

Parent-Adolescent Conflict: All in the mind?

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Speculation, theorising and research on the nature of parent-offspring relationships during the developmental period we call adolescence have a long and tortuous history. Plato and Aristotle both commented upon the tempestuousness and arrogance of youth and upon the difficulties these dispositions caused for society in general and for parents in particular. Closer to home G. Stanley Hall's biogenetic theory of development highlighted the storm and stress of adolescent adjustment and regarded intergenerational conflict as an inescapable concomitant of this period of growth. Similarly, Sigmund Freud believed the adolescent to be on a developmental path which led inexorably to conflict with parents as the young person sought to establish autonomy and to establish new bonds outside the family.

As every undergraduate student of psychology knows, however, anthropological and psychological research have yielded findings which are hardly unequivocal in their support for stress and conflict models of adolescence is passed through without major upheavals. Similarly in advanced, complex, technological societies the evidence suggests that intergenerational conflict is far from normative. Study after study has brought it home to us that while adolescents and their parents do hassle over day to day issues and have temporary disagreements, the majority of families do not experience severe trau-

matic, intergenerational conflict. Indeed, by the mid 70's, the psychological *zeitgeist* concerning adolescence had so shifted as to influence Ausubel (1977) in his volume on *Theory and Problems of Adolescence* to argue that psychologists were in danger of downplaying the storm, stress and conflict of adolescence to the point of almost denying that there was anything special at all about development during adolescence.

Results from empirical research appear to minimize the importance of parent-child conflict during adolescence. On the other hand, it is still enshrined in our folklore that parents and their adolescent children give each other a hard time. Moreover, the clinical literature is replete with papers on adolescence as a stressful and conflict ridden period of development. Indeed, as Adelson and Doeherman (1980) have pointed out, whether or not one views adolescence as a time of conflict may depend entirely on one's professional affiliation and the literature one reads. They suggest that the research psychologist who consumes a steady diet of *Child Development* articles may be excused for concluding that the adolescent is quietly «engaged in an implacable expansion of intellectual and moral capacity». On the other hand, the clinician who is an avid reader of the annual volumes of *Adolescent Psychiatry* is more likely to conclude that the adolescent is able miraculously to hold on to his sanity only by achieving Herculean feats of psychic adjustment and veritable prodigies of ego defence (*Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, p. 105).

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My own interest in the issue of parent adolescent conflict arose in the course of an enquiry I conducted with my colleague Martin Glachan, into young peoples' representations of the intellectual, social and emotional life of adults (McGurk & Glachan, 1988). Subjects were aged between 4 and 14 years. We were impressed in this study by the frequency with which 12-14 year old respondents claimed that they had more insight into the workings of adult minds than adults seemed to show of adolescent minds. Many of these young people felt misunderstood and misrepresented by the adults — mainly parents and teachers — in their lives. Now, this in itself is not a new observation. For example, it echoes the 1957 report by Hess and Goldblatt that adolescents believe that adults deprecate teenagers. However, the examples which some of our subjects reported from their experiences sounded vivid and convincing and suggested that there may be some truth in their claim. At least it was worth investigating. It suggested to me also an approach whereby we may gain some insight into the nature of adolescent-parent conflict if we were prepared to regard this as a dimension of individual difference rather than as a normative characteristics of adolescents.

The reasoning went along the following lines. If either or both of two parties to an interaction within a family entertains, for whatever reason, a false representation of the perspective of the other, or of the other's perspective of self, then this is likely to lead to misinterpretation of the communications in the exchange. If such misinterpretation is persistent then misunderstandings and disagreements are likely to be frequent. Thus, communication may break down and conflict between family members result. On the other hand, in families where the members have accurate representations of each other's perspectives then misinterpretation and misunderstanding are likely to be less frequent and such conflict as occurs might be expected to be resolved before it escalates into a crisis in the relationship between the parties.

