

CONFLICT-RESOLUTION STRATEGIES AND ADOLESCENT IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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I explored the influence of parent–adolescent conflict on identity development by examining the identity status of 278 migrant and mainstream adolescents in relation to methods of dealing with disagreements with parents. Results were generally consistent with Erikson’s theory, with the 8% minority of teenagers who habitually disputed so violently with their parents as to attempt to inflict verbal or physical injury scoring higher on the diffusion maladaptive identity dimension, whereas the 26% who routinely avoided all forms of heated discussion or argument scored nonsignificantly higher on identity foreclosure.

Keywords: parent–adolescent conflict, ethnicity, interpersonal conflict, conflict resolution, adolescent development, identity development.

Like several other developmental theorists (Piaget, 1970; Riegel, 1975), Erikson (1968) viewed conflict as the primary stimulus for positive developmental change: “I shall present human growth from the point of view of the conflicts, inner and outer, which the vital personality weathers, re-emerging from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity” (p. 91). The notion that conflict can foster personality growth sheds new light on the pervasive phenomenon of parent–adolescent disputation (Freud, 1958; Montemayor, 1982). In the centuries since Socrates first remarked that Athenian teenagers “show disrespect for their elders...contradict their parents...and tyrannize their teachers” (cited in Kiell, 1967, p. 18), popular consciousness has characterized adolescents as uniquely prone to question, challenge, or even rebel against parental opinions. While clearly harmful to individual and familial well-being when taken to violent or destructive extremes (Deutsch, 1975; Straus, 1979), increased interpersonal conflict

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during adolescence could also serve a productive function if it were to trigger psychological growth in the developing young person.

In a study of parent-adolescent conflict in harmonious, nonclinical families, Peterson, Peterson, and Skevington (1986) reported significantly more advanced cognitive development in adolescents who used heated argument to resolve domestic disputes. That is, formal operational reasoning was associated with intense and emotional debates and concrete-operational reasoning, with milder conflict resolution strategies ranging from calm discussion to outright avoidance. While the causal direction for this finding could not be ascertained, it is consistent with Piaget's (1970) theory that internal cognitive conflict triggers cognitive growth.

Therefore, I tested for a similar link between methods of resolving conflicts with parents and adolescent identity development (Erikson, 1968). On the grounds that parent-child debates are one form of outer conflict that may also trigger inner conflicts—jointly seen by Erikson (1968) as the root causes for developmental gain—I predicted that adolescents who actively exchanged opinions with their parents would show more advanced levels of identity development than would those who avoided the cognitive element of parent-child disagreement by refusing to argue or by escalating the conflict to the level of violent fighting.

In their analysis of family dialogues during problem solving, Cooper, Grotevant, and Condon (1983) yielded results broadly consistent with this hypothesis. They brought adolescents and their parents to the laboratory for a taped discussion of an experimentally presented dilemma (e.g., how to plan a 2-week family vacation). Correlations were computed between the adolescent's degree of *identity exploration* (i.e., the extent to which alternatives were being explored and the identity crisis was actively being confronted) and frequencies of overt agreement and disagreement in the family's conversational exchanges. Adolescents who disagreed most often with their parents had the highest identity development scores, and higher absolute frequencies of expressing disagreements and ratios of disagreement relative to agreement were also observed for the fathers of adolescents with advanced identity development. Further, these advanced offspring had mothers and fathers who disagreed more frequently as a couple during the laboratory dialogue. Conversely, the adolescent's level of identity development was negatively correlated with mothers' frequent expressions of agreement. Thus, Cooper et al. (1983) concluded that "these findings are consistent with Erikson's (1968) view of the task of identity as the need to define a sense of oneself as distinctive from others. Disagreement is one way of expressing this difference" (p. 53).

