
Title	Adolescents' relationships with parents and peers
Author(s)	Ang Mee Foong and Agnes Chang Shook Cheong
Source	<i>ERAS Conference, Singapore, 24-26 September 1992</i>
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

ADOLESCENTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND PEERS

Miss Ang Mee Foong
Chinese High School

and

Dr Agnes Chang Shook Cheong
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University

Introduction

The escalating increase in the number of run-aways, disciplinary problems in schools, glue sniffing and increasing crime rate among adolescents have been attributed to the influence of peers and decline in parental control (The Straits Times, Dec 4, 1988; Sep 3, 1989; May 14, 1990; Aug 29, 1990 The New Paper, Jan 12, 1990).

Most of the studies on parent-peer issue were conducted in the west. There were two conflicting bodies of literature on this issue. Some of the research indicated that throughout adolescence, parents continued to play a major role (Arora, Verma & Agrawal, 1985; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; de Vaus, 1983; Kandel & Lesser, 1972; Pablo, 1974). Other researcher argued that peers became increasingly important during this period at the expense of parental influence (Berndt, 1970; Coleman, 1961; Coleman, 1974; Krosnick & Judd, 1982; Rosen, 1955; Sebald & White, 1980; Thompson, 1985; Utech & Hoving, 1969).

There were a few studies conducted in the Asian contexts. Arora, Verma & Agrawal (1985) and Pablo (1974) conducted research into the parent-peer issue on the Indian and the Filipino contexts respectively. Both studies found that the adolescents in these societies were more parent-conforming than peer-conforming. Chiam (1987) conducted a study into the adolescents' attitudes towards parents and peers in Malaysia. She found that the Malaysian adolescents were more parent-oriented too. As Singapore is an Asian society where deference to seniors is encouraged, one wonders if the findings by Arora, et al, Pablo and Chiam will apply to the Singapore context.

The aim of this research is to investigate whether there is a shift in the adolescents' orientation from their parents to their peers in Singapore. This study was designed to investigate the adolescents' orientation towards their friends (boy friends versus girl friends) and parents (father versus mother) and how age and gender interrelate to modify the development of these relationship patterns. In addition, since describing both parents together may mask the more important relationship one parent has with a son or a daughter, questions in this study were asked about mothers and fathers separately. The same rationale was applied to peers. Distinction was made between close boy friends and close girl friends.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 950 students from seven schools. The sample composed of 473 male and 477 female students. There were 363 students belonging to the 12 to 13 year old age-group, 341 students from the 15 to 16 year old age-group and 246 students from the 18 to 19 year old age group.

Table 1 : Distribution of sample for the main study

School	Age-group						Sub		Total
	12-13		15-16		18-19		Total		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
1	98	-	90	-	-	-	98	90	188
2	-	85	-	90	-	-	-	175	175
3	50	40	53	25	-	-	103	65	168
4	40	50	30	53	28	33	98	136	234
5	-	-	-	-	27	34	27	34	61
6	-	-	-	-	21	25	21	25	46
7	-	-	-	-	36	42	36	42	76
	188	175	173	168	112	134	473	477	950
	363		341		246		950		

The students came from four Secondary schools, two Pre-U centres and one Junior College. In order to ensure a representative sample, both government and mission Secondary schools and Pre-U centres and a Junior College were included. The sample also included single-sex and co-educational Secondary schools.

The Instrument

This study was conducted using the structural approach put forward by Youniss and Smollar (1985). This approach was based on the premise that interpersonal relations consists of interactions which are conceptually organised by the participants into structures (Youniss, 1980).

