

## Family Relations and the Self-esteem of Adolescents and their Parents

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**\*\*\*Note: Footnotes and endnotes indicated with parentheses**

### **Abstract:**

Previous research, especially that of Gecas and Schwalbe (1986), relating adolescent self-esteem to parental support, control, and participation is extended in the present investigation, which examines the effects of parent-adolescent communication and investigates dimensions of parent-adolescent interaction that predict parents' self-esteem. The findings suggest that (a) adolescents and their parents have similar but distinct perceptions of their relationships; and (b) self-perceptions of these relationships, especially self-judgments of communication, are important in predicting levels of self-esteem for both adolescents and their parents. Our discussion focuses on gender differences in the relationships reported, the central role of communication within the family unit, and the reciprocal character of parent-adolescent socialization.

### **Article:**

An important context for the evolution of one's self-esteem is the family and the kinds of interactions that occur among family members. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, an individual's sense of self is a social product of the reflected appraisals of others, especially those of significant others, that are transmitted in the course of social interaction. Gecas (1981: 170) noted that the "intimate, intensive, relatively enduring" nature of family interactions implies that "the socialization that takes place [in this setting] is usually the most pervasive and consequential for the individual." Thus, because parents and their offspring are among the most important persons in the other's life, it is reasonable to suggest that parent and child conceptions of self are significantly influenced by the nature of their relationship with one another. The research to date, however, has been unidirectional, documenting the effects of family interaction on children's self-esteem (see Gecas and Schwalbe, 1986, for a recent review and empirical test), but neglecting the reciprocal influences of these interactions on parents' self-esteem. The purpose of this study is to examine the different perceptions that parents and adolescents have of their relationships and to examine the correlations between these perceptions and the overall self-esteem level of adolescents and their parents.

### **PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Rollins and Thomas's (1979) comprehensive review of studies conducted between 1960 and 1974 that correlated parental behavior with the behavior of children and adolescents yielded few published studies that examined issues of self-concept. But there have been four fairly extensive monographs that attempted to specify how salient parental behavior dimensions are related to a child's self-esteem (Bachman, 1970; Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1965; Thomas, Gecas, Weigert, and Rooney, 1974). The major conclusions of these studies were that parental support of and involvement with their children and parental willingness to grant autonomy and freedom to their children are positively related to high self-esteem among the children. Such behavior "conveys to the child information about his or her inherent worth . . . [and] suggests to the child that the parent trusts the child and considers him or her to be a responsible person. This too has favorable consequences for the child's self-esteem" (Gecas and Schwalbe, 1986: 38).

Our review of studies published in the decade since the Rollins and Thomas review located additional evidence that adolescent self-esteem is related to family relationships, although most studies rely on the adolescents' perceptions of these relationships. Variables reported to be significantly correlated with the adolescent's self-esteem include the individual's "feelings toward his or her parents" (O'Donnell, 1976); family conflict and support (Cooper, Holman, and Braithwaite, 1983); perceptions of family acceptance, intercommunication, and shared satisfaction (Watkins and Astilla, 1980); and parental support and control, with the latter subdivided into induction and coercion (Openshaw, Thomas, and Rollins, 1983, 1984). Gecas and Schwalbe (1986) obtained significant correlations between adolescents' self-esteem and their perceptions of parental support, autonomy / control, and participation, but they found little correspondence between parents' reports of the same behavior and adolescent self-esteem,

There is an emerging consensus among researchers that parental support and participation have a positive effect on an adolescent's self-esteem. The data concerning parental control, however, are less definitive. The inconsistent findings concerning parental control may be the result of a number of factors. First, although the relationship between parental control and self-esteem may be positive for children, the opposite may be true for adolescents, Baumrind (1971) argued that firm parental control is beneficial for the young child, but a number of adolescent theorists have emphasized that parents should be fairly permissive with adolescents if the youth are to become autonomous and responsible (Elder, 1962; Hill, 1980). Second, the inconsistent findings may be due to differences in the sources of information. Coopersmith (1967) obtained data from both mothers and children, whereas Thomas et al. (1974) relied entirely on data reported by adolescents. Gecas and Schwalbe (1986) compared adolescents' reports of parental control/autonomy with those of both parents and obtained correlations ranging from .24 to .41. A symbolic interactionist perspective suggests that it is necessary to examine the adolescent's perceptions as well as the parents' perceptions of control in family relations. From the adolescent's perspective, control involves the parent's attempt to limit or direct his or her activities (Gecas and Schwalbe, 1986); thus, the more the adolescent feels that decisions and behaviors that affect him or her are under the control of the parent, the lower will be his or her level of self-esteem. Parents may view their control differently, however, perceiving it as necessary for the adolescent's growth and development.

