

Sweet sixteen... Adolescents' Problems and The Peer Group as Source of Support

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This survey reports on the coping process of adolescents with three relational problems, two personal problems, and two socio-institutional problems. Overall, 770 Italian adolescents between 14 and 20 years took part. They responded to a questionnaire consisting of four parts: a part querying demographic data, one on the peer group the adolescents join, the third was on life values, and in the final part seven developmental tasks were presented and aspects of the coping process were investigated.

The study shows, first, that adolescents who strongly identify with their peers also feel close to their family, their best friend, and their school mates. Thus, identification with the peers does not lead to isolation from the family. Second, the study shows that identification with social entities, in part, is due to the similarity of values the adolescent and the respective entities have. The more similar life values are the more strongly the adolescents identify with the peers, the family, the best friend, or the school mates.

Third, effective coping with developmental tasks was found to be dependent on the degree of identification with the peers. The type of group that adolescents join, be it a formal group or an informal street group, had no significant effect on the coping process. Highly identified adolescents more often relied on their family, peers, and other social entities for emotional and instrumental support, and trace more advantages out of a developmental problem for their future.

Introduction

Adolescence is a life period in which great changes are observable both within the individual and the social environment. It presents a period of developmental transition (Eichorn, Mussen, Clausen, Haan, & Honzik, 1981) that can evoke serious psychological difficulties which often persist into adulthood. However, as Olbrich (1985), Petersen (1988) and Petersen, Silbereisen and Sorensen (1989) emphasize, it is inappropriate to assume that psychological difficulties

in adolescence are normal and something that young people grow out of. Petersen (1988) reports, for instance, a study which reveals that 57% of the young adolescents have a basically positive development during early adolescence; 32% have more intermittent and probably situational conflicts, and about 11% of the teenagers had serious chronic difficulties. Also, Offer (1983) reports that 90% of teenagers are happy with their life, 70% accept and judge positively their body-changes, almost all describe themselves as work-oriented and have no serious problems with the family and their friends. Finally, Kazdin (1990) summarizes that approximately 12% of the children suffer emotional disturbance; between 2% and 4% suffer severe disorders and the remaining 8% to 10% are in need of treatment.

Although, adolescence is not necessarily storming and troublesome for anybody, teenagers traverse it with varying degrees of difficulty. Seiffge-Krenke (1983) found that among 350 German adolescents only about 12% had serious problems. Those adolescents had problems with the family, reported frequent disagreements and almost no autonomy. As concerns the peers, they were dissatisfied for not having any friends. Moreover, they felt socially isolated, lonely, and suffered from low self-esteem. The intensity of turmoils during adolescence are assumed to depend on the availability of instrumental and emotional support from others. The more support teenagers derive from their families, peers, friends, and colleagues, or from a fictive person which can «materialize» through a diary (Seiffge-Krenke, 1985), the less troublesome their transition into adulthood might be.

Traditionally, the relationship between adolescents and the family was perceived as a conflictual rather than a supportive one. Despite the necessity of the family system to readjust to the needs and developmental changes of the adolescent and its difficulties to achieve a new «homeostasis» (Petersen, 1988), the home can be an important source of support. Connectedness with the family was found to be favorable for adolescent development of role-taking and identity development. However, the family needs to leave the adolescent also enough «space» for the development of his or her individuality. According to Cooper, Grotevant and Condon (1983) and Grotevant and Cooper (1985) individuation in the family context, a balance between connectedness and individuality, affects positively the transition process. Seiffge-Krenke and Olbrich (1982) show that the parents often provide significant support to adolescents in reorganizing the intra-familial relationship rather than being a source of distress. However, if parents observe changes in the teenager fearfully, if they are shaken and insecure about the needs for autonomy, or are too norm-oriented, then they affect negatively the transition process.

The interaction with the peer group may also help the teenagers on their ways to grow into adulthood. The concept of peers implies in this study a small group of similarly aged, fairly close friends, sharing the same activities. The peer group becomes more important during adolescence. Adolescents spend and enjoy more time with the peers than anybody else and are more involved in the group's activities (Coleman, 1980; Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1989; 1990). Peer group relations offer the adolescents multiple opportunities for witnessing the strategies others use to cope with similar problems, and for observing how effective they are. The peers present an area for learning to present oneself in the society and for accounting for one's actions (Weinstein, 1973). They present a reference point, a setting which allows the teenagers to explore autonomy without the control of adults and parents (Olbrich, 1985).

Brown, Eicher and Petrie (1986) asked adolescents to explain why belonging to a peer group was important to them and found seven clusters of responses. The peers were perceived as a means for helping:

- a) to define one's identity, interests, abilities, and personality;
- b) to building one's reputations;
- c) to develop a balance between individuality and conformity;
- d) to provide instrumental and emotional support;
- e) to provide a chance to build and maintain friendships. Moreover,

- f) the peer group engages in various activities to which the adolescents participate and entertain themselves.

