Morality in Adolescent-Parent Relationships

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Adolescent Moral Development

- Focused primarily on prohibitions ("don’ts")
- Substantially less attention to the "do’s" of development
  - E.g., the need to be compassionate, caring
- Interpersonal caring has been seen as a superogatory expectation ("nice to do") rather than a moral obligation ("ought to do")
Adolescent Prosocial Moral Reasoning

- Research on prosocial moral reasoning (Eisenberg et al., 2006) has assumed that prosocial reasoning develops in progressive stages.
- In contrast, other research has focused on how individuals weigh & coordinate different kinds of concerns in their judgments (more contextual).
Adolescent Moral Development

Social domain research has shown that teens view helping, caring as obligatory

- When interpersonal needs are great (Neff, Turiel, & Anshel, 2002)
- When interpersonal relationships are close (Killen & Turiel, 1998)

Different types of relationships (close friends, parent-child, spousal) have been examined

Research has not specifically examined reasoning in the context of adolescent-parent relationships
Parent-Adolescent Relationships

- Parent-child relationships are “closed field,” difficult to dissolve
- Behaviors that may disrupt more voluntary relationships may be tolerated
- Parents and teens can be ‘selfish’ & know that the relationship will endure
Parent-Adolescent Relationships

- Parent-child relationships entail mutual obligations & reciprocal duties
- Parents are obligated to nurture and care for children
- Children have rights to self-determination
  (Ruck, Abramovitch, & Keating, 1998)
Study Aims

- To examine age-related, parent-teen, & contextual changes in judgments & reasoning about hypothetical situations where adolescents’ & parents’ needs conflict with personal desires

**Novel Features:**

- We obtained teens’ & parents’ evaluations
  - Of situations where a parent (or teen) requests help
  - Teen (or parent) must give up personal desires to help
  - Included low & higher interpersonal need situations & a conventional situation

- We examined correlates of judgments
Sample Demographics

- **Family Sample** (*n* = 118 families)
  - 57 with 7th graders (*M* = 12.32 years, *SD* = .51)
    - 30 males, 27 females
  - 61 with 10th graders (*M* = 15.18, *SD* = .47)
    - 30 males, 31 females
  - 118 parents (mostly mothers)

- Primarily lower middle SES, European American (88%)
  - 9% African American, 3% Other

- **College Student sample** (*n* = 48)
  - 23 males, 25 females (*M* = 19.96, *SD* = 1.30)
Methods

- Parents and adolescents were individually interviewed during visits to our lab
- Audio-taped interviews were transcribed for coding
- Participants completed ratings of permissibility and selfishness
- Completed questionnaire assessments of family obligation, relationship quality (closeness & conflict), and behavioral autonomy
Interview Stories (6)

- Pit teen’s or parent’s needs or request against the other person’s desires
  - 3 stories - teen needs help/makes request
  - 3 stories - parent needs help/makes request
- Teen protagonist’s sex matched to participant
- Stories presented in counterbalanced order
Interview Stories

Interpersonal/Personal (Low Need)
- Parent: Give up going to theater to attend school auction (teen was minimally involved)
- Teen: Given up going to movie to stay home for furniture delivery

Interpersonal/Personal (Higher Need)
- Parent: Help teen with act in talent show instead of going to book club
- Teen: Help with holiday party instead of sledding

Conventional/Personal
- Parent: Change embarrassing clothes to go to school soccer game
- Teen: Change casual clothes to visit grandparents
Assessments

- Judgment: Should protagonist help/assist?
- Justifications for judgments: Why?
- Permissibility (5-pt scale): How permissible (OK) is it to satisfy personal desire?
- Selfishness (5-pt scale): How selfish is it (for actor) to satisfy personal desires?
Obligations to Help

- Low Need
- Convention
- Higher Need

Percent

- Teens
- Parents
Obligations to Help -
Lower Need and Conventional Situations

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<th>Teens</th>
<th>Parents</th>
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<td>Conventional Story</td>
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Justifications

- Conventional
  - Tradition/Respect, Authority/Punishment Avoidance, Social Nonconformity
- Role Responsibility
  - Role & Relationship Responsibility, Social System Perspective
- Concern for Others
- Psychological
  - Relationship Maintenance, Psychological
- Moral
  - Instrumental Reciprocity, Fairness
- Personal
  - Benefits Actor/Personal Matter, Inconsequential
- Pragmatic/Prudential
Justifications For Helping

