

Adolescent Disclosure and its Relationship to Parental Monitoring and the Legitimacy of Parental Authority

Christopher Rackauckas
Oberlin College

It's not uncommon for early adolescents to begin to keep secrets. In fact, mastering this "art of secrecy" seems to be part of normal development (Peskin, 1992; Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005). As the child enters early adulthood, this ability to conceal information from others appears to become an adaptive skill for managing everyday social interactions (Schlenker & Weigold,1992).

This paper will focus on the related but distinct topic of disclosure. Although past research has shown that disclosure and secrecy are inversely correlated (Finkenauer et al., 2005), research suggests that disclosure and secrecy are empirically distinct. Adolescent disclosure to parents, the willingness to convey information to the adolescent's parent, differs in the fact that it deals with conveying information to the parent or telling the parent the information whereas secrecy deals with intentionally witholding information.

There is a debate as to what determines an adolescent's disclosure behavior. Some models suggest that disclosure is more related to characteristics of the child (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Others suggest that disclosure more related to the characteristics of the parenting (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2004; Hawk, 2010). Our study will examine the extent to which the characteristics of the child predict disclosure and the extent to which characteristics of the parenting predict disclosure.

Past evidence suggests that disclosure may have to do with the adolescent's characteristics. Specifically, some past studies imply that there is a relationship between disclosure to parents and a child's ideas about legitimate parental authority. Studies have shown that adolescents consistently reject their parents' legitimate authority to regulate personal issues (Smetana 1988, 2000, 2006). However, both the adolescents and the parents agree that the parents have legitimate authority over moral issues, conventional issues, and prudential issues. This, in turn, suggests that adolescents may believe that they are only obligated to disclose information about their moral, conventional, and prudential behavior to their parents (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Due to the tendency shown in these studies, we hypothesize that there exists a relationship between the legitimacy of parental authority and adolescent disclosure such that higher amounts of adolescent disclosure are associated with a lower degrees of legitimacy of parental authority.

However, a number of recent studies have suggested that adolescents' disclosure have unique associations with parenting (Smetana et al., 2006). A study by Noller and Callan (1990) revealed that adolescents reported not disclosing much information to their parents, but the amount of disclosure depended on the gender of both the parent and the adolescent. Adolescent girls reported more disclosure to mothers than to fathers, while adolescent boys reported equal disclosure to both parents. However, it should be noted that this study lacks a conceptual framework and does not have enough of a systematic approach for understanding the type of issues adolescents disclose and conceal from their parents (Smetana et al., 2006).

This raises the question as to the extent that parental characteristics play in the amount of information an adolescent will disclose. In order to attempt answering that question, our study will focus on the parenting characteristic of parental monitoring. Parental monitoring, "a set of correlated parenting behaviors involved attention and tracking of the child's whereabouts, activities, and adaptions" (Dishion & McMahon, 1998), has been shown to have heavy implications in an adolescent's development. Adolescents tend to have more deviant friends when parental monitoring is low (Fridrich & Flannery, 1995) and tend are more likely to be associated with peers that support drug use (Chassin et al., 1993). Also, Kerr and Stattin (2000) found a weak correlation between parental monitoring and disclosure (R=.41). These findings suggest that parental monitoring may play a role in adolescent disclosure. However, while past studies have studied more extreme cases of parental monitoring, this study focuses on more everyday aspects of parental monitoring and differences in the outcomes may occur due to the differences in the construct.

We hypothesize that a relationship exists between parental monitoring and disclosure. Also, we hypothesize that the relationship may differ with gender. Buhrmester and Prager (1995) found that females self-disclose more than males. Also, Noller and Callan (1990) found a tendency for adolescent girls report more disclosure to mothers than fathers while adolescent boys tend to report equal disclosure to both parents. These findings combined with the fact that boys have a tendency to lie more (Engles & Finkenauer 2006) and keep more secrets from their parents as they get older (Keijsers, Branje, Frijins, Finkenauer, & Meeus, 2010). Lastly, because our study only deals with mothers (or other female gendered guardians), our measures would only increase the difference between the adolescent disclosure from the girls and the adolescent disclosure from the boys. Thus, we hy-

pothesize that the relationship between adolescent girls disclosure and parental monitoring will be stronger than the relationship between adolescent boys disclosure and parental monitoring.