Cooper et al. (1983) coded disagreements in nonemotive terms, as direct or implied negative rephrasings of another person's previous affirmative statement. There was no suggestion in the coding criteria or examples

given of any tendency toward heatedness or anger in these nonaffirmative exchanges. Thus, although they are consistent with the broader notion that interpersonal conflict may trigger inner psychic growth, Cooper et al.'s results do not provide information directly relevant to the present hypothesis that there will be a positive link between emotionally intense or heated parent-adolescent disputing and the latter's more advanced identity growth. This hypothesis was derived by analogy with Peterson et al.'s (1986) earlier finding of cognitive correlates of heated argument. To test this hypothesis, and also the generalizability of Cooper et al.'s laboratory findings to naturally occurring conflicts at home, I related adolescents' self-reports of their methods of handling ongoing family disagreements over chores, friends, bedtimes, and so on, to their identity development. Additionally, I used an objectively scored measure of strategies employed to resolve the identity crisis (Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979; Grotevant & Adams, 1984), in which identity development is subdivided into diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement statuses.

Finally, recent interest in the adjustment and identity development of Australian adolescents from non-English-speaking migrant backgrounds (Rosenthal, 1982; Taft, 1977) led me to incorporate the variable of family ethnic background into the study design. Greater divergence in attitudes has been found between Italian-migrant adolescents and their parents than in mainstream Anglo-Australian households (Connell, Stroobant, Sinclair, Connell, & Rogers, 1975; Rosenthal, 1982). However, because diverging attitudes may not be overtly expressed, and given that Peterson et al. (1986) found no relationship between intergenerational attitude divergence and adolescent cognitive advancement, I withheld predictions concerning ethnic differences in identity until possible differences in the heatedness or intensity of the conflict resolution methods employed by adolescents from migrant versus mainstream Australian backgrounds, could be tested.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 278 pupils (131 male, 147 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 16.5$ years, range = 15–19) from private, fee-paying Catholic high schools in Perth, Western Australia. They were divided into three ethnic background categories: 88 "mainstream" Australians born in Australia to Australian-born parents, 39 British migrants born in the United Kingdom to two English-speaking parents, and 151 non-Anglo migrants born overseas in a country (Europe, Asia, and Middle East) where English was not the native language and with at least one nonnative English-speaking parent.

In an effort to confine the study to harmonious, nonclinical households as well as to simplify the criteria for determining ethnicity, participants

whose parents were separated, divorced, or in other than a first marriage, were excluded from the final sample. Because all four schools were religious and charged tuition fees, most families were similar in relative affluence (mostly middle-class) and predominant religious orientation.

Measures

Identity. To measure identity development, I used the 64-item extended version of the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (EOM-EIS; Adams et al., 1979). Responses to this objective measure (Grotevant & Adams, 1984) are made on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly agree* to 6 = *strongly disagree*. The four 16-item subsets are randomly ordered and typify major ways of dealing with an identity crisis: foreclosure, diffusion, achievement, and moratorium. Dimensions were derived from an open-ended interview study by Marcia (1966) and are used frequently in identity development research (e.g., Bourne, 1978).

In terms of Erikson's (1968) theory, foreclosure and diffusion reflect a less-advanced stage of identity development than either moratorium or achievement. *Diffusion* is, overall, the least adaptive of the four, being linked with high levels of anxiety and poor self-esteem (Marcia, 1966), and resulting from the adolescent avoiding or giving up on the identity question without engaging in exploration. Adams and Jones (1983) stated that "individuals who are diffused show no sign of commitment nor do they express a need or desire to begin the questioning process" (p. 249). Likewise, identity foreclosure indicates a failure to fully confront and resolve the identity crisis; however, unlike their diffused counterparts, foreclosed individuals show little overt anxiety and display high levels of aspiration toward conventional standards (Marcia, 1966). *Foreclosure* results when an adolescent makes a premature commitment to a set of values prescribed by others, without engaging in any self-determining resolution or exploration of alternatives. According to Whitbourne and Weinstock (1979), a frequent cause is "the fact that the identity has been precluded within the individual in favor of acceptance of parental beliefs" (p. 100). *Moratorium* is developmentally more advanced than the previous two statuses, in that active confrontation of the identity crisis indicates a person who is "on the way toward reaching some kind of resolution" (Whitbourne & Weinstock, 1979, p. 100). Finally, the most advanced status is *identity achievement*, where the crisis has been fully resolved and the person "has made a self-defined commitment following a period of questioning and searching" (Adams & Jones, 1983, p. 24).

In a large-scale validation study of the extended version of the EOM-EIS, Grotevant and Adams (1984) indicated that the scale "has acceptable reliability (both internal consistency and test-retest) and validity (content, factorial, discriminant, and concurrent)" (p. 419). Categorizations based on

this scale have also been found to closely match those determined using clinical interview procedures (Grotevant & Adams, 1984).

