

# ПСИХОЛОГИЯ РАЗВИТИЯ

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## DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIP NETWORKS AMONG ITALIAN AND GERMAN ADOLESCENTS AND LINKS TO ADAPTATION

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**Summary.** In a study of 350 Italian and German adolescents with a mean age of 17.3 years, network structure and the quality of their relationships with mothers, fathers, siblings, close friends and romantic partners were assessed. Results identified similarities among Italian and German adolescents in their network structure but differences in the quality of their close relationships. Concerning network structure, in both countries, friends and romantic partners assumed the highest positions in the support-provider hierarchy during adolescence. Further, Italian adolescents, across all relationship types, reported more positive and more negative relationship characteristics than German adolescents.

**Key words:** adolescence; network structure; quality of close relationships.

### Introduction

Recent years have seen an explosion of research in close relationships. A central question in relationship research is whether there is continuity or discontinuity in close relationships, both with respect to network structure and quality. In particular, some researchers are inclined to believe that discontinuity exists, over the lifespan, between different types of close relationships (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2007; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). In fact, as friendships became closer and more intense, the exclusivity of parent-adolescent relationships wanes (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). From mid adolescence onwards, as intimacy and commitment to romantic relationships increase, friendship quality decreases and romantic partners achieve a privileged position in a given individual's social network (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Other researchers, however, are more inclined to believe that, over the lifespan, a substantial continuity exists between different types of close relationships. Based on attachment theory, it is suggested that past relationships continue to have a fundamental, varying influence in different developmental phases (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Furman & Wehner, 1997).

Although a valuable body of studies analyzed continuity and discontinuity in close relationships, most studies have focused on the comparison of two close relationships and did not acknowledge the major changes in sev-

eral close relationships during adolescence. Further, close relationships and their developmental changes are strongly embedded in a societal and cultural framework (Ladd, 1992), with great differences in the importance given to family values, peer group norms and couple life through different cultures (Claes, 1998; Cooper, 1994; Edwards, 1992). To date, only a handful of empirical studies have analyzed changing close relationships in different cultural contexts.

This study, therefore, aimed to analyze differences in network structure and quality among adolescents from two different countries, Italy and Germany. The hypothesis underlying this study was that there are similarities with respect to network structure but differences with respect to network quality among Italian and German adolescents. It was hypothesized that there would be similar changes in network structures among Italian and German adolescents insofar as parents will assume an important position as support provider, but will be surpassed by friends and romantic partners during adolescence (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). In addition, it was expected that Italian adolescents assign more importance to the relationship network structure than German youth (Bruckner, Knaup & Müller, 1993; Claes, 1998).

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The overall sample consisted of 350 adolescents (157 males and 193 females) aged from 15 to 19 years (mean age = 17.3; SD = .97), with 166 German (73 males and 93 females; mean age = 17.02; SD = 1.22) and 184 Italian adolescents (84 males and 100 females; mean age = 17.5; SD = .59). All adolescents, recruited from secondary schools of Florence (a city in Central Italy) and Mainz (a city in Central Germany), were selected according to similar criteria, e.g. with respect to age, gender and educational level. After the adolescents had agreed to participate and parental consent was obtained, subjects were asked to fill in a questionnaire on their close relationships anonymously. 88.5% were raised in two-parent families. Only 67.4% of adolescents were in a committed romantic relationship and reported on romantic partner.

For this study, only adolescents who reported on all five close relationships simultaneously (40.3%) were selected. The final total sample comprised 141 adolescents (64 males and 77 females) with 61 German (32 males and 29 females; mean age = 17.25; SD = 1.37) and 80 Italian adolescents (32 males and 48 females; mean age = 17.51; SD = .59).