**Percent**

- Conventional
- Role Responsibility
- Psychological
- Concern for Others
- Pragmatic
- Personal

- Teens
- Parents
Justifications For Story Actors

**Concern for Others**
- Parent Actor: Teens (35%) vs. Parents (37%)
- Teen Actor: Teens (33%) vs. Parents (25%)

**Role Responsibility**
- Parent Actor: Teens (22%) vs. Parents (30%)
- Teen Actor: Teens (13%) vs. Parents (27%)

**Note:**
- **:** Significant difference
- **:** Very significant difference
Permissibility of Satisfying Personal Desires
When Help is Requested

- **Low Need**
  - Teens: 2.9
  - Parents: 3.0
  - Significance: **

- **Convention**
  - Teens: 2.7
  - Parents: 3.0
  - Significance: +

- **Higher Need**
  - Teens: 2.5
  - Parents: 2.4
  - Significance: **

Ratings scale from 1 to 4.
Age Differences in Permissibility of Satisfying Personal Desires

Permissibility Ratings

7th Grade 10th Grade

Adolescents
Parents
Justifications for Not Helping
(Satisfying Personal Desires)

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Teens</th>
<th>Parents</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>30</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
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** indicates a significant difference between groups.
Teens' Selfishness Ratings
In Low Need Situation

- Blue line: Low Need - Parent Actor
- Red line: Low Need - Teen Actor

Ratings

7th Grade  10th Grade  College
Family Measures

- Family Obligations/Interdependence
  - 5 items - Fuligni et al., 1999; 6 items from Phinney et al., 2005

- Behavioral Autonomy Expectations
  - 20 items adapted from Feldman & Quatman, 1988
  - When should a teen be able to decide issue for self? (1 = before 12 yrs of age, 5 = after age 20)

- Closeness to Parents
  - 18 items - Trust & Communication subscales of Parent-Peer Attachment Inventory (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)

- Conflict Intensity
  - 11 items (Smetana, 1989) - How “hot” did conflicts get?
## Correlations Between Permissibility of Personal Desires and Family Variables

| WHO DECIDES: | Teens’ Ratings | | | Parents’ Ratings | | |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|              | Teen           | Parent         |                | Teen           | Parent         | | |
| Family Income| -.09           | .10            |                | .02            | .23*           | |
| Mothers’ Educ (yrs ) | -.04           | .01            |                | -.14           | .13            | |
| Fathers’ Educ (yrs ) | -.06           | .07            |                | -.01           | .22*           | |
| Family Obligation | -.25**         | -.13           |                | .11            | .10            | |
| A Autonomy Expectations | -.24*         | -.08           |                | .19*           | .05            | |
| P Closeness → A | .00           | -.24*          |                | -.04           | -.15+          | |
| A Closeness → M | -.16+         | -.14           |                | -.16+          | .01            | |
| A Closeness → F | .14           | -.19*          |                | -.04           | -.06           | |
| P Confl. Intensity → T | .07           | .27*           |                | -.07           | .08            | |

Note. + p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01.
Conclusions

- Teens (and parents) were neither selfish nor selfless
- Rather, evaluations of interpersonal family situations differed in complex ways (who was requesting help, type & level of need, adolescents’ age)
- Most participants thought both adolescents and parents were obligated to help in higher need situations but less so in the other situations

**Our higher need situations were everyday family situations (more like minor needs in other studies, e.g., Miller et al., 1990)**
Conclusions

- Age & parent/child differences in ratings suggest:
  - With age, increasing differentiation in terms of level of need
  - Low need - depends on role and age (parents increasingly obligated)

- Consistent with the notion that both autonomy and relatedness are basic human needs

- Thus, participants weighed, evaluated, and coordinated personal, moral, and conventional components

- Evaluations were associated with autonomy development, family relationships, and values (family obligation), but only in specific contexts
Future Directions

- Need to examine evaluations in a broader range of situations & samples
  - Different levels of needs, different family members
  - Samples other than primarily White, middle class families
  - In real-life situations
Thank you!

- We are grateful to the Fetzer Institute and the Institute for Unlimited Love ♥ for their support of this research.

- Learn more about the Family & Social Processes Research Group of the University of Rochester at:

  - http://www.psych.rochester.edu/research/socialdev/