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Discrepancies Between Adolescent and Parent Reports About Family Relationships

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Abstract

Family relationships play an essential role in adolescent development. When studying relationship domains (e.g., quality, conflict, communication), researchers typically rely on adolescents and their parents as informants. However, across research teams, domains, and measurement methods, researchers commonly observe discrepant estimates of family relationships between informants' reports. In this article, we review theoretical models for understanding these discrepant reports, summarize research on how the degree of discrepancy between reports informs our understanding of adolescent development, and highlight directions for research.

Introduction

Adolescents' relationships with their families play a key role in their own functioning and long-term development (e.g., Ingersoll, 1989; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006; Steinberg, 2005). For instance, the extent to which parents know and monitor their adolescents' whereabouts, activities, and associations with peers may predict adolescents' antisocial behavior (e.g., illicit drug use, delinquency; Smetana, 2008). Similarly, a high degree of conflict in interactions between adolescents and parents increases the likelihood of adolescent risk-taking (e.g., reckless driving, risky sexual behavior; Hollenstein & Lougheed, 2013). Thus, understanding family relationships is a priority for research and theory on adolescent development. To understand these relationships, researchers may select from a range of measures across subjective, physiological, and observational modalities (De Los Reyes & Ohannessian, 2016). Many instruments designed to assess these domains (e.g., conflict, parents' knowledge and monitoring of their adolescent, the quality of the relationship, parents' acceptance and warmth, adolescents' disclosure of their whereabouts and activities, communication) have parallel forms that can be administered to both adolescents and parents (e.g., Cole et al., 2018; Frick, 1991; Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Prinz, Foster, Kent, & O'Leary, 1979). Indeed, both adolescents and parents are key sources of information about various domains of family relationships. In this article, we suggest that studying discrepancies between adolescents' and parents' subjective reports of their relationships yields important information about family functioning and adolescent development.

In theory, one might expect convergence between reports provided by adolescents and parents about family relationships. By definition, behaviors indicative of family relationship domains (e.g., how often adolescents and parents argue about household chores) occur

specifically in interactions between adolescents and their parents. Indeed, in areas of study that rely on reports from multiple informants (e.g., adolescent mental health), the highest levels of convergence often come from reports by informants who observe the behaviors in the same social context (e.g., pairs of parents, teachers, clinicians; Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; De Los Reyes et al., 2015). However, in practice, adolescents' and parents' reports of family relationships rarely converge, and low convergence between reports is replicated across assessments of family relationship domains as well as researchers conducting these assessments (e.g., Korelitz & Garber, 2016; Taber, 2010).

Yet low convergence between reports does not tell the whole story. That is, some dyads converge considerably in their reports, whereas others diverge in their reports (for a review, see De Los Reyes & Ohannessian, 2016). Among dyads that diverge, the direction of this divergence can vary from dyad to dyad (e.g., adolescent report > parent report and vice versa). Stated another way, the overall low convergence between adolescent and parent reports hides considerable individual differences between these reports. Consequently, emerging work suggests that measuring the distance between adolescents' and parents' reports of family relationships can help us predict psychological phenomena relevant to understanding adolescent development.

Understanding Discrepant Reports

When examining discrepant reports about family relationships, it is important to consider that informants' reports of psychological phenomena commonly yield discrepant estimates of such phenomena (Achenbach, 2017; De Los Reyes, 2013; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005, 2006). Beyond family relationships, discrepant reports manifest in psychological assessments across the

