



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.

When the findings of the aforementioned studies are taken together, they seem to suggest that age will moderate the relationship between exiting statements and GAD for adolescent females but not for the relationship between exiting statements and delinquency. For adolescent males it would appear that age moderates the relationship between exiting statements and GAD symptoms as well as exiting statements and delinquency. Hence, the final goal of the present study was to investigate whether the age of the adolescent males and females moderated the relation between exiting statements on the one hand and self-rated GAD and delinquency symptoms on the other hand. However, since this has not been directly tested in previous studies, the moderating effects of age on the associations between exiting statements and GAD and exiting statements and delinquency for adolescent males and females were tested in an explorative manner.

In summary, in this study the association between the adolescent conflict resolution style exiting statements (i.e., the expression of the adolescents' desire to minimize or end the contact with his or her parents and no longer consider his or her parents as parents) and perceived GAD symptoms as internalizing problem behavior, and perceived delinquency symptoms as externalizing problem behavior, was investigated for early and late adolescent males and females.

Method

Participants

The 1313 students who participated in this study came from various Dutch junior high and high schools in the Utrecht province of The Netherlands. The data of this study were collected in the context of an ongoing study of Dutch adolescents. Because we wanted to study age differences in the relationship between exiting statements and GAD and between exiting statements and delinquency, we used data from early and late adolescents in the general population. In this study the adolescent population was comprised of 923 (70.3%) early adolescents of whom 455 (49.5%) were girls and 468 (50.5%) boys, and 390 (29.7%) late adolescents of whom 221 (43.8%) were girls and 169 (56.2%) boys. The early adolescents were ranging in age from 11 to 16 years old, ($M = 13.37$, $SD = .59$) with the group composed primarily of 13–14 year olds (95.2%). The late adolescents were ranging in age from 20 to 24 years old ($M = 20.74$, $SD = .85$) with the group composed primarily of 20–21 year olds (82%).

Procedure

Prior to the study, both adolescents and parents received written information and, if the adolescent chose to participate, were required to provide written informed consent. The adolescent participants completed questionnaires during homeroom study period, which lasted for an hour. Verbal instructions as how to fill in the questionnaires were given to the adolescents by the research assistants just prior to the testing to complement the written instructions printed above each questionnaire. At the end of the homeroom study period, the research assistants collected the questionnaires. These assistants conducted the data entry to insure that the data remained anonymous to the researcher.

Measures

Conflict resolution style exiting statements

The conflict resolution style exiting statements was measured by a Dutch adaptation of Kurdek's Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994), which measured four conflict resolution styles: conflict engagement, positive problem solving, withdrawal and compliance. The Dutch adaptation includes a fifth conflict resolution style, 'exiting statements', the expression of the adolescents' desire to minimize or end the contact with his or her parents and no longer consider his or her parents as parents. Items pertaining to exiting statements behaviors were used in previous research and added to Kurdek's measure (i.e., Branje et al, 2009). The adolescent rated the four items of this subscale on a five-point Likert scale: (1) *never*, (2) *seldom*, (3) *sometimes*, (4) *often*, and (5) *always*. Factor analysis for this study showed that the revised CRSI revealed a five-factor structure. Loadings on the exiting statements items were $> .45$ with no cross-loadings on the other factors. The instruction was: 'Using the scales (1 = *never* and 5 = *always*), rate how frequently you use each of the following styles to deal with arguments or disagreements with your parents' (instruction). The four 'exiting statements' items are: (1) "I no longer consider my parents as my parents", (2) "I have told my parents that I'll never want to have anything to do with them ever again", (3) "I have told my parents I do not want to have any contact with them" and (4) "I have told my parents I never want to talk with them again". In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .87 for the early adolescents and .85 for the late adolescents. Concurrent validity was demonstrated by negative correlations between exiting statements and the scale 'support' of the Network of Relationship Inventory (NRI: Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) in early ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$) and late ($r = -.38$, $p < .01$) adolescents, and the positive correlations between exiting statements and the scale 'rejection' of the Level of Expressed Emotion scale (LEE: Gerlsma & Hale, 1997; Hale, Raaijmakers, Gerlsma & Meeus, 2007) in early ($r = .33$, $p < .01$) and late ($r = .39$, $p < .01$) adolescents.