The peer group plays an important role in the period of the adolescents' emergence from the family towards independence. However, the increased involvement with the peer group does not necessarily lead to a rejection of the family, as the traditional view holds. Recent studies rather suggest that adolescents perceive both peers and parents as competent guides in difficult conflictual areas (Coleman, 1980; Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Dreher & Dreher, 1985; Hexel & König, 1986; Larsen, 1972; Stiksrud, 1988). Coleman (1980, p. 428) concludes his taught-provoking article on friendship and the peer group in adolescence stating that the peer group fills a vacuum rather than provokes a conflict between parents and teenagers.

The support deriving from the family and peers seems to vary according to the types of problems of the teenagers. Coleman and Hendry (1990), for instance, hold that parents' influence prevails in future-oriented domains, such as the school and work career, whereas the peers' influence centers around current events and activities, such as misunderstandings with the partner or conflicts with friends (see also Kandal & Lesser, 1972; Hunter, 1985). Similar results were presented by Seiffge-Krenke (1985): adolescents indicated that they talk most often to the family as a strategy to cope with problems, especially with the problems concerning school, work, and the future in general. When the problem concerned social relations, such as interactions with the family, the peers or friends, or the self, the adolescents said that they talk to both the family and the peers.

It can also be assumed that the relationship with peers favorably influences coping with developmental tasks if the teenager is able to achieve a balance of connectedness and individuality. Those adolescents who are able to establish a strong friendship with the peers and are at the same time able to keep their personal ideosyncracies are probably better off than teenagers in loose contacts with peers or adolescents who face the risk of becoming deindividuated in the group.

As the family and peers have found to be sources of support to the adolescents, the best friend and the school mates may also provide help. At an earlier age the friend is important for common activities for the help he or she can provide, whereas at later stages of adolescence, common interests, intimacy and similarity in attitudes and values play an increasingly greater role. Coleman (1980) found that friendship is important to both males and females. However, the meaning of friendship is somewhat different for males and females. Despite controversial results, it can be concluded that boys lay stress on relationships that are action-oriented whereas girls need friends to satisfy emotional needs.

In sum, it can be hypothesized that those adolescents are better equipped to deal with stormy situations when they receive emotional and instrumental support from their families, the peers and other social entities. Establishing a friendly and supportive relationship with the peers does not necessarily imply a conflict with the parents. Adolescents who are able to establish a positive relationship with their peers are likely to maintain a positive relationship also with their family. Thus, closeness to the peers should be positively correlated with closeness to the family and to other social entities.

In previous studies (Palmonari et al., 1989; 1990; Pombeni, Palmonari, & Kirchler, submitted for publication) the relationship with the peer group was operationalized as degree of identification with the peers. It was shown that the stronger the identification of adolescents with their peers, the more likely they talk about their problems to somebody, peers, parents, a friend or an adult, the better they cope with developmental tasks, and the more positive their social representation of peer groups other than the own. In these studies, identification with the peers implies that the adolescent feels close to the group and similar to the peers but maintains his or her individuality. It is important to note that no delinquent peer groups participated in the study. Thus, the findings of a positive effect of identification with peers on the transition process hold for peer groups who are not deviant and for who have close relationships that permit individuation. If the peers commit micro-criminal acts, such as abusing drugs, or unwanted behavior, such as cigarette smoking, the closeness of the teenagers to the

group is positively correlated to the risk that they commit similar acts (Morgan & Grube, 1989).

Our previous studies showed that it is the type of relationships teenagers are able to establish with their age colleagues that plays a major role in the transition process rather than the type of group they belong to. Common sense holds that those adolescents are better off who join well formalized peer groups with a specific program of activities; such as for instance, groups engaged in sport and physical education, religious and social programs; whereas teenagers in informal groups, such as street groups, are in danger. In fact, the summary of a conference on juvenile criminality which appeared in an Italian newspaper recently (Pizzo, 1990, p. 22) displays the following description of the deviant teenager: Juvenile gangsters come «Di famiglia sottoproletaria, cresciuti nei quartieri degradati, non hanno frequentato la scuola, sono spesso ospiti dei riformatori (di droga), sono stati educati dalla strada». This «mask» for identifying juvenile delinquents could suggest that those who are «educated at the streets» necessarily become deviant. Although, it may be the case that among delinquent adolescents one often finds teenagers who meet their peers in informal settings at streets and corners of the cities, this does not imply a circular conclusion such as those who meet with peers on street corners are likely to become delinquent. Since approximately three quarters of the Italian adolescents have peers meeting on the streets (Palmonari et al., 1989; 1990), it is not astonishing that the majority of the delinquent teenagers are educated on the streets.

