

When Parents and Adolescents Disagree: Disclosure Strategies and Motivations

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Abstract:

Adolescents' agreement with parents, their decisions about what to do in cases of disagreement, and their reasons for choosing to disclose or not disclose vary depending upon characteristics of themselves, their relationship with their mothers, and the issue at hand. Adolescents who believe their parents don't have a right to set rules about an issue are likely to confront their parents with the issue if it is important to them, or lie about it, if it is not. In contrast, adolescents who believe their parents have a right to set rules about the issue are more likely to omit or avoid a confrontation. Motivations for disclosure and non-disclosure also varies depending upon adolescents' beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority. Adolescents who believe their parents do not have a right to set rules about the issue are most likely to be motivated by pragmatic reasons (e.g. they will try to stop me) or beliefs that it is out of parental jurisdiction (e.g. it's my business, not theirs). In contrast, those who believe their parents have a legitimate right to set rules are motivated by emotional reasons (e.g. my parents would be disappointed in me). We need to understand adolescents' decisions about disclosure to understand the role of the adolescent in processes such as parental monitoring.

Introduction:

Differences in the way that adolescents and their parents define legitimate domains of parental control may be one source of conflict during adolescence (Smetana & Asquith, 1994). Direct communication about the disagreement, however, is only one of several actions available to an adolescent. For example, adolescents might choose to confront the issue directly with their parents or they might choose to avoid a confrontation or to disclose only some of the information that their parents might want to know. They might even choose to lie about their beliefs, behaviors, or plans (Darling, Cumsille, & Dowdy, 1998). Such actions can be considered strategic (Goffman, 1969; Elkind, 1980) in that they involve calculations about the parents' potential reaction to full disclosure. As children become adolescents, increasing conflict, improved perspective-taking ability, and increasing autonomy may all contribute to changes in adolescents' decisions about disclosing information to parents and their motivations for doing so.

Research on the strategic disclosure of information by adults (e.g. Daily & Wiemann, 1994) has assumed non-disclosure to be the norm and focused on why adults would choose to communicate particular types of information (including potential sources of conflict). In contrast, the developmental literatures on parental monitoring and lying assume full disclosure by adolescents to be the ideal for parent-adolescent communication and non-disclosure to be problematic (Steinberg, 1990). However one aspect of the development of autonomy in adolescence is an increased desire for privacy and increasing reluctance to disclose personal information to parents.

Questions

This paper addresses the following questions.

- Is adolescent agreement with parents predicted by characteristics of the adolescent (age), the parent-adolescent dyad (responsiveness and demandingness), and the issue (perceived parental legitimacy and importance to the adolescent)?
- In cases where adolescents disagree with their parents, when are they most likely to disclose their disagreement or disobedience? Do motivations for disclosure vary as a function of adolescent, dyadic, and issue characteristics?
- In cases of disagreement where the adolescent chooses not to disclose, when are they most likely to lie to their parents rather than omit information or avoid the subject? Do motivations for non-disclosure vary as a function of adolescent, dyadic, and issue characteristics?

Methods

Sample: 120 central Pennsylvania high school students (9th-12th grade) were recruited to participate in a study of adolescent social relationships, leisure, and adjustment. Students were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. The core group of approximately 20 teens were approached directly in locations frequented by adolescents who engaged in problem behavior (i.e. students smoking behind the mall before school or hanging out in or near video parlors after 10:00 on school nights). After receiving student consent and parental permission, adolescents were interviewed and completed a questionnaire. At the end of each interview, students were asked to name up to five of their friends who might be willing to participate in the study. These students, in turn, were contacted to participate.

Procedure: Adolescents were asked to rate 36 different issues according to legitimacy, the importance of the issue, and the extent to which they agreed with their parent about the issue. For items they always or sometimes disagreed with their parent about, adolescents reported their strategy for disclosure or non-disclosure and their motivations for disclosing or non-disclosing. Legitimacy and the importance of the issue were measured during the questionnaire component of the study. The balance of the measures were administered as a card sort procedure during the interview.

