Adolescent's views of their relations with their parents

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to portray various aspects of the way the Greek adolescents view their relations with their parents. The sample consisted of 123 boys and 152 girls aged 13–17 years. Adolescents were asked to characterise their parents as authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive and to evaluate various aspects of their family life with their parents. They were also asked to report on the frequency of conflicts with their parents and the emotional climate of their home. Results indicate that the vast majority of adolescents characterised their parents as authoritative, while less than one tenth characterised them as authoritarian. There were slight differences due to the gender of both parents and adolescents. The aspects of life that most often evoke conflicts between adolescents and their parents are: Adolescents' performance at school, staying out late, and use of language. Finally, the majority of adolescents reported that they consider they get along quite well with their parents.

Key words: Conflicts, Parent-adolescent relations, Parental behaviour.

Introduction

Adolescence is known as a period during which the developing person demonstrates rapid changes in all aspects of his/her development. These changes pertain to the biological, cognitive, emotional, and personality domains and are usually displayed by alterations of mood, distressing and unpredictable thoughts, exaggerated defenses and impulsive or inconsistent behaviours (Conger & Galambos, 1997). All these manifestations are centred on a focal point, which is also the main developmental task of adolescence, namely, the acquisition of autonomy. The main element of this task consists of a gradual separation-'distancing' of the adolescent from parents, who naturally comprise the second interested part in this process. Although adolescents demonstrate a new interest in peer company and in the other sex, parents are still playing a critical role in the development of adolescents' personality (Lasser & Snarey, 1989). As a matter of fact, a growing body of empirical evidence indicates that parents are the single most important external influence on the average young person attempting to accomplish the developmental task of autonomy (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Baumrind, 1975).

Parent-child relations and especially parental behaviour has been extensively studied in recent years (Steinberg, 2001). Models of parental behaviour have been proposed which stress such components as love-hostility and autonomy-control (e.g., Baumrind, 1989; Elder, 1980) or interactions between them, which result in the well-known dimensions of authoritativeness,

authoritarianism, and permissiveness (Baumrind, 1989). Characteristics of parental behaviour that comprise these dimensions have been described in various studies. Thus, authoritative parents have been described as parents who show respect for their children, involve them in family affairs and decision making, and encourage the development of age-appropriate independence while retaining ultimate responsibility. Another central characteristic of authoritative parents is that they encourage verbal give and take, and, when they exercise authority in the form of demands or prohibitions, they *explain the* reasons for doing so (Baumrind, 1989; Elder, 1980). On the other hand, authoritarian parents simply dictate their will to children without explaining why something has to be done. Obedience is for them the ultimate virtue and any attempts from the child's part to protest are met with forceful and punitive measures (Baumrind, 1989; Baumrind, 1991; Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis, & Mueller, 1988). Finally, permissive parents allow their children to disregard parental wishes (Elder, 1980). They also promote an exaggerated egalitarianism in parent-child relations, and fail to provide the kind of support that adolescents need.

In addition to personal development, adolescence is also known as a period of significant changes and reorganisation in family relationships, which are characterised as conflictual. However, it does not seem to be correct to view this period as a time of conflict for most families, the critical factors being the meaning of the concept "conflict" and how data were collected (Bosma, Jackson, Zijsling, Zani, Cicognani, Xerri, Honness, & Charman, 1996; Steinberg, 1993, 2001). Moreover, there is growing indication that parent-adolescent conflicts of not high intensity do not affect negatively the function of the family (Jackson, Cicognani, & Charman, 1996; Smetana & Asquith, 1994).

This paper, which is part of a larger research project, aims at determining the kind of parental behaviour toward adolescents as the latter view it in the Greek population. Moreover, it purports to offer a detailed account of what parents do in relating to their children, i.e., what makes them authoritative. The third goal of this study was to examine the extent to which parents and adolescents engage in conflicts on various matters of everyday life.