We have reason to believe that the amount of disclosure due to parental monitoring may change with grade level. It has been shown that with changes in grade level, children increasingly view parental monitoring as indicative of incompetence (Pomerantz 2000). It is suggested that the adolescents may begin to try to become more autonomous to decrease the stigma associated with the perceived incompetence and thus begin to disclose less to their parents. This would be compatable with the theory from Finkenauer et al. (2005) which predicted that adolescents may use concealment to "liberate themselves from parental supervision" and, as a result, regulate the parent's access to information. Therefore, we hypothesize that the relationship between disclosure and parental monitoring will become stronger as the adolescent ages.

Methods

Participants

55 families participated in the study. Participants were recruited using a calling list of all 5th and 6th graders in the Oberlin School District. A letter was sent to them that gave the web address for the representative website and the participants were called at most 3 times. The age of the children ranged from 9 to 13 with a mean of 10.76. 54.5% of the children were boys and 45.5% were girls. 89.1% of the guardians were the child's mother, 7.3% were the child's adopted mother, and 3.6% were the child's grandmother. The mother's years of education ranged from 9 to 27 with a mean of 15.5. 71% of the guardians identified as Caucasian, 16.1% identified as African American, 5.7% identified as Hispanic, 1.9% identified as other, and 3.6% of the guardians identified themselves as multiethnic. 54.8% of the children identified as Caucasian, 22% identified as African American, 5.7% identified as Hispanic, and 18.2% of the children we identified by their guardian as multiethnic.

Procedures

Each participant was assesed on various biological factors, filled out questionaires, and completed two tasks. Upon entering the lab, participants received a scripted introduction by the researchers. They were then given a consent form, briefly discussed the informed consent, and were told what activities would take place. Next, the researchers hooked the participant up to a heart monitor and measured their heart rate. The participants were then given a questionnaire. Shortly after, the researchers collected a spit sample. Then the participants were asked to build a squid with K'Nex in a way such that the mother could only read the directions and the child could only touch the K'Nex. Right afterwards the participants were shown a video of themselves doing the tasks and were told to analyze it. The participants then completed another questionnaire and the researchers took two more spit samples 15 minutes apart. The participants were then debriefed and paid for their visit.

Measures

Parental Monitoring. The adolescents reported on the extent to which their mothers tried to know about who their friends were, where they went at night, how they spent their money, what they did with their free time, where they were most of the afternoons after school, what made them angry, what made them happy, what they worried about, what was really important to them, and who was really important to them. Adolescents reported on a 1-3 scale with 1 indicating that their mother "doesn't try", 2 indicating that their mother "tries a little", and 3 indicating that she "tries a lot". A mean score was calculated (M = 2.4, SD =.53, α= .95).

Disclosure. The adolescents reported on how they would normally react when they disagreed with their parent on certain issues. Example issues included what they wore, what they did on the computer, who their friends were, and where they went after school. There were a total of 19 issues. The adolescents reported on a 1-3 scale where 1 indicates that he/she would normally "tell her what I really think", 2 indicates that he/she would normally "keep some things to [his or her] self", and 3 indicates that he/she would normally "hide what [he/she] really thinks". A mean score was calculated (M=2.2, SD =.92, α= .88).

Legitimacy of Parental Authority. The adolescents reported on the extent to which it is ok for their mother to set rules on certain issues. Example issues included what they wore, what they did on the computer, who their friends were, and where they went after school. There were a total of 19 issues. The adolescents reported on a 1-3 scale where 1 indicates that it is not ok for their mother to set rules about the subject, a 2 indicates it is sometimes ok for their mother to set rules about the subject, and a 3 indicates ok for their mother to set rules about the subject. A mean score was calculated (M=1.8, SD =.23, α= .73).

