

# ADOLESCENTS COMMUNICATION, CONFLICT STYLES AND CONFLICT RESOLUTIONS WITH PARENTS, PEERS AND ROMANTIC PARTNERS: SIMILARITY, DIFFERENCES AND RELATIONS WITH SATISFACTION

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## **Abstract**

*Communication and conflict styles and resolutions are key issues for understanding the dynamics underlying every social relationships. However they are usually investigated separately in different social contexts. In the current study, the similarities and differences of the adolescents' communication, conflict styles, conflict resolution and satisfaction with parents, best friends and boy/girlfriend were explored.*

*One hundred and three Italian adolescents, aged 15 to 20years, were administered a version of the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS; Barnes, & Olson, 1985). Exploratory principal component analyses, Cronbach's alpha, Repeated Measures ANOVAs, correlation and hierarchical regression analyses were used to analyze the data.*

*The adolescents use similar levels of open and problem communication, compromise and aggression (conflict styles), intimacy and frustration (conflict resolutions) with father, mother, friends and romantic partners and they are similarly satisfied with their partners. However open communication, compromise and intimacy are more frequent with friends and romantic partners than with the parents.*

*Besides, the strongest predictor of satisfaction is always open communication. However, with the family and the boy/girlfriend the resolution of the conflict is also important, while with the friends the way to manage the conflict is relevant too.*

**Key words:** *adolescent social partners, communication, conflict, satisfaction.*

## **Introduction**

Despite family, friends and dating partner are usually acknowledged as relevant and intertwined adolescent developmental contexts, personal relationships between the adolescents and their social partners have, for the most part, been investigated in terms of their potentially negative correlates and consequences, such as psychological discomfort and involvement in internalized or externalized risk behavior (Du Boys-Reymond, & Raveslout, 1994). While the importance of investigating the negative sides of adolescent personal relationships is clear, there are other aspects that deserve equal attention. Particularly, the present study investigated the similarity and differences in com-

munication, conflict, and conflict resolutions among the adolescent and the three social contexts of family, friends and dating partner, and the association between the satisfaction of the adolescents with their personal relationships.

Family communication is involved in both cognitive and social development. In fact, the communication with the parents affects adolescent identity formation and role-taking ability (Cooper, Grotevant, & Condon, 1983). In particular, family communication can facilitate or reduce the family cohesion and adaptability through two dimensions: one positive as open communication and the other negative as problematic communication (Barnes, & Olson, 1985)

With respect to conflict styles and resolution among family members, scholars agreed that conflicts are normative and temporary perturbation and also that they are functional in transforming family relationships and in helping family members to renegotiate their roles (Goossens, 2006; Grotevant, & Cooper, 1985; Steinberg, 1990). However studies about resolutions adopted by the adolescents and/or their parents to deal with conflict are quite limited (Reese, & Weber, 2000). Nevertheless some scholars developed a multidimensional measure of conflict that allows to detect both the conflict styles and the resolution, according to the perspectives of both adolescents and their parents (Honest, Charman, Zani, Cicognani, Xerri, Jackson, & Bosma, 1997; Cicognani, & Zani, 2010a). This instrument measures two styles of conflict: aggression (involving sarcasm, anger, and shouting), and compromise (involving reasoning, listening, compromising, and caring for the other). It measures also two resolutions of conflicts: one positive (involving intimacy and closeness), and one negative (involving frustration and escalation).

The quality of communication and the way to deal with conflicts between parents and adolescents has been commonly associated with family satisfaction (Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, & Bosma, 1998). Adolescents and parents who feel they can communicate and deal with conflicts more efficiently also show more satisfaction with family life and higher feelings of personal worth. Nevertheless, whether or not a more active approach in dealing with problems, as expressed by open communication and positive ways to face and solve conflicts, leads to high levels of satisfaction also outside the family, such as in the relationships with peers and romantic partners has still to explore.

In sum, in the present study is aimed at going a step further previous studies, by exploring the psychometric properties of a new instrument and investigating the similarities and differences of the adolescents' communication, conflict styles, conflict resolution and satisfaction for the relationship with parents, best friends and boy/girlfriend. This exploration will include the examination of the psychometric properties of the new scales (in terms of factor structure and internal coherence), of the discriminant and concurrent validity by describing the similarities and differences of the adolescent relational patterns across different social partners and finally the relations among the adolescent relational patterns and the satisfaction for the relationship with different social partners.