The concept of conflict in parent-child relations has been extensively studied, especially since the 1960s. Conflicts have been considered to be a critical element of these relations and usually they are triggered by everyday issues such as curfews, household chores, choice of friends, schoolwork, and clothing styles (Collins, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; National Association of Secondary School Principles, 1984). In a previous study of ours (Καλαντζή, Μπεζεβέγκης, & Γιαννίτσας, 1989) in Greece, we found that most of the parent-adolescent conflicts centre around such issues as: Going out (in the night, and time of returning home), vacation (taking a vacation with or without family), school (behaviour at school, progress and grades), language (way of adolescent talk), peer company (quality of friends), allowance (quantity of money granted to children and use of it), personal ideas, and personal life (right of child to have its own life style and ideology), profession (choice of and getting prepared for a future job), other sex (relation with members of opposite sex), dressing (kind of clothing and appearance) and entertainment (way and kind of adolescents' entertaining him/herself). All these issues have been used in the questionnaire, which was employed in this study (see Method).

In another previous study of ours (Besevegis & Giannitsas, 1996) in Greece, it was found that the great majority of adolescents indicated their parents' behaviour in general as authoritative, girls rated both paternal and maternal behaviour in a more positive way than boys and younger adolescents judged their parents' behaviour as more authoritative than older ones. In this same study, parental behaviour was rated by

adolescents as relatively less authoritative on the issues that created conflicts and tension between the two parts and adolescents seemed to be satisfied from their communication with their parents.

Based on the above our main research hypotheses were: (a) The great majority of adolescents would view their parents' behaviour as authoritative. (b) Girls are expected to rate parental behaviour (for both fathers and mothers) in a more positive way than boys. (c) Younger adolescents are expected to judge their parents' behaviour as more authoritative than older ones. (d) Parental behaviour is expected to be characterised by adolescents as relatively less authoritative on the issues which were reported to create most conflicts in everyday life, and (e) adolescents are expected to be satisfied from their communication with their parents.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 275 adolescents, 44.7% (123) males and 55.3% (152) females. They constituted whole classes of high schools in Athens (60.4% juniors and 39.6% seniors). Modal age of the junior and senior group was 14 and 17 years, respectively.

Measures and procedure

Participants filled in a self-report questionnaire, which was designed for the specific purposes of this research project. After reading definitions and relevant examples of authoritarian, permissive or authoritative parental behaviour, adolescents were asked to indicate –separately for fathers and mothers– whether their parents' behaviour was in general either authoritarian, permissive or authoritative (Baumrind, 1968). Then, they were asked to do the same, but this time taking into account

parental behaviour as it is demonstrated in dealing with issues, which are known to create tension and disputes between the two parts (Going out, school, language, peer company, entertainment, allowance, personal ideas, personal life, profession, relation with other sex, dressing and entertainment). Furthermore, frequency of conflicts on these issues was estimated by adolescents' checking the appropriate point on a 4-point scale: 1 = never; 2 = seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often.

Participants also indicated by a "yes" or "no" whether they felt that they (a) were granted sufficient freedom, (b) were treated by their parents as adults/mature persons, (c) participated in family decision-making, and (d) were satisfied by the emotional climate in family. Subsequently, they were asked to state whether they were satisfied by the quality of "communication" with their parents by checking the appropriate point on a 4-point scale: 1 = not at all; 2 = a little; 3 = well; 4 = very well. Finally, they were asked to give an estimation of an important familial variable, that of the emotional climate prevailed in their families. Short definitions were given of the following five kinds of family's climate: Warm (supportive, positive affect, understanding, sharing), democratic/dialectic (respect for others, decision making in common), austere/restrictive (rules have to be observed by everybody with no objection), loose (there are no rules, personal will is rule), and rejective (adolescent is not accepted, he/she is always blamed). Participants indicated the kind of the prevailing emotional climate in their families by checking the appropriate point again on a 4-point scale: 1 = not at all; 2 = a little; 3 = much; 4 = very much.

Data collection took place in students' classes at days and times which did not seriously interfere with the schools' programs. Although participation in the study was clearly voluntary, *none of the adolescents refused to fill in the questionnaire.*

Results

This section is divided into three parts on the following subjects: (a) Perceptions of parental behaviour, both in general and in relation to specific "difficult" issues; (b) conflicts between adolescents and their parents and (c) specific aspects of parental behaviour and families' environment.

