

Conflict and Cohesion in African American Adolescents' Relationships with Parents:  
A Five-Year Longitudinal Study

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Paper presented at a symposium on "Parent-Adolescent Conflict, Family Relationships, and Adolescent Adjustment" at Biennial Meetings of the Society for Research on Adolescence, Baltimore, MD, March, 2004. Correspondence may be addressed to the author at the Department of Clinical and Social Sciences in Psychology, Meliora Hall, RC 270266, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627. E-mail: [smetana@psych.rochester.edu](mailto:smetana@psych.rochester.edu). We would like to thank the many families who participated in this research and the William T. Grant Foundation for their support of this project.

There has been a great deal of interest in the quality of parent-child relationships during adolescence. The development of autonomy has been described as a central developmental task of adolescence (Holmbeck, 1996; Steinberg, 1990; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), and researchers have been interested in whether this task is accomplished in the context of conflictive, disrupted relationships with parents, or whether adolescents' attachments to parents are maintained while their relationships are transformed. Most of the available research has focused on the impact of the normative transitions in early adolescence on adolescent-parent relationships. For instance, it has been asserted that adolescent-parent conflict may increase in early and middle adolescence, as families adapt to the social, cognitive, and biological changes of early adolescence, and research has confirmed that conflicts between adolescents and parents increase in intensity from early to middle adolescence (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Other research has indicated that emotional closeness with parents declines during adolescence (Conger & Ge, 1999; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). However, relatively few studies have examined changes in late adolescents' relationships with parents, although late adolescence is an important period of change, transition, and preparation for adulthood (Arnett, 2000). During late adolescence, developmental factors may combine with increasing heterogeneity in life choices to produce considerable diversity in developmental pathways (Sherrod et al., 1993).

Some researchers have suggested that it may be difficult to establish mature relationships with parents during late adolescence until a certain degree of individuation has been achieved (White et al., 1983). For instance, research has shown that young adults who have more frequent contact with parents, or live in close geographical proximity to parents, have poorer psychological adjustment than those who have moved out of the parental home,

have less contact with parents, or live further away (Dubas & Petersen, 1996; O'Connor et al., 1996). To date, however, research on transitions in family relationships during late adolescence has focused almost entirely on European American (or European) middle class families and on adjustment to college.

The present study had two aims. The first aim was to examine differences in African American adolescents' perceptions of their relationships with parents as a function of the developmental transitions in late adolescence. The sample for the present study was drawn from the third wave of a five-year longitudinal study that was initiated in a sample of middle to upper class African American early adolescents and at Wave 3, included three groups of adolescents: adolescents who were living at home, either attending high school, working, or going to college, a transitional group of adolescents who were in the process of leaving home to attend residential colleges, and adolescents who had been away from home for at least a year and living semiautonomously (Goldscheider & DaVanzo, 1986). We examined differences in present and past parent-adolescent relationships as a function of these three autonomy statuses.

The second aim of the present study was to examine the relative influence of adolescent-parent conflict and adolescents' perceptions of emotional closeness to parents in early and middle adolescence on African American late adolescents' perceptions of positive and negative relationships with parents. Adolescent-parent conflict has been described as a temporary perturbation leading to transformations in family relationships (Holmbeck, 1996; Smetana, 1996; Steinberg, 1990). This suggests that conflict in early adolescence may not negatively influence the quality of African American late adolescents' relationships with parents. In contrast, although emotional closeness has been found to decline over the

adolescent years, research has shown significant stability in closeness over time (Conger & Ge, 1999). Therefore, we hypothesized that there would be considerable continuity in adolescents' perceptions of closeness to parents across adolescence and that more positive relationships in early adolescence would predict closer and more supportive relationships in late adolescence.

To examine these aims, we draw on the results of a multi-informant study of 95 African American middle class families with early adolescents (*M* age = 13 years) and their parents, who were followed longitudinally for five years. Attrition over the course of the study was 17%, resulting in a sample of 76 adolescents at the final assessment. Nearly all adolescents reported being single, unmarried, and not cohabitating.