Generally speaking, open communication has been found negatively related to problem communication, that compromise is negatively related to aggression, and that intimacy and closeness is negatively related to frustration (Barnes, & Olson, 1985; Grotevant, & Cooper, 1985). However, it is not yet known whether or not this pattern of relationships is valid with respect to different social partners and whether or not the use of compromise with a social partner is positively related with the use of compromise with a different social partner. Besides, open and expressive communication, compromise, and intimacy and closeness as the resolution of a conflict are more related to satisfaction for one's own social relationships than problem communication, aggression, and frustration (Jackson et al., 1998). However although some studies (Beyers, Goossens, Vasant, & Moors, 2003; van der Vost, Engels, Meeus, Deković, & van der Valk, 2006) postulated the presence of some degrees of stability in the "typical" way of communicating and leading and solving conflict a person uses in different social contexts, such as the original family and those of friendship and dating, these processes have been usually investigated separately in the different social contexts, especially in not clinical samples. Besides, it is not yet known which component among communication, conflict styles and conflict resolution is more important in constructing the satisfaction of the adolescent for the relationship with different social partners.

To test the factor structure of the new scales, exploratory principal component analysis has been applied. For the friends and the boy/girlfriends, the expectation is to confirm the factor structure that previously emerged for the relationships between the adolescents and their parents: communication

(open vs. problem communication), conflict styles (aggression vs. compromise), conflict resolution (intimacy and closeness vs frustration and escalation), and satisfaction (Honest et al., 1997; Cicognani, & Zani, 2010a e b). Differences in communication patterns, conflict styles, conflict resolutions and satisfaction according to the social partner were assessed. As regards discriminant validity, consistently with previous studies about adolescent development and developmental tasks (Kirchler, Palmonari, & Pombeni, 1993; Jackson, & Rodriguez-Tomé, 1993) it is possible to hypothesize that adolescents are: a) more likely to use open instead of problem communication with their peers and boy/girlfriend and reversely that they are more likely to use problem communication with parents and especially with the father; b) more likely to behave aggressively towards their parents and less inclined to compromise with them than with both friends and boy/girlfriend; c) more likely to solve a conflict with peers with intimacy and closeness and to solve a conflict with the parents with frustration and escalation; d) equally satisfied of all their social relationships.

Another focus of the study is on the relationships among the relational patterns the adolescent uses with different social partners (communication, conflict styles, conflict resolutions and satisfaction). On the bases of previous studies (Honest et al., 1997; Jackson et al. 1998), the expectation is that open communication with the parents is positively associated with open communication with the other social partners and negatively associated with problem communication with the parents as well as with the other social partners.

Finally, the relationships among on the one side relational patterns (in terms of communication, conflict styles and conflict resolutions) and on the other side satisfaction (with the family, the friends and the boy/girlfriend) were explored.

In sum, the research questions are:

1. Are the conflict-related relational patterns the adolescents use with different social partners similar or different in terms of factor structure?
2. Do adolescent conflict-related relational patterns differ with different social partners?
3. Are communication patterns, conflict styles and conflict resolution stable across different social partners?
4. Which relational patterns among ways of communicating, conflict styles and conflict resolutions are more related to the satisfaction of the adolescent with different social partners?

## Methodology of Research

### *Sample of Research*

The participants were 103 adolescents aged 15 to 20 ( $M= 17.34$ ;  $SD= 1.42$ ; 58% female) attending high school (36% lyceum and 64% technical high school) in the North-West of Italy. The sixty-five percent ( $N= 67$ ) was involved in a steady relationship with a dating partner at the time on which data were collected while the 35% ( $N= 36$ ) was not.

The administration was done at school, during normal lessons. This sample is representative of the population of adolescents attending high school in this part of Italy, where 98% of all adolescents attend high school following primary school. Regarding relevant structural indicators, the sample appears to be relatively comparable to the general Italian population (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2009). The unemployment rate in Italy is roughly 10%, while in sample of this study it is 6%. The proportion of divorce is 9% in this sample vs. 11.5% in the general Italian population. Half of the adolescent families consist of four members and 3% are one-parent families (same proportion in the population). With respect to the level of education of the parents, 37% completed basic school (57% in the general population), 39% high school (27% in the general population), 10% have some vocational specialization (6% in the general population) and finally 14% graduated from university (10% in the general population).

### *Instrument and Measures*

To investigate the patterns of communication of the adolescent with different social partners, a modified Italian version of the Parent–Adolescent Communication scale was used (Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, & Muxen, 1983; Lanz, 1997). The original instrument includes 20 items, measuring open communication (10 items) and problem communication (10 items) between the adolescent and his/her parents (using a 5-point Likert scale). Using statements exactly identical to the original ones, in the present modified version, adolescents are asked to describe their communication with four different types of social partners: father, mother, friends, boy/girlfriend. In particular, they are asked: “How well does each of the following statements describe YOU when you communicate with him/her”. An example of a statement is: “He/she is a good listener”. Answers to each set of 20 items are provided with a 5-point Likert scale (as in the original version: completely disagree (1); partially disagree (2); neither disagree nor agree (3); partially agree (4); completely agree (5). The expectation is that the new modified scales have a factor structure congruent with the subscales proposed by Olson and colleagues (1983).

