



## Interpersonal relationships and emotional distress in adolescence



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### A B S T R A C T

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The aim of this study was to examine positive and negative qualities in adolescents' interpersonal relationships and their relative importance in predicting emotional distress. Participants were 260 students from three schools in the Dublin area (119 girls; 141 boys), aged 12–18 years ( $M = 15.32$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ). Students completed questionnaires assessing qualities in important interpersonal relationships in their lives and emotional distress. Girls reported more positive qualities in their relationships with mothers and best friends than boys. Younger students reported more positive qualities in their relationships with parents than older students. Stepwise multiple regression analysis revealed high levels of satisfaction in interpersonal relationships were predictive of low levels of emotional distress whereas high levels of criticism and exclusion were predictive of high levels of distress. High levels of support and disclosure were also linked to emotional distress. These findings and their implications are discussed in detail.

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### Introduction

Adolescence is a time of changing social relationships. During this period, young people move away from parental authority and increasingly turn to peers as a source of support and companionship (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000; McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). In Western culture, adolescence is also the time when most individuals experience their first romantic relationships (Furman, Low, & Ho, 2009). Theory suggests that the formation and maintenance of stable interpersonal relationships is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and research findings have consistently indicated that poor quality relationships are linked to negative mental health outcomes in young people (Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney, & Marsh, 2007; Branje, Hale, Frijns, & Meeus, 2010; Jenkins, Goodness, & Buhrmester, 2002; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Molcho, Nic Gabhainn & Kelleher, 2007; Sheeber, Davis, Leve, Hops, & Tildesley, 2007; Stice, Ragan, & Randall, 2004). The overall quality of a young person's relationship can be conceptualised as comprising of a number of positive and negative components, which represent the overall supportive and discordant qualities in the relationship. Positive relationship qualities are comprised of companionship, disclosure, emotional support, approval and satisfaction and negative relationship qualities are comprised of conflict, criticism, pressure, dominance and exclusion (Furman & Buhrmester, Network of Relationships Questionnaire Manual).

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### *Relationship with parents during adolescence*

During adolescence individuals' relationships with their parents undergo change. As they struggle to develop autonomy, they spend a decreasing amount of time with their parents and throughout this period a moderate degree of parent–adolescent conflict is normal (Montemayor, 1983; Santrock, 2003). Research suggests that conflict with parents is at its highest in early to middle adolescence and then decreases as adolescents mature (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Older adolescents tend to report less support (Cheng & Chan, 2004; Helsen et al., 2000; Scholte, Van Lieshout, & Van Aken, 2001) and more autonomy (Mayseless, Wiseman, & Hai, 1998) in their relationships with their parents than younger adolescents, however studies have suggested that overall emotional closeness with parents remains stable across age (Mayseless et al., 1998; Smetana, Metzger, & Campione-Barr, 2004).

Girls generally report better quality, more supportive relationships with their mothers than boys (Branje et al., 2010; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Paterson, Field, & Pryor, 1994; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). There is also evidence to suggest that boys perceive their relationships with their fathers to be closer and more supportive than girls (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Starrells, 1994) and young people generally identify with their same-sex parent more than their opposite-sex parent (Starrells, 1994). Interestingly, in terms of conflict, previous research has suggested that both boys and girls report higher degrees of conflict with their mothers than with anyone else in their social network (Laursen, 1995; Montemayor, 1983).

### *Parental relationships and mental health*

Positive qualities in parent–adolescent relationships such as high levels of support (Helsen et al., 2000; Jenkins et al., 2002; Meadows, Brown, & Elder, 2006; Sheeber et al., 2007; Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2006), warmth (Greenberger, Chen, Tally, & Dong, 2000) and approval (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2006) are associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms in young people. While some degree of conflict with parents is considered to be normal during adolescence (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006), prolonged, intense and repeated conflict is frequently associated with poor psychological adjustment (Barber & Delfabbro, 2000; Branje et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2002; Sheeber et al., 2007; Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2006). Other negative qualities such as high levels of over-intrusive and authoritarian parental control (Rigby, Slee, & Martin, 2007), and low levels of perceived parental communication (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006) have also been significantly associated with negative well-being in adolescence. Furthermore, a concerning finding by Wedig and Nock (2007) was that high levels of parental criticism were associated with self-harm behaviour in young people. To date there is a lack of research examining the relationship between parental criticism and symptoms of emotional distress in adolescents and further exploration of this relationship is needed.

### *Peer relationships during adolescence*

Close friendships are regarded as the most important peer relationships formed during adolescence (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1993; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Rubin et al., 2004) and the majority of young people report having at least one close friend (Brown & Klute, 2003). Girls generally attribute higher quality to their relationships with friends than boys, reporting higher levels of support (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Helsen et al., 2000; Jenkins et al., 2002), closeness (Johnson, 2004) and disclosure (McNelles & Connolly, 1999; Pagano & Hirsch, 2007) in these relationships. Some studies suggest that qualities in close friendships in adolescence vary with age. For example, levels of support from peers have been found to initially increase in early adolescence before declining in mid to late adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Helsen et al., 2000), which may reflect the increased amount of support older adolescents receive from romantic partners (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). Furman and Buhrmester (1992) found that conflict with close friends is less frequent in older adolescents than younger adolescents. This is one of the few studies looking at age differences in peer conflict during adolescence. Interestingly, La Greca and Harrison (2005) found no age differences in overall levels of positive or negative friendship qualities during adolescence which highlights the importance of looking at individual relationship components when examining friendship quality across adolescence.

Taken together, there is evidence to suggest that age and gender difference in peer friendship qualities exist during adolescence. However there is a need to identify the relative influence of peer positive and negative friendship qualities during adolescent, and whether age and gender differences in these qualities exist.

### *Peer relationships and mental health*

While there is a body of research suggesting the importance of good quality peer relationships for psychological well-being in young people (Brown & Klute, 2003; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; La Greca & Lopez, 1998; Steinhausen & Metzke, 2001), studies examining how specific relationship qualities are linked to mental health outcomes are lacking. To date only a small number of studies have examined this, such as Buhrmester (1990) who found higher levels of intimacy in peer relationships were linked to better psychosocial outcomes and La Greca and Lopez (1998) who found that lower levels of perceived intimacy, support and companionship in close friend relationships were linked to higher levels of social anxiety. However, La Greca and Harrison (2005) found that while the presence of positive qualities in best friend relationships

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