

Adolescent-Parent Conflict and Conflict Resolution  
in Middle Class African American Families

Judith Smetana  
University of Rochester

Paper presented at a symposium titled, “Cultural Values in Conflict and Conflict Resolution Among Adolescents from Diverse Ethnic and Cultural Backgrounds” at the Biennial Meetings of the Society for Research on Adolescence, New Orleans, April, 2002. I am grateful to Susan Chuang for her assistance with coding, Christopher Daddis for his assistance with data analyses, and to the many families who participated in this research. I also wish to thank the William T. Grant Foundation for their on-going support of this research.

There has been ongoing interest in studying adolescent-parent conflict, but there has been much less attention to patterns of conflict and conflict resolution in ethnic minority families and in families of varying cultural backgrounds. Research and theorizing, particularly from cultural psychology, have challenged us to think more carefully about the cultural contexts of conflict. For instance, building on their previous work, Markus and Lin (1999) have coined the term 'conflictways' to examine how culture and conflict intersect. They assert that conflictways vary dramatically in different cultural contexts and that the way individuals raise, negotiate, and resolve conflicts are culturally patterned. They propose that individualistic cultures like the US are oriented around the unspoken assumptions that individuals have the right to disagree, that individuals should be open and honest in expressing their perspective, that there is a 'correct' solution to a conflict, and that this solution will prevail, given reason and solid argument. In contrast, in collectivist cultures, which value interdependence, relationships and their maintenance are given priority. Accordingly, whether conflicts are raised openly and how they are negotiated and resolved reflect a focus on solving interpersonal problems in ways that give priority to maintaining the relationship.

These descriptions have usefully focused our attention on the ways that individuals in different cultural contexts actively construct meaning from their social interactions. However, critics have questioned whether cultures really are quite as homogeneous, internally consistent, and externally distinctive as these views suggest (see Killen & Wainryb, 2000; Smetana, in press; Turiel & Wainryb, 2000 for reviews). In line with these researchers, my research on adolescent-parent conflict and conflict resolution has revealed a complex pattern of heterogeneity within groups and homogeneity across groups. This paper focuses primarily on ongoing research with middle class African American families with adolescents, but the

findings are placed in the context of other research to provide a broader perspective for interpretation.

The primary data presented here are drawn from University of Rochester Youth and Family Project. This is a multi-method, multi-informant study of 95 middle class African American families with early adolescents ( $M = 13.10$  years,  $SD = 1.29$ ) who were followed longitudinally for two years ( $M = 15.50$  years,  $SD = 1.28$ ). Attrition over the two-year period resulted in a Time 2 sample of 85 families (82 with complete data for the present analyses). The focus here is on mothers' and adolescents' responses. At both assessments, adolescents and parents responded to the Issues Checklist (Prinz, Foster, Kent, & O'Leary, 1979; Robin & Foster, 1989). They indicated which of 37 different areas of day-to-day decision-making were discussed over the previous two weeks and then rated those issues for intensity and frequency. They then indicated their three "hottest" conflicts, which formed the basis for individual semi-structured interviews focusing on descriptions of the conflicts (which were content-analyzed), justifications for their positions, and conflict resolutions.

Before describing results, the cultural context of African American families should be considered. African American culture has been described as strongly influenced by West African values, including spirituality, the importance of extended kin networks, communalism, and hierarchical family relationships that include obedience and respect for elders. These values have been transformed into a distinctively American pattern by the history of slavery and the ongoing experience of oppression and racism (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Garcia Coll, Meyer, & Brillion, 1995; Parke & Buriel, 1998). In describing conflictways, Markus and Lin (1999) have elaborated that despite the importance of kin and friends, African Americans relate to others as separate individuals with unique thoughts and feelings, and spontaneity and self-expression are valued. Comparing Black and White styles of conflict, Kochman (1981) has

described African American interactions in conflict situations as emotional, animated, energetic, and even confrontational at times.