In addition to support, control, and participation, another mediating variable, parent-adolescent communication, is suggested by Olson's Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Barnes and Olson, 1985; Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxen, and Wilson, 1983). According to this model, open and frequent communication is critical in that it enables supportive-affectional feelings and behaviors to be transmitted between family members. Although there is strong support for the central role that communication plays in family functioning, prior researchers have generally neglected to examine this dimension when studying parent-child relations or familial antecedents of individual wellbeing and development.

Finally, we examine a second dimension of support, namely, the support adolescents give their parents. Just as communication is, by definition, a reciprocal process, the support that is exchanged in family relationships is bidirectional (parent to adolescent and adolescent to parent) and can be conceptualized as part of a reciprocal socialization process. Because adolescents assign considerable importance to their role identity as son or daughter (Hoelter, 1986), it is reasonable to expect that those adolescents who feel good about their relationships with their parents, demonstrated by supporting and expressing affection to their parents, will experience higher self-esteem. Viewed in this manner, adolescents' support of parents provides an additional indicator of the quality of parent-adolescent relationships.

#### FAMILY INFLUENCES ON PARENTS' SELF-ESTEEM

No study of which we are aware has examined the possibility that children influence parents' self-evaluations. A recent indication of the pervading unidirectional emphasis is that Gecas and Schwalbe (1986: 37) opened their paper by stating, "The family is generally considered an important context for the development of a child's self-concept" (emphasis added), but they did not make the same assertion in regard to the parent's self-concept. Their important contribution to the existing literature was to add a comparison of the influence of parent reports

and child reports of parental behavior on the child's self-esteem. We agree that this is an essential addition, but we carry the logic one step further by assessing how the parent's self-esteem is related to parent and child reports of their behavior toward one another.

Despite Bell's (1968) early warning on the direction of effects in socialization studies, the reciprocal nature of parent-child interaction is often overlooked by researchers whose focus on adolescent self-esteem implies an assumption that processes of socialization and self-concept formation have crystallized by late adolescence, thereby neglecting the role that children play in shaping the lives of their parents. This empirical omission is not consistent with sociological theories (e.g., reflected appraisals) nor with life course perspectives (e.g., human ecology, life span development), both of which acknowledge and emphasize the importance of viewing mutual adult-child influences on developmental processes. Indeed, there are repeated occasions in which parents judge children and children judge parents regarding each other's worth, competence, and effectiveness as individuals. Viewed in this way, the family is a critical context for self-concept formation in that by adolescence the children come to see some part of themselves as they perceive their parents view them, and conversely, parents come to see aspects of themselves as they perceive their adolescent children view them.

For these reasons we examine the correlations between parents' self-esteem and the same dimensions of parent-adolescent interaction that we propose influence adolescent self-esteem: support given and received in the relationship, communication, and participation in joint activities. In addition, because parents often experience considerable stress in managing the responsibilities associated with teenage children (Kidwell, Fischer, Dunham, and Baranowski, 1983), we examine the relationship between the level of stress parents report in this role and parents' overall feelings of self-esteem.

## ANALYSES AND EXPECTATIONS

In examining self-esteem, we rely on Rosenberg's (1979: 54) definition: A person who possesses high self-esteem "has self-respect, considers himself a person of worth." The term low self-esteem "means that the individual lacks respect for himself, considers himself unworthy, inadequate, or otherwise seriously deficient as a person." Our measures of family relationships include both parents' and adolescents' perceptions of their relationship, allowing comparisons of these perceptions as well as comparisons of one's own perceptions versus others' perceptions with one's self-esteem. The symbolic interactionist argument (Blumer, 1969; Gecas, 1971; Gecas and Schwalbe, 1986; Peterson and Rollins, 1986) is that an individual's perception or interpretation of others' behavior is more important to that individual and his or her self-esteem than is others' actual behavior. We therefore expect a stronger relationship between the adolescent's perceptions of parental behavior and the adolescent's self-esteem than between the parent's perceptions of parental behavior and the adolescent's self-esteem. Conversely, we expect a stronger relationship between the parent's perceptions of her or his behavior and parent's self-esteem than between the adolescent's perceptions of the relationship and parent's self-esteem.

