Relations with Parents and Friends During Adolescence and Early Adulthood

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Running Head: RELATIONS WITH PARENTS AND FRIENDS

Abstract

Relative power, conflict, and intimacy in adolescents' and young adults' relations with mothers, fathers, and best friends were examined. Two hundred eighty five students from German high-track (i.e., university bound) schools and universities (aged 12.0, 14.7, 17.8, 21.8, and 26.9 years) completed the respective scales of the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Relations with friends were more symmetrical and had a better socio-emotional quality than relations with parents. Still, increases in relative power in relations with parents were accompanied by low absolute levels of conflict. A symmetrical distribution of power in the family was not reached before the end of the third decade of life. To explore the influence of the entry into worklife on close relations, an additional subsample of 55 working young adults was compared with the participating university students. Despite slight differences in age-related patterns of intimacy, similarities prevailed. Overall, findings mostly converge with observations in U.S. samples of high school and college students and point to a more general process of relationship development as suggested by individuation theory.

Relations with Parents and Friends During Adolescence and Early Adulthood

Across the lifespan, personal relationships provide an important context for individual well-being and development. Although it is clear that relationships differ in their specific contributions to individual growth, there is no doubt concerning the outstanding role that parents and same-sex friends play throughout the course of development (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). The quality of relationships with parents and friends and its age-related changes has been investigated most extensively for young people in their childhood and adolescent years (e.g., Collins, 1990; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Noack & Kracke, 1998; van Aken & Asendorpf, 1997). In these studies, particular interest was paid to changes in close relationships during adolescence initiated by pubertal maturation (Montemayor, Eberly & Flannery, 1993; Papini & Sebby, 1987; Steinberg, 1987). Clearly, less is known concerning the quality of relationships with mothers, fathers, and friends during the third decade of life which, only recently, has attracted more systematic interest of developmental scholars (Galambos & Leadbeater, 2000).

The present cross-sectional study is a replication and extension of earlier work conducted by Furman and Buhrmester (e.g., 1985, 1992; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). Our primary goal was descriptive, aiming at the analysis of variations in perceptions of parent and friend relationships depending on age and sex. The study includes age-graded subsamples covering the second and third decade of the lifespan which allow us to examine the quality of close relationships beyond the transition to adulthood. Moreover, a comparison of early adult subsamples from campus and community settings helps to elucidate variations in the quality of close relationships depending on the step into worklife that is considered a prominent aspect of the transition to adulthood (Bynner & Roberts, 1991; Hamilton, 1990; Vondracek, Lerner & Schulenberg, 1986; cf. Super, 1980). Even though the study we present is not cross-cultural in nature, the fact that our data were collected in Germany allows for a tentative comparison with earlier findings which are largely based on North-American samples. Thus, we expected some first insights into the general or culture-specific quality of age-graded differences of young people's close relationships (cf. Claes, 1998).

The following discussion of earlier research is organized into three sections. Taking the work of Furman and Buhrmester as the point of departure, we first summarize findings on adolescents' close relationships. Then, we turn to the more scattered studies focusing on early adulthood. In the final paragraphs, we provide some background information on Germany as the cultural context of our study.

The Network of Adolescents' Close Relationships

A major research program investigating the quality of relationships between children and their parents as well as further significant others has been conducted by Furman and Buhrmester (e.g., 1987). Studying young people between fourth grade and college, that is, roughly from age 9 to 19, Furman and Buhrmester (1992) could show that adolescents describe their relationships with fathers and mothers in quite favorable terms. While reported levels of parental support remained above the scale midpoint in all age-groups the opposite was true of perceived conflict with parents. Age-graded patterns, however, followed u-shaped curves, suggesting heightened levels of tension around mid-adolescence which could be interpreted as indicating intensified negotiations of roles, rights, and duties in the family. At the same time, adolescents' subjective power in their parent relationships also showed a u-shaped pattern as a function of age. While fourth-graders felt comparably more powerful vis-à-vis their parents than did sons and daughters in early and mid-adolescence, the age-graded pattern suggests an increase of relative power as adolescents approach majority. While children in the youngest group might simply overestimate the extent of their self-direction and of their influence on their parents, it could also be that a decrease of subjective power results from more active attempts on the part of parents to stay in control when adolescents start to push more strongly for autonomy (cf. Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