For measuring conflict styles of the adolescent towards their parents (mother and father separately), their friends and the boy/girlfriend, the correspondent part of the “When We Disagree” scale (WWD), a multidimensional measure of the styles of conflict developed by Honess et al. (1997), was modified. The original instrument consisted of 12 items describing adolescent conflict styles with their parents. The modified instrument used in this study asked adolescents to describe their conflict styles with four different social partners: father, mother, friends, boy/girlfriend. In particular, they are asked to describe their disagreements with their social partners as follows: “How well does each of the following statements describe YOU when you and he/she disagree about something that is important to both of you?”. An example of the statements: “I get really wound up and start shouting”. Answers to the 12 items for each social partner (for a total of 48 items) are provided on a 4-point scale: not at all (1); not too well (2); fairly well (3); and very well (4). The new modified scales were expected to have the same two-factor structure as found by Honess et al. (1997) on the original version, corresponding to aggression (involving sarcasm, anger and shouting), and compromise (involving reasoning, listening, compromising and caring for the other).

For measuring conflict resolutions between adolescents and their social partners a modified version of part 3 of the WWD scale (Honess et al. (1997) was employed. The original instrument consisted of 18 items describing conflict resolution styles between adolescents and their parents. The modified instrument used in this study asked adolescents to describe their conflict resolution with four different social partners: father, mother, friends, boy/girlfriend. In particular, they are asked to describe the outcomes of the conflicts with their social partners as follows: “Different things can happen when two people have a serious disagreement. How often does each of these things happen when YOU and your FATHER disagree about something which is important to both of you?” An example of the statements: “I feel that continuing to talk would be only a waste of time”. Answers to the 18 items for each social partner (for a total of 72 items) are provided on a 5-point scale: never (1); almost never (2); sometimes (3); often (4) and very often (5). Even with these modified instrument we expected to find factor structures congruent with the subscales proposed by the authors of the original version.

For measuring the satisfaction of the adolescents for the relationships with their family, their friends and the boy/girlfriend, the 14-item Family Satisfaction Measure (Olson, et al, 1983), a unidimensional instrument (Olson, 2004) intended to measure family satisfaction, was modified. The original instrument asks adolescents to evaluate their satisfaction with respect to their family. The instrument was adapted to be adequate to measure satisfaction with the different social partners considered in this study. The modified versions for satisfaction with friends and boy/girlfriend have an item less (13, instead of 14) because the content of one item (satisfaction with house-chores) was not appropriate with these social partners. In the modified versions of the scale adolescents are asked to describe the satisfaction for the relationships with their social partners (father, mother, friends, boy/girlfriend) as follows: “How much are you satisfied with?”. An example of the statements: “The degree of closeness with/among”. Answers to the 13 items

for each social partner (for a total of 52 items) are provided on a 4-point scale: not at all (1); not that much (2); enough (3); very much (4).

### *Procedure*

The study was conducted in different upper-secondary schools in the North-West of Italy. Parents provided written consent for minor students to participate, and students older than 18 years assented to participate in accordance with Italian law and the ethical code of the Professional Psychologists Association in Italy. Students completed questionnaires, which were distributed by trained research staff during classroom time. Questionnaires took approximately 30 minutes to be filled in. Adolescents were assured about confidentiality and anonymity. Teachers were not presented in the classroom during the questionnaire administration. No incentives were offered for participation, however 100% of the youth completed the questionnaires.

### *Data Analysis*

To test the component structure of the new adapted scales, principal component analysis was employed. Internal consistency was investigated using Cronbach's alpha.

After having ascertained the expected functioning of the employed instruments, Repeated Measures ANOVAs were employed for evaluating differences in communication patterns, conflict styles, conflict resolutions and satisfaction using the social partner as the within-subjects independent variable.

In order to study the relationships among the different study variables (communication, conflict and conflict resolutions and satisfaction), the intercorrelations (Pearson's  $r$ ) were computed within the four different social partners.

Finally, in order to study the relationships between the relational patterns (communication, conflict styles and conflict resolutions) and satisfaction, hierarchical regression analysis, using satisfaction (with family, friends and boy/girlfriend), as dependent variable, was employed. Predictors were entered in the models as follows: 1. Communication patterns, 2. Conflict styles, 3. Conflict resolutions. Communication patterns, conflict styles and conflict resolutions with the parents were combined in a single variable (by computing the mean between the separate scores for the father and the mother) because the measure of satisfaction with the family is a global one. Regression models were evaluated considering standardized regression coefficients, total R-square and R-square changes.