Given existing theory and the empirical literature reviewed above, we suggest that both parent and adolescent self-esteem will be related to perceptions of intrafamilial support, participation, and communication. Specifically, the higher the reported level of support, participation, and communication, the higher will be the self-esteem of adolescents and their parents. Although, as previously noted, we expect to find a relationship between adolescents' perceptions of parental control and adolescent self-esteem, there is little plausible reason to believe that parental control will be related to parents' self-esteem. Finally, we expect to find a negative relationship between parental self-esteem and the level of stress parents experience in relationships with their adolescents.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 139 parent-adolescent dyads.<sup>(1)</sup> Parents were enrolled in one of five one-week family-oriented summer educational sessions sponsored by Cornell University. Families with adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17 years were invited to participate in the study at an orientation meeting.

The participants were predominantly white, middle or upper-middle class, and highly educated; 90% of the fathers and 82% of the mothers graduated from college. All of the parents were married at the time; 60% of the parents were female and 40% were male. Fathers ranged in age from 33 to 61 years (mean = 43.2); mothers from 32 to 53 years (mean = 41.2). One parent from each participating family was included in the study. The participating youth, 70 females and 69 males, ranged in age from 10 to 17 years, with a mean of 13.4 years.(2)

### *Procedures*

Parents were instructed to complete questionnaires by themselves without discussing them with their spouse or adolescent child. The first questionnaire assessed aspects of their relationship with their child, and the second instrument measured the parent's self-esteem. They were informed that all responses would be kept strictly confidential. Later in the week, adolescents were administered questionnaires that included a self-esteem instrument and measures of the parent-child relationship. Adolescents were given assurances similar to those given their parents concerning the anonymity of their responses. Instructions for completing the questionnaire were given orally and all questions concerning the purpose or procedures of the study were answered. It should be noted that parents and adolescents were housed in separate residences and there was little contact between them during the week-long session.

### *Measures*

The complete questionnaire, the items that comprise each scale, their item-total correlations, the method used to score the scale, and the scale's alpha reliability coefficient are presented in detail in Small (1985). All measures were pretested in a pilot study with adolescents and their parents. Those items in a measure that did not correlate significantly ( $p < .01$ ) with the scale's total adjusted score (the sum of all the items in the scale minus that specific item) were excluded from the final measure. The components of the questionnaire for parents and for adolescents are described below, with alpha reliability coefficients shown in parentheses.

#### *Parent Questionnaire*

**1. Parent's expression of support to the adolescent (.89).** This measure assesses how frequently the parent expresses affection to the adolescent. It is composed of seven items that ask the parent to indicate the frequency with which he or she exhibits to the adolescent a number of affectionate verbal and nonverbal behaviors, such as hugging and kissing. Response categories range from "a few times a day" to "never."

**2. Parent's perception of the adolescent's support (.85).** The parent's report of the adolescent's affection and positive sentiment for the parent was assessed by the 6-item support scale from the Child Behavior Toward the Parent Inventory (Schaefer, Edgerton, and Finkelstein, 1979). The parent was asked questions such as whether or not the adolescent seems eager to do things with him or her. There are four response categories ranging from "very much" to "not at all."

**3. Parental control over decisions involving the adolescent (.88),** This measure was developed to assess the pattern of decision-making between parent and adolescent. The Independence Training Index, employed by Elder (1962) and Kandel and Lessor (1972), is composed of a single item that asks the respondent how most decisions are made in his or her family. There are five response categories along a continuum from high parental domination to high parental permissiveness. A new measure was developed, resembling the original in its basic format but differing in that it asks the respondent how decisions are made on a wide variety (15 items) of issues.