Furman and Buhrmester's findings correpond to claims of individuation theory (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). According to this perspective, relationships between parents and their offspring change from hierarchical and unilateral to more egalitarian and reciprocal patterns in the course of adolescence. Abandoning core assumptions of

earlier theorizing (e.g., Blos, 1979; Hall, 1904; Kroh, 1958; cf. Steinberg, 1990), a major tenet of individuation theory is that adolescents do not become more autonomous by turning away from their parents. Rather, a high level of connectedness is seen as the necessary basis for structural changes of the relationship resulting in reciprocity and mutual acceptance as self-directed individuals, that is, individuality in the relationship. Considerable evidence supports this view suggesting, for example, that most parent-adolescent relationships are characterized by sound emotional bonds in absolute terms despite a modest peak in conflicts and a low in harmony between parents and their sons and daughters around mid-adolescence (Montemayor, 1983; Noack, Oepke & Sassenberg, 1998; Steinberg, 1990). Even irritations in family relationships linked to pubertal maturation seem to be minor in size (Laursen, Coy & Collins, 1998). At the same time, an increase of reciprocity and egalitarian interchanges was observed during the second half of adolescence (Hunter, 1984; Noack & Kracke, 1998; Wintre, Yaffe & Crowley, 1995).

The quality of relationships with friends contrasts with parent-adolescent relationships (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). In line with theoretical accounts of peer relations as – in principle – egalitarian and reciprocal (Krappmann, 1998; cf. Piaget, 1973; Sullivan, 1953), Furman and Buhrmester (1992) observed a balanced distribution of power among friends as opposed to the unilateral power constellation characterizing the relationships with parents. At the same time, the socio-emotional quality of same-sex friendships equalled or even exceeded the quality of family bonds. While these findings as well those from other studies (e.g., Clark-Lempers, Lempers & Ho, 1991; Hunter, 1984; Noack & Fingerle, 1994) correspond to expectations of individuation theory concerning adolescent friendship relations, the more far-reaching claim that experiences of reciprocity in same-sex friendships systematically contribute to the initiation of changes in the family system (Youniss, 1980) remains speculative.

Sex differences in subjective relationship quality vary depending on the specific type of relationship as well as on the relationship aspect which is analyzed. In general, female adolescents experience more support in several of their relationships than do young males,

namely in their mother- and same-sex friendship relationships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Noller & Callan, 1990; Sharabany, Gershoni & Hofman, 1981; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Positive socio-emotional bonds linking girls and their mothers, however, seem to reflect the closeness typical of relationships with the same-sex parent, as boys report on comparably more support on the part of their fathers (Noack, 1995; Richardson, Galambos, Schulenberg & Petersen, 1984). Concerning relative power, imbalances are generally less pronounced in young males' relationships while adolescent girls tend to describe their relationships as slightly more unilateral.

It seems plausible to assume that patterns of relationship development as suggested by the findings reported up to this point do not reach a stable plateau by the age of majority. Addressing parent-child relationships, statements of individuation theory are somewhat vague in this repect. The findings reported by Furman and Buhrmester (1992) show that even college students experienced more relative power exerted by their parents as compared to their own power. If their parent relationships are to eventually assume a peer-like character (Smollar & Youniss, 1989), further changes of these relationships can be expected to take place during early adulthood.

Parent-child and Friend Relationships During Early Adulthood

Young adults' close relationships have not been a major focus of developmental research. Data available typically address the transition to college and the years directly subsequent to this step. Little is known about family and friendship relationships of young people in the second half of their 20s. Despite the marked changes of several aspects of life that the transition to college entails, the quality of family relationships shows a remarkable stability, indicated by longitudinal correlations (e.g., Rice & Mulkeen, 1995; Schneewind & Ruppert, 1995; Tubman & Lerner, 1994). It may not come as a total surprise, however, that the entry into college goes along with a systematic improvement of the socio-emotional quality of relationships with parents if this transition is linked with a move out of the family home (Larose & Boivin, 1998; Takahashi & Majima, 1994; cf. Golish, 2000). After all, not sharing the same home brings an end to many

everyday conflicts related to the distribution of chores, duties, and mutual consideration (Papastefanou, 1997). At the same time, the ecological transition from school to college goes along with an increase of relative power in the relationships with fathers and mothers (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Pipp, Shaver, Jennings, Lamborn & Fischer, 1985). However, it is less clear whether and at which age these relationships reach a state of power symmetry.

The change from school to college is but one of several life transitions on the way to adulthood. In most instances, it does not bring young people's dependence on their parents to an end. In this respect, the entry into worklife can be considered more decisive as it may result in financial independence which, in turn, facilitates autonomous decision-making in various aspects of life (Arnett & Taber, 1994). However, Scabini and Galimberti (1995) report that the transition of sons and daughters into worklife goes along with an increased level of tension within the family. When interpreting these findings, the different cultural contexts of young adult life (U.S. vs. Italy) have to be considered. In general, only scattered evidence presently informs us about possible changes of relationships with parents when young people start to work.