However apt, these descriptions, focus on African American adults. They do not consider age, status, and generational differences, which must be considered in understanding adolescent-parent conflict. Indeed, the cultural patterns just described lead to conflicting predictions regarding how adolescent-parent conflict and its resolution might be expressed in African American families. On the one hand, Markus and Lin's (1999) and Kochman's (1981) descriptions suggest that conflicts might be affectively charged and high in intensity. Because African American families have been described as encouraging self-reliance and independence, adolescents' self-expression in the context of conflict might be tolerated or even encouraged as expressions of individuality. On the other hand, African American families have been described as hierarchical, and African American parenting has been described as strict, harsh, and parent-centered (Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; Parke & Buriel, 1998). This would suggest that adolescents' expression of opposition might be discouraged, that conflicts might be low in intensity, that obedience to parents might be stressed, and that conflicts might be resolved primarily in terms of parents' point of view.

As we have found in other studies with European American families (Smetana, 1989; Smetana & Asquith, 1994) and Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong and mainland China (Yau & Smetana, 1996, 2001), conflicts in African American families occurred over the everyday details of family life, like getting along with others, doing chores, cleaning the bedroom, doing homework, watching TV or using the telephone, and choice of activities (see Figure 1). Conflicts were frequent but low in intensity

How are conflicts negotiated within families? Conflict resolution was coded using categories used in previous research: 'adolescent gives in,' 'parent gives in,' 'conflict remains

unresolved.’ and ‘compromise’. Based on a content analysis of a subset of responses, we also added another category indicating that conflicts were resolved by punishment (giving time out, withdrawing privileges, etc.). African American families reported that conflicts in both early and middle adolescence were resolved primarily by adolescents giving in to parents. A much smaller proportion of families reported that conflicts remained unresolved or were resolved through punishment, compromise or joint solutions, and only rarely, by parents giving in to their adolescents. Longitudinal analyses indicated that adolescent concession to parents did not change significantly from early to middle adolescence. Although infrequent in this sample, joint resolutions increased over time, whereas punishment declined significantly with age, due to declines in mothers’ reported use of punishment (see figure).

Comparing the responses from African American mothers and adolescents with comparable ages of middle class European American adolescents and their mothers (see figure) suggests that parental concession may be greater in middle class European American than in African American families. Indeed, cross-sectional analyses of data from our European American families (including late adolescents, who were omitted from this comparison) indicate that although the overall frequency remains low, European American adolescents are more likely to get their way in disputes as they get older. Although adolescent concession looks similar across ethnic groups, punishment can be seen as a more particularized form of adolescent concession. When considered in this way, the findings suggest that adolescent concession may be more prevalent in African American in European American families. These findings are consistent with the notion of African American parenting as strict and parent-centered. However, the results must be treated with caution, because statistical comparisons were not performed. And although our research with African American families is longitudinal, the data presented here do not extend to late adolescence, and my previous

research has suggested that this is where significant transformations in conflict resolution occur.

However, the findings for our African American families also revealed significant within-sample heterogeneity that was systematically related to family socioeconomic status. Joint resolutions and parental concession were greater as socioeconomic status increased, and parental concession increased as socioeconomic status declined, although the particular socioeconomic indicators showing significant associations varied somewhat (see Table). There have been ongoing debates about whether parent-unilateral decision-making (assessed here in terms of adolescent concession) reflects an African American cultural orientation or a protection against the dangerous environments that lower socioeconomic status families encounter (Lamborn et al., 1996). These findings point to the importance of both SES and culture.

Resolutions also varied according to the type of issue (see Figure). We looked at how conflicts were resolved for four categories of issues: chores (including the teenager's bedroom), homework, choice of activities (including activities, bedtime, and use of telephone and TV), and interpersonal relations (e.g., getting along with others). As the figure shows, mothers' views prevailed most when conflicts were over chores, less when conflicts were over homework and choice of activities, and least when conflicts were over interpersonal relations. Reported punishment was greater for interpersonal relations than for other issues.