**4. Parental stress (.89).** Parental well-being was assessed by a subjective measure of stress. Following Pearlin and Schooler (1978), the present investigation relies on the self-reported experience of emotional stress. The nine-item scale asks the parents how bothered, content; or emotionally upset they felt when they thought about their present experience as parent of the target adolescent. There are four response categories ranging from "very" to "not at all."

**5. Parent's perception of parent-adolescent communication (.84).** The parent's perception of the level of positive communication between parent and adolescent was assessed by a four-item scale developed for the present investigation. The items ask the parent how frequently he or she has friendly discussions with his or her child about both positive and negative concerns or topics (e.g., "How often do you have friendly conversations with your child?"). The six response categories range from "never" to "a few times a day."

### *Adolescent Questionnaire*

**1. Adolescent's expression of support to the parent (.83).** Parallel to the support measure administered to the parent, this scale assesses how frequently the adolescent expresses affection to the parent. The measure is composed of seven items that ask the adolescent to indicate how frequently he or she exhibits a variety of affectionate behaviors to the parent.

**2. Adolescent's report of parent's support (.72).** The parent's warmth, support, and positive sentiment for the adolescent was assessed by the Maternal and Paternal Support Scales from the Cornell Parent Behavior Inventory (Siegelman, 1965). Each scale is composed of six items.

**3. Adolescent's perception of parental control (.75).** How restrictive and controlling the child perceives the parent as being was ascertained by the Maternal and Paternal Control-Autonomy Scales from Schaefer's (1965) Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory. Each scale contains four items.

**4. Adolescent's participation with parents (.68).** A six-item scale was developed to assess the amount of time the adolescent spends with his or her parent in educational and recreational activities, such as watching television, playing games, and attending movies or events. The six response categories range from "a few times a day" to "never."

**5. Child's perception of parent-adolescent communication (.84).** Parallel to the communication measure administered to parents, the level of positive communication between adolescent and parent was assessed by a four-item scale developed for the present investigation. The items ask the adolescent how frequently he or she has friendly discussions with the parent about his or her concerns, worries, interests, and recent experiences (e.g., "How often do you talk to your mother/ father about your worries or problems?"). The six response categories range from "never" to "a few times a day."

### *Self-Esteem*

For both parents and adolescents, self-esteem was assessed by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), a series of 10 questions concerning feelings about self-worth (e.g., "I take a positive attitude toward myself"). Four responses are possible, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." In the present study the overall alpha reliability coefficient for the RSE was .86, comparable to other reports on the reproducibility of RSE (Demo, 1985).

### *Analyses*

Our analyses involve examining the relationship between aspects of parent-adolescent interaction and adolescent and parent self-esteem. We begin by examining the simple relationship between adolescent and parent reports of dimensions of the parent-adolescent relationship. Then, because existing research and theory suggest important differences in parent-adolescent interaction based on the parent's and adolescent's gender (e.g., Gecas and Schwalbe, 1986; Maccoby, 1980; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974), we present separate correlations and regression coefficients to predict the self-esteem of sons, daughters, fathers, and mothers.

## RESULTS

### *Intercorrelations of Measures*

The means, standard deviations, and Intercorrelations for all of the measures are presented in Table 1. In Table 2 we focus attention on the congruence between adolescents' perceptions and parents' perceptions of four dimensions of the parent-adolescent relationship: parents' support of adolescents, adolescents' support of

parents, parental control, and communication. Eleven of the 16 correlations are significant, with most in the .30s and .40s, No correlation exceeds .55, indicating moderate levels of convergent validity between parents' reports and adolescents' reports of the same behavior. This pattern is consistent with the findings obtained by Gecas and Schwalbe (1986), although the correlations presented here are slightly stronger.

Our data also indicate greater congruence between mothers' and adolescents' reports (seven of eight correlations are significant at the .01 level) than between fathers' and adolescents' reports. The strongest correlation is between mothers' and sons' reports of adolescents' support of parents ( $r = .55$ ), and the only nonsignificant correlation coefficient for mothers' and adolescents' reports is for perceptions of parental control over sons' activities.

Sons' reports of parental control do not correspond with fathers' reports either. In fact, all of the correlation coefficients for fathers' and adolescents' reports are smaller than the corresponding coefficients for mothers and adolescents; only four comparisons between fathers' reports and those of their children are significant, Reports of parent-adolescent communication are the only reports in which there is significant correspondence across all four dyads.