## **Results of Research**

### *Factor Structure of the Instruments*

The first PCAs was conducted on communication patterns items<sup>1</sup>. On the basis of the examination of the scree plot and eigenvalues, two components were retained, explaining a considerable proportion of variance (father: 47%; mother: 49%; friend: 43%; boy/girlfriend: 41%). As expected the two components showed high factor loadings with the open communication items and the problem communication items, respectively. Thus, extracted components substantially confirmed the expected structure of two components (open and problem Communication) with all the items loading on the expected component. In particular, for each one of the adolescent social partners 10 items loaded on the first component (open communication) and 10 items loaded on the second component (problem communication). Alpha coefficients computed for the two subscales were adequate and ranged from 0.72 to 0.80 for the problem communication subscale and from 0.89. to 0.92 for the open communication subscale.

After, the item batteries investigating conflict styles between the adolescent and four different social partners were analyzed using PCA. On the basis of the examination of the scree plot

and eigenvalues, two components were retained, explaining a considerable proportion of variance (father: 44%; mother: 54%; friend: 48%; boy/girlfriend: 56%). In each of the analyses (one for each social partner) the same factor structure emerged. Component loadings matrix permitted to interpret the two extracted components as compromise (5 items) and aggression/anger (7 items). The extracted components correspond to the two subscales originally proposed by Honess et al. (1997). Alpha coefficients computed for the two emerging subscales were adequate and ranged from 0.71 to 0.81 for the compromise subscale and from 0.70 to 0.83 for the aggression subscale. As regards the 4 batteries investigating conflict resolutions, the PCAs permitted to retain for each of the scales 2 components with 10 items loading on the first one and 7 items loading on the second one. The two-components resolutions explained a considerable proportion of variance (father: 43%; mother: 45%; friend: 45%; boy/girlfriend: 50%). The first component has been interpreted as negative conflict resolution (including items on frustration and escalation), while the second component has been interpreted as positive conflict solution and includes items about intimacy and closeness. Alpha coefficients computed for the two emerging subscales were adequate and ranged from 0.80 to 0.86 for the negative subscale and from 0.72 to 0.81 for the positive subscale. However, with respect to the structure originally found by Honess et al (1997) there are both similarity and differences with the present study. In both studies (the present study and original one), Item 1 lowered the relevant alpha coefficient and was not included in any further analysis. As regards the comparison with the original instrument a component structure compatible with the one proposed by Honess and colleagues (1997) for the positive conflict solution was found. As regards the negative conflict solution, the component solution and inspection of item content favored a single scale for frustration and escalation (negative outcome), instead of two separate scales as proposed by Honess et. al. (1997).

Finally, the PCA conducted on the three satisfaction scales with respect to family, friends, and boy/girlfriend showed an unidimensional structure, with the first extracted component explaining a substantial quote of variance (family: 47%; friends: 44%; boy/girlfriend: 56%). We opted to exclude two items from the scales because of their low loadings on the extracted component and because they significantly lowered the Cronbach's alphas. In particular the two excluded items were about level of agreement and fairness of criticism within the relationship. Alpha coefficients computed for the satisfaction scales were adequate and ranged from 0.87 to 0.92.

#### *Descriptive Statistics and Differences among Social Partners*

Table 1 presents a synthesis of descriptive statistics on the study variables and the results of the Repeated measures ANOVAs conducted with the social partner as within-subjects independent variable.

Open communication is higher with friends and boy/girlfriends while problem communication is higher with the father than with the other social partners. Besides, with respect to the open communication, the Bonferroni post-hoc test comparisons highlighted that all the means are significantly different from each other with the only exception of the comparison between mother and boy/girlfriend that was not significant. With respect to the problem communication, the post-hoc test comparisons highlighted that only the problem communication with the father is significantly different from all the other means and that no other comparison is significant.

With respect to conflict style subscales, the highest level of compromise is found with boy/girlfriends; significantly lower levels are found with friends, mother and father, while aggression level does not differ with respect to different social partners. Besides, with respect to the compromise, the post-hoc test comparisons highlighted that the compromise towards father is significantly different from both that towards friends and boy/girlfriend and the compromise toward mother differs with that toward boy/girlfriend. All the other means are not significantly different from each other.

As regards conflict resolutions, the negative conflict resolution subscale (frustration and escalation) showed the highest mean with respect to father, followed by mother, friends and boy/girlfriends. The Bonferroni post-hoc test comparisons highlighted that the negative resolution with father is significantly different from both that with friends and boy/girlfriends; all the other means

are not significantly different from each other. Instead, the positive conflict resolution subscale (made of intimacy and closeness items) does not differ with respect to different social partners.