Likewise, little is known about the course that same-sex friendship relationships take during early adulthood. Furman and Buhrmester (1992) report a stable level of relative power as well as of conflict from 10$^{th}$ grade to college age and a decrease in support, while findings from other studies addressing the beginning of early adulthood point to stability or even an increase in the level of intimacy (Clark-Lempers et al., 1991; Rice & Mulkeen, 1995). The socio-emotional quality of frienship, however, seems to depend particularly on the living arrangement of the young adults (Takahashi & Majima, 1994).

Close Relationships in the German Context

In the present study, we examine parent and friend relationships of adolescents and young adults in Germany. In our review of the relevant literature, most of the research we referred to is based on data from Northamerican samples. Given the scarcity of studies which directly compare close relationships of young people in Northamerica and Germany, predictions concerning differences and similarities are difficult.

Findings from a study including subsamples from the United States, East and West

Germany (Rippl & Boehnke, 1995) suggest somewhat higher levels of acceptance of parental

authority among young Northamericans than in the participating German groups. Even though

the observed difference was small in absolute terms, it might deviate from commonly held

expectations. However, Lederer (1982) taking a more general approach to attitudes towards

authority came to similar conclusions. In her study covering several decades after World War II,

(West) German respondents showed markedly stronger orientations towards authority during the

time shortly after the war than did U.S. participants (cf. Devereux, Bronfenbrenner & Suci,

1962). In more recent assessments, attitudes among samples from both countries had become

quite similar with slightly less authoritarian views stated in Germany. Of course, it is an open

question whether and to which extent the attitudinal context translates into aspects of close

relationships (cf. Laursen, Wilder, Noack & Williams, 2000).

Turning to the socio-emotional closeness in close relationships, a study conducted by

Claes (1998) may provide some indirect information. The comparison of adolescents' closeness

with parents, siblings, and friends based on data from Canada, Belgium, and Italy yielded

comparably higher similarities between adolescents from the countries in Northamerica and

Northwest Europe as compared to the Southern Europeans who reported more closeness in their

relationships (cf. Georgas et al., 1997). Again, it remains quite speculative to extrapolate these

findings to young people in the United States and Germany and to predict levels of socio-

emotional quality in the parent and friend relationships in our data that parallel the findings

reported by Furman and Buhrmester (1992). Addressing the focal aspect of intimacy in a general

way, Lewin's (1936) writings from the first half of the 20th century suggest that Germans show

lower levels of self-disclosure as compared to people in the United States. As is the case with

power and authority in relationships, however, these differences may have leveled during the

subsequent decades.

Moreover, it has to be kept in mind that the interest of the present study is not in absolute

levels of relationship qualities. Rather, our major objective is to examine age-graded patterns of

structural and socio-emotional aspects of close relationships as well as gender-specific variations. In this respect, we are not aware of strong evidence suggesting differences between samples from Western industrial democracies. As far as previous research addressing our questions is available, we base our hypotheses on earlier findings. Consequently, a consistently symmetrical power structure is expected concerning young people's friendships as opposed to hierarchical patterns in the family which slowly give way to a balance of relative power in the course of the second and third decade of life. Moreover, young males are expected to report more relative power in their relationships as compared to young females. Concerning conflict and intimacy, we assume that young people experience their friendship relationships more favorably than their parent relationships. In the light of earlier research, we expect a relative low in closeness with parents around mid-adolescence, whereas little change or slight improvements are expected with regard to friendship relationships. At the same time, young females should experience less conflict and more intimacy vis-à-vis their mothers and their friends, whereas males should report more positive perceptions with regard to their father-relationship.

Given the prominent role of the entry into work-life in the course of the transition to adulthood, we further explore differences in parent- and friendship relationships between university students and working young adults. We expect a more positive socio-emotional quality of parent relationships among the latter as well as a more egalitarian distribution of power between working sons and daughters and their parents. However, the limited evidence available from earlier studies renders this part of the study exploratory.