Delinquency

The delinquency measure of this study was derived from a self-report questionnaire of 16 items, designed by Baerveldt, Van Rossem and Vermande (2003). Adolescents were asked how many times they had committed minor offences, such as shoplifting,

petty theft, or vandalism, during the previous twelve months. The adolescent rated 16 items on a four point score ranging from 'never' to 'four times or more'. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .86 for the early adolescents and .78 for the late adolescents.

GAD symptoms

The GAD subscale of The Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) was used to assess GAD symptoms. The SCARED is a self-report questionnaire, designed for children and adolescents, that measures the occurrence of anxiety disorder symptoms on a three point Likert scale: 0 (*almost never*), 1 (*sometimes*), or 2 (*often*) (Birmaher et al., 1997; 1999). The GAD symptom dimension subscale consists of nine items. An example item for a GAD symptom is: "I worry if others will like me". Reliability and construct validity of the SCARED are strong (Hale, Raaijmakers, Muris & Meeus, 2005; 2007; Myers & Winters, 2002). In this study Cronbach's alpha for this subscale was .85 for the early adolescents and .90 for the late adolescents.

Data analysis

First, descriptive analysis of variance and zero order correlations were conducted on exiting statements, GAD and delinquency scores in the adolescent age and sex groups. Second, a multi-group Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied. As noted in the introduction, only one empirical study has been conducted on exiting statements and this cross-sectional study was not able to determine the direction of effects. Therefore, before determining our final model, two models were tested; one in which exiting statements predicted GAD and delinquency and another in which GAD and delinquency predicted exiting statements. In this preliminary analysis we found that the former model (i.e., exiting statements predicting GAD and delinquency) statistically had the strongest explanatory power.^{1,2} Furthermore, this model agrees with the general perspective in social sciences to view interaction as a risk factor for anxiety disorders and delinquency (e.g., Granic & Patterson, 2006; Klein & Pine, 2002). Thus, findings for the model involving exiting statements predicting GAD and delinquency are presented and discussed.

This final model of exiting statements predicting GAD and delinquency was tested as a multigroup model to explore potential adolescent age and sex differences in the relationship between exiting statements and GAD and delinquency. Specifically, the multigroup model consisted of early adolescent males, late adolescent males, early adolescent females and late adolescent females.

Three model designs were examined. First a restricted model design in which all of the estimated parameters were required to be equal across groups, secondly a model design in which the estimated parameters were allowed to differ for the different age groups (i.e., early and late adolescents) and finally a non-restricted model design in which all of the parameters were allowed to differ across age and sex groups. Model fit was evaluated by means of three indices (Kline, 2005): the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI: a value of .95 or greater represents a good fit), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI: a value of .95 or greater represents a good fit) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA: a value of .05 or less represents a good fit).

Results

Age and sex differences

The means and standard deviations on exiting statements, GAD, and delinquency are shown in Table 1. An age by sex ANOVA showed no significant differences between males and females on the conflict resolution style exiting statements: $F(1, 1309) = .02$, ns , $\eta^2 = .00$, but revealed that late adolescents used the conflict resolution style exiting statements less often than early adolescents, $F(1, 1309) = 19.83$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$. The interaction between age and sex of adolescent was not significant, $F(1, 1309) = .41$, ns .

Females had significantly higher levels of GAD than males, $F(1, 1309) = 66.07$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$, and late adolescents had significant higher levels of GAD than early adolescents, $F(1, 1309) = 6.50$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$. This main effect of age, however, was qualified by an interaction with sex, $F(1, 1309) = 12.71$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$, indicating that the level of GAD was not different for early adolescent males and late adolescent males, whereas the level of GAD was significantly higher for late adolescent females than for early adolescent females.

Delinquency was found to be higher for males than for females, $F(1, 1309) = 69.70$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$. No age effect and no significant interaction between age and sex of adolescent were found; ns , $\eta^2 = .00$.