The questionnaire constructed by Youniss and Smollar (1985) was adapted and administered to the sample. The instrument consists of four scales :

i. Interaction Pattern Scale : This section focuses on the types of interaction in relationships. This section consists of three sub-scales:

- (a) Open versus Closed Interactions Sub-scale (OCI);
- (b) Interactions reflecting acceptance or non-acceptance of others' viewpoint sub-scale (ANA);
- (c) Interactions reflecting resolution of conflicts sub-scale (RCI).

ii. Conception of Self Scale : This section centres on the conception of self in relationships. This section includes :

- (a) Positive Self-concept Sub-scale (PC);
- (b) Negative Self-concept Sub-scale (NC).
- (c) Topics of Conversation Scale : This section features topics of conversation. In this section, the students were to choose one person with whom they were least likely to talk to over that topic and one other person with whom they were likely to talk to concerning that topic.

iii. Orientation Scale : This looks into adolescents' opinions concerning their friendships and relationships with their friends and relationships with their parents. Table 2 shows sample items in the questionnaire.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered by the class teacher during curriculum time. Students were ensured confidentiality in their responses and were told the purpose of the questionnaire. The teacher read aloud and explained the items where necessary. The students took about 50 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

RESULTS

The data were analysed by means of :

- a. Analysis of Variance and post-hoc comparisons (Scheffe's method);
- b. Two-way ANOVA of age and gender.

The level of significance for accepting and rejecting the hypotheses was set at the .01 level.

Table 2 : Sample Items in Questionnaire

Scale	Subscale	Sample Items
A	Open versus Closed Interactions (OCI)	This person and I always talk openly to each other. This person and I always tell each other our true feelings. This person helps me to solve my problems.
	Acceptance or Non-acceptance of other's view-point (ANA)	I am not interested in this person's advice. I don't tell this person my true feelings. This person does not talk openly to me.
	Resolution of Conflicts (RCI)	This person always wants me to change my point of view when we disagree. When we disagree, this person usually gets angry if I don't change my point of view. Whenever this person and I disagree, we talk it over and come to an agreement.
B	Positive Self-concept (PC)	I am most likely to be - helpful; - happy; - confident When I am with my mother, father, close girl friend or close boy friend.
	Negative Self-concept (NC)	I am most likely to be - dishonest; - fearful; - uneasy When I am with my mother, father, close girl friend or close boy friend.

C	Topics of Conversation	I am most likely/least likely to talk to my mother, father, close girl friend or close boy friend on : - Sport; - My attitude towards marriage; - My hobbies.
D	Orientation	Right now in my life, I feel my close friends understand me better than my parents do. I prefer to share my thoughts with my parents than with my friends. If I have a personal problem, I am as likely to go to my parents for help as to my close friends.

Generally, it was found that the adolescents chose their girl friends as persons with whom they had open interactions, followed by their mother, boy friends and father. Father was rated the highest as the person who did not accept the adolescents' views and the adolescents did not seek his advice and opinion. The adolescents also found their parents to be imposing when they disagreed. Friends, on the other hand, were perceived to be more understanding and did not impose their views on them. The adolescents felt that they were more outgoing, cooperative, open, talkative, happy and more "themselves" when they were with their friends. They felt negative about themselves in their parents' company. Generally, the adolescents preferred to talk to their friends more than to their parents. Girl friend was selected as the person with whom the adolescents liked to talk to most. Mother was the second most favoured person with whom the adolescents liked to talk to most. Father was rated as the person with whom the adolescents talked to least.

Comparison by Age-groups

Post-hoc comparisons revealed that the 15-16 year old and the 18-19 year old adolescents, compared to the 12-13 year old adolescents, showed a shift in their orientation from parents to peers in their interaction patterns with both parties. The older adolescents preferred to talk to their friends as they perceived their friends to be more understanding, as compared to their parents. This trend continues into their late teens. These adolescents also found their parents' views not totally acceptable and that their parents did not agree with their views too. The older adolescents felt that their parents were less

understanding and became more imposing when disagreements arose. They felt that they were more outgoing, cooperative, open, talkative, happy and more "themselves" when they were in the company of their friends. The adolescents felt that they had a negative self-concept in the company of their father.

The 12-13 year old adolescents preferred to talk to their mother for most items. For the items on "Sports", "Problems in school", "My political beliefs" and "Financial problems", they preferred to talk to their father most. The older adolescents, on the other hand, named their girl friends as persons with whom they preferred to talk to on most of the items. However, for topics on "Sports", "Political beliefs" and "My hobbies", they preferred to talk to their boy friends.