lifespan (i.e., reports of children, adolescents, adults); domains (e.g., crime victimization, mental health, personality, pubertal status, sleep, social functioning); informants (e.g., reports by the adolescents themselves, family members, teachers, clinical staff); methods of measurement (e.g., continuous scores from surveys, discrete scores from interviews); research settings (e.g., clinic, field, laboratory); and cultures (see Achenbach, Krukowski, Dumenci, & Ivanova, 2005; Alfano, Patriquin, & De Los Reyes, 2015; De Los Reyes et al., 2015; Goodman, De Los Reyes, & Bradshaw, 2010; Hawley & Weisz, 2003; Laird & De Los Reyes, 2013; Oltmanns & Turkheimer, 2009; Renk & Phares, 2004; Rescorla et al., 2013, 2014, 2017). Across these works, these *informant discrepancies* have posed significant interpretive problems, which likely have their roots in converging operations (Garner, Hake, & Eriksen, 1956). That is, scientists tend to use the degree of convergence across many findings of the same phenomenon (e.g., estimates of mental health taken from reports by parents, adolescents, and teachers) as an index of support for that phenomenon (De Los Reyes, Thomas, Goodman, & Kundey, 2013). According to this view, informant discrepancies could reflect a lack of evidentiary support for the phenomenon assessed (e.g., if both the adolescent and the parent did not report the presence of conflict in the home, assessments of such conflict were inconclusive) or faulty measurement (e.g., the adolescent or the parent provided reports lacking psychometric soundness). In fact, this interpretation likely informs the use of commonly implemented strategies for dealing with informant discrepancies, including aggregation strategies (e.g., rules) and analytic models that focus on shared variance to the exclusion of unshared variance (De Los Reyes et al., 2015).

Findings from emerging work support a perspective on informant discrepancies that contrasts with these traditional interpretations: The degree of discrepancy between informants' reports about psychological phenomena or constructs reveals important information about these

constructs. In fact, informant discrepancies may reflect individual differences in displays of constructs. In theoretical work, we have characterized instances in which discrepant reports reveal meaningful information about phenomena targeted for assessment (De Los Reyes, Thomas et al., 2013). Briefly, beyond converging operations, patterns of reports could reflect diverging operations or the idea that informants' reports reflect differing levels of the phenomenon assessed across a meaningful factor, such as changes in displays of the construct across social contexts (e.g., home versus school).

Several recent studies support this notion. For instance, parents' and teachers' reports of young children's disruptive behavior diverge from each other when the child displays the behavior within a context-specific, controlled laboratory interaction but not in other interactions (e.g., interactions with parents but not interactions with other adults; De Los Reyes, Henry, Tolan, & Wakschlag, 2009). Stated another way, young children vary considerably in whether they display disruptive behavior in home and nonhome contexts (or both), so parents' and teachers' reports of such behavior may vary, in part, because these informants differ in their opportunities for observing displays of disruptive behavior within and across contexts. Furthermore, links between patterns of multiple informants' mental health reports and contextual changes in displays of mental health problems also manifest across assessments of varied domains of mental health in children, adolescents, and adults (e.g., aggressive behavior, autism spectrum disorders, social anxiety; De Los Reyes, Alfano, Lau, Augenstein, & Borelli, 2016; De Los Reyes, Bunnell, & Beidel, 2013; Deros et al., 2018; Glenn et al., 2018; Hartley, Zakriski, & Wright, 2011; Lerner, De Los Reyes, Drabick, Gerber, & Gadow, 2017). Thus, research on mental health supports using patterns of multi-informant reports to characterize context-specific (and cross-contextual) displays of psychological phenomena.

Examining How the Degree of Discrepancy Informs Our Understanding of Adolescent Development

Although informed by research on discrepant reports about mental health (De Los Reyes, Thomas et al., 2013), we see value in a distinct question as it relates to discrepant reports about family relationships: Can researchers use the degree of discrepancy between informants' reports to predict domains relevant to adolescent development? Indeed, when adolescents and parents report about family relationships, they are reporting about domains that manifest in their daily interactions and carry much saliency in their lives (De Los Reyes, Lerner, Thomas, Daruwala, & Goepel, 2013; De Los Reyes, Salas, Menzer, & Daruwala, 2013). Divergence between reports of various aspects of family relationships—including conflict, the quality of the relationship, or the extent to which parents accept their adolescent for who they are—may signal key dynamics that affect adolescent-parent relationships and by extension, adolescent adjustment. Conversely, when adolescents and parents hold converging views on these domains, the convergence may signal the presence of potent risks for adolescent maladjustment or strong buffers against maladjustment.