### ***Measures***

*Social Network.* The Italian and German version of the *Network of Relationship Inventory (NRI)* (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), was administered

in order to assess the quality of their relationships with mothers, fathers, siblings, close friends and romantic partners. The NRI assessed two dimensions, namely, social support (companionship, instrumental aid, satisfaction, intimacy, nurturance, affection, admiration and reliable alliance) and negative interaction (conflict and punishment). The subjects indicated on a standard 5-point Likert-scale how strongly each dimension was experienced in each relationship (from 1 = “little or none” to 5 = “the most”). With regard to the Italian version (Guarnieri & Tani, submitted), internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach’s alpha) for social support and negative interaction ranged from .90 to .93 and from .73 to .78, respectively. Concerning the German version (Seiffge-Krenke, 2000), internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach’s alpha) for social support and negative interaction ranged from .80 to .87 and from .76 to .87, respectively.

## Results

In order to analyze similarities and differences between the structure and the quality of relationship network, ANOVAs of repeated measurements were carried out with group (Italian and German adolescents) and gender as between-subject factors, relationship types (mother, father, sibling, close friend, romantic partner relationships) as a within-subject factor and social support and negative interaction as dependent variables.

Means and the standard deviations for social support and negative interaction for mother, father, sibling, close friend and romantic partner relationships are depicted in Table 1 for Italian and German adolescents separately.

**Means, Standard Deviations and ANOVA Results of Relationship Quality with Mothers, Fathers, Siblings, Close Friends and Romantic Partners as Perceived by Italian and German Adolescents**

NRI		Italian Adolescents						German Adolescents					
		Male		Female		Total		Male		Female		Total	
		M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Mothers	Social Support	3.51	(.62)	3.74	(.62)	3.64	(.63)	3.39	(.74)	3.36	(.74)	3.37	(.74)
	Negative Interaction	2.83	(.71)	3.00	(.65)	2.92	(.68)	2.07	(.73)	2.19	(.88)	2.14	(.78)
Fathers	Social Support	3.39	(.60)	3.32	(.79)	3.36	(.71)	3.11	(.60)	3.13	(.79)	3.12	(.93)
	Negative Interaction	2.78	(.61)	2.81	(.55)	2.79	(.69)	2.07	(.79)	1.98	(.71)	2.02	(.75)
Siblings	Social Support	4.01	(.56)	4.17	(.55)	4.10	(.55)	3.38	(.71)	3.62	(.70)	3.51	(.71)
	Negative Interaction	2.13	(.53)	2.11	(.56)	2.12	(.54)	1.60	(.47)	1.48	(.37)	1.53	(.42)
Friends	Social Support	3.75	(.83)	4.00	(.71)	3.91	(.76)	3.30	(1.1)	3.52	(.87)	3.42	(.99)
	Negative Interaction	2.54	(.64)	2.42	(.72)	2.47	(.69)	1.47	(.48)	1.76	(.57)	1.62	(.55)
Partners	Social Support	3.44	(.69)	3.54	(.77)	3.50	(.74)	2.85	(.84)	3.04	(.83)	2.95	(.84)
	Negative Interaction	2.45	(.60)	2.54	(.74)	2.50	(.68)	1.89	(.61)	1.93	(.61)	1.91	(.61)

Concerning social support, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of relationship types [ $F(4,844) = 38.33, p \leq .001 (\eta^2 = .15)$ ]. Bonferroni post-hoc tests revealed that in both groups, close friends and romantic partners assumed a significant higher position in the social support-provider hierarchy than mothers, fathers and siblings ( $p \leq .001$ ). Further, mothers' support scores were higher than those of fathers ( $p \leq .001$ ) and siblings ( $p \leq .01$ ) which, in their turn, were similar ( $p = ns$ ).

Similarly, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of group [ $F(1,211) = 43.86, p \leq .001 (\eta^2 = .17)$ ]. Results showed that Italian adolescents reported significant more social support in their close relationships than German adolescents. No gender differences and interaction effects were found.