This paper presents a survey that was conducted in two Italian cities on 770 adolescents, aiming to study, first, whether identification with the peer group is correlated positively with identification with the family. Second, the influence of type of group, formal or informal, and of identification with the peers, on coping with several developmental tasks will be studied.

Method

Subjects

In this survey, 770 adolescents from the cities of Campobasso ($n = 442$), and Vicenza ($n = 328$), Italy, took part. Most of the adolescents (77.8%) indicated that they belonged to an informal or street group, 10.3% were members of sport groups; 5.0% and 4.0% joined religious groups and scouts, respectively. Seventeen (2.5%) adolescents were members of groups engaged in artistic performances, and three (.4%) were in political groups.

Most of the participants met their groups fairly regularly (89.0%; 11.0% indicated meeting the group sometimes). The respective percentages of adolescents meeting informal groups, sport groups, religious groups, scouts, artistic groups, and political groups regularly are 99.6%, 98.6%, 100%, 100%, 94.1%, and 100%.

On the average, the participants were 16.21 (standard deviation = 1.408) years old. No age differences were observed across the groups (mean age ranges from 15.97 years in sport groups to 16.35 years in artistic groups). All participants were students, 39.2% males, 60.8% females. The distribution of males and females differed somewhat across the groups ($F_{(5,675)} = 3.06$; $p = .01$). While in sport groups male adolescents predominated (57.1% males; 42.9% females), religious groups consisted mainly of females (20.6% males; 79.4% females). The respective percentages of males in informal groups, scouts, artistic, and political groups are 40.0%, 33.3%, 41.2%, and 66.7%. Most of the participants were living with their parents (92.6%; 7.4% were in single parent households), with fathers being employed (93.4%; 6.6% of the fathers were unemployed), and the mother being a housewife (56.5%; 43.5% of the mothers had a paid job). No differences between the informal and formal groups were observed in any of these demographic characteristics.

Material

On the basis of the results of a previous interview study (Pombeni et al., 1991), a

questionnaire was developed to collect information on identification with various social entities, life values, and the coping process with seven critical situations. The questionnaire focused on all relevant aspects of the coping process that were mentioned by the interviewees. Besides the demographic data, the questionnaire consisted of four parts. The subjects were asked:

- a) to indicate the peer group they join regularly and to define it, that is, to indicate whether it was a group meeting informally on street corners and places or a formal group with specific regular meeting times. Since adolescents often participate in more than one peer group, they were asked to indicate the group that is most important to them and they would not like to leave for any reasons. They were instructed to refer to the indicated group when answering the following questions.
- b) Second, Brown's identification scale for the group (Brown, 1988), and adjusted forms for their own family, the school mates, and the best friend were presented. Answers were given on five-point scales. The reliabilities for the four scales amounted to Chronbach $\alpha = .82; .88; .89; \text{ and } .82$.
- c) Then, the participants indicated how important 11 values (family, work, friends, intimate friend, leisure time, school, sport, social engagement, religious engagement, money, and political engagement) are for themselves, their peer group, their own family, their class mates, and their best friend. Answers were given on 5-point scales ranging from 1 = unimportant to 5 = important.
- d) In the last part, seven problems were presented:

Three relational conflicts assessed:

- 1) Have you ever had a conflict with your best friend with serious risks of breaking the friendship?
- 2) Have you ever happened to reveal a secret to a good friend who then betrayed you?
- 3) Have you ever suffered from misunderstandings in your family? Think of a concrete event which made you feel bad.

Two personal problems were tapped:

- 4) Have you ever felt lonely and socially isolated?
- 5) Have you ever felt empty, lacking life values?

There were two socio-institutional problems:

- 6) Have you ever had serious problems at school, that led you to consider giving up with school?
- 7) Have you ever committed an illegal action such as drug abuse, act of vandalism, shop lifting etc.?

The participants had to imagine the problems as vividly as possible and then to indicate how often the problem had occurred to them (scale from 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often). If the problem had occurred sometimes or often the participants specified the following:

- how intensive the imagined problem had been (1 = not intensive, 4 = very intensive),
- what they had felt at the moment (the participants indicated one or two of the 12 emotions listed. The emotions ranged from negative and active (e. g., anger, aggression, hate) to negative and neutral (e. g., bad mood, dissatisfaction) to negative and passive (e. g., loneliness, anxiety, shame, loss of self esteem),
- with whom they had talked about the problem (peer group, best friend, parents, school mates, other adults, nobody),
- how useful the talk had been (scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = very useful),
- why the talk had been useful (because of psychological changes (i.e., lessening of bad mood or augmentation of self esteem) or situational changes (i.e., change of the problematic situation or confrontation with other points of view),

- who had found a way out of the problem (1 myself, peer group, best friend, parents, school mates, other adults, the time passed by, the problem is still present),
- how useful the experience had been for their life (1 = it helped change my mood, 2 = I changed my behavior, 3 = I matured).