TABLE 1. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS FOR ADOLESCENTS' AND PARENTS' REPORTS OF SELF-ESTEEM AND DIMENSIONS OF THE PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP ( $n = 139$ )

Variable	PSA (1)	PSA (2)	ASP (3)	ASP (4)	PC (5)	PC (6)	PAC (7)	PAC (8)	PAR (9)	ASE (10)	PSE (11)	PS (12)	$\bar{X}$	$SD$
(1) Parents' support of adolescents (A)													12.69	2.88
(2) Parents' support of adolescents (P)	.33**												27.29	8.76
(3) Adolescents' support of parents (A)	.43**	.57**											21.80	9.19
(4) Adolescents' support of parents (P)	.19*	.42**	.31**										18.98	4.89
(5) Parental control (A)	-.39**	-.07	-.33**	-.27**									8.70	2.00
(6) Parental control (P)	.07	.27**	.20**	-.02	.15*								41.66	9.48
(7) Parent-adolescent communication (A)	.31**	.49**	.52**	.19*	-.22**	.00							15.34	4.42
(8) Parent-adolescent communication (P)	.20**	.30**	.26**	.85**	-.20**	.03	.22**						15.13	3.29
(9) Participation (A)	.24**	.31**	.60**	.05	-.15*	.26**	.39**	.04					17.45	5.76
(10) Adolescent self-esteem (A)	.09	.05	.25**	.05	-.16*	.05	.35**	.07	.36**				32.73	10.70
(11) Parental self-esteem (P)	-.03	-.05	.01	.15*	-.03	-.15*	.00	.17*	.02	.15*			35.91	10.36
(12) Parental stress (P)	-.16	-.09	-.18*	-.29**	.27**	.03	-.04	-.23**	-.12	-.11	-.16*		17.60	6.46

Note: (A) designates adolescents' reports; (P) designates parents' reports.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



TABLE 2. PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BETWEEN PARENTS' AND ADOLESCENTS' REPORTS OF SUPPORT, CONTROL, AND COMMUNICATION

Variable	Father	Mother
Son		
Parents' support of adolescents	.37*	.44**
Adolescents' support of parents	.20	.55**
Parental control	.03	-.07
Communication	.37*	.45**
<i>n</i>	29	40
Daughter		
Parents' support of adolescents	.03	.42**
Adolescents' support of parents	.17	.40**
Parental control	.43**	.32*
Communication	.32*	.34**
<i>n</i>	28	42

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

### *Correlates of Adolescent Self-esteem*

The pattern of correlations shown in Table 3 clearly indicates that the self-esteem of adolescents is more strongly correlated with their own perceptions than with parents' perceptions of the parent-adolescent relationship. Only one parent-reported variable, communication, is significantly correlated with adolescent self-esteem. But among adolescent-reported indicators of the relationship, only one (parental support) is not significantly related to adolescent self-esteem. (3) Although parental support is unrelated, adolescents' support of parents is significantly related. The variables most strongly correlated with adolescent self-esteem are communication and participation; parental control is inversely related.

The data also indicate that sons' self-esteem, compared to daughters', is more strongly correlated with dimensions of the parent-adolescent relationship. The strongest correlations in Table 3 pertain to sons' self-esteem and their perceptions of communication with parents (.44) and participation in joint activities (.41). Of the variables reported by sons, only parental support is unrelated to their self-esteem. Examining correlates of daughters' self-esteem, all five daughter-reported indicators of the relationship exhibit modest associations. For sons' and daughters' self-esteem, parental perceptions of the relationship are unrelated.

### *Regression Analysis: Adolescent Self-Esteem*

Given the correlational findings and the general consensus of existing research and theory, we regressed adolescent self-esteem on parents' and adolescents' perceptions of support and control. Two other variables, participation and adolescents' support of parents, are highly correlated with parental support of adolescents and thus appear to be assessing the same general support dimension; for these reasons the former two variables are excluded from the regression equation (similar to Gecas and Schwalbe, 1986). We also include gender in the two regression equations used to predict the self-esteem of all adolescents (Table 4). Model 1 thus includes five predictor variables frequently used in previous research. Model 2 includes these same predictors, but we add reports of parent-adolescent communication. This enables us to assess the amount of additional variance explained by these two variables and to determine if the effects of variables included in Model 1 are different when their effects are partialled out by the inclusion of communication variables in Model 2.

