			
No response	13 (5.8%)	29 (12.9%)	6.10*
Separation-individuation	19 (8.4%)	26 (11.6%)	1.08
Teen independence	16 (7.1%)	11 (4.9%)	.92
Peer group	6 (2.7%)	14 (6.2%)	3.20
School	27 (12.0%)	18 (8.0%)	1.80
Teen behavior problems	12 (5.3%)	4 (1.8%)	4.00*
Household rules	61 (27.1%)	50 (22.2%)	1.10
Intrafamilial relationships	24 (10.7%)	21 (9.3%)	.20
Extracurricular activities	7 (3.1%)	5 (2.2%)	.34
Values	16 (7.1%)	16 (7.1%)	.00
Parental behavior	2 (0.9%)	0 (0.0%)	2.00
Material possessions	2 (0.9%)	7 (3.1%)	2.78
Other	7 (3.1%)	2 (0.9%)	2.78
Illegible responses	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	.00
Missing data	13 (5.8%)	22 (9.8%)	2.32
<i>By fathers</i>			
No response	21 (9.3%)	35 (15.6%)	3.50
Separation-individuation	13 (5.8%)	19 (8.4%)	1.12
Teen independence	6 (2.7%)	10 (4.4%)	1.00
Peer group	5 (2.2%)	17 (7.6%)	6.54*
School	25 (11.1%)	17 (7.6%)	1.52
Teen behavior problems	8 (3.6%)	2 (0.9%)	3.60
Household rules	57 (25.3%)	51 (22.7%)	.34
Intrafamilial relationships	32 (14.2%)	20 (8.9%)	2.78
Extracurricular activities	4 (1.8%)	4 (1.8%)	.00
Values	27 (12.0%)	15 (6.7%)	3.42
Parental behavior	1 (0.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1.00
Material possessions	6 (2.7%)	4 (1.8%)	.40
Other	5 (2.2%)	3 (1.3%)	.50
Illegible responses	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.4%)	1.00
Missing data	15 (6.7%)	27 (12.0%)	3.42

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

own behavior problems were a more prominent topic of conflict with both their mothers and fathers. In addition, sons reported that conflicts over material possessions (e.g., television and computers) were more of an issue with their fathers. Gender differences in the topics of parent-adolescent conflict extended to those reported by mothers and fathers for their sons and daughters. Mothers reported behavior problems as a topic of conflict more frequently for sons than for daughters. These findings were consistent with the current literature indicating that the ratings of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems in boys is greater than those in girls (Thurber & Osborn, 1993). In contrast to mothers, fathers selected peer group issues (e.g., attending activities with friends, dating) as a topic of conflict more frequently for daughters than for sons. This finding is consistent with research stating that parents tend to exhibit more intense surveillance of their daughters' whereabouts than those of their sons (Berk, 1991). Overall, these results support the differen-

tial relationship of mothers and fathers with their sons and daughters.

Second, differences in topics of conflict reported by adolescents also were evident across the adolescent age groups examined in this study. Consistent with the developmental literature, early and middle adolescents indicated that separation and individuation issues (e.g., manner of dress) were topics of conflict with mothers and fathers more frequently than late adolescents did. In addition, middle adolescents listed peer group issues as topics of conflict with mothers more frequently than late adolescents did. Furthermore, early adolescents selected household rules and responsibilities as topics of conflict with mothers more frequently than middle or late adolescents did, whereas household rules and responsibilities were identified as topics of conflict with fathers by early and middle adolescents more frequently than by late adolescents. In contrast, late adolescents identified their mothers' behaviors as a source of conflict more frequently than did early or