Perceptions of parental behaviour

Following a description of parental be-haviour, which was mainly based on work by Baumrind (1968), participants were asked to categorise each of their parents as either authoritarian, permissive, or authoritative. It was evident that adolescents' perceptions of parental behaviour were very positive. Mothers were viewed as authoritative by relatively more adolescents (84.8%) than fathers (77.7%), the latter being characterised as authoritarian by almost three times as many adolescents (7.7%) as mothers (2.6%). Permissive parents com-prised a 15.1% of participants' fathers and a 12.6% of participants' mothers.

The favourable picture of perceived parental behaviour remains essentially unchanged when one looks at differences due to adolescents' age and gender, too, in the sense that percentages of authoritativeness are still high. Moreover, while an almost equal number of boys and girls rated their fathers' behaviour as authoritative (75.6% boys – 78.3% girls), relatively more girls than boys rated their mothers' behaviour as authoritative (79.7% boys – 88.8% girls). While fathers were perceived as authoritarian by relatively more girls (8.6%) than by boys (6.7%), mothers were perceived as permissive by twice as many boys (17.8%) as by girls (8.6%). None of the above differences were statistically significant. There seemed to be slight, non significant, differences in the way older (17-year olds) and younger adolescents (14-year olds) perceived their parents' behaviour. Older adolescents seemed to view their parents' behaviour in a relatively less favourable way than their younger counterparts, in the sense, that smaller proportions of the former characterised their parents' behaviour as authoritative.

The next step was to determine how adolescents judge parental behaviour when they relate it to issues, which are known to create disputes between the two parts. In this case only

Table 1
Frequency and relative frequency (%) of parental behaviour by adolescents' gender and age

	Parental type (Fathers)						Parental type (Mothers)					
	Authoritarian		Permissive		Authoritative		Authoritarian		Permissive		Authoritative	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Gender												
Boys	90	75.6	21	17.6	8	6.7	94	79.7	21	17.8	3	2.5
Girls	119	78.3	20	13.0	119	8.6	135	88.8	13	8.6	4	2.6
Age												
14	128	79.0	22	13.6	12	7.4	139	86.3	19	11.8	3	1.9
17	81	74.3	19	17.4	9	8.3	90	82.6	15	13.8	4	3.7
Total	209	77.7	41	15.1	21	7.7	229	84.8	34	12.6	7	2.6

authoritative proportions are reported. Although mothers received authoritativeness "credentials" in higher percentages than fathers, both parents were, to a considerable degree, judged less positively in comparison with the general picture described above. As Table 2 shows, it was only for a few issues that parental behaviour received authoritative ratings comparable to the general ones (profession, personal ideas and allowance). Fewer than 65% of the adolescent participants reported that their parents (especially fathers) were authoritative when dealing with issues such as problems related to school, going out (in the night), taking a vacation separately from family, the language they use, and relations with other sex.

Gender differences emerged in categorising parental behaviour (especially that of mothers). Larger proportions of adolescent females than males considered their fathers' behaviour as authoritative when relating it to "personal ideas", $z = 3.10$, $p < .01$, "allowance", $z = 2.67$, $p < .01$, "personal life", $z = 2.83$, $p < .01$, and "school", $z = 3.30$, $p < .001$. Maternal behaviour was viewed as authoritative also by more girls than boys when relating it to such issues as: "profession", $z = 2.20$, $p < .05$, "personal ideas", $z = 2.64$, $p < .01$, "allowance", $z = 2.22$, $p < .05$, "personal life", $z = 3.07$, $p < .01$, "entertainment", $z = 2.59$, $p < .01$, "dressing", $z = 2.50$, $p < .05$, "language", $z = 2.43$, $p < .05$, "going out", $z = 2.60$, $p < .01$, and "school", $z = 3.75$, $p < .001$.

Conflicts between adolescents and their parents

Table 3 presents mean frequency of conflicts between parents and adolescents on 12 issues. Data indicate that disputes between the two parts were not very frequent.