The data indicate that boys ( $\bar{x} = 33.52$ ,  $SD = 10.42$ ) have slightly, but not significantly, higher self-esteem than girls ( $\bar{x} = 31.91$ ,  $SD = 11.03$ ). In the regression predicting the self-esteem of all adolescents (Table 4, Model 1), only parental control exerts a significant influence, and its effects are negative in direction. But in Model 2 the direct effects of parental control become nonsignificant and the only significant predictor is adolescents' reports of communication, contributing to a substantially larger  $R^2$  (.161) than in Model 1 (.043). The same pattern holds when boys and girls are examined separately: when perceptions of communication are included in the

TABLE 3. PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR ADOLESCENTS' SELF-ESTEEM AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP

Variable	Adolescents' Self-esteem (n = 139)		Sons' Self-esteem (n = 71)		Daughters' Self-esteem (n = 68)	
	Parents' Report	Adolescents' Report	Parents' Report	Sons' Report	Parents' Report	Daughters' Report
Parental support of adolescents	.048	.087	.079	.046	.042	.202*
Adolescent support of parents	.046	.254*	.007	.351**	.095	.209*
Parental control	.046	-.183*	.133	-.259*	-.061	-.199*
Communication	.237*	.361**	.056	.444**	.093	.277*
Participation	—	.360**	—	.407**	—	.312**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

TABLE 4. STANDARDIZED BETA COEFFICIENTS FROM REGRESSIONS OF ADOLESCENTS' SELF-ESTEEM ON ADOLESCENT AND PARENTS' REPORTS OF THE PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP

Predictor Variable	Adolescents' Self-esteem (n = 139)		Boys' Self-esteem (n = 71)		Girls' Self-esteem (n = 68)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Gender	-.075	-.082				
Adolescent support	.011	-.057	-.126	-.165	.114	.036
Adolescent control	-.201*	-.111	-.262*	-.074	-.147	-.173
Parental support	.031	.062	.061	-.116	.068	.064
Parental control	.057	.081	.124	.117	-.033	.027
Adolescent communication	—	.368**	—	.494**	—	.298**
Parental communication	—	.193	—	.015	—	.011
R <sup>2</sup>	.043	.161	.042	.248	.050	.105

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

regression, none of the variables in Model 1 have significant effects. Adding reports of communication explains an additional 20% of the variation in boys' self-esteem and an additional 5% of the variation in girls' self-esteem. It is also evident that boys' self-esteem, compared to that of girls, is more strongly influenced by parent-adolescent interaction, corroborating the findings of Gecas and Schwalbe (1986).

### *Correlates of Parental Self-Esteem*

Extending prior investigations by examining the reciprocal influences of parent-adolescent relationships on the self-esteem of parents, Table 5 reveals again that one's own perception of these relationships is related to self-esteem, while others' perceptions show relatively little relationship. Parents' self-esteem is higher if they perceive that they receive support from, and can communicate with, their adolescent children. Parental reports of stress in raising their sons and daughters is adversely related to parents' self-esteem, although this effect is not significant among fathers. Parent-adolescent communication, on the other hand, is significantly correlated with fathers' self-esteem but not with that of mothers. In sum, the correlational data provide some indication of reciprocal socialization influences in parent-adolescent relationships.

### *Regression Analysis: Parental Self-esteem*

Next, we regressed parental self-esteem on gender and reports of adolescent support of parents, parental stress, and parent-adolescent communication. Parents' support of adolescents was not included in the analysis because of its high intercorrelations with adolescents' support of parents. The data presented in Table 6 confirm the earlier findings indicating that self-perceptions of parent-adolescent relations are related to self-esteem, while others' perceptions are consistently unrelated. Further, there is no gender difference in parents' self-esteem. In Model 1 parental judgments of support received from adolescents are positively related, and parental stress is negatively related, to parents' self-esteem. But when reports of communication are included in Model 2, the direct effects of support from adolescents become nonsignificant and communication exerts a significant positive effect. In addition, the amount of explained variation in parents' self-esteem is doubled (to 17%) by including reports of communication. Consistent