I computed Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales of the EOM-EIS and found reasonable levels of internal consistency: diffusion = .61, foreclosure = .83, moratorium = .66, and achievement = .64.

Conflict-resolution style. The self-report measure of adolescents' strategies for dealing with disputes with their parents was based on instruments used by Alford (1982) and Peterson et al. (1986). However, where a single multiple-choice item was used in the past to elicit participants' one most typical or usual intergenerational conflict-resolution strategy, the present measure was based on the combined scoring of three separate sets of choices. Each question subsumed several related areas of disagreement to include all of the most frequent topics of intergenerational discord commonly reported in attitude divergence studies (e.g., Rosenthal, 1982). My major reason for broadening the measure was to enhance sensitivity to extreme response categories, such as outright avoidance and hurtful fighting, which I viewed as having theoretical interest despite not being the universal mode for dealing with conflict in any given household.

Thus, respondents separately described their usual way of handling disagreements with their parents about personal habits (e.g., smoking), major decisions (e.g., careers), and home responsibilities (e.g., chores, late hours). In each case, the response choices were as follows: (a) "avoid mentioning it," (b) "discuss it briefly and calmly," (c) "discuss it heatedly and at length," (d) "argue angrily over it," and (e) "fight physically; exchange insults or hurtful remarks."

Participants were categorized according to the most intense or heated conflict tactic used in any disagreement area. Those who reported using response option (e) at least once were classed as "hostile fighting," those who used (d) at least once but never (e) were coded as "argue angrily," and those who never used (c), (d), or (e) were classed as "calm/avoidant."

Results

Table 1 shows the proportions of participants in each of the conflict-resolution categories. A preliminary analysis of variance (ANOVA) for unequal *ns* revealed no significant difference in age between the four groups, $F < 1$. Nor did the groups differ by gender, $\chi^2(3) = 6.91$, $p > .05$, or ethnicity, $\chi^2(6) = 2.18$, $p > .25$. Thus, these variables were combined in the remaining analyses.

Given the disparity in measures, the approximate 1:4 ratio of avoidance to active confrontation of conflict shown here is reasonably parallel to both Alford's (1982) self-report of 13% outright avoidance of conflict within parents by American teenagers and Vuchinich's (1987) direct

observational finding that 64% of the dinner-table conflicts initiated in American teenage households were actively confronted.

Table 1. Sex, Age, Ethnicity, and Identity Status Scores as a Function of Adolescents' Predominant Conflict Resolution Method

	Conflict resolution strategy			
	Avoid/Calm	Discuss heatedly	Argue angrily	Hostile fighting
<i>N</i>	68	117	73	20
Mean age (years)	16.5	16.5	16.5	16.3
Female (%)	52	47	64	50
Ethnicity (%)				
Australian	29	36	27	30
British	13	14	15	15
Non-Anglo	57	50	58	55

Figure 1 shows the mean identity status scores of each of the conflict groups. To test the significance of apparent associations between conflict resolution and identity development, four separate one-way ANOVA for unequal *ns* were computed for groups' scores on each of the four EOM-EIS subscales (Grotevant & Adams, 1984). Results showed no significant differences in identity achievement across the conflict groups, $F < 1$. Differences in identity foreclosure scores, $F(3, 274) = 2.3, p > .05$, and moratorium scores, $F(3, 274) = 2.7, p < .05$, approached significance but when separate contrasts between all pairs of means were computed using the Newman-Keuls procedure, the trend toward calm/avoidant individuals scoring higher on foreclosure ($p > .05$) and lower on moratorium ($p > .05$) than the other conflict groups did, did not achieve significance at $p < .20$.

The final comparison involved identity diffusion scores. Here, a significant overall difference did emerge between the four groups, $F(3, 374) = 2.84, p < .05$. When this was followed up using the Newman-Keuls procedure, the hostile fighters' mean of 55.4 was found to be significantly ($p < .05$) greater than the means for each of the remaining groups, with no significant differences between any of the latter. Thus, adolescents whose styles of dealing with family conflict entailed the aim of inflicting verbal or physical injury were found to be significantly more prone to adopt a diffused approach to the identity crisis, as reflected in their high rates of agreement with statements such as "I'm really not interested in finding the right job; any job will do" and "I've never had any real close friends. It would take too much energy to keep friendships going".