Procedure

During December 1989 and January 1990 the adolescents were approached by several student researchers at various schools in the cities of Campobasso and Vicenza, Italy. After having explained the scope of the study, the adolescents were invited to participate, and the questionnaires were distributed. Complete anonymity of data handling was assured. Almost all the individuals approached agreed to participate. On the average, completing the questionnaire took 30 to 40 minutes.

Results

Overview

The scope of the present study is threefold. First, it was intended to search for determinants of identification with the peers and, second, to investigate the correlations between identification with peers and other social entities. Third, the coping process with the seven critical situations was analyzed. Each situation was analyzed separately by path analyses.

Determinants of identification

The participants had to indicate how important eleven life values were for themselves, their peers, their family, their school mates, and their best friend. The mean importance ratings for adolescents of the six types of peer groups are presented in Table 1. A Statistical analyses (eleven analyses of variance with the type of peer group as independent variable; F values range from .86 to 12.00 with 5 and 665 to 673 degrees of freedom; $p = .479$ to $p < .001$) revealed that those adolescents joining sport groups attributed sport more importance than the other adolescents did. Members of sport groups, religious groups, and scouts thought social engagement is more valuable than did those of the other groups. As expected, peers from religious groups retained that religious engagement is more important than the others and were less interested in money. Political engagement was highly important to the members of political groups. For adolescents of all groups the family, work, friends, partner, and leisure time were the most important values out of the presented value list (see Table 1).

Identification with the peer group was assumed to depend on the similarity between life values of oneself and the perceived values of the peer group. The correlation between identification and the euclidean distance between value list for oneself and the peers amounted to $r = -.13$ ($p < .001$), indicating that the higher the correspondence between the adolescents' and their peers' values the higher the identification with the group.

Several t -tests with sex, employment status of the parents, living with both or one parent only as independent variables and identification as dependent variable yielded no significant effects. An analysis of variance with the type of group as independent variable revealed an effect of $F_{(5,675)} = 3.20$; $p < .007$. As linear contrasts showed, members of scouts ($M = 4.30$) and sport groups ($M = 4.21$) identified more with their group than members of all other groups (the respective means for informal, religious, artistic, and political groups are $M = 3.98$; 3.97, 4.07, and 3.33). As already found in previous studies (Palmonari et al., 1989; 1990), members of informal groups do not identify less with their peers than members of formal groups in general.

Table 1
Mean importance of eleven life values by type of peer group

Life values	Informal groups	Religious groups	Scouts groups	Sport groups	Artistic groups	Political groups
Family	4.48	4.35	4.52	4.71	4.12	3.33
Work	4.08	3.85	3.96	4.27	4.18	3.67
Friends	4.53	4.56	4.52	4.60	4.00	4.67
Partner	4.30	4.09	4.11	4.15	4.12	4.67
Leisure time	4.30	3.97	4.12	4.29	4.18	4.33
School, culture	3.83	4.06	4.04	3.90	3.94	3.33
Sport	3.70 ^b	3.65 ^b	3.82 ^b	4.66 ^a	3.77 ^b	5.00 ^{ab}
Social engagement	3.47 ^a	3.97 ^b	4.07 ^b	3.72 ^b	3.82 ^{ab}	4.67 ^{ab}
Religious engagement	3.22 ^a	4.15 ^b	3.61 ^{abc}	3.64 ^c	3.73 ^{abc}	3.00 ^{abc}
Money	3.62 ^b	2.68 ^a	2.85 ^a	3.59 ^b	3.94 ^b	4.33 ^b
Political engagement	2.09 ^a	1.97 ^a	2.48 ^a	2.30 ^a	2.31 ^a	4.00 ^b

Note. Different superscripts indicate significantly different means ($p < .01$). For instance, values followed by letter «a» are statistically significant from values followed by letters «b» or «c» etc. If a value is followed by «ab», the value is neither different from values followed by letters «a» or «b».

Identification with the peers and other social entities

If adolescents identifying highly with their peers are also willing and able to establish a close relationship with their family, best-friend and school mates, and further to highly identify with them, then the correlation between the identification indices should be positive. If the assumption that identification with peers leaves no space for identifying with family, best-friend, or school mates proves true, then the correlation between various identification scores should be negative.

All correlations between identification indices are positive and statistically significant ($p < .001$). Thus, the higher the identification with peers, the more the adolescents identify with their family, school mates and best friend (Tab. 2).