This reasoning provided a framework within which to investigate individual differences in parent-adolescent conflict. We recognised that in any such investigation it would be important to sample parents' and adolescents' representations of the other across a wide range of issues. In the event, for a variety of reasons, we chose to investigate the accuracy of reciprocal representations with respect to

factual, personality and cognitive issues as follows:

- personal preferences for food, TV viewing and leisure activities: (factual)
- subjective assessment of personality: (personal)
- moral judgement: (cognitive/judgemental).

It was also important to have an index of the degree of conflict that existed between adolescents and their parents. Here, again for a variety of reasons, we focussed upon the members of parent-adolescent dyads during the period of the week which had elapsed just prior to data collection. Data were collected from parent-adolescent dyads by means of interview and questionnaires developed on the basis of pilot work. Each member of each dyad was request to provide information from three perspectives:

- i. his/her own
- ii. that of is/her father/mother or son/daughter
- iii. as the respondent believed his/her father/mother or son/daughter perceived how the respondent would reply.

The objective of the study was to assess the relationship between the accuracy of parental and adolescent representation of each others' perspectives on the one hand and frequency of disagreements on the other. To this end four instruments were developed or adapted. Firstly, as a measure of the level of disagreement/conflict between parents and adolescent children we employed a check list of frequently occurring disputes between parents and their adolescent children and asked respondents to indicate the frequency, if any, of the disputes in which they had engaged with the other member of the dyad during the previous seven days. Secondly, ten items from the Offer (1982) Parent-Adolescent Questionnaire were employed to elicit personality judgements; each item presented a statement about a personality trait and respondents estimated, on a six point scale, how well the statement described the target person. Thirdly, Rest's (1976) Defining Issues Test, derived from Kohlberg's theory of moral development, was used to obtain data on moral orientation. Finally, respondents were asked to provide information about TV viewing, food and leisure time preferences.

Getting parents and adolescents to provide information about each other is not new. For example,

Offer, Ostrov & Howard (1982) obtained estimates from parents of how their adolescent children would complete a personality questionnaire. They found that accurate parental perception was related to optimistic self images among the adolescents. However, where the present study differs from Offer and other similar investigations is that we obtained reciprocal measures of adolescent and parent representations of each other and were able to compare and contrast the accuracy of these representations. It is in this respect that the present project breaks new ground.

The total sample comprised 320 dyads from four adolescent age groups, 12, 14, 16 and 18 years; there were 80 pairs from each group. All of the adolescents attended school in South East England and were predominantly from middle class backgrounds. Originally it had been intended to recruit equal numbers of father- and mother-child dyads. However, this proved not to be possible and the final composition of the sample was as follows:

- Fathers and sons: 40 pairs
- Father and daughters: 73 pairs
- Mother and sons: 119 pairs
- Mothers and daughters: 88 pairs.

Adolescents were interviewed at school. Parents were interviewed at home either on the same evening or the evening before the day the adolescents from the corresponding dyads were interviewed. The respondents within each dyad were asked not to discuss the interview with the other person involved until both interviews had been carried out. Although we believe that this request was honoured we have no data on the matter.

RESULTS

This study has produced a massive quantity of data and the analysis of results is still going on since data collection was completed only recently. In this presentation I will confine the discussion to consideration of the data on frequency of disagreements between adolescents and their parents; to the accuracy of adolescent and parental representations of each other's personal preferences and to the relationship between that accuracy and the frequency of

reported disagreements. I will also present some findings on the relationships between accuracy of reciprocal representations of the other's moral judgments and frequency of reported disagreement.