The findings thus far suggest the role of cultural influences on conflict resolution. However, in my research, I have been particularly interested in adolescents' and parents' justifications, or their interpretations of conflict. We have found that African American adolescents primarily justify disagreements as issues of personal jurisdiction and that reasoning about personal jurisdiction increases significantly from early to middle adolescence. Although

these findings are consistent with the notion that African American families value personal expression, or expressive individualism, they also are highly consistent with other research findings. The results are very similar to the European American adolescents (Smetana 1989), and perhaps more surprisingly, to the Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong and Mainland China (Yau & Smetana, 1996, 2001) we have studied. Although these other studies have included late adolescents, the data here are age-matched. Furthermore, in each of these contexts, with one exception, appeals to personal jurisdiction increased with age across adolescence. These findings are more difficult to interpret within a cultural lens, as Chinese have been described as prototypically collectivist and as oriented towards interdependence (rather than autonomy) and harmony in interpersonal relationships, European American adolescents have been described as prototypically individualistic, and African American adolescents have been characterized as both autonomous and interdependent. Thus, the finding that adolescents appeal to personal jurisdiction appears to reflect a great deal of cross-cultural homogeneity.

In my view, this is because adolescent-parent conflict reflects the developmental task of individuation. Although autonomy has become a culturally loaded term, a great deal of research on parents' autonomy expectations has shown that across a range of cultures, parents do expect their teenagers to become independent in managing everyday tasks and decisions, although there are cultural differences in when autonomy is expected to occur. Thus, conflict occurs when adolescents' desires for more control over decision-making collide with parents' beliefs, values, and socialization goals for their adolescents. How conflicts are resolved may be culturally variable, but adolescents do negotiate, resist, and challenge parental authority. That resistance appears to be selective and focused on redefining the boundaries of parental authority and personal jurisdiction. This process occurs in different cultural systems, leading to heterogeneity both within and between cultures.

## References

- Boykin, A. W., & Toms, F. D. (1985). Black child socialization: A conceptual framework. In H. P. McAdoo & J. L. McAdoo (Eds.) Black children: Social, educational, and parental environments (pp. 33-51). Newbury Park: Sage.
- Garcia Coll, C. G., Meyer, E. C., & Brillion, L. (1995). Ethnic and minority parenting. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), Handbook of Parenting, Vol. 2: Biology and Ecology of Parenting (pp. 189-209). Mahwah, NJ.: Erlbaum.
- Kelley, M. L., Power, T. G., & Wimbush, D. D. (1992). Determinants of disciplinary practices in low-income Black mothers. Child Development, 63, 573-582.
- Killen, M., & Wainryb, C. (2000). Independence and interdependence in diverse cultural contexts. In S. Harkness, C. Raeff, & C. M. Super (Eds.), New directions for child and adolescent development, Vol. 87: Variability in the social construction of the child (pp. 5--21). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kochman, T. (1981). Black and white styles in conflict. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamborn, S. D., Dornbusch, S. M., & Steinberg, L. (1996). Ethnicity and community context as moderators of the relations between family decision making and adolescent adjustment. Child Development, 67, 283-301.
- Markus, H. R., & Lin, L. R. (1999). Conflictways: Cultural diversity in the meanings and practices of conflict. In D. A. Prentice & D. T. Miller (eds.), Cultural divides: Understanding and overcoming group conflict (pp. 302-333). New York: Russell Sage.
- Parke, R. D., & Buriel, R. (1998). Socialization in the family: Ethnic and ecological perspectives. In N. Eisenberg (Ed.), Handbook of Child Psychology, 5th Edition, Volume 3: Social, emotional, and personality development (W. Damon, Series Editor; pp. 463-552). New York: Wiley.

- Prinz, R. J., Foster, S. L., Kent, R. N., & O'Leary, K. D. (1979). Multivariate assessment of conflict in distressed and nondistressed mother-adolescent dyads. Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, *12*, 691-700.
- Robin, A. L., & Foster, S. I. (1989). Negotiating parent-adolescent conflict: A behavioral family systems approach. New York: Guilford.
- Smetana, J. G. (1989). Adolescents' and parents' reasoning about actual family conflict. Child Development, *60*, 1052-1067.
- Smetana, J. G. (in press). Culture, autonomy, and personal jurisdiction in adolescent-parent relationships. To appear in H. W. Reese and R. Kail (Eds.), Advances in Child Development and Behavior, Vol. 29. New York: Academic Press.
- Smetana, J. G., & Asquith, P. (1994). Adolescents' and parents' conceptions of parental authority and adolescent autonomy. Child Development, *65*, 1143-1158.
- Smetana, J. G., Daddis, C. & Chuang, S. S. (in press). "Clean your room!": A longitudinal investigation of adolescent-parent conflict and conflict resolution in middle class African American families. Journal of Adolescent Research.
- Turiel, E. & Wainryb, C. (2000). Social life in cultures: Judgments, conflict, and subversion. Child Development, *71*, 250-256.
- Yau, J., & Smetana, J. G. (1996). Adolescent-parent conflict among Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong. Child Development, *67*, 1262-1275.
- Yau, J., & Smetana, J. G. (2000). Adolescent-parent conflict in Hong Kong and Mainland China: A comparison of youth in two cultural contexts. Unpublished ms., Indiana Wesleyan University.