<div align="center">Method</div>

<u>Participants</u>

A total of 285 young people participated in this study. Participants were 48 sixth-grade (25 males, 23 females; <u>M</u> age = 12.0 years), 44 nineth-grade (14 males, 30 females; <u>M</u> age = 14.7), 36 12<sup>th</sup>-grade (18 males, 18 females; <u>M</u> age = 17.8), 85 undergraduate (24 males, 61 females; <u>M</u> age = 21.8), and 72 graduate students (37 males, 35 females; <u>M</u> age = 26.9). All participants were of German origin living in a medium or large size city in the southern part of

Germany. Given the structure of the German school system the three adolescent subsamples were confined to students attending high-track schools (<u>Gymnasium</u>) which provide a university-bound education. Only a minority of them can be expected not to go on to university after completing their school education. Even though data were also collected in low- and middle track schools, we decided on this limitation for the purpose of the present study, as only high-track schools have late-adolescent students while young people in other tracks leave school earlier and enter a variety of different educational and occupational trajectories. Thus, the majority of our participants – including university students – came from middle- to upper-middle-class families.

The high-school students were contacted in their schools which were selected on a voluntary basis. As the questionnaires were completed in class, the response rate approached 100% with only those excluded who did not get parental permissions to participate. Moreover, a lottery of <u>cd</u>s served as a further incentive for participation in the study with names placed in the lottery only of those adolescents who completed the questionnaire. The university students were asked to participate during lectures, completed the questionnaire at home, and returned them to us using the free university mail service. No further incentives were offered to these young adults. Even though almost all questionnaires handed out were returned, the system of distribution does not allow for a reliable estimate of the initial return rate.

In our exploratory analyses focusing on early adulthood, two further groups of young adults who were working on a regular full-time basis were included in addition to the two university student subsamples. The younger group of working participants was comprised of 32 subjects (17 males, 15 females; <u>M</u> age = 22.4 years), and the older group was comprised of 23 subjects (10 males, 13 females; <u>M</u> age = 26.6). These young people held a variety of different jobs, most of which did not require a university-bound school education. None of them had attended the university. When interpreting the findings, it has to be kept in mind that work-status is thus confounded with educational experience. Moreover, the share of working young adults living away from their family's home is larger than the one among university students, even though the majority of the latter also did not live together with their parents. University students

and working adults did not differ with regard to involvement in romantic relationships or parenthood.

Procedure and Measure

A German adaptation of Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI) was employed in the classroom assessments conducted in the adolescents' schools as well as in the individual assessments of the young adults. The original items were translated into German and the equivalence was checked by way of back translation. Several studies administering the NRI in German samples suggest the applicability of the measures to this cultural context (Buhl, 2000; Gödde, Schwarz & Walper, 1996; Seiffge-Krenke, 2001). Subjects rated the quality of their relationships with their mother (or stepmother), their father (or stepfather), and their closest same-sex friend.

Guided by the conceptual focus of our research questions addressing the structural and socio-emotional quality of relationships with parents and friends, three NRI scales were considered in the following analyses: Relative power (of the subject and the other person in the relationship) was included to tap the power structure in a given relationship. The conflict scale captures a central facet of the socio-emotional quality of the relationship. The third scale that was included addresses intimacy. Even though the construct also taps the socio-emotional quality of a relationship, it has to be distinguished conceptually from warmth or affection (MacDonald, 1992). It rather captures closeness in a relationship as expressed by open communication and self disclosure (e.g., "How much do you share your secrets and private feelings with this person?", cf. Rotenberg, 1995). Each relationship quality was assessed by three items. Subjects were asked to rate how much a relationship quality occurred in a given relationship using five-point rating scales. Means of the responses to each set of three items were used as scale scores ranging from 1 to 5 with a midpoint of 3. Given the shortness of scales, internal consistencies with alphas ranging between .70 and .82 can be considered satisfactory. Alphas did not vary as a function of age.

Results

Age- and Sex-differences in Relationship Quality in Adolescence and Early Adulthood

In an initial step, a multivariate repeated-measures analysis of variance with grade and sex as independent variables, relationship type (mother, father, friend), and relationship quality (relative power, conflict, and intimacy) as within-subject factors was conducted. Significant effects were found for relationship type, relationship quality, sex x relationship type, grade x relationship quality, sex x relationship quality, relationship type x relationship quality, grade x relationship type x relationship quality, and gender x relationship type x relationship quality (all $p$'s($F$) < .05). Based on the substantial interaction effects including relationship quality, further analyses served to examine variations depending on relationship type, grade, and sex separately for the three relationship qualities studied. $F$-values are presented in Table 1. Newman-Keuls tests and $t$-Tests for dependent samples were then conducted to follow up significant effects.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Relative Power. Considerable differences concerning the relative power that young people experience in their relationships with parents and friends were hypothesized. Furthermore, it was expected that relative power increases with age, namely, in the relationships with fathers and mothers. Finally, we predicted higher levels of perceived relative power among males than females. An analysis of variance with grade and sex as independent variables and relationship type as between-subjects factor yielded highly significant main effects of grade and relationship type ($p$'s($F$) > .001), and a significant sex-effect ($p$($F$) > .05). In addition, we found significant interactions between grade and sex ($p$($F$) > .05) as well as between grade and relationship type ($p$($F$) > .001). Confirming our expectation, relative power vis-à-vis both parents was lower than in the friendship relationships. While concerning friends, the scores slightly exceeded the scale midpoint indicating a symmetrical structure, young people's relative power in the family was mostly lower despite increases with age. It should be noted that a subjective equality of power of