Regarding negative interaction, ANOVA results showed a significant main effect of relationship types [ $F(4,844) = 46.19, p \leq .001 (\eta^2 = .18)$ ]. Bonferroni post-hoc tests showed that negative interaction scores of close friends were significant lower than those of romantic partners ( $p \leq .01$ ), mothers, fathers and siblings ( $p \leq .001$ ). Negative interaction perceived in romantic relationships was comparable to negative interaction in sibling relationships ( $p = ns$ ) and lower than in mother and father relationships ( $p \leq .001$ ). Siblings' negative interaction scores were lower than the scores of mothers ( $p \leq .001$ ) and fathers ( $p \leq .01$ ). Further, fathers' scores were lower than those of mothers ( $p \leq .05$ ).

Similarly, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of group [ $F(1,211) = 124.93, p \leq .001 (\eta^2 = .37)$ ]. Results reveal that Italian adolescents reported significant more negative interactions in their close relationships than German youth. Again, no gender differences and interaction effects occurred.

## **Discussion**

An important aim of this study was the analysis of the network structure, e.g. relations between different types of close relationships in adolescence. Our findings suggest that the basic network structure is similar in both the Italian and German subsamples. Results have shown that at the age of 17 years, the importance of nuclear-family relationships wanes and the relevance of extra-familial relationships strongly increases (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). More specifically, in our study, close friends and romantic partners provide more social support for adolescents in both countries than their parents and siblings. Further, in both countries, family relationships are characterized by more negative aspects than friendships and romantic relationships. This finding supports results of earlier studies, which have demonstrated that conflicts during early and mid adolescence occur particularly in familial contexts (Laursen, 2005; Montemayor, 1982). Altogether, our results on network structure are in line with the developmental-contextual model of romantic development proposed by

Brown (1999) which suggests that, at this age, friends and romantic partners are the most important point of reference within adolescent social networks.

A further aim of this study was to analyze differences among network quality in Italian and German adolescents. Altogether, results have shown that Italian adolescents invest more in their relationships than German adolescents. In line with previous studies (Claes, 1998; Jurado Guerrero & Naldini, 1997), Italian adolescents perceive all their close relationships as more supportive and characterized by more positive aspects than their German counterparts. Further, our results have also shown significant differences between Italian and German adolescents in negative aspects that characterize their different types of close relationships with higher scores of Italian youth in negative relationship qualities across all relationship types. Thus, Italian adolescents perceive greater social support from their social partners, but also report more conflict within the network.

There are, though, some limitations in the present study. The two cross-cultural samples are not totally equivalent: in fact, Italian parents' educational level is higher and more Italians have married parents in comparison with the German subsample. In addition, this study considers only the individual's perspective of relationship network quality and this does not allow to investigate shared and unique views of these different types of close relationships.

Despite its limitations, the results of the present study provide a useful starting point for further exploration of network structure and quality among adolescents from different cultural contexts.

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#### РАЗЛИЧИЯ В СТРУКТУРЕ ВЗАИМООТНОШЕНИЙ ИТАЛЬЯНСКИХ И НЕМЕЦКИХ ПОДРОСТКОВ: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ

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**Аннотация.** В исследовании приняли участие 350 итальянских и немецких подростков, средний возраст участников составил 17,3 года. Предметом анализа выступили структура социальных взаимоотношений и их качество. В структуру взаимоотношений подростков вошли близкие родственники (родители, сестры, братья), друзья, романтические партнеры. Полученные результаты позволили обнаружить сходства и отличия в структуре социальных взаимоотношений между итальянскими и немецкими подростками. Подростки обеих стран воспринимают друзей и романтических партнеров как самых значимых, так как они оказывают помощь и поддержку на данном жизненном этапе. Итальянские подростки воспринимают все изучаемые в данном исследовании типы взаимоотношений как более позитивные и более негативные, чем немецкие подростки.

**Ключевые слова:** подросток; структура взаимоотношений; качество близких отношений.