## Conflict Resolution & SES

---

Teen      Mom  
Gives In Gives In Joint

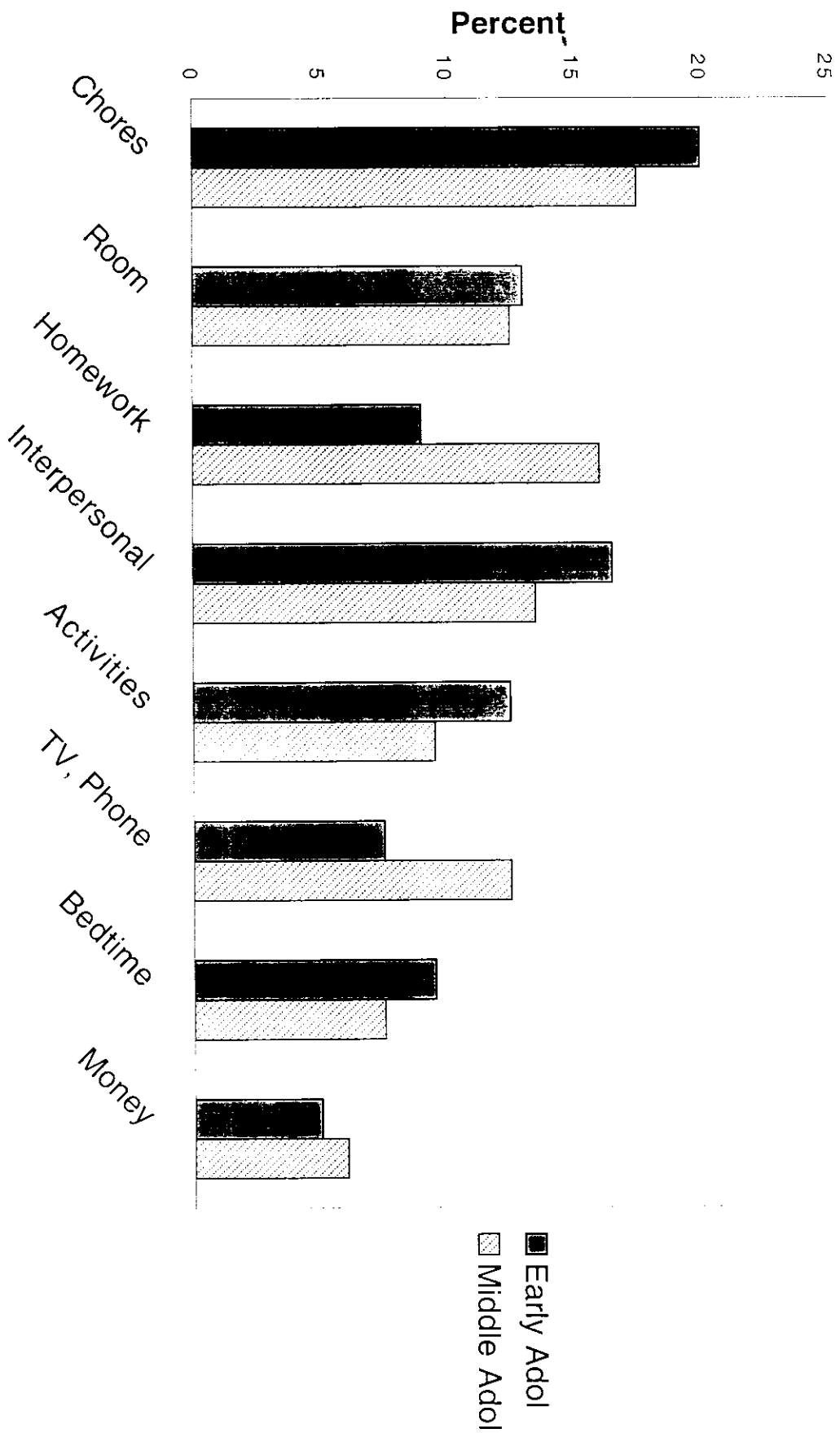