¹ We tested each of these two models (i.e., the first model of exiting statements predicting GAD and delinquency and the second model of GAD and delinquency predicting exiting statements) separately since both models are not nested models; hence, it is not possible to comparatively test the fit of both models using the chi-square difference test. However, because both models are exactly the same regarding model complexity, it is possible to compare the values of their respective fit indices (Chen, 2007). Generally, the differences were very small and negligible. The values of the χ^2 and the RMSEA were slightly in favour of the second model of GAD and delinquency predicting exiting statements ($\chi^2 = 8.1$ and RMSEA = .03 for the first model; $\chi^2 = 6.6$ and RMSEA = .02 for the second model). The values of GFI and CFI were equal for both models (GFI for both models is 1.00 and CFI .98). However, one feature favoured our final model; the explanatory power was somewhat stronger for the first model (the values of the squared multiple correlations being higher). For our final model the mean squared multiple correlations across the four groups was .089; for the second model the mean squared multiple correlation was .087.

² It should also be noted that to estimate the possible biasing effects of distributional problems a bootstrap analysis (with 500 bootstrap samples) was conducted to validate the results of the final model obtained with regular Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation, which requires the assumption of multivariate normality. Because the mean bias values regarding the model estimates (i.e., regression weights, standardized regression weights and variances) were very small (range $-.007$ to $+.002$), we decided to continue regular ML estimation for our model testing.

Table 1

Means and SD scores for the conflict resolution style exiting statements, adolescent generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (GAD), and adolescent delinquency symptoms in early and late adolescent males and females.

	Males		Females	
	Early adolescents (n = 468)	Late adolescents (n = 169)	Early adolescents (n = 455)	Late adolescents (n = 221)
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Exit. statements	1.22 (.42)	1.10 (.23)	1.20 (.44)	1.11 (.28)
GAD	1.30 (.35)	1.28 (.32)	1.41 (.40)	1.55 (.48)
Delinquency	1.20 (.35)	1.20 (.29)	1.06 (.15)	1.07 (.14)

Zero order correlations among exiting statements, GAD, and delinquency scores were also computed for male and female participants (see Table 2). These scores were significantly intercorrelated for both male and female participants in early adolescence. GAD and exiting statements scores were correlated for both male and female participants in late adolescence.

Multi-group SEM-analyses

The primary goal of the present study was to investigate whether both adolescent age and sex moderated the relation between the conflict resolution style exiting statements, on the one hand and self-rated GAD and delinquency symptoms on the other hand. The covariance between GAD and delinquency has not been included in the model due to the lack of a significant correlation between these two constructs ($r = .00, ns$).

Model comparisons tests established that the two-group age model (early and late adolescents) fit the data better than the restricted model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 7.93, \Delta df = 2, p = .019$), and that the four-group age and sex model (early and late adolescent males and females) had an even better fit of the data than the two-group model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 31.86, \Delta df = 4, p = .001$). The non-restricted model provided a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(4) = 8.12, p = .09, GFI = 1.00, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .03, Confidence Interval of RMSEA: .00-.06$). Therefore we concluded that both adolescent age and sex moderated the relation between the conflict resolution style exiting statements on the one hand and GAD and delinquency on the other hand.

Table 3 represents the maximum likelihood results for the multi-group model. Results demonstrated that the conflict resolution style exiting statements was significantly and positively related to self-rated GAD symptoms in all four groups. Thus, early and late adolescent males and females, who used higher levels of the conflict resolution style exiting statements, also had higher levels of GAD. Moreover, critical ratio (CR) comparisons revealed that the path between exiting statements and GAD was significantly stronger for late adolescent females than for early adolescent females ($CR = 3.28, p < .001$), whereas no differences were found between early and late adolescent males ($CR = .48, ns$). Findings also revealed that the association between exiting statements and GAD was significantly stronger for early adolescent males than for early adolescent females ($CR = 2.37, p = .02$), whereas there was no significant difference found between the late adolescent males and females ($CR = -1.30, ns$).

The findings of adolescent exiting statements and self-rated delinquency symptoms revealed that this relation was significant and positive only for early adolescent males and females; there was no significant relationship between exiting statements and delinquency for the late adolescent males and females. Thus, early adolescent males and females who used higher levels of exiting statements had higher levels of delinquency as well. In contrast, in late adolescent males and females exiting statements and delinquency were not related to each other. Critical ratio comparisons showed that whereas these relations were not significantly different from each other for early and late adolescent females ($CR = -.02, ns$), this relationship was significantly stronger for the early adolescent males than for the late adolescent males ($CR = -2.97, p < .001$). Critical ratio comparisons also revealed that the path from exiting statements to delinquency was significantly stronger for early adolescent males than for early adolescent females ($CR = 4.88, p < .001$), whereas there was no significant difference between late adolescent males and females ($CR = -1.09, ns$). Thus, findings demonstrate that the relation between exiting statements and delinquency was significantly stronger for early adolescent males than for late adolescent males, early adolescent females and late adolescent females.