parents and children was not reached until graduate age. Significant increases in relative power in

the mother relationship were observed from grade 9 to grade 12 as well as from grade 12 to

graduate school. In the father relationship, relative power significantly increased from grade 9 to

grade 12, and between undergraduate and graduate school. The differential pace of change

resulted in a significant difference concerning the two parent relationships in the undergraduate

group, while in all other groups relative power in the relationships with mothers and fathers did

not differ. Mean scores at each grade level are presented in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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In line with our hypothesis, sex differences resulted from females' perceptions of less

relative power in their relationships. While, in the follow-up tests, the difference was significant

concerning the friendship relationship, variations between sexes with regard to the parent

relationships were only marginal. For all three types of relationships age-graded patterns for

females suggest a steady increase of relative power. For males, on the other hand, age-specific

variations similar to the findings reported by Furman and Buhrmester (1992), suggest a decrease

of perceived power in early adolescence followed by an increase in the subsequent age-groups. It

should be noted, however, that in the Furman and Buhrmester study the youngest age-group

consisted of 9-year-olds and that their 7th-graders were only about a half a year older than the

youngest subsample in our study. In general, mean scores for comparable age-groups in the

North-American sample were slightly lower than the ones we observed among German

adolescents.

Conflict. In our analyses of conflict in close relationships, we found only two significant

effects, namely, the main effects of grade ($p(F) > .05$), and relationship type ($p(F) > .001$). While

mean scores for both parent relationships suggest a peak of conflict in mid-adolescence, follow-

up tests revealed a significant grade difference only for relationships with mothers. As can be

seen in Table 2, sixth-graders reported less conflict with their mothers than did students attending

ninth grade. Despite this differential finding the ranking of relationships according to conflict did not change across age-graded subsamples, with conflict in friendships being clearly lower than conflict in relationships with both parents. It should be pointed out, however, that the absolute level of conflict with parents also constantly remained below the scale midpoint, suggesting low to moderate tension in the families. This finding slightly diverges from the inverted u-shape pattern depending on age as reported by Furman and Buhrmester (1992).

Intimacy. Perceived intimacy in relationships varied significantly depending on grade ($p(\underline{F}) > .01$), sex ($p(\underline{F}) > .05$), and relationship type ($p(\underline{F}) > .001$). In addition, we found significant interaction effects of relationship type with grade ($p(\underline{F}) > .001$), and sex ($p(\underline{F}) > .01$). An inspection of the mean scores presented in Table 2 shows that intimacy with both parents followed a u-shaped pattern from sixth grade to undergraduate school to reach another lowpoint in the graduate subsample. Follow-up analyses, however, yielded a significant difference for reports on relationships with mothers only between the sixth grade and graduate subsamples. Concerning relationships with fathers, sixth graders intimacy scores were significantly higher than in all other groups. While the age-graded pattern observed for intimacy in same-sex friendships was almost a perfect mirror-image of the one for intimacy with parents, individual comparisons were not significant. The ranking of relationships according to intimacy was the same from nineth grade to graduate school. Intimacy with friends was highest and intimacy reported for the relationship with fathers was lowest while the relationship with mothers held a middle rank. Scores for relationships with both parents did not differ significantly only in the youngest group.

In line with our expectation, follow-up analyses of sex differences pointed to female's more intimate relationships with same-sex friends and mothers. In contrast, males perceived more intimacy in their paternal relationship than females which was, however, only a marginally significant difference. Still, this finding underscores the peculiar character of relationships with the same-sex parent as reported in our review of earlier research.