Time 1

Mom Educ	-.22*	.17+	.20+
Income	-.26*	.18+	.06
Mom SEI	-.22*	.02	.21*

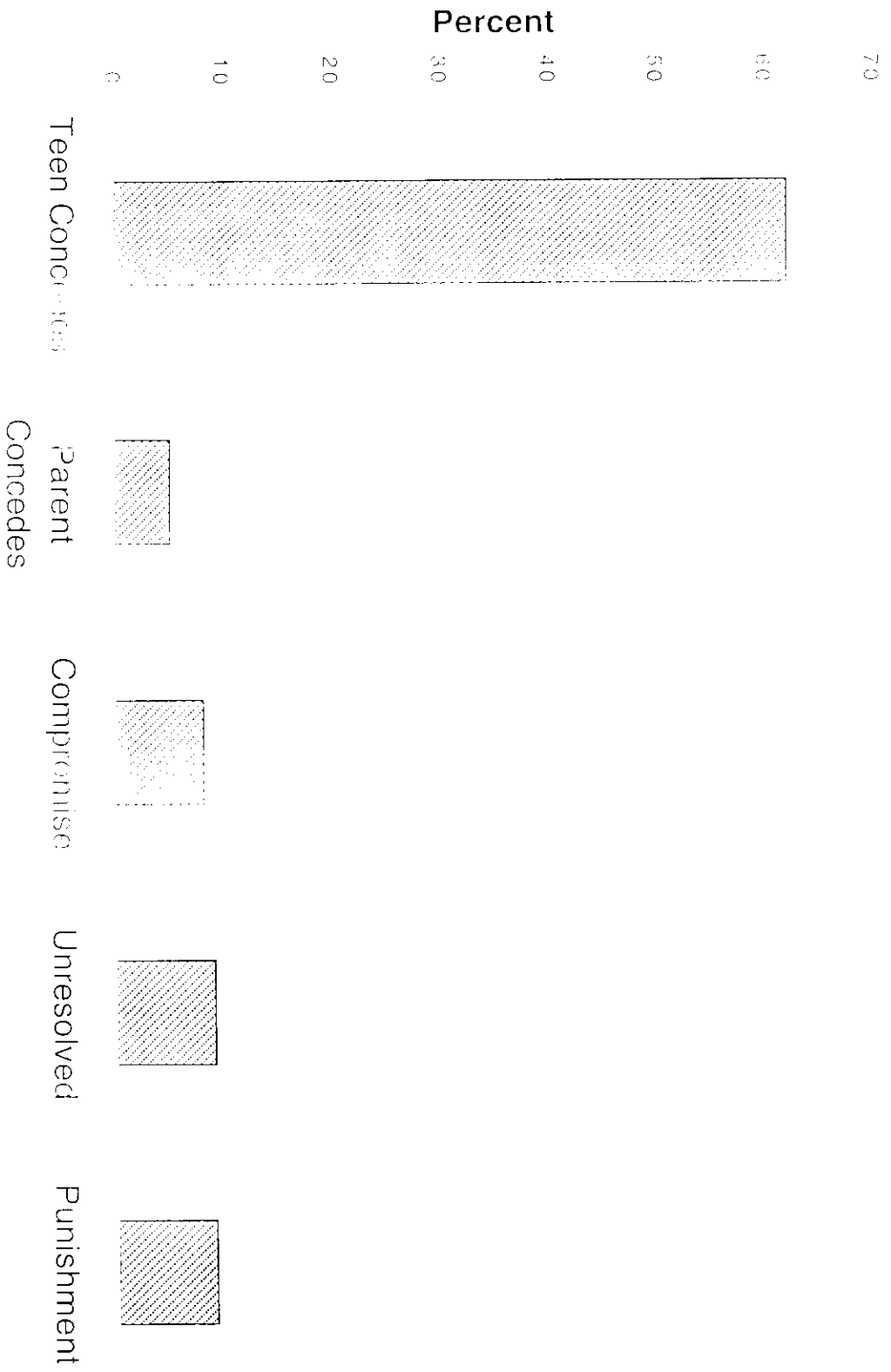