Table 2

Pearson correlations for the adolescent age–sex groups for the conflict resolution style exiting statements, adolescent generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (GAD), and adolescent delinquency symptoms.

	(1) Exiting statements	(2) Generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (GAD)	(3) Delinquency
(1) Exiting statements	–	.30*	.29*
	–	.21*	–.05
	.12*	–	–
(2) Generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (GAD)	.29*	–	–
(3) Delinquency	.14*	–	–
	.10	–	–

Note. The values above the diagonal represent the scores of the males, the values below the diagonal represent the scores of the females. Descriptives for the early adolescents are presented in bold, for the late adolescents in regular font.

* $p < .05$. $p < .01$.

Table 3
Maximum likelihood estimates of regression coefficients (ML) of the multi-group analyses.

	Exiting statements – GAD		Exiting statements – delinquency	
	B	SE(B)	B	SE(B)
Early adolescent males	.25*** ^b	.04	.25*** ^b	.04
Early adolescent females	.11** ^a	.04	.05** ^a	.02
Late adolescent males	.30** ^{abc}	.11	-.07 ^a	.09
Late adolescent females	.50*** ^c	.11	.05 ^a	.03

Note. Estimates in the same column sharing the same superscript are not significantly different from each other.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the association between the perceived adolescent conflict resolution style exiting statements in parent–adolescent conflicts and self-rated adolescent GAD symptoms as internalizing problem behavior on the one hand, and self-rated delinquency as externalizing problem behavior on the other hand in the general population. The results of the current study are discussed in relation to possible treatment implications.

Exiting statements and GAD symptoms

In regard to the relationship between the conflict resolution style exiting statements and adolescent internalizing problem behavior, the results demonstrate that higher levels of adolescent exiting statements were significantly related to higher levels of self-rated adolescent GAD symptoms. This finding supports our expectations and is consistent with previous studies in which ineffective and destructive conflict resolution in parent–adolescent conflicts was observed to be positively and significantly related to internalizing adolescent problem behavior (e.g., Branje, van Doorn & VanderValk, 2009; Collins & Laursen, 1992; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993; Tucker, McHale & Crouter, 2003).

With respect to the contrasting adolescent age and sex groups, it was found that for early and late adolescent males exiting statements and GAD were positively associated. This finding seemingly does not fit with our two aforementioned hypotheses. However, as presented in Table 3, for the adolescent females, the relationship between the conflict resolution style of exiting statements and GAD symptoms was found to be stronger in late adolescence than in early adolescence. Additionally, the relationship between exiting statements and GAD for the late adolescent females significantly differed from the other three adolescent groups. Hence, the results of the adolescent females did fit with the expectations of our second hypothesis: the use of a destructive resolution style, exiting statements, in late adolescence is less appropriate in a more horizontal and egalitarian parent–adolescent relationship than in the early adolescent vertical relationship (e.g., Russell, Pettit & Mize, 1998).

Exiting statements and delinquency

In regard to exiting statements and perceived delinquency symptoms the results, as shown in Table 3, demonstrate a positive and significant relationship for only the early adolescent males and, to a lesser degree, the early adolescent females. These results support our first hypothesis suggesting that a destructive conflict resolution style of exiting statements should be strongly associated to adolescent behavioral problems in early adolescence, the age–period with the highest prevalence of parent–adolescent conflicts, than in late adolescence. These findings are in agreement with the results of previous studies which have found a strong relation between early adolescent delinquency and high prevalence of parent–child conflicts, as well as the use of ineffective conflict resolution styles in conflicts these adolescents have with their parents (e.g., Jaffee & D’Zurilla, 2003; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993).

