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## “She Had a Reason to Be Concerned”: Youths Making Sense of Their Mothers’ and Friends’ Perspectives in Their Accounts of Conflicts

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## ABSTRACT

The study examined how preadolescents and adolescents represent and make sense of their mothers’ and friends’ perspectives concerning their real-life conflicts. Participants (N = 108) in three age groups (10-, 14-, and 17-year-olds) provided narrative accounts of their own conflicts with mothers and friends. The findings revealed age-related gains in understandings of others’ perspectives, with youths increasingly referring to others’ reasons and critically examining the validity of others’ perspectives. Contrary to some assumptions in the literature, youths were as likely to explain and validate their mother’s as their friend’s perspective. Moreover, youths more frequently agreed with their mother’s perspective and invalidated their friend’s perspective. The findings provide important insights into the different contexts afforded by youths’ relationships for socio-cognitive development.

## 1. Introduction

Much research suggests that interpersonal conflicts constitute an important context for socio-cognitive development (Shantz & Hartup, 1992; Smetana, 2005). As conflicts usually result from differences in conflicting parties’ perspectives, one significant way in which engagement in conflicts may promote socio-cognitive development is by compelling individuals to consider and reflect on these differences (Johnson, Johnson, & Tjosvold, 2000), and eventually gain a better understanding of others and themselves. Despite the general recognition of the role of conflict in socio-cognitive development, little is known about what youths, especially past early childhood, learn about others’ perspectives in the context of their real-life conflicts with various relationship partners. The present study compared preadolescents’ and adolescents’ accounts about their conflicts with their mothers and friends, to illuminate how youth represent and evaluate the perspectives of significant others, and how their understandings of these perspectives change across development.

### 1.1. Conflict as a context for understanding one’s own and others’ perspectives

Developing an understanding of others’ perspectives has been recognized as laying an essential foundation for empathy, forgiveness, cooperation, prosocial behavior, and the maintenance of positive relationships (Healy, 2011; Piaget, 1932; Rizkalla, Wertheim, & Hodgson, 2008; Sandy & Cochran, 2000). Some evidence in support of these claims comes from research with preschool-aged children. For example, Laible and Thompson (2002) examined the longitudinal links between 30-month-old children’s conflict

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interactions with their mothers and children's socio-emotional competence six months later. They found that mothers' justifications of their own position during conflict interactions predicted children's performance on an affective perspective-taking task.

The facilitative role of conflict for understanding differing perspectives has been also demonstrated in a series of experimental studies with older children, adolescents, and adults. The "revealed differences" paradigm involves initial testing of participants' reasoning about a socio-moral dilemma, followed by a discussion session in which participants are paired with others who either agree or disagree with them on the dilemma resolution, after which their reasoning is re-tested (Berkowitz and Gibbs, 1983; Johnson et al., 2000). Results of these studies suggest that when individuals are confronted with others' contrasting interpretations in the disagreement condition, they gain a better understanding of their own and others' perspectives and shift towards a higher level of reasoning.

Additional evidence for the import of conflict comes from autobiographical narrative research. For example, in one study examining late adolescents' self-defining memories about relationships (McLean & Thorne, 2003), conflict memories were shown to be more conducive to meaning making (i.e., gaining insights about oneself and others) than were more pleasant relationship memories. The authors argued that making sense of conflict events helps individuals to cope with interpersonal distress and learn how to prevent it in the future, whereas more enjoyable interpersonal events do not induce such active psychological processing.

### 1.2. Conflicts in child-parent and friendship relationships

It has been also noted that conflicts and their developmental significance may vary substantially across different relationship contexts. Conflicts with parents are embedded in more hierarchical interactions, whereby parents unilaterally enforce responsibilities and expectations about children's behavior regarding such issues as chores, academic performance, safety, and health (Adams & Laursen, 2001; Riesch et al., 2000). Conflicts with friends, on the other hand, are more egalitarian, and involve mutual discussion of varying opinions or relational priorities (Adams & Laursen, 2001; Laursen & Pursell, 2009). It has been proposed by Piaget (1932) already many years ago that children feel more at ease to explore and challenge various points of view within equal than hierarchical relationships, and consequently conflicts between peers provide an important foundation for such moral concepts as empathy, fairness, and reciprocity. Close friends also perceive themselves as similar to each other (Healy, 2011; Simpkins, Parke, Flyr, & Wild, 2006), which may further facilitate their ability to imagine and identify with each other's perspectives.

Friendships differ from child-parent relationships in another important way – they are voluntary and thus easily terminable. These features may have implications for how conflicts within such relationships are resolved, and relatedly, how contrasting perspectives are made sense of. It has been suggested that in an attempt to preserve their friendships, youths often try to find compromise and mutually satisfying conflict resolutions (Adams & Laursen, 2001; Yu, Branje, Keijsers, & Meeus, 2014). Conflicts with parents, by contrast, often result in one of the parties losing the argument (Recchia, Ross, & Vickar, 2010), as child-parent relationships are not contingent on harmonious conflict resolutions. Notably, however, some research suggests that such win-lose outcomes may result in an inferior understanding of others' contrasting positions than do compromise resolutions (Stein, Bernas, & Calicchia, 1997).

However, compromise resolutions seem to be more common in hypothetical than in real-life situations (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Townsend Betts, 2001). In real-life conflicts, especially between friends, standoff resolutions, which allow parties to disengage and cool off until interpersonal harmony can be restored, have been shown to be more prevalent (Black, 2002). Friends often try to actively repair their relationship, given that relational matters such as possessiveness or betrayals are often at stake (Hand & Furman, 2009). Importantly, such resolutions may be primarily motivated by the desire to restore harmony in a threatened relationship, and less conducive to exploration of others' perspectives than compromise resolutions.

Unfortunately, direct comparisons between child-parent and friendship contexts in youths' attunement to the other's perspective have been made only in research with young children. Observational studies (Dunn & Herrera, 1997; Dunn, Slomkowski, Donelan, & Herrera, 1995) showed, consistent with Piaget's propositions, that children were more likely to take into account others' needs and desires in their arguments with friends than with mothers. However, these findings cannot be merely assumed to apply past early childhood.

### 1.3. Development of child-parent and friendship relationships

Youths' relationships with both parents and friends undergo key changes throughout adolescence, which may be relevant to how conflicts with those significant others are understood and managed across development. The harmony characterizing child-parent relationships in middle childhood gets disturbed in early adolescence when youths begin to actively seek autonomy and de-idealize parental figures, attempting to better understand themselves and the world (McElhane, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009; Smetana, 2005; Smollar & Youniss, 1989). By late adolescence, child-parent power differentials diminish, and youths develop more balanced views of their parents (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009), which are reflected in their more positive and mutual resolutions of conflict (Van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2011).

Youths' perceptions of their friends also significantly shift during adolescence. Friendships are known to take on special significance in middle childhood, when friends start spending increasingly more time and become strongly attached to each other (Berndt, 2004). With this change comes preadolescents' preoccupation with peer acceptance and maintaining positive relationships (Sandy & Cochran, 2000), which results in efforts to please friends even at their own cost (Komolova & Wainryb, 2011). This identification and compliance with friends' demands increase even more in early adolescence (Yu et al., 2014), when friendships become more intimate (Way & Silverman, 2012) and overshadow reliance on parental figures (McElhane et al., 2009). By late adolescence, however, youths begin to perceive their friends in more humanized terms, showing more respect for each other's

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