Table 2
Frequency and relative frequency (%) of authoritative parents' behavior in 12 issues by adolescents' gender

| | Parental type (Fathers) | | | | | | Parental type (Mothers) | | | | | |
| | Total | | Boys | | Girls | | Total | | Boys | | Girls | |
Issues	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Profession	225	83.6	96	79.3	129	87.2	227	83.5	96	78.0*	131	87.9*
Personal ideas	201	74.2	78	65.0**	123	81.5**	210	76.6	84	68.9**	126	82.9**
Allowance	188	69.6	73	61.3**	115	76.2**	186	68.6	74	61.7*	112	74.2*
Personal life	176	64.9	67	55.8**	109	72.2**	188	68.6	72	59.0**	116	76.3**
Peer company	168	62.2	68	56.7	100	66.7	194	71.6	80	66.7	114	75.5
Entertainment	167	62.1	68	56.2	99	66.9	175	64.8	69	56.6**	106	71.6**
Dressing	166	61.9	69	58.5	97	64.7	179	66.5	69	58.5*	110	72.8*
Other sex	155	58.5	68	58.6	87	58.4	184	68.9	76	64.4	108	72.5
Vocabulary	152	56.1	64	53.3	88	58.3	157	57.3	60	49.2*	97	63.8*
Vacation	150	55.8	73	60.8	77	51.7	169	62.1	78	63.9	91	60.7
Going out	140	52.0	60	50.0	80	53.7	155	56.6	59	48.0**	96	63.6**
School	129	50.2	43	38.7**	86	58.7**	130	50.0	42	37.2***	88	59.9**

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Table 3
Mean frequency of conflicts of adolescents with their parents by adolescents' gender

Issues	Conflicts with fathers			Conflicts with mothers		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
School	2.41	2.65	2.23	2.59	2.74	2.47
Going out	2.17	2.12	2.21	2.28	2.24	2.32
Vocabulary	2.07	2.07	2.07	2.16	2.17	2.15
Entertainment	1.92	1.98	1.86	1.82	1.93	1.73
Vacation	1.84	1.88	1.81	1.85	1.87	1.84
Peer company	1.65	1.62	1.68	1.75	1.74	1.76
Dressing	1.57	1.62	1.54	1.67	1.76	1.60
Allowance	1.54	1.67	1.43	1.58	1.79	1.40
Personal ideas	1.53	1.67	1.42	1.48	1.64	1.36
Profession	1.48	1.55	1.42	1.47	1.53	1.42
Personal life	1.44	1.49	1.40	1.55	1.63	1.48
Other sex	1.38	1.29	1.45	1.42	1.38	1.45

Note. Scale: 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often.

As a matter of fact, for most of the issues the frequency of conflicts was between "never" and "seldom" ($M < 2.00$). For most issues, more conflicts were reported with mothers than with fathers. This was especially true for the issues: "school", $t(267) = 3.28, p < .001$, "going out", $t(267) = 2.12, p < .05$, "peer company", $t(269) = 2,48, p < .05$, and "personal life", $t(267) = 2.44$, $p < .05$, which is probably an indication of mothers' greater involvement in day-to-day hassles than that of fathers'. It is worth mentioning that the size order of the means (from "school" to "other sex") was almost the same for both parents.

Statistically significant gender differences in mean scores of frequency emerged in the issues: "school", "allowance" and "personal ideas". Boys reported more conflicts (than girls) with fathers and mothers on issues having to do with their school progress, $F(1, 269) = 11.46, p < .001$ for fathers, and $F(1, 270) = 4.25, p < .05$ for mothers; on issues having to do with allowance, $F(1, 270) = 5.89, p < .05$ for fathers, and $F(1,$ 272) = 14.00, $p < .001$ for mothers, and on issues having to do with personal ideas, $F(1, 270) = 5.59, p < .05$ for fathers, and $F(1, 271) = 7.94$, $p < .01$ for mothers.