Lastly, satisfaction level with the three considered social partners did not show significant differences.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics and results of Repeated measures ANOVA.**

Social partners	Communication				Conflict styles				Conflict resolution				Satisfaction	
	Open		Problem		Aggression		Compromise		Frustration (negative)		Intimacy (positive)			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Father	32.1	11.3	28.3	8.6	14.4	4.1	13.5	3.4	29.9	7.9	21.4	5.8	32.9 <sup>2</sup>	6.9
Mother	36.4	11.0	24.8	8.5	14.7	5.1	14.0	3.9	28.4	8.3	21.6	5.8		
Friends	42.3	7.6	23.5	7.3	13.5	3.9	14.7	3.7	27.5	7.3	23.2	5.1	33.8	6.7
Boy/girlfriend	39.3	9.1	23.2	7.5	13.6	5.1	14.9	3.8	26.5	8.7	22.9	6.1	33.7	7.9
F	11.85		6.88		1.85		4.21		4.34		2.15		0.39	
df	3.54		3.54		3.58		3.57		3.54		3.54		2.53	
p<	0.0001		0.001		0.145		0.009		0.008		0.11		0.68	
η <sup>2</sup>	0.39		0.29		0.08		0.18		0.19		0.11		0.01	

*Intercorrelations among Study Variables*

Table from two to five shows correlations among the study variables. The patterns of communication used by the adolescents with different social partners are strongly interrelated among each other (Table 2). Open communication with the father is positively related with open Communication with the mother and it is negatively associated with the problem communication with the father. The open communication with the mother is positively correlated with the open communication with friends and it is negatively correlated with the problem communication with the mother. The open communication with friends is positively correlated with the open communication with the boy/girlfriend and it is negatively correlated with the problem communication with friends. The open communication with the boy/girlfriend is negatively correlated with the problem communication with friends and the boy/girlfriend. The problem communication with both the father and the mother are positively correlated between each other and with the problem communication with friends (but not with the problem communication with the boy/girlfriend). Finally the problem communication with friends is positively correlated with the problem communication with the boy/girlfriend.

**Table 2. Correlations among adolescent communication patterns with different social partners.**

Communication	Correlation values (N)						
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Open with Father	0.41** (93)	0.02 (80)	-0.01 (65)	-0.34** (91)	0.06 (92)	0.12 (83)	0.13 (61)
2. Open with Mother		0.23* (91)	0.19 (72)	-0.20 (92)	-0.54** (100)	-0.15 (93)	-0.11 (69)

<sup>2</sup> The measure of satisfaction for the family is global.

Communication	Correlation values (N)						
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
3. Open with Friends			0.55** (68)	0.12 (82)	-0.04 (89)	-0.49** (90)	-0.29* (65)
4. Open with Boy/girlfriend				-0.08 (65)	-0.23 (72)	-0.44** (70)	-0.40** (70)
5. Problem with Father					0.51** (93)	0.42** (83)	0.15 (62)
6. Problem with Mother						0.35** (91)	0.23 (68)
7. Problem with Friends							0.33** (67)
8. Problem with Boy/girlfriend							

Note. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$

The two different conflict styles used by the adolescents with different social partners are strongly interrelated among each other (Table 3). The table shows that aggression towards the father is positively correlated with aggression towards all the other social partners and negatively associated to compromise with both the father and the mother. Aggression towards the mother positively correlates with aggression with all the other social partners and it is negatively correlated with compromise with the mother, with the friends and the boy/girlfriend (but not with the father). Aggression towards friends is positively correlated with aggression towards the boy/girlfriend and it is negatively correlated with the compromise with both the friends and the boy/girlfriend. The aggression towards the boy/girlfriend is negatively associated with the compromise with the father and the mother (but it is not related with the compromise with the friends and the boy/girlfriend). The compromise used with different social partners are all strongly interrelated among each other.

**Table 3. Correlations among the conflict styles with different social partners.**

Conflict styles	Correlation values (N)						
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Aggression towards Father	0.55** (89)	0.30** (80)	0.57** (64)	-0.31** (90)	-0.26* (87)	-0.14 (83)	-0.21 (65)
2. Aggression towards Mother		0.57** (84)	0.56** (67)	-0.21 (89)	-0.47** (92)	-0.22* (87)	-0.42** (69)
3. Aggression towards Friends			0.48** (64)	-0.13 (79)	-0.21 (82)	-0.34** (82)	-0.47** (66)
4. Aggression towards Boy/girlfriend				-0.33** (62)	-0.26* (64)	-0.24 (65)	-0.19 (67)
5. Compromise with Father					0.49** (89)	0.44** (83)	0.53** (65)
6. Compromise with Mother						0.49** (87)	0.64** (68)
7. Compromise with Friends							0.59** (68)
8. Compromise with Boy/girlfriend							

Note. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$



The conflict resolutions reported by adolescents with respect to different social partners (see Table 4) are strongly interrelated among each other on both the positive and negative sides. Adolescents who declare a negative conflict resolution with the father are also more likely to declare it with all the other three social partners (mother, friend and boy/girlfriend). Furthermore the adolescents who declare a positive conflict resolution with the father are also more likely to declare it with all the other three social partners (mother, friend and boy/girlfriend). Any significant correlations was found between positive resolution with the mother and positive resolution with the boy/girlfriend.