TABLE 4
Frequencies of Topics Selected by Adolescents in Developmental Groups

Topic	Frequencies—Early	Frequencies—Middle	Frequencies—Late	χ^2
<i>For mothers</i>				
No response	49 (22.7%)	24 (16.7%)	16 (17.8%)	19.96***
Separation-individuation	31 (14.4%)	20 (13.9%)	6 (6.7%)	16.53***
Teen independence	12 (5.6%)	12 (8.3%)	11 (12.2%)	.06
Peer group	8 (3.7%)	17 (11.8%)	5 (5.6%)	7.80*
School	15 (6.9%)	7 (4.9%)	8 (8.9%)	3.80
Teen behavior problems	3 (1.4%)	3 (2.1%)	5 (5.6%)	.72
Household rules	41 (19.0%)	17 (11.8%)	11 (12.2%)	21.92***
Intrafamilial relationships	13 (6.0%)	9 (6.3%)	5 (5.6%)	3.56
Extracurricular activities	4 (1.9%)	6 (4.2%)	8 (8.9%)	1.34
Values	0 (0.0%)	3 (2.1%)	1 (1.1%)	3.51
Parental behavior	9 (4.2%)	7 (4.9%)	1 (1.1%)	6.12*
Material possessions	8 (3.7%)	3 (2.1%)	2 (2.2%)	4.77
Other	6 (2.8%)	4 (2.8%)	2 (2.2%)	2.00
Illegible responses	4 (1.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	8.02*
Missing data	13 (6.0%)	12 (8.3%)	9 (10.0%)	.77
<i>For fathers</i>				
No response	69 (31.9%)	27 (18.8%)	20 (22.2%)	36.32***
Separation-individuation	25 (11.6%)	19 (13.2%)	8 (8.9%)	8.58*
Teen independence	9 (4.2%)	6 (4.2%)	8 (8.9%)	.60
Peer group	8 (3.7%)	12 (8.3%)	11 (12.2%)	.84
School	11 (5.1%)	7 (4.9%)	4 (4.4%)	3.37
Teen behavior problems	2 (0.9%)	2 (1.4%)	6 (6.7%)	3.20
Household rules	29 (13.4%)	26 (18.1%)	4 (4.4%)	18.95***
Intrafamilial relationships	11 (5.1%)	8 (5.6%)	4 (4.4%)	3.22
Extracurricular activities	7 (3.2%)	6 (4.2%)	7 (7.8%)	.11
Values	3 (1.4%)	3 (2.1%)	2 (2.2%)	.25
Parental behavior	8 (3.7%)	6 (4.2%)	1 (1.1%)	5.20
Material possessions	7 (3.2%)	4 (2.8%)	3 (3.3%)	1.86
Other	11 (5.1%)	5 (3.5%)	2 (2.2%)	7.01*
Illegible responses	4 (1.9%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (1.1%)	3.00
Missing data	12 (5.6%)	12 (8.3%)	9 (10.0%)	.54

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

middle adolescents. Consistent with the existing literature (Holmbeck & Hill, 1991; Laursen et al., 1998), adolescents appear to be negotiating topics regarding their own autonomy and responsibilities with their parents during early and middle adolescence. These issues may be resolved by late adolescence, however. The progressive resolution of these conflicts also may be related to the differential roles and/or expectations of mothers and fathers. The relationship of parental expectations and parent-adolescent conflict should be examined in future research.

Similarly, maternal and paternal reports of topics of conflict were significantly different across adolescent age groups. Similar to the report of adolescents themselves, mothers selected separation-individuation issues more frequently for early and middle adolescents than for late adolescents. Mothers also were more likely to indicate that school issues were more frequently topics of conflict for early adolescents than for middle or late adolescents, whereas fathers

indicated that school issues were more frequently topics of conflict for early and middle adolescents than for late adolescents. Both mothers and fathers indicated that teen behavior problems (e.g., adolescents' acting out or substance use) were more frequently topics of conflict for early adolescents than for middle adolescents. Mothers also indicated that teen behavior problems were more frequently a topic of conflict for early adolescents than for late adolescents. In addition, mothers and fathers both selected topics of conflict involving household rules and responsibilities and intrafamilial relationships more frequently for early adolescents than for middle or late adolescents. Finally, values were more frequently a topic of conflict for mothers of middle adolescents than for those of late adolescents. Consistent with existing literature (Holmbeck & Hill, 1991; Laursen et al., 1998), parents also appear to be negotiating the autonomy and responsibilities of their adolescents during early and middle adolescence and possibly experiencing the resolution of these negotiations