Aspects of parental behaviour and family environment

Table 4 presents percent of positive answers to four questions asked from participants, i.e., whether they (a) were granted enough freedom, (b) were treated by their parents as adults, (c) participated in family's decisions and (d) were satisfied from relations with their parents. It is evident that, on the general, the great majority of adolescents answered positively, i.e., they stated that they were given enough freedom (83.6%), they participated in family decisions in an impressive 91.5%, and they were satisfied from the interpersonal family relations (80.1%). On the other hand, a considerably smaller proportion (65%) of participants stated that were treated as adult/mature persons. The two genders gave

Table 4
Frequency and relative frequency (%) of positive answers to four issues
by adolescents' gender and age

Issues	Gender				Age					
	Boys		Girls		14 years		17 years		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Freedom	105	86.1	124	81.6	140	84.8	89	81.7	229	83.6
Adult treatment	79	64.8	99	65.1	109	66.1	69	63.3	178	65.0
Participation in decision making	111	91.7	138	91.4	152	93.3	97	89.0	249	91.5
Satisfaction from relations	102	83.6	116	77.3	139	84.2	79	73.8	218	80.1

positive answers to these questions in comparable numbers. The only statistically significant difference was that 17-year olds felt less satisfied from relations with their parents than their younger counterparts, $x^2(1, N = 274) = 4.34, p < .05$.

Communication with mothers tends to be of higher quality than with fathers for the total sample ($M = 3.27$ for fathers and 3.45 for mothers), a trend, which is attributable to girls' better communication with mothers than with fathers, $F(1, 271) = 6.91, p < .01$.

Table 6 presents adolescents' mean estimates of five kinds of emotional climate in family. Adolescents perceived the emotional climate in their families as being "more than enough" warm and democratic (respective means: 3.39 and 3.41), "a little" austere/restrictive ($M = 2.01$) and between "a little" and "not at all" loose ($M = 1.58$) and rejective ($M = 1.27$). The two genders coincided in all cases except for "loose", which boys considered as more prevailing in their families than girls, $F(1, 269) = 22.71, p < .001$.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study attempted to offer a descriptive

Table 5
Mean quality of adolescent-parent communication by adolescents' gender

	Father	Mother
Boys	3.34	3.33
Girls	3.21	3.55
Total	3.27	3.45

Note. Scale: 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = well, 4 = very well.

Table 6
Mean estimates of emotional climate in family by adolescents' gender

Emotional climate	Boys	Girls	Total
Warm	3.32	3.44	3.39
Democratic	3.41	3.41	3.41
Austere	2.05	1.98	2.01
Loose	1.83	1.38	1.58
Rejective	1.30	1.24	1.27

Note. Scale: 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = much, 4 = very much.

account of parent-adolescent relationships and their specific components in Greece. The methodology chosen does not allow drawing conclusions as to what exactly parents do in relation with their adolescent children, as it did not employ a direct observational procedure. It is only adolescents' perceptions of parental behaviour, which was evaluated, and the favourable picture, which is discussed below, has obvious implications for the relations between the two parts.

Roughly speaking, as it was hypothesized, more than 8 out of 10 adolescents in this study viewed their parents' behaviour as authoritative (democratic), while less than 8% of them perceived it as authoritarian. This was an exceptionally high percent if it is compared to the few studies, which deal with frequency of parental behaviours typology. For instance, Kandel and Lesser (1969) reported that only 40% of their adolescent sample perceived their mothers as democratic (29% for fathers), while the percent of authoritarian parents was much higher than in this study (43% for mothers and 53% for fathers). It is noteworthy that in the same study Danish adolescents viewed their parents' behaviour more positively than their American counterparts. Similar frequencies were reported also by Elder (1962). It must be mentioned, however, that there is indirect evidence of more frequent authoritative parental behaviour than it

was reported in these previous studies of the 1960s. For instance, Rutter, Graham, Chadwick, and Yule (1976) reported that 75% of their adolescent sample described their relations with their parents as happy and pleasant. Like in the studies above, mothers in our study were seen as slightly more authoritative than fathers, probably because children see them as more affectionate and supportive (Dahlem, 1970).

Differences due to adolescents' gender and age were not pronounced in our sample; the ones we found were in the expected direction: There was a tendency for girls to rate parental behaviour in more positive terms than boys, a trend observed in other studies, too (e.g., Schludermann & Schludermann, 1971). In this study only slight differences were found between the way older and younger adolescents seemed to judge parental behaviour, although findings of previous research suggest that older adolescents clearly judge their parents' behaviour as authoritarian more frequently than younger ones, probably because they feel more distant from them (e.g. Besevegis & Giannitsas, 1996; Ziegler & Dusek, 1985). Fathers, who are characterised more authoritarian, are probably seen as stricter and exerting more control than mothers.