**Table 4. Correlations among conflict solution with different social partners.**

Conflict solution	Correlation values (N)						
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Frustration with Father	0.63** (77)	0.58** (74)	0.63** (61)	0.05 (79)	0.03 (77)	0.37** (76)	0.13 (61)
2. Frustration with Mother		0.64** (76)	0.62** (64)	0.11 (79)	-0.21 (81)*	0.23 (78)	-0.09 (64)
3. Frustration with Friends			0.75** (63)	0.33** (76)	0.04 (78)	0.18 (78)	-0.09 (63)
4. Frustration with Boy/girlfriend				0.25 (61)	-0.02 (63)	0.29* (63)	-0.04 (63)
5. Intimacy with Father					0.56** (80)	0.51** (78)	0.36** (62)
6. Intimacy with Mother						0.38** (78)	0.10 (64)
7. Intimacy with Friends							0.51** (63)
8. Intimacy with Boy/girlfriend							

Note. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$

The levels of satisfaction expressed by adolescents about their relationships with different social partners (see Table 5) are strongly correlated among each other. The adolescents who experience satisfaction in the relationship with one social partner are also more satisfied with the other ones. However the satisfaction with the family is more correlated to that with the friends than to that with the boy/girlfriend and the satisfaction with the friends is more correlated to that with the boy/girlfriend than to that with the family.

**Table 5. Correlations among satisfaction with different social partners.**

Satisfaction for the relationships with	Correlation values (N)	
	2	3
1. the Family	0.49** (73)	0.30* (59)
2. the Friends		0.63** (60)
3. the Boy/girlfriend		

Note. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$

*Regression Analyses*

In order to evaluate the relationships between on the one side perceived satisfaction and on the other side the communication, the conflict styles and solutions with different social partners, hierarchical stepwise regression analysis was used (see Table 6). Before modelling, correlation coefficients between independent variables were checked for detecting multicollinearity problems. No relevant collinearity emerged: The highest values of correlation among predictors were the following: family, correlation between compromise and positive resolution:  $r=0.57$ ,  $p<0.01$ ; friends: correlation between aggression and negative resolution,  $r=0.56$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; boy/girlfriend: correlation between open communication and positive resolution,  $r=0.59$ ,  $p<0.01$ . All of the three tested models were adequate: satisfaction with the family,  $F_{6,49}=7.52$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ,  $R^2=0.48$ ; with friends,  $F_{6,54}=6.77$ ,  $R^2=0.44$ ; with boy/girlfriend,  $F_{6,41}=14.08$ ,  $R^2=0.66$ ].

As regards the impact of the independent variables, with all the three social partners, the strongest predictor of satisfaction was open communication, which is positively related to satisfaction. In the family context and with boy/girlfriend, the only other significant predictor was positive conflict resolution, which is positively associated with satisfaction. Differently, with friends the only other significant predictor was a compromise: individuals with a compromise-based conflict style tends to report higher satisfaction with their friends. With family and boy/girlfriend the way to solve conflicts seems more important for satisfaction than the conflict style. With friends the opposite holds true: The way to manage the conflict has a stronger impact on the satisfaction for the relationships than the way to solve it.

**Table 6. Hierarchical Regression Results – Adolescent Communication, Conflict Styles and Conflict resolution Predicting Satisfaction with different social partners.**

Predictors	Social partners					
	Family		Friends		Boy/girlfriend	
	B	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1 – Communication patterns		0.37**		0.29*		0.57*
Open	0.58**		0.44**		0.77**	
Problem	-0.07		-0.17		0.00	
Step 2 – Conflict style		0.03		0.12**		0.04
Aggression	0.05		0.05		-0.19	
Compromise	0.23		0.40**		0.14	
Step 3 – Conflict resolution		.08*		0.03		0.05*
Intimacy (Positive)	0.39**		-0.21		0.31**	
Frustration (Negative)	-0.06		-0.07		-0.02	
		$R^2 = 0.48$		$R^2 = 0.44$		$R^2 = 0.66$

Note \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Discussion**

The present study examined the similarity and differences in communication, conflict styles, and conflict resolutions among the adolescent and the three social contexts of family, friends and dating partner, and the association among the satisfaction of the adolescents and their personal relationships. Besides the factor structure of a new instrument constituted by all these components was tested, and its discriminant validity, considering differences in communication patterns, conflict styles, conflict resolutions and satisfaction according to the social partner was assessed. The concurrent validity within the same dimensions were assessed. Finally, the predicted validity of the new instrument was explored by investigating the relationships between on the one side relational patterns (in terms of

communication, conflict styles and conflict resolutions) and on the other side satisfaction (with the family, the friends and the boy/girlfriend).