Comparison of University Students and Working Young Adults

As in our main analyses, we first conducted a multivariate repeated measures analysis of variance as an initial screening test in which age group, sex, and work status (university student, working young adult) were independent variables, and relationship type and relationship quality were within-subject factors. Guided by our specific research question, we confined ourselves to effects involving the work status variable when examining the findings. The interaction of work status, relationship type, and relationship quality as well as the four-way interaction including these three variables and sex were significant (both $\underline{p}$'s($\underline{F}$) < .05). Subsequent analyses of variance conducted separately for each relationship quality yielded a significant interaction of age group and work status concerning perceptions of intimacy, while this was not the case for relative power and conflict in relationships. These analyses did not help to elucidate the multivariate four-way interaction including sex.

Age-graded differences in <u>intimacy</u> in the relationships of university students and working young adults show reverse patterns as can be seen in Figure 1. Students reported lower levels of intimacy in graduate school than in undergraduate school which were significant in follow-up tests for both parental relationships. Conversely, scores for young adults who had already entered worklife suggest a slight, albeit insignificant increase of intimacy in their close relationships. Thus, higher intimacy in the relationships of students among the two younger subsamples gave way to the opposite picture in the two older groups concerning relationships with parents, while the difference in intimacy characterizing friendships decreased.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Discussion

In this investigation of relations with mothers, fathers, and same-sex friends across adolescence and early adulthood, a major objective was to examine variations depending on age and work status. Our findings of age-graded patterns that suggest increases in relative power of young people in the family accompanied by comparably low rates of conflict are in line with our

expectations. Likewise, the postulated differences between parent and peer relations were confirmed by our analyses. In particular, the balanced distribution of power between same-age friends sharply contrasts with the more hierarchical situation in the family. Our findings thus mostly correspond with the observations of Furman and Buhrmester (1992) who studied age-groups up until the college years. The u-shaped pattern of age-graded variation which Furman and Buhrmester observed is due the fourth-graders included in their study and could be a peculiarity of this agegroup. Findings for parallel agegroups in the Northamerican sample and in the groups we studied are basically parallel.

In absolute terms, young people in our German sample experienced more relative power in their relations than adolescents in the Furman and Buhrmester study. While differences are negligible concerning young people's friendships, they range between approximately one third of a standard deviation and half a standard deviation when comparing reports on parent relationships. Differences between findings from the two studies should, however, be interpreted with caution. It has to be considered that the samples are not identical, for instance, concerning age. Still, a direct comparison of data from sixth- and nineth graders participating in our study with data based on parallel assessments conducted in the U.S. (Wilder, 1995) points to a certain validity of the observed differences in relationship power. They correspond to recent findings of systematic, albeit small variations in general orientations towards authority (Rippl & Boehnke, 1995) as well as to data from a large-scale international youth study conducted in Europe and the United States (Nurmi, Liiceanu & Liberska, 1999) suggesting stronger normative orientations towards institutions such as one's parents and one's country among adolescents in the United States than among their agemates in Germany and other Western European countries such as Switzerland, Finland, and France.

Results of a comparison are less clear when it comes to conflict and intimacy in relations. Both studies point to a better socio-emotional quality of friendships as compared to relations with parents. However, the age-graded decrease of conflict rates as reported by Furman and Buhrmester was only found on the absolute level in our data on parent-adolescent relationships

but failed to reach significance. Moreover, we observed higher levels of intimacy between parents and their offspring in the younger agegroups paralleling a trend reported by Furman and Buhrmester. However, it has to be acknowledged that a direct comparison is not possible as in the earlier study analyses included a composite measure of social support which considered intimacy and additional provisions of support while we solely focused on the intimacy scale.

Gender differences pointed out by our analyses, again, correspond to Furman and Buhrmester's findings. For example, young males experienced more power in their relationships than young females. At the same time, female respondents described their relationships as being more intimate than did males.

In general, slight differences such as in the level of relationship power are less instructive than the overall similarities between German and U.S. samples. This is particularly true of age-graded patterns which are suggestive of a more general course of transformation of family relations during adolescence as posited by individuation theory (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). At the same time, our data clearly show that this process is not completed by the age of majority. A rough balance of power between young people and their parents seems not to be reached before the end of the third decade of life. Still, popular views stating that "parents will always remain parents" seem not to be true with regard to the distribution of power. In this respect, the situation is described as symmetrical by sons and daughters who have reached their late 20s. On the other hand, the overall picture is complex. Higher conflict rates and lower levels of intimacy in young adults' interactions with parents as compared to friendship conflict and intimacy speak against a fully peer-like character of family relations in early adulthood. Further research is needed to arrive at a better understanding of the differentiated character of relations between parents and their adult sons and daughters.