Time 2

Mom Educ	-.20+	.25*	.20+
Income	.04	.16	.25*
Mom SEI	-.14	.16	.26*

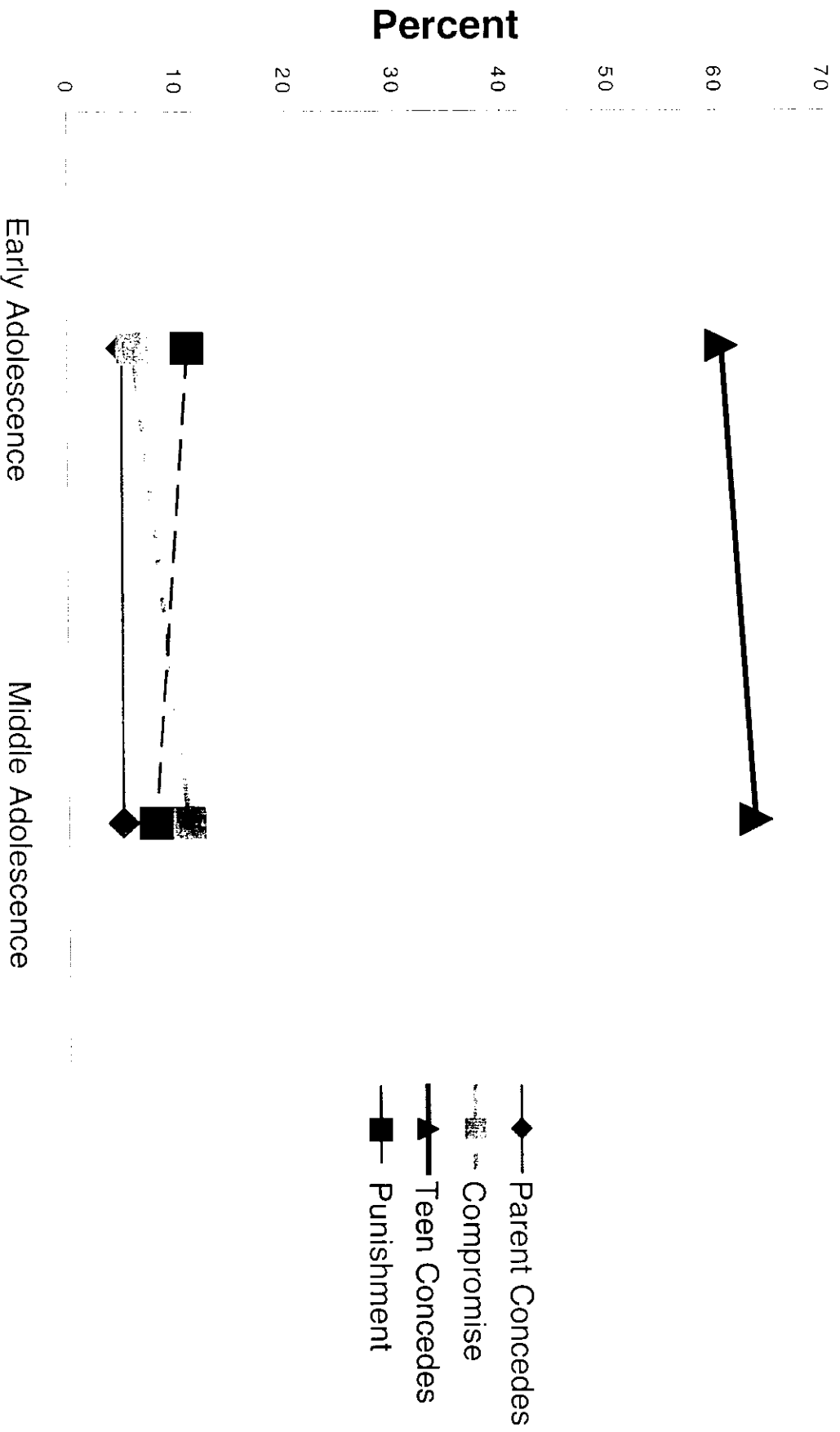