Strategic Disclosure:

- **Agreement:** Students indicated whether they “Basically Agreed”, “Basically Disagreed”, or Sometimes Agreed and Sometimes Disagreed with their parents about each issue. Ratings were then coded dichotomously as Agreed v. Disagreed and Sometimes Disagreed. Issues that did not apply to the individual student were not rated.
- **Strategy:** Students indicated their disclosure strategy in case of disagreement for each item students sometimes or always disagreed with their parents about. Strategy choices included “Tell parents all the important details” (**Tell All**), “Leave our important details parents would want to know” (**Omit**), “Make up a story or lie” (**Lie**), “Avoid discussing the issue” (**Avoid**).
- **Motivations for Disclosure:** For each issue students indicated that they Tell All, student indicated whether they were motivated because “Parents might give in”, “I couldn’t get away with it”, or “Because they’re my parents, so I should”.
- **Motivations for Non-Disclosure:** For each issue students indicated that they did not Tell All, parents indicated their motivation for non-disclosure. Students were given 10 choices, which were recoded into 3 categories.
 - **Emotional Reasons:** Reasons included “My parents would worry”, “My parents would be disappointed in my”, “I’d be embarrassed or uncomfortable”, and “My parents wouldn’t understand”.
 - **Fear of Consequences:** Reasons included: “My parents would be angry”, “My parents would lecture or hassle me”, “My parents would stop me”, and “My parents would punish me”.
 - **Not in Parents’ Jurisdiction:** “It’s my private business”, and “It’s my decision, not theirs”.

Issue Characteristics:

- **Legitimacy of parental authority:** For each issue, students indicated whether it was okay for parents to set rules about this issue (legitimate) or not okay (not legitimate).
- **Importance of Issue.** For each issue, students indicated how important the issue was to them (Very Important, Important, A Little Important, Not Important).

Person/Relationship Characteristics

- **Age:** Grade in school was used as a proxy for age.
- **Parenting Style:** Students completed the PSI-II (Darling & Toyokawa, 1997), a 15 item measure of parenting style relative to their mother. Two subscores were calculated: maternal responsiveness (sample item: “My mother doesn’t really like me to tell her my troubles” (reverse coded) and maternal demandingness (sample item: “My mother really expects me to follow family rules”).

Results

Is adolescent agreement with parents predicted by characteristics of the adolescent (age), the mother-adolescent relationship (responsiveness and demandingness), and the issue (perceived parental legitimacy and importance to the adolescent)?

- Adolescents are more likely to agree with parents when they think their parent has a legitimate right to set rules about the issue and when they consider the issue unimportant.
- There is a trend indicating that older adolescents and those who see their mothers as unresponsive are less likely to agree with them.

Table 1: Results of HLM analysis predicting agreement of adolescent with parent on issue from child, relationship, and issue characteristics.

- Positive coefficients indicate greater agreement.

| Variable | Coefficient |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Intercept (Mean % Agreement) | 0.36 |
| Child Characteristics | |
| Grade | -0.02# |
| Relationship Characteristics | |
| Maternal Responsiveness | -0.03# |
| Maternal Demandingness | 0.01 |
| Issue Characteristics | |
| Parental Legitimacy | 0.14*** |
| Importance | -0.02*** |

| | Within Person (Issue) Model | Between Person Model |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| | variance | variance |
| Baseline Model | .13828 | .01890 |
| Current Model | .12579 | .08982 |

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

1. 9% of the variance is between persons, 91% is within person plus error.

In cases where adolescents disagree with their parents, when are they most likely to fully disclose their disagreement or disobedience?

- Adolescents are more likely to fully disclose their disagreement or disobedience when they do not consider their parents to have a legitimate right to set rules about the issue.

Table 2: Results of HLM analysis predicting adolescent disclosure of disagreement or disobedience to parent from child, relationship, and issue characteristics.

- Positive coefficients indicate disclosure.

| Variable | Coefficient | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Intercept (Mean % Tell All) | .24 | |
| Child Characteristics | | |
| Grade | 0.00 | |
| Relationship Characteristics | | |
| Maternal Responsiveness | 0.03 | |
| Maternal Demandingness | -0.03 | |
| Issue Characteristics | | |
| Parental Legitimacy | -0.03* | |
| Importance | 0.00 | |
| | Within Person (Issue) Model | Between Person Model |
| | variance | variance |
| Baseline Model | .07266 | .03254 |
| Current Model | .07141 | .02962 |
| # p<.10, * p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 | | |
| 1. 30% of the variance is between persons, 70% is within person plus error. | | |

Do motivations for full disclosure vary as a function of adolescent, dyadic, and issue characteristics?

- Older adolescents are more likely to disclose fully because they believe they should. Younger adolescents are more likely to disclose fully because they hope their parents will change their minds.