Our comparison of university students and working young adults could only partly elucidate conditions shaping close relations in early adulthood. Even though a decrease of intimacy in relations with parents and friends was only observed in the student subsample, the differential age-related pattern is difficult to interpret. Focusing on the structural meaning of

intimacy, a strong tendency towards self disclosure vis-a-vis parents could be seen as an indication of dependency. Reversely, higher levels of intimacy could also be indicative of a more relaxed stance assumed by working young adults who might feel less need to affirm their privacy (cf. Altman, 1977) and to keep up informational boundaries between themselves and their parents. In the latter case, it could be speculated that the situation of university students is a continued moratorium which allows for further identity development while working young adults have already moved beyond this stage. However, respondents from the university setting might also simply indulge in the intensity of student life and not see their parents as prime addressees of their private thoughts and concerns.

It should be noted that we cannot rule out the possibility that differences in intimacy between university students and working young adults just reflect differences of socio-economic status. While working young adults certainly have more money available for personal use than the average university student, students' educational status is superior and their family backgrounds are more advantaged in an educational as well as material respect. There is some evidence that socio-economic status and, in particular, the level of education is associated with the intensity of verbal exchange between parents and their sons and daughters (Galland, 1997; Lye, 1996). Still, the discussion of a particular difference should not obscure the fact that similarities between the two groups prevailed. Despite the considerable differences in conditions of everyday life, close relations of students and working young adults were similar concerning levels of conflict and the balance of power.

Despite the advantages of confining our main analyses to a homogeneous sample (i.e., high-track students), this decision sets limits to the generalization of our findings. A further limitation of this study results from the cross-sectional character of the data. With almost two decades separating the birth dates of our oldest and youngest subsamples, we cannot discard the possibility that age-related differences observed in the study are partly due to cohort-specific variation (cf. Steinberg, 1996; Schneewind & Ruppert, 1995). Findings from longitudinal studies, however, which covered far shorter time intervals (Noack & Kracke, 1998; Noack, Oepke &

Sassenberg, 1998; Powers & Welsh, 1993), provide some support for an interpretation of the reported age-group differences in terms of change across time. Longitudinal studies that provide comparable information on relationship development well into early adulthood still remain a desideratum for future research.

It should also be noted that we focused on aspects of close relationships as perceived by adolescents and young adults while not considering the perspectives of their relationship partners. Subjective relationship quality as seen by the different partners involved are indeed only moderatly correlated (e.g., Noack, 1991). Even though it is not plausible to assume that we would arrive at different findings in the case of friendships as seen by friends, this is less obvious for descriptive analyses of family relations based on parental reports. Direct comparisons of family members' perceptions of their relations typically point to systematic perceiver effects (e.g., Branje, van Aken & van Lieshout, 2002; Lanz, 2000). Data from our own studies suggest, for instance, that mothers systematically provide more positive accounts concerning their families than do their adolescent sons and daughters. It is open to question how far mean level differences between partners' perspectives also affect age-graded patterns. Even though subjective experiences as captured in our assessments can be assumed to provide more instructive descriptions of family and friendship relations as developmental contexts, further analyses are needed to clarify this question.

At the same time, our findings based on the multi-age subsamples in this study covering almost two decades of life as well as our analyses comparing young adults in the university and in worklife who face quite different contextual conditions have yielded instructive insights. Moreover, the parallel methodology employed in our study and earlier research conducted in the United States allows for tentative comparisons which could stimulate future investigations into cultural similiarities and differences in the development of close relationships.

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Table 1

Effects of Grade, Sex, and Relationship Type on Relationship Qualities (F-scores)

|  | Relative power | Conflict | Intimacy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grade | 15.12*** | 2.47* | 3.71** |
| Sex | 5.52* | .02 | 4.37* |
| Relationship Type | 126.55*** | 42.95*** | 171.51*** |
| Grade x Sex | 2.99* | .48 | 1.44 |
| Grade x Relationship type | 9.37*** | 1.90+ | 4.14*** |
| Sex x Relationship type | .17 | .87 | 6.07 |
| Grade x Sex x Relationship type | 1.74+ | .48 | .77 |