Results

To test whether a relationship exists between parental monitoring and disclosure, a correlation was used. No significant correlation was found (R =-.12, t=4.55, df=49, p=.362).

To test whether a relationship exists between legitimacy of parental authority and disclosure, a correlation was used. No significant correlation was found (R=.10, t=.70, df=48, p=.49).

To test the whether there was a difference in the correlation of parental monitoring and disclosure between adolecent boys and girls, two independent correlations were computed (R_{boys}=.04, N_{boys}=27, R_{girls}=-.26, N_{girls}=22). The correlation coefficients were compared using Fisher's R-Z transformation to test the difference between the correlation of parental monitoring and disclosure for adolescent boys and girls. No significant difference was found (z=1.0, p=.32).

To test whether there was a difference in the correlation of parental monitoring and disclosure between adolescent

boys and girls, two independent correlations were computed ($R_{5thGrade}$=.03, $N_{5thGrade}$=26, $R_{6thGrade}$=-.25, $N_{6thGrade}$=23,). The correlation coefficients were compared using Fisher's R-Z transformation to test the difference between the correlation of parental monitoring and disclosure for 5th graders and 6th graders. No significant difference was found (z=.93, p=.35).

Discussion

An understanding of the relationship between disclosure, legitimacy of parental authority, and parenting characteristics can lead to major insights into the adolescent's development. Past research had indicated that there would be a relationship between adolescent disclosure and legitimacy of parental authority and between adolescent disclosure and parental monitoring. However, our hypothesis that there would be a relationship in both cases was not supported by the evidence. Furthermore, we hypothesized that age and gender would lead to differences in the relationship between adolescent disclosure and parental monitoring. Our expectations were that there would be an strengthing of the relationship between adolescent disclosure and parental monitoring with age and girls would exhibit a stronger relationship between parental monitoring and disclosure than boys. However, neither of these hypotheses' were supported by the evidence. There was no significant difference in the strength of the relationship between adolescent disclosure and parental monitoring between ages or genders.

Past research has shown that characteristics of the child play a crucial role in the development of the adolescent. It was found that the types of issues that the child would disclose depends on the child's view of legitimate parental authority (Smetana 1998, 2000). Adolescents consistently reject the legitimacy parental authority to know about personal issues, while adolescents' and the parents' do agree that the parents have legitimate authority over moral issues, conventional issues, and prudential issues. Our evidence suggests that, although it is the case that legitimacy of parental authority effects what issues a child would disclose, in general, parental legitimacy does not have a relationship with adolescent disclosure. Thus, we suggest that the characteristics of the child may predict adolescent disclosure in an issue to issue basis but do not predict adolescent disclosure in the more generalized view to the extent that Smetana states.

Though past studies have shown that the level of parental monitoring on an adolescent can predict various traits in an adolescent such as a youths' psychological adjustment, grades, test scores, the child's and amount of delinquent friends (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Hawk, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Wim, 2008), our results do not support the generalization of this predictive power of adolescent disclosure. This is consistent with the evidence that shows disclosure of information by adolescents depends on a child's internal ideas about legitimate parent authority. However, these results disagree with the results from Kerr and Stattin (2000). It should be noted, however, that certain elements of this study were imperfect. The parental monitoring measure was slightly negatively skewed and the disclosure measure was positively skewed. Likewise, there was a difference in how the construct of disclosure was developed. Kerr and Stattin's measure focused on the general case of "do you usually tell" and "do you hide a lot" whereas our measure was tailored toward arguments of disagreement by asking for each situation "when you disagree about this, what do you usually do".

Thus, although the findings at first may seem to be opposed to Kerr and Stattin's study, it happens to be insightful though the fact that the constructs for disclosure slightly differ. In the more general case, disclosure was shown to be correlated with parental monitoring while in the case of talking about disagreement, parental monitoring did not correlate with disclosure. This would also explain why the other hypotheses turned out to not be supported by the evidence. The past studies that have been shown led us to believe that there would be a stronger relationship between adolescent disclosure and parental monitoring with age and a difference between genders, but these were no indicators for our current study due to the difference in the disclosure construct.