Conflict was assessed at Waves 1 and 2 using the Issues Checklist (Prinz et al., 1979; Robin & Foster, 1989) and at Time 3 using the conflict and antagonism subscales from Furman and Buhrmester's (1985, 1992) Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI). At each assessment, adolescents also completed the Trust and Communication subscales of the Parent-Peer Attachment Inventory (PPAI; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987), which were combined based on their high intercorrelations. At Time 3, adolescents also rated perceptions of social support from each parent on 15 items from the NRI. Consistent with other research (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), we found that African American late boys and girls reported more supportive relationships with mothers than with fathers, but there were no significant differences in adolescents' ratings of closeness or conflict with mothers or fathers.

Adolescents were grouped into three autonomy statuses. The first group consisted of adolescents who were living at home, either attending high school, working, or attending college. Preliminary analyses indicated that high school students did not differ from

adolescents who were working or attending local colleges in their ratings of closeness, supportive, and negative interactions with mothers and fathers, so they were combined in the 'living at home' group. The second group (referred to as transitional) included adolescents who were within three months (+ or -) of moving away from home for the first time to attend college. The final group consisted of semiautonomous adolescents (Goldscheider & DaVanzo, 1986) who had lived away from home at a residential college for at least a year or were in the Armed Services. Only two adolescents were clearly living independently. Autonomy status was highly associated with age at Wave 3,  $r(76) = .70, p < .001$ , and thus we controlled for age in the analyses. Adolescents' autonomy status at Wave 3 did not differ by gender, parents' marital status, or family socioeconomic status.

First, we tested the hypothesis that relationships with parents would be better among adolescents, and particularly among girls, who had left home. We performed separate 3 (autonomy status) X 2 (gender) ANOVAs with age as a covariate on adolescents' ratings of closeness, supportive, and negative interactions with mothers and fathers. With age controlled, there was a significant autonomy status X gender interaction in ratings of negative interactions,  $F(2, 65) = 5.34, p < .01$  (see Figure 1). Consistent with previous research on primarily European American samples (Aseltine & Gore, 1993; Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996), girls who were living at home or in transition to leaving home reported more negative relationships with mothers than did semiautonomous girls,  $F(2, 34) = 7.26, p < .01$ . Moreover, African American girls who were living at home or in transition out of the house reported more negative relationships with mothers than did same-status boys. Negativity may decline as girls move out of their parents' home because, as Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996) have asserted, there is less opportunity for conflict over parental rules

and expectations and more opportunity for independent decision-making. This may have been especially salient for the African American girls, because African-American adolescent boys have been found to more freedom, including being allowed to be home alone more, having fewer rules, and a later curfew, than do African American adolescent girls (Bulcroft, et al., 1996). Thus, the loosening of restrictions that accompanies leaving home for African American girls may lead to a rapprochement in their relationships with mothers.

Bivariate correlations revealed that adolescents' ratings of closeness to both mothers and fathers were highly stable across the five years of the study (see Table 1). However, adolescents' and parents' ratings of conflict intensity showed little to moderate stability over time, and parents' and adolescents' ratings of conflict intensity were not consistently associated. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that disagreements have very different meanings for adolescents and their parents (Smetana, 1989).

Next, we employed hierarchical regressions to predict adolescents' perceptions of positive and negative interactions with mothers and fathers at Wave 3 from the earlier measures of relationships. Because closeness was assessed at all three waves but supportive relationships were assessed at Time 3 only, the influence of earlier relationships on closeness and supportive relationships at Wave 3 were examined separately to determine whether similar patterns of relationships were obtained for the two outcome variables. The independent variables for these analyses included adolescents' sex, autonomy status, and stable father presence (included in Step 1 of the analyses) and adolescents' (and in the analyses for mothers, mothers') Wave 1 separate ratings of conflict intensity and adolescents' perceptions of closeness to that parent (in the second step). In the third step, to assess change, we added the same variables as in the previous step to the regressions.

As predicted, neither ratings of conflict intensity (nor changes in conflict intensity) significantly influenced adolescents' perceptions of closeness or supportive relationships with mothers or fathers at Time 3. However, analyses of both closeness and support suggested that adolescents' perceptions of closeness at Time 2 mediated the effects of Time 1 attachment on Time 3 relationships. Employing Baron and Kenny's (1986) criteria, we tested for mediation and found that adolescents' perceptions of closeness to mothers at Wave 1 were fully mediated by the effects of closeness to mothers at Wave 2 on Wave 3 closeness and supportive interactions (see Figure). The regressions indicated that: (a) Wave 1 attachment had a direct relationship with both Wave 3 closeness and supportive interactions, and (b) when controlling for Wave 1, Wave 2 closeness was related to Wave 3 attachment and support. There was a direct relationship between Wave 1 and Wave 2 closeness, and (c) adolescents' Wave 1 ratings of closeness were reduced to nonsignificance when adolescents' Wave 2 perceptions of closeness to mothers were entered in the regression equations.