# Conflict Issues



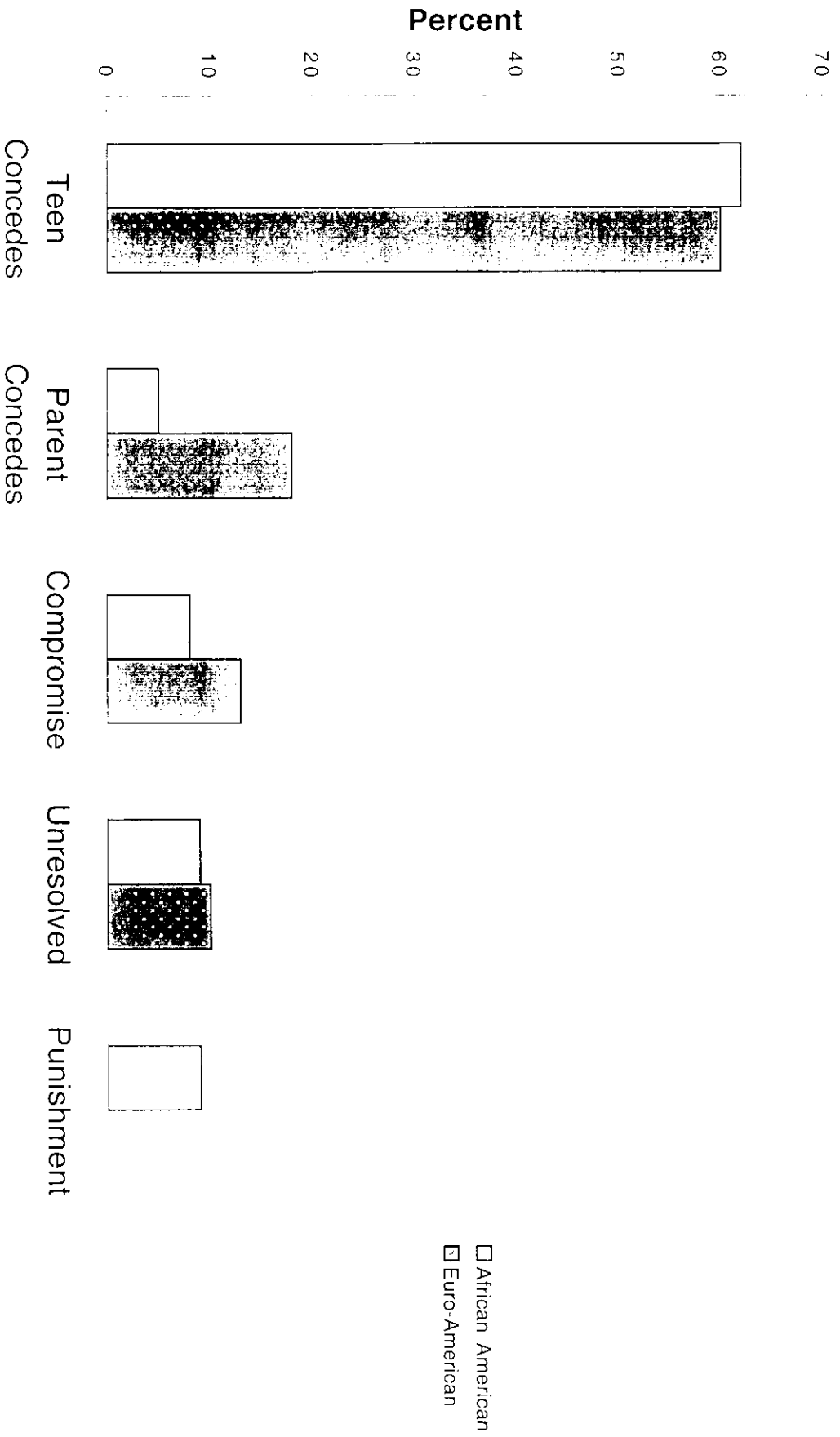
## Conflict Resolution in African American Families



