



Is the resolution style 'exiting statements' related to adolescent problem behavior?

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the association between the adolescents' conflict resolution style 'exiting statements' (i.e., the expression of the adolescent's desire to minimize or end the contact with his or her parents) in parent–adolescent conflicts with self-rated adolescent GAD symptoms and delinquency symptoms of 1313 adolescents. A multi-group, structural equation model was employed to analyze the relationship between the constructs for four age–sex groups. Results demonstrated that age and sex moderated the relationship between exiting statements, GAD and delinquency. For late adolescent females, perceived difficulties in solving conflicts in horizontal parent–adolescent relationships were significantly related to self-rated GAD symptoms. It is discussed how the Multimodal Treatment Approach could be applied for family conflict resolution. For early adolescent males, perceived problems in solving parent–adolescent conflicts were strongly related to self-rated delinquency symptoms. These findings are discussed in light of Parent Management Training that focuses on the conflict resolution styles of family members.

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Introduction

In previous studies it has been shown that ineffective and destructive conflict resolution in parent–adolescent conflicts is related to internalizing (e.g., Branje, van Doorn, VanderValk & Meeus, 2009; Collins & Laursen, 1992; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993; Tucker, McHale & Crouter, 2003) and externalizing adolescent problem behavior (e.g., Branje et al., 2009; Edwards, Barkley, Laneri, Fletcher & Metevia, 2001; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993). Effective and constructive conflict resolution in parent–adolescent conflicts has been found to be associated with better adolescent adjustment, that is, less depression, aggression and anxiety (Branje et al., 2009; Tucker et al., 2003), and with less risk behavior, higher self-esteem and better school functioning (Collins & Laursen, 1992; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993). More recently, a destructive conflict style that has been linked to problems for adolescents is the conflict resolution style 'exiting statements'.

To our knowledge, only one study of the conflict resolution style exiting statements has been conducted as of the present time (i.e., Branje et al., 2009). The conflict resolution style exiting statements is conceptualized as the adolescents' expression of the desire to end the relation without resolving the conflict (Branje et al., 2009). The adolescent expresses the wish to no longer consider his or her parents as his or her parents anymore and does not want to have any further contact with them. This conviction is reflected in a process of emotional detachment and limitation of contact. The adolescent wishes to actively limit his or her contact with his or her parents to an absolute minimum or, in extreme forms, actively end all contact with the parents, in the context of an emotionally poor and troublesome parent–adolescent relationship. The conceptualization of exiting statements as the expression of the desire to end the relationship without resolving the conflict is based on an existing typology of responses to

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dissatisfaction in close relationships (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983). The resolution style exiting statements is generally studied as the expression of the desire of the adolescent to minimize or to end the relationship, the statements of the adolescent about an eventual end or the use of behaviors that could end the relationship rather than actually ending the relationship. How the relationship actually changed as the result of the exiting statements or if the adolescent really detached from the relationship has not been assessed.

Exiting statements is conceptually distinguished from the other negative conflict resolution styles, such as conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance (Kurdek, 1994). Conflict engagement refers to quarreling, showing anger and behaving with a risk on loss of self-control. Withdrawal refers to a temporary situation in which, on the initiative of the adolescent, parental contact is limited and communication, especially about contentious topics, is avoided without the intention of ending the relationship. Compliance refers to the adolescent accepting any solution of his or her parents without presenting his or her own point of view. These styles take place within the context of ongoing mutual interactions between parents and adolescent, whereas in case of the conflict resolution style of exiting statements, communication takes place only within the context of desired extremely minimized interactions or the ending of mutual interactions. In this framework the conflict resolution style of exiting statements can also be considered to be one of the most extreme forms of avoidance. In the current study the conflict resolution style of exiting statements is investigated as the expression of the adolescents' desire to extremely minimize or end the contact with his or her parents and no longer consider his or her parents as parents.