TABLE 5. PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR PARENTS' SELF-ESTEEM AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP

Variable	Parents' Self-esteem (n = 139)		Fathers' Self-esteem (n = 57)		Mothers' Self-esteem (n = 82)	
	Parents' Report	Adolescents' Report	Parents' Report	Adolescents' Report	Parents' Report	Adolescents' Report
Adolescent support of parents	.166*	.013	.222*	.044	.199*	-.009
Parental support of adolescents	-.054	.087	.010	.011	-.107	.000
Parental stress	-.178*	—	-.145	—	-.238**	—
Communication	.176*	.008	.285**	.061	.102	-.049
Participation	—	.021	—	.074	—	.051

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

TABLE 6. STANDARDIZED BETA COEFFICIENTS FROM REGRESSIONS OF PARENTS' SELF-ESTEEM ON ADOLESCENTS' AND PARENTS' REPORTS OF THE PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP

Predictor Variable	Parents' Self-esteem (n = 139)		Fathers' Self-esteem (n = 57)		Mothers' Self-esteem (n = 82)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Gender	-.022	-.039				
Adolescent support	-.047	-.047	-.055	-.069	-.088	.079
Parental support	.218*	.051	.149	-.191	.118	.099
Parental stress	-.198*	-.211*	-.088	-.077	-.247*	-.211*
Adolescent communication	—	.004	—	.072	—	-.051
Parental communication	—	.248*	—	.379**	—	.034
R <sup>2</sup>	.086	.169	.041	.071	.045	.048

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

with the correlational findings, self-reports of communication are significantly related to the self-esteem of fathers but not mothers, Further, parental stress is again inversely related to mothers' self-esteem but unrelated to that of fathers.

## DISCUSSION

Our data provide empirical support for two central propositions: (a) adolescents and their parents have independent yet overlapping perceptions of their relationships; and (b) the individual's perceptions of the relationship are consistently related to his or her self-esteem while the others' perceptions are generally unrelated. Viewed from a symbolic interactionist perspective, these findings suggest that the intimate, challenging, and emotionally charged nature of parent-adolescent relations is indeed influential in shaping the self-concepts of all family members involved. We believe the nature of these relationships is critical in that both adolescents and parents serve as significant others whose opinions and reflected appraisals are influential in shaping the others' self-esteem. Reflected appraisals are mutually transmitted as parents and their children interact in daily social encounters.

In general, the reports of adolescents on family relations were more congruent with the reports of mothers than of fathers, highlighting the central role of the mother in interpersonal family relations. Our findings also indicate that the self-esteem of boys, compared to that of girls, is more strongly related to family relations, replicating the findings of Gecas and Schwalbe (1986). They propose that one reason for "the stronger relationship between parental behavior and boys' self-esteem (compared to that for girls) is ... greater parental responsiveness to the self-esteem of boys than of girls—that is, responsiveness in terms of control and support behavior" (1986: 44).(4) Adolescent boys may express and communicate their self-esteem in ways that prompt parents to respond (with support, control, or communication), while girls provide fewer or more subtle expressions and thereby deny parents potential cues they need for appropriate responses. For both boys and girls, however, communication and participation with parents are strongly tied to adolescent self-esteem, illustrating highly reciprocal social relationships, in which shared activities, conversations, and emotional support are correlates of children' self-esteem.

From the perspective of the adolescent, both male and female, the quality of intrafamilial communication is clearly the strongest correlate of his or her self-esteem, but the adolescent's perception of familial communication is not significantly related to the self-esteem of his or her parents. From the parents' perspective,

communication is related to their self-esteem, although this relationship disappears when mothers are examined separately. For other family members, however, these results support Olson's circumplex model, which argues for the critical function of communication in family relations. In fact, with communication entered in our regression equations predicting adolescent self-esteem, the effects of variables emphasized in previous research (support received from parents and parental control) are nonsignificant. We do not interpret these findings (based on a restricted sample, discussed below), as suggesting that parents' support of adolescents is unimportant. Rather, we want to emphasize that in conceptualizing parent-adolescent interaction, greater attention must be devoted to the role of communication, to the possibility that communication is itself an indicator of support, and to the realization that support (measured as bidirectional in the current study) is a multidimensional construct including components of physical affection and companionship (Barber and Thomas, 1986).