The regression analyses also revealed that being in a stable, two-parent married family (either biological or step-parent) positively influenced adolescents' perceptions of supportive interactions with fathers. This is not surprising, in that having a father or father figure present in the home provides more opportunities for support, but it is interesting that nearly all adolescents in the present study provided ratings of closeness to fathers (or step-fathers, in step-parent families), even if their father did not live in the home. That adolescents maintained contact with fathers regardless of marital status contradicts stereotypes of African American families as matriarchal, with fathers absent from children's lives (Billingsley, 1992; McLoyd et al, 2000).

Moreover, as found with mothers, the results indicated that Wave 2 closeness to fathers fully mediated the earlier effects of closeness on Wave 3 closeness and supportive interactions with fathers (see Figure). The regressions indicated that Wave 1 closeness directly influenced Wave 3 closeness and support. Furthermore, when controlling for Wave 1 closeness, Wave 2 closeness was related to Wave 3 closeness and support. Wave 1 and Wave 2 closeness had a direct relationship, and adolescents' Wave 1 ratings of closeness were reduced to nonsignificance when Wave 2 perceptions of closeness to fathers were entered in the regression equations. These results indicate that there was significant continuity in African American adolescents' perceptions of emotional closeness to both parents across the five years of the study. They also demonstrated that late adolescents' perceptions of close, supportive relationships and negative interactions with parents differed significantly as a function of the developmental transitions of late adolescence.

The regressions for negative interactions with mothers and fathers indicated that ratings of conflict intensity at earlier ages did not significantly influence perceptions of negative interactions at Wave 3. Because we assessed the intensity of everyday disagreements in early and middle adolescence and used a more global measure of negativity in interactions at Wave 3, the lack of findings may have been due to differences in measurement over time. In addition, our ratings of conflict were not parent-specific, which may have limited their predictive power. However, these results, as well as the relatively low stability in the different ratings of conflict over time, are consistent with recent theorizing that conflict is a temporary perturbation in adolescent-parent relationships (Holmbeck, 1996; Smetana, 1996; Steinberg, 1990). It is important to note that longitudinal research has demonstrated that ongoing and highly intense and conflictive family relationships in early

adolescence do lead to significant deterioration in adolescent-parent relationships (Patterson & Bank, 1989). However, conflict was very moderate in our sample, and thus, our results are consistent with the notion that moderate conflict does not have long-term negative effects on African American parent-adolescent relationships. We did find that adolescents' autonomy status had a unique influence on negative interactions with mothers; less autonomous adolescents reported more negative relationships with mothers at Wave 3.

A strength of our study was that we followed an African American sample recruited in early adolescence, primarily on the basis of their middle class status, through some of the developmental transitions of late adolescence. Research on late adolescent transitions in African American youth has focused primarily on families in poverty or youth facing challenges such as school drop-out or early childbearing, although the number of African American youth graduating from high school and going on to college has been steadily increasing (Billingsley, 1992). In our view, African American middle class, college-bound youth deserve further study, as they are "the forgotten half" of research on developmental transitions in late adolescence. Moreover, racism remains pervasive in American society (Garcia Coll et al., 1996), and its influence on the life choices of African American college-bound youth deserves further attention.

The present study suggests that there is significant continuity in African American adolescents' emotional closeness to parents across adolescence but that conflict in early adolescence does not impair later adolescent-parent relationships. Future research should examine how conflict and closeness in late adolescence influence subsequent psychosocial adjustment in the transitions to young adulthood and their commitments to relationships and institutions beyond the sphere of the family.

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Table 1:

*Stability in Adolescents' Ratings of Closeness to Parents*

	<u>Wave 1</u>	<u>Wave 2</u>	<u>Wave 3</u>
<u>Wave 1</u>	1.00`	.69***	.42***
Wave 2	.62***	1.00	.56***
Wave 3	.37**	.46***	1.00

*Note.* Correlations above diagonal are for mothers; below are for fathers.

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Figure 1:

Adolescents' Negative Interactions with Mothers as a Function of Autonomy Status





