Mother–Daughter Dyads View the Family: Associations Between Divergent Perceptions and Daughter Well-Being

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Divergent perceptions (or "disagreements") within the mother–daughter dyad and the association of such divergence with daughter's affective and behavioral well-being were examined in the current study. One hundred sixty-one mother–daughter dyads (daughters aged 14–18 years; mothers aged 37–59 years) completed paper-and-pencil measures assessing their perceptions of family cohesion and conflict; daughters also rated their own depressive affect and dieting behavior. While the means for groups of mothers and daughters on family cohesion and conflict were similar, dyads varied substantially in their level of agreement. Disagreements on family cohesion were associated with daughter dieting behavior; maternal employment status was more highly associated with daughter depressive affect than either family conflict or cohesion. Findings are discussed in terms of their implications for studying the divergent perceptions.

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of family members, and for family systems and relationship approaches to understanding the family.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in family relationships during the adolescent years are often thought to be characterized by increases in both conflict and emotional distance between parents and their adolescent children (Feldman and Gehringer, 1988; Hill, 1988; Smetana, 1988a,b; Steinberg, 1990). Studies have more often been concerned with family conflict than with other aspects of family relationships. Attention has frequently been focused on the mother–daughter dyad, given both theoretical concerns with this dyad (Deutsch, 1944; Kaplan, 1984; Paikoff et al., 1991) as well as empirical findings of more frequent conflict in this than in other parent–adolescent dyads (Hill, 1988; Montemayor, 1983; Smetana, 1988b).

For the most part, these studies have consistently reported increases in conflict between parents and their adolescent daughters at or soon after menarche (Hill et al., 1985; Hill, 1988; Holmbeck and Hill, 1991) or at the midpoint of puberty (Papini et al., 1988; Steinberg, 1987, 1989), with decreases slowly thereafter. Level of conflict remains relatively high, however, in families with adolescents until approximately age 18 (with decreases at this point probably due to the child’s leaving home; see Montemayor, 1983). The level of conflict most adaptive for later autonomy, health, and well-being in adolescents at various stages of puberty and beyond, however, remains an issue of controversy (Cooper, 1988).

With regard to emotional distancing, some investigators report decreases in emotional closeness and increasing distancing between mothers and their adolescent daughters in association with pubertal change as well (Steinberg, 1990). It is important, however, to note that these empirical data suggest modest effects, and would not support a characterization of adolescent–parent relationships as widely diverging from prior relationships in terms of closeness or warmth (Collins, 1990; Paikoff and Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Steinberg, 1990).

In the current study, we take a somewhat different approach to the operationalization of conflict in the mother–daughter relationship. In addition to examining reports of behavioral conflict and emotional closeness, we examine the level of disagreement (or divergence) in mothers and daughters’ perceptions of the family in association with daughters’ health and well-being. The current study poses three basic questions: (a) How much disagreement exists between groups of mothers vs. groups of daughters? (b) How much variation in level of disagreement exists between dif-