TABLE 5
Frequencies of Topics Selected for Adolescents in Developmental Groups

Topic	Frequencies—Early	Frequencies—Middle	Frequencies—Late	χ^2
<i>By mothers</i>				
No response	15 (6.9%)	21 (14.6%)	6 (6.7%)	8.14*
Separation-individuation	24 (11.1%)	15 (10.4%)	6 (6.7%)	10.80**
Teen independence	9 (4.2%)	8 (5.6%)	10 (11.1%)	.22
Peer group	6 (2.8%)	9 (6.3%)	5 (5.6%)	1.30
School	27 (12.5%)	11 (7.6%)	7 (7.8%)	14.94***
Teen behavior problems	11 (5.1%)	3 (2.1%)	2 (2.2%)	9.13*
Household rules	62 (28.7%)	24 (16.7%)	25 (27.8%)	25.35***
Intrafamilial relationships	27 (12.5%)	11 (7.6%)	7 (7.8%)	14.94***
Extracurricular activities	3 (1.4%)	5 (3.5%)	4 (4.4%)	.50
Values	10 (4.6%)	18 (1.3%)	4 (4.4%)	9.25**
Parental behavior	2 (0.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.98
Material possessions	2 (0.9%)	3 (2.1%)	4 (4.4%)	.66
Other	5 (2.3%)	4 (2.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1.66
Illegible responses	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	.00
Missing data	13 (6.0%)	12 (8.3%)	10 (11.1%)	.22
<i>By fathers</i>				
No response	33 (15.3%)	19 (13.2%)	4 (4.4%)	22.54***
Separation-individuation	13 (6.0%)	13 (9.0%)	6 (6.7%)	3.06
Teen independence	5 (2.3%)	6 (4.2%)	5 (5.6%)	.12
Peer group	8 (3.7%)	8 (5.6%)	6 (6.7%)	.36
School	22 (10.2%)	12 (8.3%)	8 (8.9%)	7.43*
Teen behavior problems	7 (3.29%)	1 (0.7%)	2 (2.2%)	6.21*
Household rules	54 (25.0%)	34 (23.6%)	20 (22.2%)	16.22***
Intrafamilial relationships	32 (14.8%)	16 (11.1%)	4 (4.4%)	22.77***
Extracurricular activities	3 (1.4%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (5.6%)	4.74
Values	19 (8.8%)	12 (8.3%)	11 (12.2%)	2.72
Parental behavior	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2.02
Material possessions	5 (2.3%)	2 (1.4%)	3 (3.3%)	1.40
Other	3 (1.4%)	4 (2.8%)	1 (1.1%)	1.75
Illegible responses	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2.02
Missing data	12 (5.6%)	15 (10.4%)	15 (16.7%)	.43

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

during late adolescence. Furthermore, from the results of the current study, mothers and fathers appear to express different concerns for their adolescents, possibly due to the different activities and roles of mothers and fathers in the family (Collins & Russell, 1991).

The no-response and illegible categories also provided some interesting differences across the gender and age of adolescents in the study. Mothers indicated more frequently that they had no topics of conflict with regard to their daughters compared to their sons. In addition, this type of response was reported more frequently for early adolescents of both mothers and fathers than for middle adolescents. Moreover, mothers and fathers of late adolescents indicated fewer no responses than those of early or middle adolescents. It may be that early adolescents are just beginning to negotiate topics of conflict with their parents or are less likely to reveal their conflictual issues. In contrast, mothers and fathers may have

already identified relevant issues for their early adolescents but may believe that most topics of conflict have been negotiated by late adolescence. Although relatively infrequent, sons and early adolescents were more likely to provide illegible responses (i.e., the topic of conflict could not be deciphered from the written response provided) with regard to conflicts with their mothers. The potential reasons for these differences should be examined further.

In general, it appears that adolescents and their mothers and fathers believe that similar areas of conflict were relevant in their relationships with each other. In particular, the overall level of agreement across the topics selected by adolescents and their parents did not differ significantly with the gender or the age of the adolescent. Thus, it does not appear that mothers and fathers are more attuned with the topics of conflict for sons versus daughters or for adolescents of a particular age group. The recognition of the most important or most

frequent topics of conflict between adolescents and their parents should be explored further with regard to the quality of the adolescent-parent relationship.