TABLE 1
Percentage frequencies of reported conflicts

ADOLESCENTS		PARENTS	
1. Television	37.2 %	1. Helping at home	46.2 %
2. Homework	34.1 %	2. Television	22.4 %
3. Helping at home	32.8 %	3. Time to be home	22.2 %
4. Money	23.8 %	4. Other	20.0 %
5. Time to be home	15.0 %	5. Appearance	19.7 %
6. Appearance	15.0 %	6. Homework	19.4 %
7. Boy/Girl friends	8.8 %	7. Money	18.4 %
8. Dinner at home	8.1 %	8. Dinner at home	12.2 %
9. Other	7.8 %	9. Friends	11.9 %
10. Friends	6.9 %	10. Boy/Girl friends	5.3 %
11. Smoking	3.8 %	11. Drinking	0.9 %
12. Drinking	3.1 %	12. Smoking	0.0 %
13. Religion	2.5 %	13. Religion	0.0 %

Table 1 shows the percentage frequency with which various issues were identified as the source of disagreement between adolescents and their parents during the week preceding data collection. The table lists individually all issues which were quoted by more than 2% of the entire sample as being the occasion of dispute. Thus, we can see that parents referred to idiosyncratic issues of disagreement more frequently than adolescents.

Overall, however, two points emerge clearly from the table. Firstly, the table confirms that disputes between adolescents and their parents are primarily concerned with matters of day to day existence. Secondly, there is a high level of agreement between parents and adolescents as to what issues lead to discord; a Spearman Rank correlation test revealed a significant agreement between parents and their adolescent offspring in this respect ($r = 0.80$; $p < 0.01$).

The total number of disputes reported by each adolescent age group is shown in Table 2 along with the percentage of each age group who reported no disputes during the previous week.

Clearly the 18 year olds reported less conflict with their parents than the younger age groups. In addition there were greater numbers of 16 and 18 year olds

who reported no disputes compared with younger subjects.

TABLE 2

Total number of disputes reported by adolescents according to age

	12YR: OLDS	14YR: OLDS	16YR: OLDS	18YR: OLDS
Total disputes	181	176	192	144
Average per dyad	2.3	2.2	2.4	1.8
No disputes	21.0 %	23.5 %	34.2 %	34.2 %

Taking the latter finding into account it appears that, with respect to 16 year olds, the average number of disputes reported is higher than for other age groups.

A similar breakdown of parents' reports of disputes with their adolescent offspring is presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Total number of disputes reported by parents according to age of adolescent

	12YR: OLDS	14YR: OLDS	16YR: OLDS	18YR: OLDS
Total disputes	202	193	121	121
Average per dyad	2.5	2.4	1.5	1.6
No disputes	6.2 %	19.2 %	41.8 %	36.7 %

Overall parents report fewer disputes with older age groups compared with the younger ones. However, taking into account the greater number of parents who report no disputes with older adolescents then the average number of disputes, for those parents who do report conflicts, is similar across all age groups (12 yrs 2.7; 14 yrs 3.0; 16 yrs 2.6; 18 yrs 2.5). Thus for those families where disputes continue into the later years of adolescence, the frequency of disputes, as perceived by parents, remain at a steady rate across age.

The data can also be broken down according to type of dyad, namely; father/son, father/daughter, mother/son and mother/daughter. Table 4 shows the total number of disputes reported by adolescents in each dyad type along with the percentage of adolescents who reported no disputes with their parents during the previous week.

TABLE 4

Total number of disputes reported by adolescents according to structure of dyad

	FATHER/ SON	FATHER/ DAU- GHTER	MO- THER/ SON	MO- THER/ DAU- GHTER
N	40	73	119	88
Total disputes	48	143	269	185
Average per dyad	1.2	2.0	2.3	2.1
No disputes	27.5 %	33.3 %	23.5 %	30.7 %

The data in table 4 shows that of the four group least conflict is reported between sons and fathers, with little difference between the other pairings. Corresponding data for parents' reports are presented in the next table.

TABLE 5

Total number of disputes reported by parents according to structure of dyad

	FATHER/ SON	FATHER/ DAU- GHTER	MO- THER/ SON	MO- THER/ DAU- GHTER
N	40	73	119	88
Total disputes	54	117	266	205
Average per dyad	1.4	1.6	2.2	2.3
No disputes	37.5 %	31.5 %	25.2 %	17.0 %

Overall fathers report lower levels of conflict with both sons and daughters than mothers. Comparing adolescents' and parents' reports there is considerable agreement. However, fewer mothers (17%) than daughters (31%) perceive themselves as having had no disagreements with each other during the preceding week.