The expectation was that there are both similarities and differences for communication, conflict styles and conflict resolutions among the adolescents and the three social contexts of family, friends and romantic partners. There was also the expectation to find an association among these relational patterns and the satisfaction for relationships with different social partners. In particular, the hypotheses were that adolescents are: a) more likely to use open instead of problem communication with their peers and boy/girlfriend and reversely that they are more likely to use problem communication with parents and especially with the father; b) more likely to behave aggressively towards their parents and less inclined to compromise with them than with both friends and boy/girlfriend; c) more likely to solve a conflict with peers with intimacy and closeness and to solve a conflict with the parents with frustration and escalation; d) equally satisfied of all their social relationships. Finally, open communication with the parents was expected to be positively associated with open communication with the other social partners and negatively associated with problem communication with the parents as well as with the other social partners.

According to the expectations, adolescents are more likely to use open, rather than problematic, ways of communicating, to express conflict styles addressed to compromise, rather than to aggression, and to find positive, instead of negative, resolution of the conflict, especially when they interact with friends and romantic partners.

Some evidence of problems in communicating and facing and solving the conflicts with the parents was also found, although these problems are not so great to appear pervasive and prevalent. As anticipated, previous studies already highlighted the possibility of an increase of intergenerational conflict during adolescence and also that these conflicts are not negative in themselves because they may answer to the development tasks related to identification processes, personal autonomy and independence (Honess et al., 1997; Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Cicognani, & Zani, 2010b). Nevertheless recently some preventive studies showed the possibility of ameliorating parent-adolescents relationships and how this amelioration may have a positive effect on the general adolescent psychosocial adjustment (Ortega, Giannotta, Latina, & Ciairano, 2012; Giannotta, Ortega, & Stattin, submitted). Overall the findings of the present study highlight that, although the relationship with the father appears usually more problematic than that with the mother, and that the relationship with the mother is more problematic than those with friends and romantic partners, there is a great similarity in the adolescents' communication patterns, conflict styles and resolutions with different social partners.

The ways the adolescent manage and solve his/her conflicts in friendships and romantic relationships has generally received scarce attention. Laursen and Adam (2000) underlined that in friendship, which is the developmental context where the adolescents are allowed to experiment new social skills, the use of negotiation and disengagement as ways for solving conflicts is more frequent than in other relational contexts. However the authors themselves raised questions about the generalizability of their findings at different samples and with different methodologies. The findings about the conflict styles and the conflict resolutions used with different social partners underline that when the adolescent is more likely to use compromise as a conflict style and to get intimacy as the conflict resolution, he/she is generally more available to use them, independently from the type of social partner. Besides, the use of compromise in the family seems to train the adolescents at not using an aggressive conflict style with the boy/girlfriend. Nevertheless, the use of an aggressive conflict style seems less negative related to the use of compromise within a romantic relationship than within the other types of social relationships. That is to say that the adolescents who are more likely to use compromise are also less likely to use aggression in the case of parents and friends but not in the case of the romantic partner. In fact in the case of the dating partner the use of opposite conflict styles seems relatively independent from each other. Among the possible explanations of this phenomenon there is the fact that the construction of a dating relationship is a recent acquisition for the adolescent who have still to learn how to balance his/her reactions to a conflict between the two sides of aggression and compromise. Nevertheless, considering the increasingly proportion of violence registered in adolescent romantic relationships, and especially that against girls (Menesini, & Nocentini, 2008), the findings suggest to carefully monitor this phenomenon also in order to prevent its possible nega-

tive consequences. However, a strong negative relationship between on the one side the negative resolution of a conflict as frustration and on the other side a positive resolution as intimacy was not found. In other words, negative and positive outcomes appear more two sides of the same coin than two alternatives. In sum the solution of a social conflict may leave the people involved more or less frustrated or intimate, but at the end is always a solution. In fact to be more likely to find a positive resolution does not automatically imply to be less likely to find a negative one.