Recent work supports these ideas. For instance, when parents report low levels of adolescent pubertal development relative to adolescent self-reports of their development, adolescents display relatively high levels of antisocial behavior, relative to adolescents in dyads who display other reporting patterns (e.g., both adolescent and parent report high pubertal development; Laird & De Los Reyes, 2013). Here, the discrepancy between reports of pubertal development may signal a lack of awareness on the part of the parent of key elements of the adolescent's life, perhaps as a function of poor communication or high levels of conflict between the adolescent and parent.

In fact, when rating domains of family relationships, one particular pattern of diverging reports—adolescents reporting low positive relationships relative to parents—appears to be a potent marker for adolescent maladjustment. For example, divergence between reports—with adolescents' reports on family relationships more negative than parents' reports—predicts more internalizing problems in adolescents (Human, Dirks, DeLongis, & Chen, 2016; Nelemans et al., 2016). Patterns of convergence predict such problems, too: When adolescents and parents agree on reports of high levels of parental acceptance, adolescents tend to display relatively low levels of symptoms of depression relative to other reporting patterns (Laird & De Los Reyes, 2013). Furthermore, when adolescents and parents have close relationships, the adolescents might be more inclined to communicate openly information about feelings, thoughts, and activities (Smetana, 2008). Consistent with this notion, when adolescents report that their parents have less knowledge about their feelings, thoughts, and activities than parents report (perhaps reflecting low levels of communication between parents and adolescents that stem from a distant or conflicted relationship), this divergence increases the risk that adolescents will use substances, relative to other reporting patterns (Lippold, Greenberg, & Collins, 2013, 2014).

This emerging work reveals the importance of characterizing and understanding individual differences between adolescents' and parents' reports of family relationships. In fact, based on work reviewed previously four groups appear particularly informative. First, convergence between reports of high levels of a positive relationship domain (e.g., adolescent-parent communication) may signal consonance in understanding and expectations in adolescent-parent dynamics; this convergence may portend positive outcomes (De Los Reyes, Lerner et al., 2013). Second and conversely, convergence between reports of high levels of a negative relationship domain (e.g., adolescent-parent conflict) may signal relatively high severity or risk

in a key element of the family environment; this convergence may portend negative outcomes (De Los Reyes & Ohannessian, 2016).

Similar to convergence between reports, divergence between reports may vary in prediction of positive versus negative adolescent outcomes. A third pattern may involve divergence between reports of positive relationship domains (e.g., communication)—such as adolescents reporting lower levels than parents report—predicting more maladjustment in adolescents. However, divergence between reports may not always portend negative outcomes (see also Ohannessian & De Los Reyes, 2014). In fact, for some adolescents, reports of high levels of family dysfunction relative to parents (e.g., adolescent-parent conflict) may stem from mastery on the part of the adolescent of age-appropriate tasks, namely an increased push for autonomy and independence (for a review, see De Los Reyes & Ohannessian, 2016). In this way, a fourth pattern may involve divergence between reports that reflects normative developmental processes for which greater divergence points to positive outcomes.

Directions for Research

We see three fruitful (and related) directions for research. First, discrepancies manifest robustly between adolescents' and parents' reports of family relationships. However, the developmental course of these discrepancies is not understood fully. That is, what is a normative level of these discrepancies and does this level depend on development (e.g., early, middle, late adolescence)? Does a certain level of discrepancy protect against maladjustment? Is a certain level of discrepancy a marker of risk for maladjustment? Is the level of discrepancy less of a concern than the *direction* of the discrepancy (e.g., when the adolescent views the family far more negatively than the parent)? The absence of firm answers to these questions makes it

difficult to understand whether discrepant reports reflect risk or protective factors for adolescent maladjustment.

Second, researchers should examine links between adolescent-parent discrepancies and adolescent maladjustment. If specific reporting patterns (e.g., when an adolescent reports less optimal family relationships than a parent reports) predict more maladjustment *relative to other reporting patterns*, not all adolescent-parent dyads produce reports that diverge from one another. That is, dyads vary in how they report about family relationships, and studies of informant discrepancy involve testing the effects of differences between dyads in reporting patterns on key outcomes. Current recommended techniques for testing links between informant discrepancies and adolescent maladjustment involve polynomial regression models (see Laird & De Los Reyes, 2013). In these models, the operational definition of discrepant reports is a statistical interaction between informants' reports. For example, to study links between adolescent-parent discrepancies in reports of relationship quality and adolescent maladjustment, a polynomial regression model would test whether the interaction between adolescents' and parents' reports predicts the criterion variable (i.e., adolescent maladjustment), over and above the main effects of the individual reports of relationship quality. In these regression models, probing a statistically significant interaction is key to understanding the nature of the effect. Without such probing, we would not know which kinds of adolescent-parent dyads account for the effect. By construction, probing procedures leverage sample-specific parameters to characterize the nature of the effect of the interaction (see Holmbeck, 2002).