Note. *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Ratings by Grade and Relationship Type

| | | | Grade | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 6 | 9 | 12 | U | G |
| **Relative power** | | | | | |
| Mother | $2.21^{1,a}$ | $2.24^{1,a}$ | $2.56^{1,b}$ | $2.77^{2,b,c}$ | $3.01^{1,c}$ |
| | (.68) | (.64) | (.54) | (.60) | (.70) |
| Father | $2.06^{1,a}$ | $2.05^{1,a}$ | $2.47^{1,b}$ | $2.56^{1,b}$ | $2.93^{1,c}$ |
| | (.67) | (.58) | (.70) | (.75) | (.82) |
| Same-sex friend | $3.06^{2,a}$ | $3.20^{2,a}$ | $3.11^{2,a}$ | $3.15^{3,a}$ | $3.12^{1,a}$ |
| | (.46) | (.45) | (.53) | (.43) | (.59) |
| **Conflict** | | | | | |
| Mother | $2.01^{2,a}$ | $2.64^{2,b}$ | $2.55^{2,b}$ | $2.47^{2,b}$ | $2.33^{2,b}$ |
| | (.62) | (.86) | (1.12) | (.94) | (.77) |
| Father | $2.05^{2,a}$ | $2.54^{2,a}$ | $2.15^{2,a}$ | $2.37^{2,a}$ | $2.32^{2,a}$ |
| | (.71) | (.99) | (.88) | (.85) | (.97) |
| Same-sex friend | $1.78^{1,a}$ | $1.70^{1,a}$ | $1.77^{1,a}$ | $1.85^{1,a}$ | $1.89^{1,a}$ |
| | (.62) | (.54) | (.81) | (.65) | (.64) |
| **Intimacy** | | | | | |
| Mother | $2.97^{2,b}$ | $2.56^{2,a,b}$ | $2.61^{2,a,b}$ | $2.75^{2,a,b}$ | $2.24^{2,a}$ |
| | (1.12) | (1.00) | (1.04) | (1.13) | (.99) |
| Father | $2.56^{1,b}$ | $1.79^{1,a}$ | $1.85^{1,a}$ | $1.96^{1,a}$ | $1.66^{1,a}$ |
| | (1.08) | (.74) | (.85) | (.83) | (.59) |
| Same-sex friend | $3.21^{2,a}$ | $3.75^{3,a}$ | $3.73^{3,a}$ | $3.66^{3,a}$ | $3.46^{3,a}$ |
| | (1.10) | (1.22) | (.94) | (1.00) | (1.06) |

Note. U = undergraduate, G = graduate. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. The numbers in superscripts indicate significant differences in means between types of relationships within a given grade level. The letters in superscript indicate significant differences in means between grade levels within types of relationship.
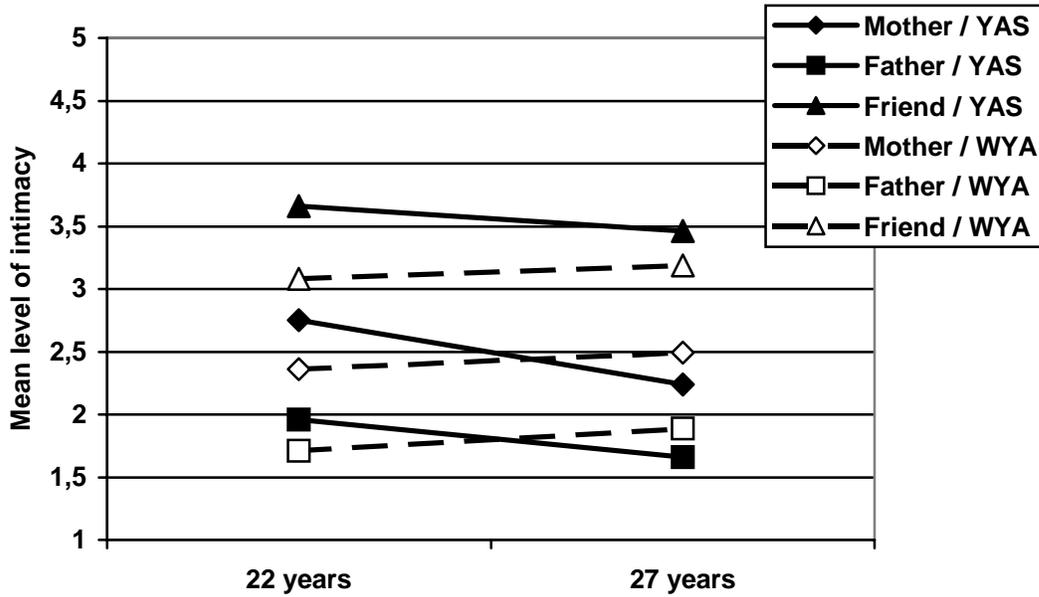
Figure 1

Intimacy in Three Relationship Types as Rated by Young Adults Depending on Work Status and Age Group

Note. YAS = Young adult students; WYA = Working young adults. To denote the respective subsamples among the student and working participants, mean ages are used instead of grade levels which we consider less instructive concerning young adults.