Comparison by Gender

The ANOVA results show that there was significant difference between the genders in their choices of friends as their preferred dialogue partners. The male adolescents preferred to talk to their boy friends while the female adolescents preferred to talk to their girl friends. The male adolescents had positive self-concept in their boy friends' company while the female adolescents felt positive about themselves when they were with their girl friends. The trend for parents is not as clear-cut. There was no significant gender difference in their preference for mother as their dialogue partner but there was significant gender difference in their preference for father as their dialogue partner. Generally, father was the least likely person with whom the adolescents like to talk to but more female adolescents did not enjoy talking to their father, as compared to the male adolescents. There was also significant gender difference in the adolescents' responses regarding father as the person in whose company they felt positive about themselves. The male adolescents felt that they had a positive self-concept when they were with their father more than the female adolescents did.

Generally, the adolescents were closer to their parents when they were younger (at about 12 to 14 years old). As they grew older, they were more attached to their friends. However, an interesting trend which was observed here is that the 18 to 19 year old adolescents, though still close to their friends, had a tendency to orientate themselves slightly to their parents more than the 15 to 16 year-olds. However, this orientation was much less than when they were at 12-13.

The adolescents were closer to their mother than to their father and they were also closer to their girl friends than to their boy friends.

DISCUSSION

Friends were chosen more often than parents as those whom they had open interactions. This supports the findings by Hunter (1985) that parent-adolescent interactions are basically

unilateral interactions which are based on unequal status, privileges and expertise and are characterized by one person providing already-formed opinions and directives to the other person based on greater knowledge and/or more powerful status. Adolescent-peer interactions are basically mutual interactions which are based on equality of status, privileges and experiences. This equality is based on an implicit agreement between the interacting persons to mutually extended equal respect for the other person's wishes, opinions and intentions.

Girl friend was chosen as the one with whom the adolescents had open interactions. This supports the findings by Youniss and Smollar (1985) that in a mixed sample, communication between close female friends is somewhat closer than that between male adolescents. In this case, the male adolescents prefer to talk to their girl friends as their relationships with their male counterparts may not be so intimately established. Generally, in the Asian society, males do not communicate very much about their feelings and they do not talk openly to each other. Such open expression of feelings is viewed as a weakness in character. This accounts for the fact that both boy friend and father were ranked lower than girl friend and mother.

The younger adolescents (12-13 year olds) were closer to their parents than to their peers. In contrast, the 15-16 year old and 18-19 year old adolescents were closer to their friends than to their parents. At 15, the adolescents have already spent three years in the secondary school and they are already well acquainted with their friends. Due to their heavy involvement in school activities, they get to know more friends and spend more time with their friends. Furthermore, the problems they encounter are probably similar to those of their friends. Hence, they may feel that they have more common ground with their friends. This trend continues to the time when they are in the Pre-University courses (18 to 19 year-olds). However, at 12, the adolescents have just started their life in a Secondary school. They probably have not established themselves in the new system and the new school yet, thus, they still pour their problems to their parents and not to their friends.

Gender differences were not clear-cut. There was gender difference in their choice of friends as their preferred dialogue partners. The girls preferred their girl friends as their dialogue partners while the boys preferred to talk to their boy friends. According to Youniss & Smollar (1985), adolescents generally have closer friendships with friends of the same sex. Even when they grew older and acquire friends of the opposite sex, they will still keep their friendship with their same-sex friends. However, this is not true when the teenagers were younger (at 12-13). At that age, they always bicker with their same-sex friends. There was gender difference in their preference for mother as the person with whom they had open interactions. Mother was perceived to be close to both male and female adolescents. In the Asian society, mother is the one who takes care of the welfare of the children. Hence, the adolescents tend to have a closer relationship with their mother. There was also gender difference in their preference for father as their dialogue partner. Generally, the adolescents did not talk openly

with their father, but the male adolescents were closer to their father than the female adolescents. Father had the highest rating as the person who did not accept the adolescents' opinions and who was the adolescents' least likely dialogue partner. A father, in the Chinese society, always acts as the head of the family, and as such, he tends not to lower himself to talk to his children, much less to seek his children's advice and to accept their opinions or views. Most fathers have a distant relationship with their children. However, their relationships with daughters are more strained than their relationships with their sons. Girls in some Asian societies are seen as inferior to their brothers. Their opinions are not deemed as important. As such, communication between father and daughter is minimal and closed.