A possible model to explain our findings would be that adolescents generally have a level of disclosure that is affected by the level of parental monitoring, but when it comes to arguments topics of disagreement, adolescents have a predefined response. Our data indicates that the response that most adolescents would have is to tell their parents what they really think. Further research would have to come to illuminate the distinction between these measures of disclosure and justify the extent to which adolescents disclose information to their parents on topics of disagreement.

References

Buhrmester, D., & Prager, K. (1995). Patterns and functions of self-disclosure during childhood and adolescence. In K. J. Rotenberg (Ed.), *Disclosure processes in children and adolescents.* (p. 10-56).

Chassin, L., Pillow, D. R., Curran, P. J., Molina, B. S. G., & Barrera, M. (1993). Relation of parental alcoholism to early adolescent substance use: A test of three mediating mechanisms. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *102*(1), 3-19.

Dishion, T. J., & McMahon, R. J. (1998). Parental monitoring and the prevention of child and adolescent problem behavior: A conceptual and empirical formulation. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, *1*(1), 61-75.

Engels, R. C. M. E., Finkenauer, C., & van Kooten, D. C. (2006). Lying behavior, family functioning and adjustment in early adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *35*(6), 949-958.

Finkenauer, C., Frijns, T., Engels, R. C. M. E., & Kerkhof, P. (2005). Perceiving concealment in relationships between parents and adolescents: Links with parental behavior. *Personal Relationships*, *12*(3), 387-406.

Fletcher, A. C., Steinberg, L., & Williams-Wheeler, M. (2004). Parental influences on adolescent problem behavior: Revisiting stattin and kerr. *Child Development*, *75*(3), 781-796.

Fridrich, A. H., & Flannery, D. J. (1995). The effects of ethnicity and acculturation on early adolescent delinquency. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *4*(1), 69-87.

Frijns, T., Finkenauer, C., Vermulst, A. A., & Engels, R. C. M. E. (2005). Keeping secrets from parents: Longitudinal associations

of secrecy in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *34*(2), 137-148.

Hawk, S. T. (2010). *Stay out of my business! predicting adolescents' perceptions of parental privacy invasion and related reactions* (Vol. 70). Unpublished master's thesis.

Hawk, S. T., Hale, W. W., Raaijmakers, Q. A. W., & Meeus, W. (2008). Adolescents' perceptions of privacy invasion in reaction to parental solicitation and control. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *28*(4), 583-608.

Keijsers, L., Branje, S. J. T., Frijns, T., Finkenauer, C., & Meeus, W. (2010). Gender differences in keeping secrets from parents in adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, *46*(1), 293-298.

Kerr, M., & Stattin, H. (2000). What parents know, how they know it, and several forms of adolescent adjustment: Further support for a reinterpretation of monitoring. *Developmental Psychology*, *36*(3), 366-380.

Noller, P., & Callan, V. J. (1990). Adolescents' perceptions of the nature of their communication with parents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *19*(4), 349-362.

Peskin, J. (1992). Ruse and representations: On children's ability to conceal information. *Developmental Psychology*, *28*(1), 84-89.

Pomerantz, E. M., & Eaton, M. M. (2000). Developmental differences in children's conceptions of parental control: "they love me, but they make me feel incompetent.". *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly: Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *46*(1), 140-167.

Schlenker, B. R., & Weigold, M. F. (1992). Interpersonal processes involving impression regulation and management. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *43*, 133-168.

Smetana, J. G. (1988). Adolescents' and parents' conceptions of parental authority. *Child Development*, *59*(2), 321-335.

Smetana, J. G. (2000). Middle-class african american adolescents' and parents' conceptions of parental authority and parenting practices: A longitudinal investigation. *Child Development*, *71*(6), 1672-1686.

Smetana, J. G., Metzger, A., Gettman, D. C., & Campione-Barr, N. (2006). Disclosure and secrecy in adolescent-parent relationships. *Child Development*, *77*(1), 201-217.