Discussion

The link I observed between hurtful fighting and identity diffusion accords with theoretical accounts (Erikson, 1968; Straus, 1979) of the

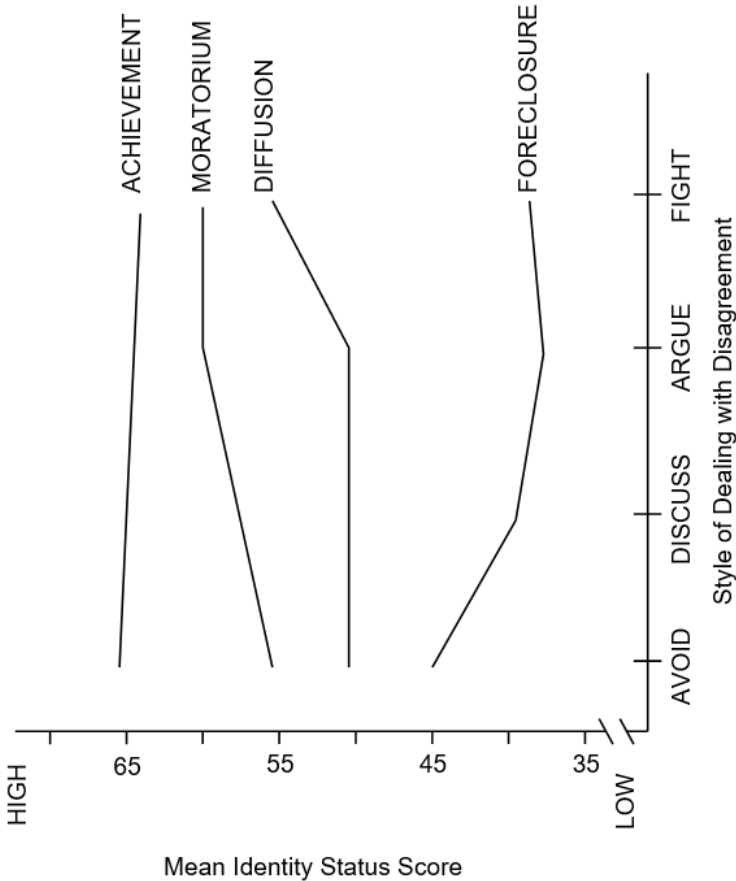


Figure 1. *Styles of dealing with disagreements.*

adverse influences on individual and family well-being conflict strategies and hostile violence. However, my finding that the identity development of adolescents who argued angrily or discussed heatedly was as high as that of peers who refrained from emotional displays during conflict, shows the need to distinguish carefully in future research between the simple arousal of negative effect during a debate and the more worrisome intent to inflict verbal or physical injury. The former is a commonly noted concomitant of pubertal maturation (Freud, 1958), whereas only the latter had a maladaptive association with identity growth in this study.

In line with Cooper et al.'s (1983) finding of more identity exploration (and, by implication, less foreclosure) among adolescents who disagreed freely with their parents during a family discussion, I observed a marginally significant trend for adolescents who reported that their approaches to conflict with their parents never exceeded the level of "brief, calm discussion," to score higher on foreclosure and lower on the developmentally more advanced moratorium measure. However, the suggestion that identity foreclosure may be linked with a calm or avoidant approach to family conflict should be treated cautiously, pending more substantive statistical confirmation than is provided by the present data.

In previous studies of identity diffusion and foreclosure that were not focused specifically on the family's conflict-resolution methods, scholars obtained results that are broadly in line with my findings. In particular, Adams and Jones (1983) found "little overt expression of emotions" (p. 250) by parents of foreclosed adolescents, whereas adolescents using moratorium and achievement had parents using a "style that encourages autonomy and enhances the individuation" (p. 255). Although the correlates of identity diffusion were considered paradoxical and difficult to interpret, Adams and Jones' suggestion that "parental conduct creates a condition for the diffused female adolescent that is interpreted as rejecting" (p. 255) is highly consistent with my finding of more reported intergenerational hostility among diffused participants than other groups.

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