Table 2
Correlations between identification indices

Identification with	Peers	Family	School mates
Peers	—		
Family	.18	—	
School mates	.24	.22	—
Best friend	.38	.19	.24

Similarly, as identification with the peers, the remaining identification indices are mainly determined by the similarity of life values. The higher the similarity between the subjects' life values and the perceived values of the family the higher the identification with the family ($r = .44$; $p < .001$). The correlations between identification with the school mates and the similarity with their values amounts to $r = .29$; $p < .001$. The respective correlation between identification with the best friend and similarity of values is $r = .19$; $p < .001$. While the

type of group adolescents join and the employment status of the parents have no impact on identification indices, sex and age were of importance. Females reported less identification with the family ($M = 4.24$) than males ($M = 4.38$; $t(728) = 2.22$; $p < .027$) and higher identification with the best-friend ($M = 4.44$) than males did ($M = 4.19$; $t(723) = 5.20$; $p < .001$). Age was significantly correlated with identification with the family and school mates: the older the subjects the lower they identified with the family ($r = -.10$; $p < .003$) and the school mates ($r = -.14$; $p < .001$).

Coping with critical situations

The next step of the analysis concerned coping processes with critical incidents. If a subject had indicated that a critical problem had never occurred in his or her life, the specific case was excluded from the analysis. The critical problems with the highest frequencies of occurrence were relational problems (71.3% for revealing of a secret by a good friend; 77.8% for misunderstandings with the family; 60.4% for a serious conflict with the best friend). Overall, 69.8% of the adolescents reported having felt lonely; 59.1% experienced lack of life values. Frustration at school as a serious problem was experienced by 56.7% of the subjects, and 20.2% of the participants reported a minor criminal act.

When these problems occurred, the participants said they either talked to their peers, best friend, family, other persons (adults, school mates), or to no one. The frequencies of talking to somebody varied from problem to problem. Table 3 shows the percentages of talks with somebody as depending on the type of problem and identification with the peers. The sample was split on the median of identification into two subgroups with high versus low identification, respectively. Table 3 shows that adolescents most often approached their best friend if they had a problem except for problems at school for which they sought help in their family. However, they were also often not able to talk to anybody. Adolescents with high identification more often sought support from their peers when relational or personal problems occurred and when they felt frustrated at school (see Table 3).

The process of coping with the seven problems was perceived as moving from the awareness of a problem and emotional reactions to the need to talk to somebody, to spontaneous outcomes of the talk, a solution of the problem and long term effects of the problem. This process was operationalized by measuring:

- a) the frequency with which the presented problem occurred in the life of the participating adolescents and the importance of the respective problem,
- b) emotional reactions (either passive, such as fear, anxiety, blame = 1; neutral, such as dissatisfaction, bad mood = 2; or active, such as aggression, anger, hate = 3),
- c) the persons approached to talk to (peers, best friend, family, school mates, other adults, nobody; dummy variable),
- d) the evaluation of the talk (scale ranging from 1 = negative to 5 = positive),
- e) immediate outcomes of the talk (psychological change = 1; or change of the objective situation = 2),
- f) source finding the solution (the adolescents himself/herself, best friend, peers, family, other adults, school mates, no solution of the problem or amelioration by the time passing by; dummy variable), and
- g) long term outcomes of the problem (1 = change of the mood state, 2 = change of behavior, 3 = maturation).

These 7 variables as well as identification with the peers, age, sex and type of group the adolescents belonged to (this variable was dichotomized with informal groups on the one hand and formal groups; i.e., religious groups, scouts, sports, artistic, political groups; on the other hand) were included in seven path analyses, one for each of the presented critical situations. The results of the analyses are presented in Figures 1 to 7.

Table 3

Percentages of adolescents talking to somebody as depending on type of problem and identification with the peer group

Talking to:	Peers	Friend	Parents	Others	Nobody
Low identification (n = 333)					
Conflict with best friend	12.1	45.9	18.8	5.8	17.4
Betrayal by a friend	12.9	49.8	10.7	8.1	18.5
Conflict with the family	8.0	42.0	11.0	11.3	27.7
Social isolation	4.3	38.3	10.6	4.2	42.6
Lack of life values	8.2	33.8	17.9	6.3	33.8
Frustration at school	6.4	27.7	36.7	15.9	13.3
Microcriminality	23.4	35.9	6.3	1.6	32.8
Total	10.8	39.1	16.0	7.5	26.6
High identification (n = 349)					
Conflict with best friend	20.8	52.0	9.9	4.4	12.9
Betrayal by a friend	16.0	50.8	9.4	5.4	18.4
Conflict with the family	12.1	47.5	10.2	5.3	24.9
Social isolation	10.3	32.2	15.5	3.4	38.6
Lack of life values	15.2	45.7	10.7	2.9	25.5
Frustration at school	13.5	28.5	30.1	12.9	15.0
Microcriminality	24.1	26.6	3.8	6.3	39.2
Total	16.0	40.5	12.8	5.8	24.9