Table 3: Results of HLM analysis predicting adolescents motivations for full disclosure from child, relationship, and issue characteristics.

- Positive coefficients indicate the adolescent discloses because they feel their parent has a right to know. Negative coefficients indicate the adolescent discloses because they hope their parent will change their mind.
- Items in which the adolescent did not believe they could get away with non-disclosure were eliminated from this analysis.

| Variable | Coefficient |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| Intercept | 2.03 |
| Child Characteristics | |
| Grade | 0.17** |
| Relationship Characteristics | |
| Maternal Responsiveness | 0.13 |
| Maternal Demandingness | 0.01 |
| Issue Characteristics | |
| Parental Legitimacy | -0.07 |
| Importance | -0.01 |

| | Within Person (Issue) Model | Between Person Model |
|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| | variance | variance |
| Baseline Model | .14005 | .61967 |
| Current Model | .64005 | .22410 |

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

1. 81% of the variance is between persons, 19% is within person plus error.

When adolescents choose not to disclose, when are they most likely to lie to their parents rather than omit information or avoid the subject?

- Adolescents are more likely to lie when they do not believe their parents have a legitimate right to set rules about the issue and when they consider the issue to be unimportant.
- There is a trend suggesting that younger adolescents are more likely to lie to parents than to avoid the issue or omit key information.

Table 4: Results of HLM analysis predicting adolescents decision to lie, rather than omit information or avoid the issue, when they disagree with their parents and choose not to disclose fully.

• Positive coefficients indicate greater likelihood of lying.

| Variable | Coefficient | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Intercept (Mean % Lie) | .19 | |
| Child Characteristics | | |
| Grade | -0.03# | |
| Relationship Characteristics | | |
| Maternal Responsiveness | 0.00 | |
| Maternal Demandingness | 0.00 | |
| Issue Characteristics | | |
| Parental Legitimacy | -0.07* | |
| Importance | -0.07*** | |
| | Within Person (Issue) Model | Between Person Model |
| | variance | variance |
| Baseline Model | .17007 | .03213 |
| Current Model | .15783 | .07517 |
| # p<.10, * p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 | | |
| 1. 16% of the variance is between persons, 84% is within person plus error. | | |

Do motivations for non-disclosure vary as a function of adolescent, dyadic, and issue characteristics?

- Adolescents who see their parents as having a legitimate right not set rules about issues of disagreement choose not to disclose because of the **emotional** consequences (my parent would be disappointed in me; my parent would be worried; I'd be embarrassed or uncomfortable; my parents wouldn't understand). There is a trend indicating adolescents who see mothers as non-demanding are motivated for emotional reasons as well.
- Adolescents who do not believe their parents have a legitimate right to set rules about the issue choose not to disclose because of **fear of consequences** (my parents would punish me; my parents would stop me; my parents would lecture or hassle me; my parents would be angry) or because they believe it is **not in the parents' jurisdiction** (it's my private business; it's my decision, not theirs). Non-disclosure by adolescents who describe their mothers as non-demanding also tends to be motivated by the belief that the issue is not in the parents' jurisdiction.

Table 5a: Results of HLM analysis predicting adolescents motivations not to disclose, contrasting Emotional Reasons with other motivations.

• Positive coefficients indicates greater likelihood of being motivated because of emotional reasons.

| Variable | Coefficient | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Intercept (Mean % Emotional) | .36 | |
| Child Characteristics | | |
| Grade | .02 | |
| Relationship Characteristics | | |
| Maternal Responsiveness | -.00 | |
| Maternal Demandingness | .05# | |
| Issue Characteristics | | |
| Parental Legitimacy | .02* | |
| Importance | .00 | |
| | Within Person (Issue) Model | Between Person Model |
| | variance | variance |
| Baseline Model | .05252 | .05238 |
| Current Model | .05224 | .04581 |
| # p<.10, * p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 | | |
| 1. 50% of the variance is between persons, 50% is within person plus error. | | |

Table 5b: Results of HLM analysis predicting adolescents motivations not to disclose, contrasting Fear of Consequences with other motivations.