Finally, an association was expected among the relational patterns and the satisfaction for relationships with different social partners. The adolescents who experience satisfaction in the relationship with one social partner are also more satisfied with the other ones. The findings underlined that the satisfaction with the family is more correlated to that with the friends than to that with the boy/girlfriend and that the satisfaction with the friends is more correlated to that with the boy/girlfriend than to that with the family. As Jackson and colleagues (1998) have already underlined it seems reasonable to expect that the adolescents who are more satisfied with their family relationships, who are more able to use efficient communication modalities and constructive management of the conflicts within the family context, are also more likely to transfer their skills in different relational contexts, as friendships and romantic relationships. The findings of the present study seem to go in the same direction: open communication and a positive way of solving conflicts are positively related to satisfaction at both levels of family and peer relationships. However, the adolescents are especially satisfied with friendships when they are likely to use compromise and negotiation, while with the family and the boy/girlfriend the way to solve conflicts seems more important than the conflict style. With the friends the opposite holds true: the way to manage the conflict has a stronger relationship with the satisfaction than the way to solve it. Again the cross-sectional research design prevents us for testing any interpretation of these findings. However it seems reasonable to interpret the great similarity found between family and romantic partner accordingly the following lines. The family represents for the adolescent the solid basis from which he/she will depart towards an independent life in the future. The romantic partner represents to a certain extent the first experimentation of this future. To solve a conflict with both these social partners could be much more relevant than the way to manage it. Friends represent for the adolescents the laboratory for experimenting social strategies and new behaviour: they are certainly very important in the adolescent life (Poulin, & Chan, 2010; Vacirca, & Rabaglietti, 2010; Rabaglietti, Vacirca, & Ciairano, 2011). Nevertheless they could be substituted with new friends who answer more than the previous ones to the adolescent changing needs in navigating towards their future life paths.

## Conclusion

Previous studies already highlighted that among the adolescent developmental tasks there are those of partially disengaging from the original family and of developing and maintaining independent and satisfactory horizontal relationships with peer and romantic partners (Furman, & Simon, 1998; Shantz, & Hartup, 1992; Tani, & Fonzi, 2005). This study added to this knowledge that the social strategies used by the adolescents in horizontal relationships are generally more flexible and efficient than those used with the parents. In fact adolescent horizontal relationships are characterized by the wish of smoothing things over and by the attempt of reflecting taking into account the point of view, the motivation and the feelings of the social partner. It seems reasonable to conclude that the adolescents are more likely to use flexible social strategies in communication pattern and conflict when the risk of losing the relationship is higher than is with friends and romantic partners. In fact friends and romantic partners, differently from the parents and other relatives, can break the relationship whether it is not satisfactory any more.

This study also showed that there is evidence of both problems in communicating with the parents, especially with the father, and a kind of continuity that may lead the adolescents to use similar relational patterns first with both the parents, second with the friends and finally with the romantic partner. Furthermore, the study showed that the way to manage the conflict is important for the satisfaction of the relationship with the friends, while the way to solve is important for the satisfaction of the relationships with both parents and romantic partner. Again there is a similarity between what the adolescent experiences in the original family and what he/she is starting to construct

in his/her first experiences of dating. So far the present study suggests that preventive intervention aimed at promoting the family relationships in adolescence may have positive influence also in the other adolescent social contexts. The promotion of positive and flexible social strategies might be particularly helpful in the case of romantic relationships, that is where the adolescents show great levels of uncertainty to tackle them probably also because of their scarce expertise in balancing between managing a conflict and being aggressive toward the partner.

## Limitations and Strengths

This study has certainly several limitations including the limited sample size and the cross-sectional research design. There is the need of longitudinal long-term designs in order to follow along time the shape that the regulation of communication and the management of conflict with different social partners assume at different developmental phases. In particular, there is the need to investigate whether and how the observed patterns of interrelationships change during the passage from adolescence to young adulthood (Schulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2005). Furthermore, future studies have to include other kinds of social bonds as those developed in the school (Giannotta, & Özdemir, in press) and in the leisure context (Larson, 2000; Ciairano, 2008). There is also the need to consider and to evaluate the effects of continuous and deep modifications the present society is currently undergoing, especially focusing on youth life paths. Nowadays, especially in some countries as Italy (Crocetti, Rabaglietti, Sica, in press) youths cohabit with the original family much longer than in the recent past, the enter in the labor market is much delayed as well as both the decision to construct a new family and that of giving birth to one's own children is postponed to an undefined future.

However, despite these limitations, the innovation represented by this study consists in having explored differentiated adolescent social relationships and having found substantial similarities across them. The findings of this study strongly support the idea that promoting the efficiency of the family (Stattin, Persson, Burk, & Kerr, 2011; Kerr, Stattin, & Özdemir, 2012; Rabaglietti, Roggero, Begotti, Borca, & Ciairano, 2012) in developing positive ways of communicating and of managing unavoidable social conflict may represent a crucial step in the construction of the present and future social adjustment of the individual.

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