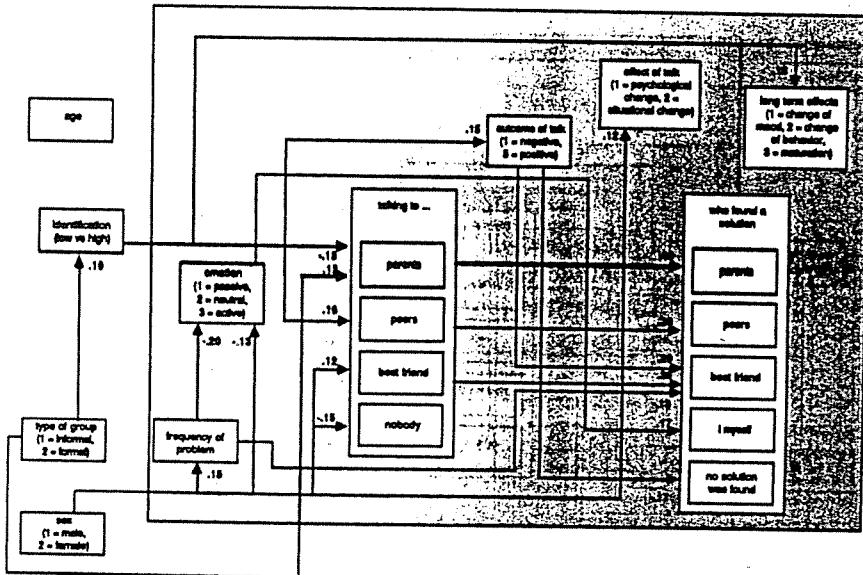


Figure 1. Coping with serious conflicts with best friend (n = 324)

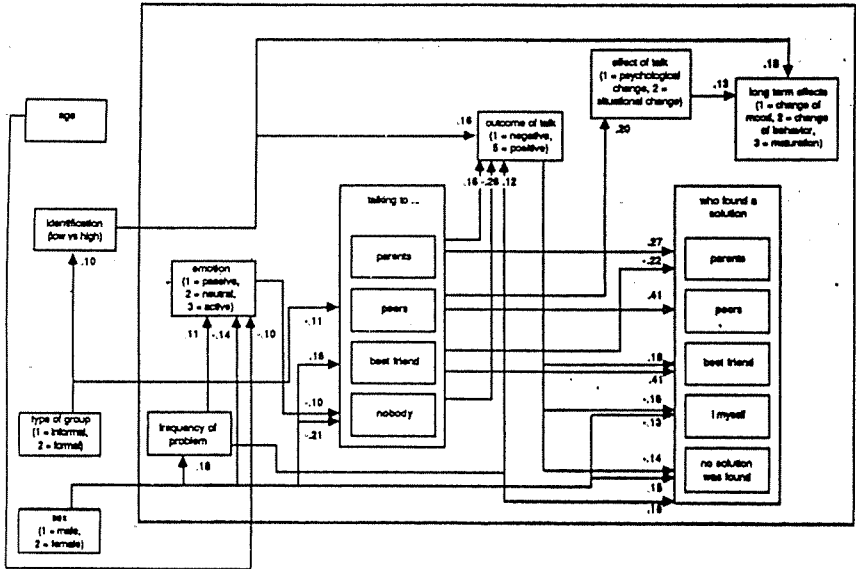


Figure 2. Coping with a betrayal by a friend ($n = 362$)

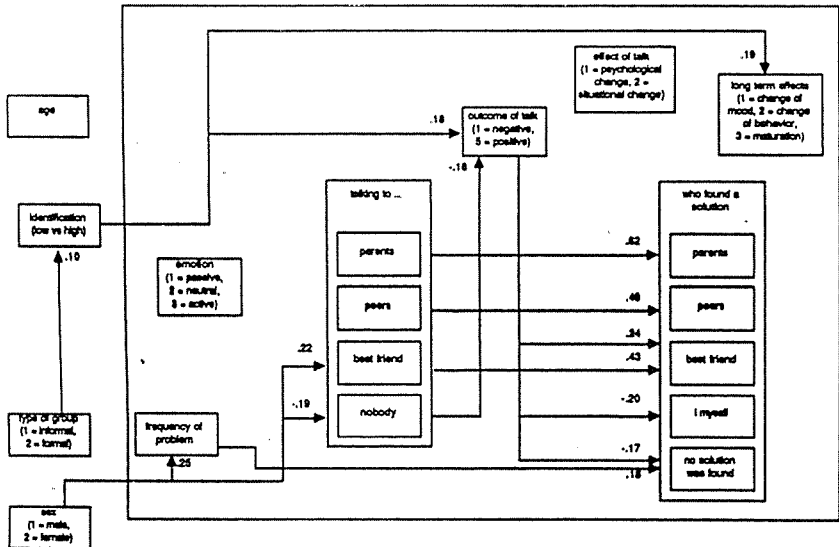


Figure 3. Coping with serious conflict with the family ($n = 352$)