Limitations

The results of this study should be viewed within the context of its limitations. First, because the main purpose of the study was to examine the topics of conflict generated by adolescents and their parents, the intensity of these conflicts and how frequently they occurred were not measured. These characteristics of conflict, in addition to the topics of parent-adolescent conflict, would provide a well-rounded picture of the conflict that occurs between adolescents and their mothers and fathers. Although the study provides cohesive categories for the examination of parent-adolescent conflict, the questionnaire used to generate these topics was open-ended. As a result, adolescents and their parents were at liberty to list the topics of conflict that first came to mind. These topics, however, may not have been representative of actual conflicts that occur within the home setting. Future research should explore the manner in which different types of questionnaires are related to the topics of conflict reported by different family members.

Furthermore, the sample of families examined in this study was composed of biologically related mothers, fathers, and adolescents who self-selected to participate and who were relatively homogeneous in their characteristics. A high percentage of these families were Caucasian and had parents who were married to each other, characteristics that are not representative of families in general. As a result, the topics of parent-adolescent conflict outlined in this study may not generalize to other types of family constellations with more diverse characteristics (e.g., cultural background, marital status). It is likely that the topics of conflict present in families will vary with the cultural background, gender expectations, and socioeconomic characteristics of families. Given the importance of cultural background and other characteristics of families not examined in this study, topics of parent-adolescent conflict within the context of these variables deserve further study. Finally, parents selected the adolescent who attended the data collection session with them. Parents' selection of which adolescent would participate may have resulted in a bias to the results presented here.

Implications for Clinical Interventions

Thus far in the literature regarding parent-adolescent conflict, much more investigation has been done on the process of conflict and its resolution, with a relative lack of investigation pertaining to the topics of conflict themselves. Although an understanding of the process of parent-adolescent conflict and its resolution is certainly important for the success of clinical interventions, developing a normative comparison of the topics of parent-adolescent conflict also will be instruc-

tive to clinical interventions. Such a normative comparison would be especially useful in normalizing some families' experience of parent-adolescent conflict. In addition, clinical interventions designed to assist families in managing their conflicts may prove to be most useful if they are varied with regard to the topics of conflict evident in each individual family situation. For example, families experiencing conflict over everyday issues may benefit from a different intervention than those families experiencing conflict over issues regarding the developmental transition (e.g., individuation) of their adolescents. By matching clinical interventions to the topics of conflict dealt with in each family, as clinicians do with regard to other psychological difficulties that families experience, clinical interventions are more likely to be effective.

Such differential interventions may be particularly important when examining the different dyadic relationships in families (e.g., mother-son, father-daughter), especially with regard to the gender and age of adolescents in the family. Although adolescents and their mothers and fathers often indicated that conflicts occurred about similar issues in general, their levels of agreement were not significantly different. The unique relationships of mothers and fathers with their adolescent sons and daughters may be important in the process and resolution of conflict regarding these different topics, however. As a result, clinical interventions for parent-adolescent conflict must contain a comprehensive clinical assessment component so that a thorough evaluation of each dyadic relationship in the family can be completed with regard to the topics of parent-adolescent conflict as well as its intensity and frequency. Having adolescents and their parents discuss these topics of conflict in the context of a comprehensive clinical assessment may be the first step toward opening communication within families and using clinical interventions to resolve the conflicts that may be occurring (Foster & Robin, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the topics of parent-adolescent conflict vary with the gender and age of adolescents and the gender of parents involved in the conflict. This study provides an examination of the topics of conflict that are reported by adolescents and their parents. The open-ended questionnaire completed by the adolescents and their parents in this study permitted each family member the freedom to list the actual topics of conflict that they encounter in their relationships and did not confine them to a preset notion of what the topics might be. The findings of this study indicate that it is important to examine the topics of conflict in parent-adolescent dyads. Topics of parent-adolescent conflict included everyday family matters, such as household rules and responsibilities, but also encompassed separation-

individuation and autonomy issues, school-related issues, and the general values held by members of the family. These differences in topics may pose challenges for clinicians attempting to understand the dynamics of parent-adolescent conflict and to implement appropriate clinical interventions.

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