Exiting statements and adolescent problem behavior

When the abovementioned is taken together, it becomes clear that the associations between exiting statements and GAD symptoms as an internalizing problem behavior, and exiting statements and delinquency symptoms as a externalizing problem behavior, have divergent age- and sex specific patterns and, hence, different explanation. Exiting statements and self-rated GAD symptoms are strongly related for late adolescent females. Studies have found that GAD usually appears before mid-adolescence (e.g., Comer & Kendall, 2004; Masi, Millepiedi, Mucci, Poli, Bertini & Milantoni, 2004) and continues to increase through late adolescence (Rapee, 2001). Additionally, GAD seems to be more common in females than in males (e.g., Cohen et al., 1993; Hale, Raaijmakers, Muris & Meeus, 2005; Keller et al., 1992). A recent longitudinal study has found that the increase of GAD in adolescence mainly applies to adolescent females (Hale, Raaijmakers, Muris, Van Hoof & Meeus, 2008). Late adolescent females have a tendency to be more sensitive to interpersonal relationships than early adolescent females and adolescent males (Hale, Engels & Meeus, 2006; Hankin & Abramson, 2001). The difficulties of late adolescent females with GAD symptoms and their parents in resolving parent–adolescent conflicts in constructive ways, even in horizontal and egalitarian parent–adolescent relationship, suggest that the relationship is problematic over time.

The relationship between exiting statements and perceived delinquency symptoms is especially strong in early adolescent males. Early adolescence is characterized as an age-period with a high prevalence of parent-adolescent conflicts and frequent delinquent problem behavior on the part of males (e.g., Gorman-Smith & Loeber, 2005; Offord, Adler & Boyle, 1986). Additionally, the use of non-constructive conflict resolution styles often occurs in early adolescence (e.g., Russell, Pettit & Mize, 1998). According to the coercion theory (e.g., Granic & Patterson, 2006) coercive interactions are a fundamental behavioral mechanism between parent and adolescent by which delinquent behavior emerges in pre-adolescence and early adolescence; the age-period with a high prevalence of parent-adolescent conflicts (e.g., Arnett, 1999; Laursen, Coy & Collins, 1998; McGue, Elkins, Walden and Iacono, 2005; Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2002). This might explain why the incompetence of early adolescent males and their parents to solve parent-adolescent conflicts in a constructive way seems to be especially associated with delinquency in early adolescence.

Possible treatment implications

The results of this study have practical implications for treatment of late adolescent females with GAD symptoms from the general population and their parents, as well as for preventive interventions for early adolescent males with delinquency symptoms and their parents. With respect to late adolescent females with GAD symptoms, recently the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry issued a statement that the Multimodal Treatment Approach (AACAP, 2007) should be the first choice in treating adolescents with anxiety syndromes. Reviews of specific GAD treatment outcome research indicated that Cognitive Behavior Treatment (CBT) as a part of the Multimodal Treatment Approach is superior to other treatment conditions (e.g., Albano & Kendall, 2002; Borkovec & Ruscio, 2000; Chambless & Gillis, 1993). However, several studies suggest that for older youth the integration of CBT with a family component (Southam-Gerow et al., 2001) or CBT in a combination with interpersonal therapy (Borkovec, Newman, Pincus & Lytle, 2002) is advisable. In such a systemic orientated context attention should be paid to restructuring the adolescents' perception of the parent-adolescent relationship and to the theme of conflict resolution in the family. This is important since it is known that late adolescent females with GAD symptoms persistently worry about the quality of their relationships (Hale, Engels & Meeus, 2006; Hankin & Abramson, 2001) and exiting statements of the parent-adolescent relationship and GAD are strongly related for late adolescent females.

Our results also have implications for interventions concerning early adolescent males with delinquent behavior and their parents. Since the delinquency behaviors many times have a direct effect on others, the parents of the adolescent are also held responsible. Hence, several researchers have advised that Parent Management Training (PMT) may be the best course of action (e.g., Brestan, & Eyberg, 1998; Carr, 2000; Hipwell, & Loeber, 2006; Kazdin, 2000). PMT is a well-documented and evaluated treatment for delinquency symptoms of pre- and early adolescents. PMT has the aim to improve the quality of positive parenting skills and, indirectly, help to improve delinquent child behavior (Nock, 2003). Based on our results, within PMT, attention should be given to conflict resolution styles of adolescents and parents in the context of conflict situations in early adolescence.