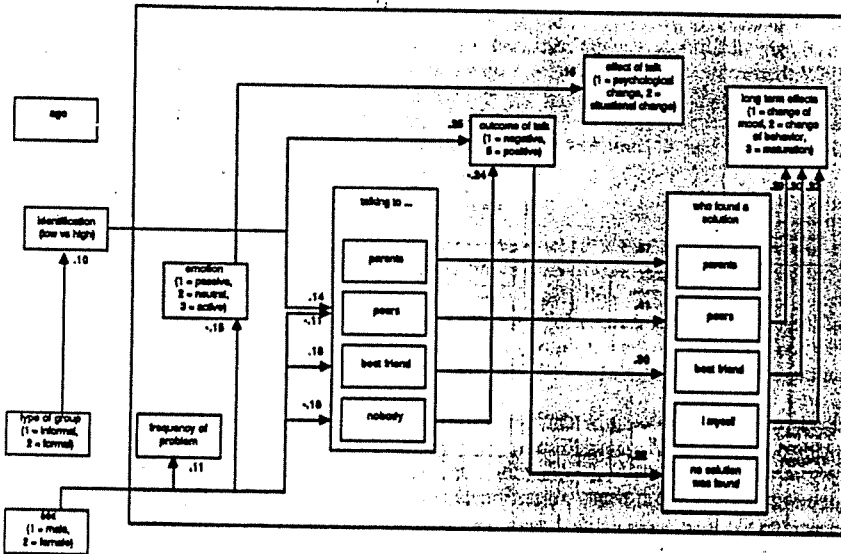


Figure 4. Coping with feelings of loneliness ($n = 264$)

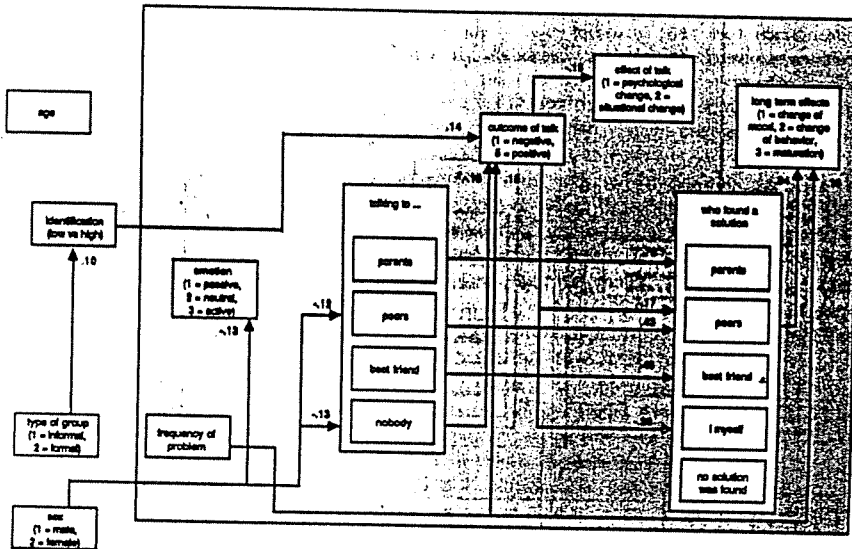


Figure 5. Coping with feelings of a psychological vacuum ($n = 268$)

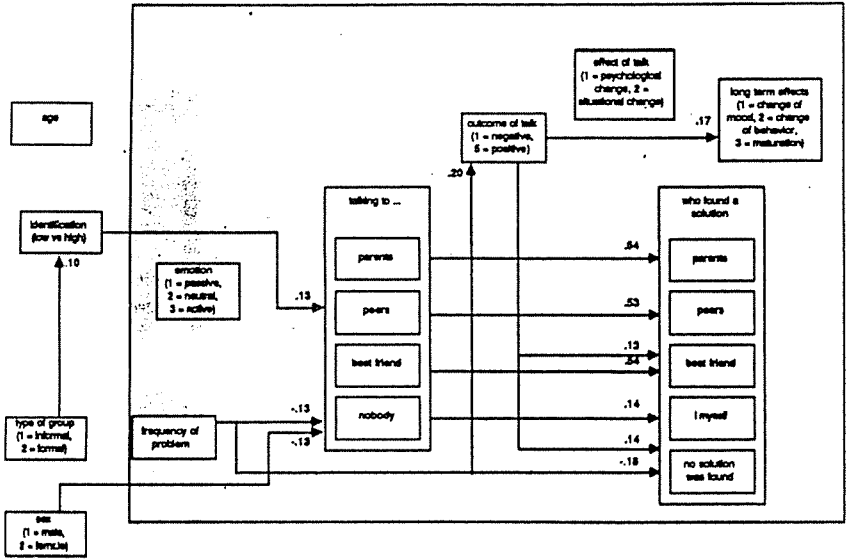


Figure 6. Coping with frustration at school ($n = 301$)