Our findings underscore the reciprocal character of parent-adolescent socialization. It is commonly assumed that the nature of parent-child interaction is influential in shaping the self-concept and broader personality of children and adolescents. The evidence presented here suggests further that fathers' self-esteem is related to a high level of communication with adolescents and that mothers' self-esteem is adversely related to stress associated with the responsibilities of parenting teenagers.

Research suggests that while role identities vary in importance, adolescents' evaluations of themselves as sons or daughters are quite important to their self-esteem (Hoelter, 1986). We should not be surprised, then, to find that performance in what is usually considered the most important familial role, namely, parent, is related to an adult's overall self-esteem. Although relationships with children appear to be one important factor for adult self-esteem, there are probably other relationships—familial (e.g., relations with spouse and one's elderly parents) and nonfamilial—that account for the variability of an adult's self-esteem level. This is not an unreasonable assumption given that adults, compared to children, are likely to be involved in a greater diversity of settings and to be exposed to a greater number of significant others. Thus, adults might be expected to derive their sense of self from a broader range of sources than is the case for adolescents. These findings are supportive of sociological and life course perspectives that argue for the plasticity of adult characteristics without denying the reality that some variables, such as self-esteem, are more malleable during childhood and adolescence than during adulthood. The degree of flexibility in adult self-esteem relative to that of adolescents is an empirical question that we must leave for other investigations.

We must acknowledge that the homogenous composition of our sample, particularly on the dimension of social class, limits the generalizability of our findings. Several studies (Kohn, 1969; Mortimer, 1976; Thomas et al., 1974) indicate that middle-class father-son relationships are more supportive than those in the working-class, and Kohn argues that these differences have implications for boys' self-esteem. Adams (1986: 165) asserts that "middle-class parents have consistently been found to be more emotionally warm and expressive toward their children, showing pleasure in them and generally bolstering their sense of self-esteem." We also need to point out that by examining intact two-parent families we are in no position to generalize our findings to relationships in single-parent families or other family structures. An obvious next step for future research would be to replicate the present findings with a more diverse sample.

Another issue that deserves attention in future research is the possibility that shared method variance attributable to self-reports contributes to the greater correspondence between one's self-esteem and one's reports of family relations than between one's self-esteem and others' reports (Demo, 1985; Savin-Williams, 1987). Because the reciprocal nature of parent-adolescent relations has been ignored for so long and the issues of measurement and causality require extensive research to resolve, it is clear that considerable work lies ahead before we will be able to disentangle the intricacies of family influences on self-esteem.

#### FOOTNOTES

(1). The original sample consisted of 223 children and 165 parents. The 139 parent-child dyads on which this study is based were included because of their ability to meet several criteria. First, only families in which both a

parent and a child filled out a questionnaire were included. Second, only two-parent families were retained in the final sample. Finally, although in some cases both the mother and father from the same family filled out questionnaires, only one parent from each family was included. In most such cases, fathers rather than mothers were selected because of the lower overall rate of participation of fathers.

(2). Because of the wide range in the youths' ages, we ran partial correlations, controlling for age, between adolescent self-esteem and each of the parent-adolescent interaction variables. In all cases the first-order correlations (see footnote 3) were nearly identical to the zero-order correlations, indicating that age of the adolescent does not affect the central relationships discussed in this article.

(3). We also examined the partial correlations, controlling for age, between adolescents' self-esteem and their reports of parent-adolescent interaction. With age partialled out, the correlations with adolescent self-esteem are nearly identical to the zero-order correlations: parents' support of adolescents (.075); adolescents' support of parents (.237); parental control (-.156); communication (.344); and participation (.347). Thus, age is not an important factor in these relationships.

(4). Gecas and Schwalbe also speculate that girls' self-esteem (compared to that for boys) may not be as dependent on family relations because during adolescence girls' concerns turn to "the rating and dating complex" (Waller, 1937) and to the evaluation of same-sexed and cross-sexed peers.

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