There was a fair amount of agreement overall in the kinds of issues which gave rise to discord within different dyads:

Fathers and Sons both tended to see *homework* and *money* as important issues over which they disagreed.

Mothers and Sons disagreed mostly over *homework* and *TV viewing*.

Fathers and Daughters had their disagreements over *helping at home*, *time to be home at night* and *friendships*.

Mother and Daughters disputed over *helping at home*, and *relationships with boys*.

Thus, in late 20th century middle class Britain traditional sex-role divisions are still apparent with male and female parents more concerned about their sons' educational progress and with their daughters' domestic activities.

PERSONAL PREFERENCES

I want to turn now to consideration of the accuracy with which parents and their adolescent children perceive each other's personal preferences with respect to TV viewing, food and leisure activities. Each adolescent member of each dyad was asked to report his or her own preferences, the preferences of the relevant parent and that parent's perceived judgement of the preferences of the respondent. Reciprocal judgements were obtained from parents. The respective judgements were then compared and scored for their absolute accuracy. The next table illustrates how accurately adolescents and their parents perceive each others preferences.

TABLE 5
Percentage accuracy of parent and adolescent representations of each other's perspectives

ADOLESCENTS		PARENTS	
	Percentage correct		Percentage correct
TV	46.9 %	TV	48.7 %
Food	46.9 %	Food	60.3 %
Pastime	43.4 %	Pastime	54.4 %
Overall average	45.7 %	Overall average	54.4 %

In general, parents are a little more accurate about their offspring's preferences than vice versa, being particularly accurate about food preferences. Overall, parents are just over 50% accurate whilst adolescent are just under 50% accurate.

Table 6 shows the percentage of adolescents and parents who believed that the other would accurately represent their perspective.

Table 6 reveals that similar proportions of adolescents and parents believe that the other has an accurate representations of their preferences. However, it is evident that a greater percentage of adolescents and parents believed that the other knows

TABLE 6

Percentage belief in accuracy of other's representation of self with respect to personal preferences

ADOLESCENTS		PARENTS	
	Percentage correct		Percentage correct
TV	53.4 %	TV	61.9 %
Food	60.9 %	Food	56.6 %
Pastime	68.8 %	Pastime	59.4 %
Overall average	61.0 %	Overall average	59.3 %

their preferences compared with what actually is the case. That is perceived accuracy is greater than actual accuracy for both parents and children (59 vs 45 percent for parents and 61 vs 54 percent for adolescents).

Breaking this data down by the age of the adolescents reveals a trend for older adolescents to be more accurate about their parents' likes than younger ones (12 year olds 42.5%; 14 year olds 41.3%; 16 year olds 50.0%; 18 year olds 50.0%) and for parents to be more accurate about the likes of older adolescent offspring than younger ones (12 year olds 47.9%; 14 year olds 50.9%; 16 year olds 60.4%; 18 year olds 58.8%). On the other hand no age differences exist among adolescents concerning how accurately they believe their parents know their likes (12 year olds 60.0%; 14 year olds 60.0%; 16 year olds 63.8%; 18 year olds 60.4%). Parents, however, tend to believe that older adolescent know their likes better than younger ones (12 year olds 56.7%; 14 year olds 54.6%; 16 year olds 64.6%; 18 year olds 61.3%).

Let us turn now to consideration of the relationships between accuracy of judgements about the other's preferences and frequency of parent-adolescent disagreements. Two composite measures were developed to reflect the accuracy of the representations which adolescents' or parents have of the others likes in the three domains under discussion. Those subjects who were only accurate concerning a single domain or were inaccurate in all domains were categorised as a «low accuracy group» while those who were accurate in two or all three domains were categorised as a «high accuracy group». Similar measures were adopted to reflect how accurate adolescents and their parents perceived the other to be concerning their preferences. Thus «low» and «high perceived accuracy» groups were established.