The 18-19 year old adolescents, though still close to their friends, had a tendency to orientate themselves slightly to their parents more than the 15-16 year olds. This orientation was, however, much less than when they were at 12-13. The plausible reason why the 18-19 year old adolescents are slightly closer to their parents than when they are 15-16 is because these adolescents have a mature view about their parents and understand their parents more at this age. This thus draws them closer to their parents.

The above findings may reinforce the parents' views that they need to be more firm with their teenage children to ensure that their authority and importance are still recognized. However, it is precisely this need to be more authoritative that leads to the parents having unilateral interactions with their children, even when they have grown up and have formed their own opinions. The parents have to understand that their relationship with their teenage children is transformed, not severed, as the adolescents still remain responsive to parental authority while they experience greater freedom from it.

If the father wants to play a more important role in his teenage children's life, he has to shed his "head-of-the-family" image. He needs to be more involved in his children's life, to be genuinely interested in their activities and their likes and dislikes. He needs to get to know his children and to let his children get to know him. Father can still be the disciplinarian at home even when he is close to his children. In that way, the children may respect him, instead of being afraid of him.

On the whole, this study shows that adolescents in Singapore are unlike their counterparts in India, the Philippines and Malaysia. In these countries, it was found that the adolescents are more parent-oriented than peer-oriented whereas the Singaporean adolescents are more peer-oriented when they have grown up. Singaporean adolescents are more like their western counterparts than their Asian counterparts. This could be due to the fact that the Singaporean adolescents are more exposed to the western literature and culture and are westernized in their thoughts, unlike their Asian counterparts. Western literature, videos and television programmes are easily available in Singapore and these have played an important role in changing and moulding the young Singaporeans' outlook of life.

REFERENCES

- Arora, M., Verma, R. & Agrawal, P. (1985). Parent and Peer Conformity in Adolescents : An Indian Perspective. Adolescence, 20 (78), 467-478.
- Berndt, T.J. (1979). Developmental changes in conformity to peers and parents. Developmental Psychology, 15(6), 608-616.
- (1982). The features and effects of friendships in early adolescence. Child Development, 53, 1447-1460.
- Chiam, H.K. (1987). Adolescents and significant others : Relationships and Influences. Paper presented at the Biennial Conference of the International Society for the study of Behavioural Development (9th, Tokyo, Japan, July 12-17, 1987) (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 293 620).
- Coleman, J.S. (1961). The Adolescent Society. New York : The Free Press.
- Coleman, J.C (1974). Relationship in Adolescence : Theoretical Background. London : Routledge & Regan
- De Vaus, D.A. (1983). The relative importance of parents and peers for adolescent religious orientation : An Australia study. Adolescence, 18, 147-158.
- Douvan, E. & Adelson, J. (1966). The Adolescent Experience. New York : Wiley.
- Kandel, D. & Lesser, G.S. (1969). Parent-adolescent relationships and adolescent independence in the United States and Denmark. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 31, 348-358.
- Krosnick, J.A. & Judd, C.M. (1982). Transitions in social influence at adolescence : Who induces cigarette smoking? Developmental Psychology, 18(3), 359-368.
- Niles, F.S. (1979). The adolescent girls' perception of parents and peers. Adolescence, 14 591-597.
- Pablo, R.Y. (1971). A study of Filipino children's attitudes toward peers and parents. The Philippine Journal of Psychology, 4, 31-36.
- Rosen, B.C. (1955). Conflicting group membership : A study of parent-peer cross-pressures. American Sociological Review, 20, 155-161.
- Sebald, H. & White, B. (1980). Teenagers' divided reference groups : Uneven alignment with parents and peers. Adolescence, 15(60), 979-984.

Thompson, N.N. (1985). Parent-peer compliance in a ground of preadolescent youths. Adolescence, 20(79), 501-507.

Utech, D.A. & Hoving, K.L. (1969). Parents and peers as competing influences in the decisions of children of differing ages. Journal of Social Psychology, 78, 267-274.

Youniss, J. & Smollar, J. (1985). Adolescent Relations with Mothers, Fathers and Friends, Chicago : University of Chicago Press.