The implications of such a positive picture of parental behaviour are obvious: The fact that adolescents describe their parents as authoritative (i.e., warm, involved, consistent in

establishing guidelines, limits and developmentally appropriate expectations and granting psychological autonomy [Steinberg, 1990]) puts them in a better condition, in the sense that adolescents from authoritative homes have been found to achieve more in school, report less depression/anxiety, score higher in measures of self-esteem and are less likely to engage in antisocial behaviour, delinquency and drug use (Steinberg, 2001).

As it was hypothesized, a considerably different picture of parental behaviour emerged when it was connected to specific issues, which are known to create tension between parents and adolescents, and this has been the major contribution of this study. It was only for a few 'painless' issues – choice of profession, personal ideas and allowance – that the percentages of authoritativeness were comparable to those concerning the global picture described above. Thus, for most of the issues, which bring about disputes between parents and adolescents, the latter view parents as more restrictive and authoritarian than when they judge them globally. It is evident that, when specific problems arise between the two parts, parents become strict and demanding, and their adolescent children interpret this as an authoritarian attitude.

Data on frequency of conflicts are important in several respects: First, they replicate the findings discussed right above, i.e., on the significance of the various issues which are connected with disputes between parents and adolescents. School (mainly grades), going out in the night (and time of return home), language (adolescent way of talking), kind of entertainment, vacation (without family) and peer company seem to be the issues which create the strongest disputes between the two parts. These are the issues, which both parts are highly interested in, evidently for different reasons. There is an indirect, but clear, relation between characterisation of parental behaviour and frequency of conflicts: Parental behaviour was

characterised as relatively less authoritative on the issues, which were reported to create most conflicts. These issues are: "school" and "going out".

Generally speaking, conflicts are slightly more frequent with mothers than with fathers, probably because the latter are more involved in the task of children's education or more expressive or even more intrusive (e.g., Cubis, Lewis, & Dawes, 1989; Fuligni, 1998; Jackson, Cicognani, & Charman, 1996). Gender differences concerning conflicts about school, allowance and personal ideas probably reflect specific conditions prevailing in the Greek culture. On the other hand, the fact that no statistically significant gender differences were found concerning the issues "language", "going out", "entertainment", "vacation", "peer company", "dressing", "profession", "personal life" and "other sex" leads to the hypothesis that, at least for these issues, boys and girls have equal problems with their parents, or, stated another way, fathers and mothers deal with male and female adolescents in a similar way on these issues. This is consistent with the finding that parents generally agree on important matters concerning their children's education (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Sellers, 1999).

The question still remains as to why all these disputes and differences do not essentially affect the general, positive impression that adolescents have of their parents' behaviour. The answer is twofold: (a) It must be pursued in adolescents' perceptions of parental behaviour and family environment. Participants stated, in impressive percentages, that they were given enough freedom, they participated in family decisions and they were satisfied from interpersonal family relationships. They were, also, as it was hypothesized, satisfied from their communication with their parents and stated that the emotional climate in their families was warm and democratic. It is clear that all these aspects are viewed by adolescents as critical components of an authoritative/democratic attitude in a family,

while parents' treatment of their adolescent children as adults evidently is not. (b) It is highly probable that adolescents get emotionally involved in a conflict in a less intense way than parents; their moderately upsetting interchanges over day-to-day issues do not constitute a relationship break-up (Steinberg, 2001).

In the light of the above, the authors of this study believe that the two different estimates of parental behaviour obtained are not really contradictory. The second, more specific and less favourable, view (connected with specific issues of conflict) represents a situational estimate of parental behaviour, which is considerably influenced by the tension created by issues of high interest for both parties. This estimate evidently does not do much harm to the general, positive perception, which adolescents have of their parents, regardless of the frequency of conflicts. Effective communication between parents and adolescents is the key for retaining the balance of the relations within the family (Conger & Galambos, 1997).

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