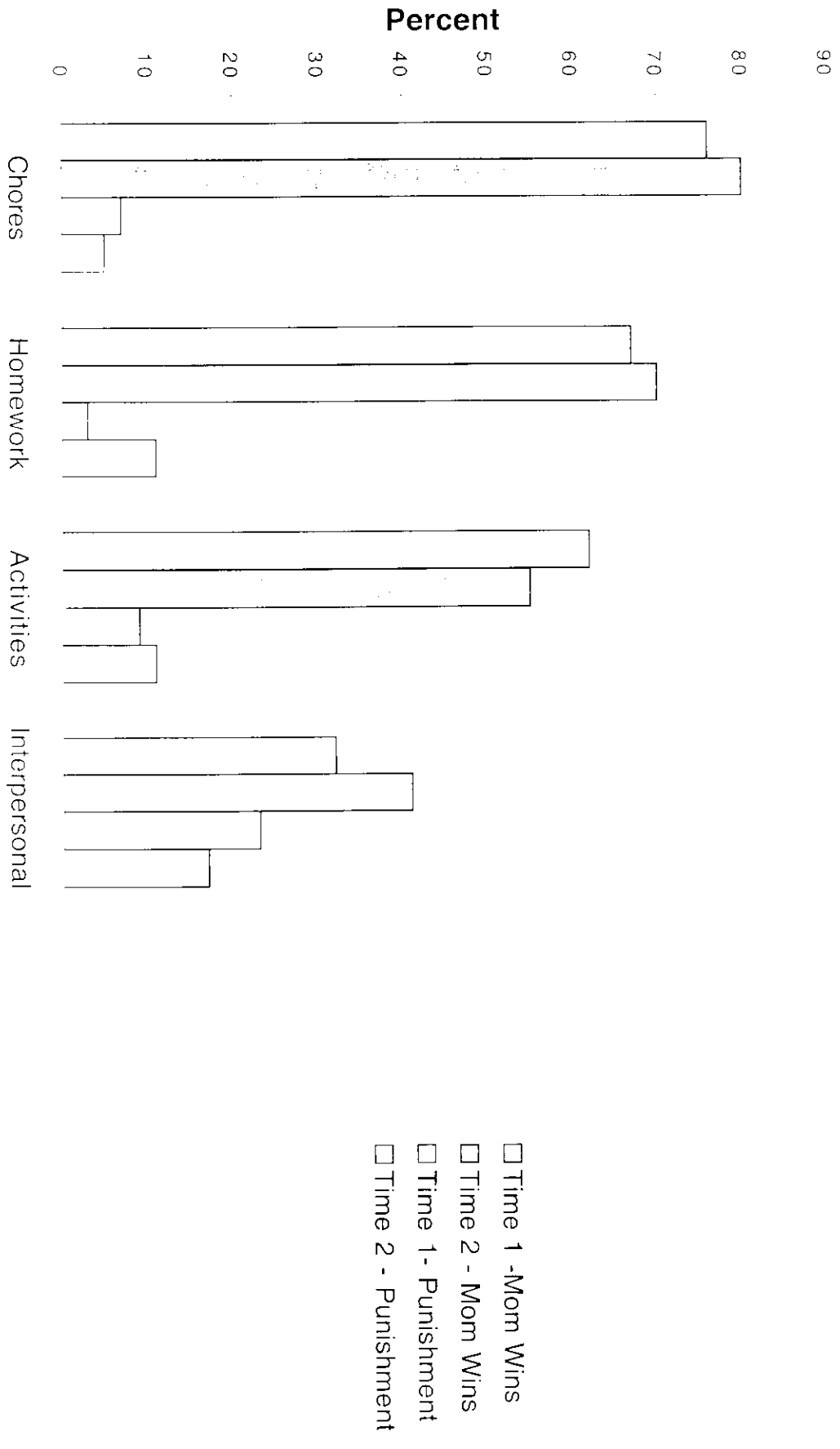
# Conflict Resolution in African American Families



# African American and Euro American Families



# Resolutions for Different Issues



## Personal Reasoning in Cultural Contexts