Further composite measures were developed to reflect the amount of conflict reported by adolescents and parents. In each case subjects who reported either a single dispute or no disputes during the previous week were categorised as a «low conflict group». Those who reported two or three disputes as a «middle conflict group» and those who reported four or more disputes as a «high conflict group».

FIGURE 1

Schematic illustration of eight possible contrasts to assess relationship between accuracy of representation of other and reported conflict between adolescent and parents

		ACCURACY	
		0/1	2/3
CONFLICT LEVEL	LOW 0/1		
	MIDDLE 2/3		
	HIGH 4+		

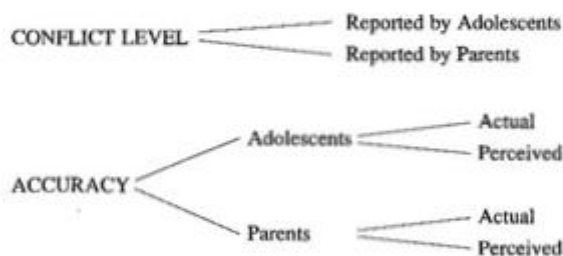


Figure 1 illustrates the series 3x2 chi squared tests were carried out to assess the relationship between the conflict measures and the actual or perceived accuracy of representations measures. The results can be summarised as follows:

1. Increasing levels of conflict reported by adolescents is associated with:

- a) Lower adolescent accuracy about parent likes ($X^2 = 67.1$; $p < 0.0001$).
- b) Lower belief in the accuracy of their parents' representations of their likes ($X^2 = 19.9$; $p < 0.001$).
- c) Lower parent accuracy concerning the adolescents' likes ($X^2 = 16.9$; $p < 0.001$).

d) Lower parental belief in the accuracy of their adolescents' knowledge of the parents' likes ($X^2 = 19.2$; $p < 0.001$).

2. Increasing levels of conflict reported by parents is associated with:

- e) Lower parent accuracy about adolescent likes ($X^2 = 51.0$; $p < 0.0001$).
- f) Lower belief in the accuracy of their adolescents' representations of their likes ($X^2 = 95.1$; $p < 0.00001$).
- g) Lower adolescent accuracy concerning the parents' likes ($X^2 = 64.9$; $p < 0.0001$).
- h) Lower adolescent belief in the accuracy of their parents' knowledge of the adolescents likes ($X^2 = 19.2$; $p < 0.001$).

Thus, these overall results demonstrate that for adolescents and their parents alike, judgement about conflict between them is related to their representations of the other and of the other's perspective of self, such that the more accurate these representations are the less frequently do disputes arise.

The relationship just described has been illustrated with respect to representations of the other's perspectives concerning personal preferences for TV viewing, food and leisure pursuits. We also obtained data on representations of the other's perspectives concerning the resolution of moral dilemmas. The dilemmas were taken from the versions employed in Rests «Defining Issues Test». Each subject in each dyad was asked to resolve a series of dilemmas from his/her own viewpoint, from the viewpoint of the other and from viewpoint of the other's view of self. For example here is the dilemma entitled «The Escaped Prisoner»:

«A man had been sentenced to prison for 10 years. After one year, however, he escaped from prison, moved to a new area of the country and took on the name of Thompson. For 8 years he worked hard, and gradually he saved enough money to buy his own business. He was fair to his customers, gave his employees top wages and gave most of his own profit to charity. Then one day Mrs Jones, an old neighbour, recognised him as the man who has escaped from prison 8 years before and whom the police had been looking for. Should Mrs Jones report Mr Thompson to the police and have him sent back to prison?».