- Positive coefficients indicates greater likelihood of being motivated because of fear of consequences

| Variable | Coefficient | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Intercept (Mean % Not in Jurisdiction) | .45 | |
| Child Characteristics | | |
| Grade | -.02 | |
| Relationship Characteristics | | |
| Maternal Responsiveness | -.02 | |
| Maternal Demandingness | .01 | |
| Issue Characteristics | | |
| Parental Legitimacy | .03** | |
| Importance | -.01 | |
| | Within Person (Issue) Model | Between Person Model |
| | variance | variance |
| Baseline Model | .06056 | .05265 |
| Current Model | .06023 | .04703 |
| # p<.10, * p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 | | |
| 1. 50% of the variance is between persons, 50% is within person plus error. | | |

Table 5c: Results of HLM analysis predicting adolescents motivations not to disclose, contrasting Not in Parents' Jurisdiction with other motivations.

- Positive coefficients indicates greater likelihood of being motivated because they do not think it is in their parents jurisdiction

| Variable | Coefficient | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Intercept (Mean % Not in Jurisdiction) | .19 | |
| Child Characteristics | | |
| Grade | -.01 | |
| Relationship Characteristics | | |
| Maternal Responsiveness | .02 | |
| Maternal Demandingness | -.06* | |
| Issue Characteristics | | |
| Parental Legitimacy | -.04*** | |
| Importance | .00 | |
| | Within Person (Issue) Model | Between Person Model |
| | variance | variance |
| Baseline Model | .04853 | .04986 |
| Current Model | .04738 | .03864 |
| # p<.10, * p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 | | |
| 1. 51% of the variance is between persons, 49% is within person plus error. | | |

Conclusion

Adolescents' agreement with parents, their decisions about what to do in cases of disagreement, and their reasons for choosing to disclose or not disclose vary depending upon characteristics of themselves, their relationship with their mothers, and the issue at hand.

- Adolescents are most likely to agree with their parents when they think the parent has a right to set rules about the issue and when they consider the issue to be unimportant.
- In cases of disagreement . . .
 - When they believe parents have a right to set rules about the issue they are more likely to **avoid** the issue or **leave out** important information.
 - When they believe parents do not have a right to set rules about the issue they are more likely to either **tell** them or **lie**.
 - Adolescents are more likely to **lie** when they consider the issue unimportant.
- Why do adolescents decide to disclose their disagreement with parents?
 - Older adolescents are more likely to tell because they think they **should**. Younger adolescents are more likely to tell because they hope their parents will change their **mind**.
- Why do adolescents choose non-disclosure?
 - When adolescents believe their parents have a **legitimate** right to set rules about the issue they disagree about, they choose not to disclose for **emotional reasons** such as embarrassment or concern that the parent will worry.
 - When adolescents believe their **parents do not have a legitimate right** to set rules about the issue, they are more likely to be motivated by **fear of consequences** or belief that the issue is **not in their parents' jurisdiction**.
 - Adolescents with **non-demanding** mothers are most likely to be motivated by the belief that the issue is **not in their parents' jurisdiction**.

A clear understanding about adolescents' decisions to disclose information to parents is critical if we are to understand the dynamics of parental monitoring and the development of autonomy. As children become adolescents, they spend increasing time outside of the direct supervision of adults. Because of this, parents become increasingly dependent upon adolescents' internalization of parental authority and willingness to obey parental rules in conditions when they have no direct fear of consequences. Parents' ability to monitor adolescent behavior, set appropriate rules, and punish misbehavior also becomes increasingly dependent upon adolescents' willingness to share (disclose) information to them.

One interesting aspect of these results is that adolescents' beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority predict both adolescents' decisions to tell their parents about their disagreement and to lie. One factor determining which choice the adolescent makes is how important the issue is to them. Contrary to our initial thoughts about adolescent disclosure, adolescents are most likely to disclose and least likely to lie when the issue is *important* to them. In other words, they are more likely to lie when they consider the matter trivial.

Also interesting is that legitimacy beliefs also discriminate between motivations for non-disclosure. When adolescents believe their parents have a legitimate right to set rules, but don't disclose anyway, it is because of emotional reasons - i.e. reasons indicative of shame or connection between parents and adolescents. When they do not believe the parent has a legitimate right to set rules, they do so for reasons that are either pragmatic (they would stop or punish me) or exclusionary (it's my decision, not theirs). These types of motivations indicate neither guilt nor parent-adolescent connection.

These results support the idea that adolescents' beliefs that their parents have the right to set rules both increases the likelihood that they will agree with them, but also increases the likelihood that they will share information with their parents even when they disagree.