Statistical interaction techniques yield potent tools for testing links between informant discrepancies and outcomes of interest (e.g., adolescent maladjustment). However, they provide no information on whether specific patterns in discrepancies (e.g., adolescent report > parent

report or vice versa) can be detected reliably from sample to sample. For instance, researchers who observe a significant statistical interaction in one sample might find that the interaction effect reflects one of the convergence or divergence patterns described previously. However, much like an exploratory factor analysis solution detecting subscales on a measure, this interaction test does not yield information on whether that same pattern of multiple informants' reports can be detected in another sample of adolescents' and parents' reports on the same measure of family relationships. Use of person-centered modeling techniques may address this concern. Techniques such as latent class analysis (LCA) are Bayesian models of inference that allow testing for the presence of sample subgroups that display homogeneity in patterns of indicators within the subgroup (e.g., group of dyads in a sample where adolescent report > parent report) and heterogeneity between subgroups (e.g., in the same sample, another group of dyads where parent report > adolescent report; McCutcheon, 1987). In fact, several studies of informant discrepancies have leveraged these techniques (for reviews of this work, see De Los Reyes et al., 2015; De Los Reyes & Ohannessian, 2016). We call for greater *synergy* in the use of variable-centered interaction and person-centered modeling techniques.

For example, researchers should continue testing for informant discrepancies effects (i.e., links between these discrepancies and domains relevant to adolescent development) using the interaction techniques described previously. Furthermore, the probing procedures used to characterize interaction effects observed in a given sample yield information about specific reporting patterns of interest (e.g., in dyads where adolescent report > parent report, adolescent may be at particular risk for maladjustment). Research using an independent sample should then leverage LCA to demonstrate the ability to detect these specific reporting patterns reliably, thereby confirming underlying reporting patterns that account for any significant interaction

effects observed in the original study. This work will facilitate the ability of basic research on informant discrepancies to inform applied research on these discrepancies.

Finally, research on informant discrepancies should inform efforts in applied developmental science, namely prevention and intervention. Research on mental health tells us how knowledge about informant discrepancies can inform applied research. For example, youth who report fewer concerns about anxiety than parents report about them, particularly at the beginning of treatment, have less optimal responses to the treatment (Becker-Haimes, Jensen-Doss, Birmaher, Kendall, & Ginsburg, 2018), so the degree of divergence between parents' and youth's reports may help inform treatments for anxiety in youth. Researchers should also aim to understand if certain domains of early family life predict problematic patterns of informant discrepancies (e.g., adolescent report > parent report). For instance, are there individual factors (e.g., children's temperament, parents' mental health), dyadic factors (e.g., parent-child communication, parental supervision), or environmental factors (e.g., school and neighborhood contexts) that set the stage for higher levels of divergence in reports of family relationships? Could any of these antecedents be considered protective, leading parents and adolescents to manifest a more adaptive pattern of reporting?

Additionally, if basic research identifies reporting patterns that place adolescents at particular risk for negative outcomes (or their antecedents), and these reporting patterns can be detected, can we use them to identify adolescents who might benefit from preventive interventions designed to protect them from negative outcomes? Might reporting patterns serve as indicators of intervention outcome? For instance, if basic research identifies a reporting pattern that predicts healthy outcomes (e.g., both adolescents' and parents' report indicate relatively high parental acceptance), might this serve as a marker of a positive response to an

intervention (e.g., significant increase from before to after the intervention in the number of dyads in which adolescents' and parents' report converge on high parental acceptance)? The field is likely years from testing these questions adequately, but we expect this research path to yield fruitful outcomes.

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