For the purposes of this presentation we will consider only the simplest level of scoring these

stories. Subjects who said that Mrs Jones should report to the police were awarded a score of 1; those who couldn't decide were scored 2 and those who said she should not report Mr Thompson were scored 3. Using this scoring system we were able to assess how accurately parents and adolescents were at representing each others moral judgements and how accurately each felt the other would represent his or her point of view. Then, in the same manner as for personal preferences we were able to evaluate the relationship between accuracy of representation of the other's perspectives and reported levels of disagreement between parents and adolescent children. The results can be summarised as follows.

1. Increasing levels of conflict reported by adolescents was found to be significantly associated with:

a) Lower adolescent accuracy about their parent's responses to moral dilemmas ($X^2 = 23.37$; $p < 0.001$).

b) Lower belief in the accuracy of their parent's representations of their responses to moral dilemmas ($X^2 = 53.26$; $p < 0.0001$).

c) Lower parent accuracy concerning the adolescents' responses to moral dilemmas ($X^2 = 44.88$; $p < 0.0001$).

d) Lower parental belief in the accuracy of their adolescents representations of their responses to moral dilemmas ($X^2 = 14.07$; $p < 0.005$).

2. Increasing levels of conflict reported by parents was also found to be associated with:

e) Lower parent accuracy about their adolescent's responses to moral dilemmas ($X^2 = 6.64$; $p < 0.05$).

f) Lower belief in the accuracy of their adolescent's representations of their responses to moral dilemmas ($X^2 = 19.32$; $p < 0.001$).

g) Lower adolescent accuracy concerning the parents' responses to moral dilemmas ($X^2 = 19.16$; $p < 0.005$).

h) Lower adolescent belief in the accuracy of their parents representations of their responses to moral dilemmas ($X^2 = 11.65$; $p < 0.05$).

This exactly repeats the pattern of results obtained with respect to personal preferences. In both instances increased accuracy in representing the perspective of the other and the other's perspective of self is consistently and significantly associated with decrease

in the frequency of disputes between adolescents and their parents.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of general conclusions can be drawn from these findings. They also point the way to fruitful avenues for further investigations into the nature of parent-adolescent conflict.

1. The results demonstrate that there is a broad consensus between adolescents and their parents concerning the nature and amount of disagreement that arises between them. They agree about how frequently they disagree and about the issues which give rise to such disagreements. Our findings reinforce the argument that disputes between parents and adolescents are focussed upon everyday issues of living together and do not reflect fundamental difference in values.

2. At a general level, parents tend to have somewhat more accurate representations of their adolescents perspectives than the reverse. However, with increasing age of the adolescents the respective accuracy of representations of the other increases for adolescents and their parents. Put differently, parents and adolescents understand each other better as adolescents get older. Whether this comes about because of an increasing convergence of points of views is an issue we have not directly addressed.

3. Again, at a general level, adolescents and their parents are equally optimistic about the accuracy with which the other represents the point of view of self; both parents and adolescents believe that the other has more accurate expectations of self than actually turns out to be the case.

4. There are individual differences between families in the frequency of disputes between adolescents and their parents and in the accuracy with which each represents the perspective of the other. These parameters are inter-dependent. Data on representations of personal preferences and or representations of moral judgements converge to support the conclusion that high levels of accuracy in parent and adolescent representations of each other are associated with low levels of parent-child conflict. In other words, some parents and adolescents are well understood by each other, others less so. Those that do understand each other tend to have fewer disagreements than those who do not.

5. Analysis of the results of this investigation remain incomplete and much of the fine detail of these conclusions remains fleshed out. Even so the results emerging thus far justify our proposal that it is more fruitful to conceptualise parent-child conflict during adolescence as a dimension of individual difference rather than as a normative characteristic of adolescence. The model I outlined at the beginning of this paper, of the potential for conflict that is inherent when effective communication is jeopardised by mutual misrepresentation of the perspective of the other, has been supported by the results I have presented here. However, the model is one which can apply to relationships at any developmental stage, both within as well as between generations. Those aspects of the model which are specific to parent-child relationships during adolescence remain to be specified more fully and to be tested by further research. However, the model appears to hold considerable promise for our understanding of relationships between adolescents and their parents.

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