In general it has been found that greater problem severity is strongly related to the use of exiting statements in a close relationship (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983). In the case of adolescents (Branje et al., 2009) greater psychosocial problem severity is strongly related to the use of exiting statements in the parent–adolescent relationship. Branje et al. (2009) found that adolescents who used the conflict resolution style of exiting statements had more conflicts with their parents before and simultaneous to the use of exiting statements and had significant higher levels of adolescent internalizing (i.e., depression and anxiety) and externalizing (i.e., aggression) problem behavior.

However, the aforementioned study on exiting statements did not examine both adolescent age and sex differences in one and the same design. Therefore, the main purpose of the current study is to explore how the conflict resolution style exiting statements is related to the internalizing and externalizing problem behavior of early and late adolescent males and females from the general population.

In regard to adolescent internalizing problem behavior, generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (GAD), one of the most commonly occurring adolescent problems (Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler & Angold, 2003; Rapee, 1991; Verhulst, Van der Ende, Ferdinand & Kasius, 1997), may be related to exiting statements. GAD is characterized by frequent, excessive anxiety and worry (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Social-evaluative concerns are at the center of adolescent GAD worry symptoms (Hudson & Rapee, 2004; Weems, Silverman & La Greca, 2000), hence interpersonal problems with parents were found to be related to adolescent GAD (Hale, Engels & Meeus, 2006; Muris, Mayer & Meesters, 2000; Muris, Meesters, Merckelbach & Huelsenbeck, 2000; Muris, Meesters, Van Melick & Zwambag, 2001; Van Brakel, Muris, Bögels & Thomassen, 2006). Adolescents with GAD subsequently use avoidant coping behavior in negative interactions (Borkovec, Newman, Pincus & Lytle, 2002; Newman, Castonguay, Borkovec & Molnar, 2004; Riskind, 2005). The conflict resolution style of exiting statements can also be considered to be one of the most extreme forms of avoidance, thus we expected adolescent exiting statements and GAD symptoms to be significantly and positively related to one another.

A myriad of studies has established that, as is the case with GAD, adolescents with delinquent behavior symptoms also experience problematic parental relationships (e.g., Goetting, 1994; Meeus, Branje & Overbeek, 2004; Simons, Chao, Conger & Elder, 2001; Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Wei, Farrington & Wikström, 2002; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt & Silva, 2001). Social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) assumes that a good parent–child relationship protects a child against the development of delinquency. Therefore, in this study the conflict resolution style exiting statements and adolescent delinquency symptoms were expected to be significantly and positively related.

Another goal of this study concerns the differences of exiting statements and problem behavior between early and late adolescent age groups as well as adolescent males and females from the general population. Specifically, with regard to adolescent age groups, we tested two alternative hypotheses. The first hypothesis is derived from findings that early adolescence is a specific age-period with a high prevalence of parent–adolescent conflict (e.g., Arnett, 1999; Laursen, Coy & Collins, 1998; Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2002), compared to late adolescence (De Goede, Branje & Meeus, 2009; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Laursen et al., 1998). In this period a destructive conflict resolution style as exiting statements may be strongly associated to adolescent behavioral problems, such as self-rated GAD and delinquency symptoms, than in late adolescence (Russell, Pettit & Mize, 1998).

The second hypothesis originates from the prior observation that parent–child relationships develop from a vertical relationship in early adolescence, where parents exert authority over their children, towards a more horizontal and egalitarian relationship in late adolescence (e.g., De Goede, Branje & Meeus, 2009; Russell, Pettit & Mize, 1998; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). When parents and adolescents develop more egalitarian relationships (Russell, Pettit & Mize, 1998) adolescents also learn to solve conflicts in more mature and constructive ways with their increasing possibilities of perspective taking and compromise. A destructive conflict resolution style might be less appropriate in late adolescence than in early adolescence. The second hypothesis therefore predicts a stronger relationship between exiting statements and self-rated GAD symptoms and delinquency symptoms in late adolescence than in early adolescence.

With respect to adolescent sex differences, Branje et al. (2009) found sex specific moderating effects of negative conflict resolution for internalizing and externalizing adolescent problem behavior. They found a moderating effect of sex such that for females only negative conflict resolution styles and internalizing problem behavior were associated, whereas for males they observed an association between negative conflict resolution styles and both internalizing and externalizing problem behavior.

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