Limitations

In terms of the limitations of this study, it should be first noted that this explorative study employed only correlations in a cross-sectional dataset. Hence it is not possible to determine whether the use of exiting statements, self-rated GAD symptoms or self-rated delinquency symptoms develop or diminish over time, nor can the direction of the relationship between exiting statements and adolescent GAD symptoms and exiting statements and delinquency symptoms be determined. Future longitudinal studies should be conducted to examine these observed relationships.

Secondly, when interpreting the results, it is important to bear in mind that exiting statements, GAD and delinquency were assessed by the self-report method. When we refer, for instance, to GAD symptoms or delinquency symptoms, we are speaking of self-rated GAD symptoms or self-rated delinquency. This should not be confused with an actual clinical diagnosis of an adolescent anxiety or delinquency disorder. The use of multiple self-report measures also leads to associations due to shared variance in responses. Future studies may do well to not only investigate conflict resolution as an individual characteristic of the adolescent, but also additionally focus on conflict resolution as a characteristic of a specific adolescent-parent dyad and/or triad with interactions between the conflict resolution styles of adolescents and parents (Van Doorn, Branje & Meeus, 2008).

It should be noted that while the conflict resolution style exiting statements was investigated (i.e., the expression of the adolescents' desire to minimize or end the contact with his or her parents and no longer consider his or her parents as parents), how the relationship changed as the result of the conflict resolution style exiting statements or if the adolescent really detached from the relationship has not been directly assessed. Hence these findings are a reflection of the adolescents' perception of their relationship with their parents. The overall use of the conflict style exiting statements seemed to be rather low, probably due to the particular nature of the items. The items of the other conflict resolution styles (Kurdek, 1994) demonstrate statements about specific behavior showed within the generally accepted context of the parent-adolescent relationship. The items of the 'exiting statements' construct, on the other hand, are probably a much less employed conflict style in parent-adolescent interactions and this is reflected in the low means levels.

In this explorative study the concept of the conflict resolution style exiting statements consists of the expression of the adolescents' desire to minimize or to end the relationship with his or her parents and to consider his or her parents no longer as parents. In future studies it should be interesting to investigate how the relationship changed as a result of the use of the conflict resolution exiting statements or if the adolescent really detached from the relationships with his or her parents.

In this study attention is only given to both parents as a unit, rather than focusing attention on father and mother separately. It is possible that adolescent males and females respond in a different way to their mothers and fathers. Additionally, mothers and fathers might respond in different ways to their adolescent males or females.

A final limitation of our study is that findings were characterized by small effect sizes (Cohen, 1992). However, in the context of this study we concur with the observation of Prentice and Miller (1992) that small effects can be impressive if they are of theoretical importance. The results of this explorative study are theoretically relevant as a next step in conceptualizing the conflict resolution style of exiting statements and investigating the relationship between exiting statements and adolescent problem behaviors.

Summary

To conclude, the current study demonstrated that both adolescent age and sex moderated the relationship between exiting statements (i.e., the expression of the adolescents' desire to minimize or end the relationship with his or her parents and do not consider his or her parents as parents anymore), and GAD symptoms, as an internalizing problem behavior, and exiting statements and delinquency symptoms, as an externalizing problem behavior. The association between exiting statements and GAD symptoms was found to be strongest in late adolescent females. When late adolescent females and their parents have remarkable difficulties to resolve conflicts in even a horizontal and egalitarian relationship this goes together with high levels of adolescent GAD. The relationship between exiting statements and delinquency symptoms is significantly positive for early adolescent males. The problems of early adolescent males and their parents to solve their conflicts in a constructive way seem to be especially associated with delinquency symptoms in early adolescence, an age-period with a high prevalence of parent-adolescent conflicts. The findings of this study indicate for late adolescent females with GAD symptoms the need of specific attention to restructuring the adolescent perception of the parent-adolescent relationship and need for attending to conflict resolution in the family as part of the CBT in a Multimodal Treatment Approach. For early adolescent males with delinquency symptoms the results suggest that specific attention must be given to the conflict resolution styles of family members in the context of a Parent Management Training.

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