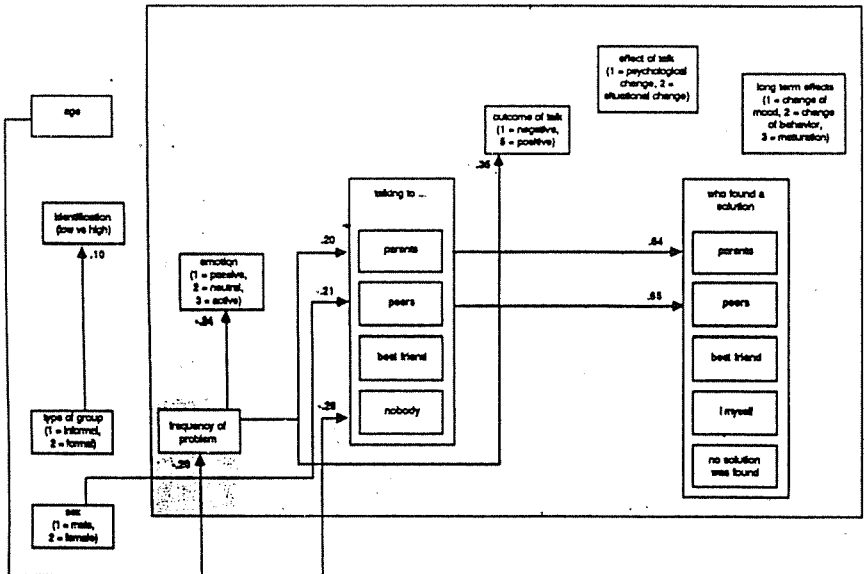


Figure 7. Coping with microcriminality ($n = 72$)

A first view of the seven figures shows that identification with the peers depends on the type of group the adolescents belong to. Although the covariation is statistically significant it can be neglected. Usually only path coefficients with $\beta > .15$ or $< -.15$ are interpreted. While sex was of great importance, the age of the adolescents and group type had almost no influence on the coping process. Identification affected directly the adolescents' choice of the person to talk to about their specific problems, the outcome of the talk and, in case of a relational problem, the long term effects of the coping process.

The first problem represented a conflict with the best friend with serious risks of breaking the friendship. While the type of group and age of the adolescents had no effect upon the coping process, sex and identification proved to be significant. Females seem to face more often conflicts with their best friend and are also more shaken than males, experience more often negative and passive emotions rather than active ones, they talk more often to their best friends than males do, and are able to reach a situational change. Highly identified participants talk more often to the peers about problems with the best friend than those with low identification. They judge the talks more positively and report more often maturation as a long term effect of the problem. If adolescents had talked to somebody they usually reported that the respective persons had helped them in finding a way out of the problem. If no solution was found they often judged the experiences and outcomes of the talks as negative.

The second problem concerned a betrayal by a good friend. Also in this situation, age and group type were not significant while sex and identification play a major role in the coping process. Again, females face conflicts with their best friend more often and are also more shaken than males. They also experience negative and passive emotions more often than negative and active emotions. Moreover, females talk more often to their best friends than males do and report less often not having revealed their problem to anybody. Identification did not affect the persons to whom the adolescents revealed their problem but the outcome of the talks in general and the long term effects. Again, if identification was high the talk was judged more positively and the process led more likely to maturation rather than a change of the mood. As in the previous case and in all following cases, the person to whom the adolescents talked were most often indicated as those who finally found a solution.

Also the third relational problem, conflicts and misunderstandings with the family, were reported more often by females than males. While females talked to their best friend about the problem, males often did not talk to anybody. As already found in the previous analyses, identification affected positively the outcome of the talk as well as long term effects. The higher the identification with the peer group the better was the talk with somebody and the more likely the critical situation led to maturation rather than a mere change in the mood state after some time.

The coping process with personal problems was also affected by sex and identification with the group but independent of age and the type of group the adolescents joined. While relational problems were more often experienced by females, personal and also socio-institutional problems were reported equally often by males and females. Again, females reacted with more negative and passive emotions to personal problems than did males. They were more likely ready to talk to somebody, especially to their best friend. Males rather talked to their peers. Highly identified participants disclosed their personal problems more often to their peers than did low identifiers and were more satisfied with the talk to somebody.

In situations of loneliness, talks to another persons were useful and often the persons approached helped finding a solution. If the peers or best friend found a solution or the adolescent himself or herself then the critical situations was perceived as leading to maturation. In situations of melancholy and feelings of lack of values, the persons to whom the adolescents had talked were attributed the capacity to find a solution. The problem was experienced as contributing to maturation especially if the peers were able to help the subject. In the case of socio-institutional conflicts, sex, age, the type of group, and identification were of minor importance.

In case of frustration at school, males more often talked to nobody than females. High

identifiers revealed their problem more often to their peers than low identifiers. Again, the capacity to find a solution was attributed to the persons to whom the adolescents had talked to. In case of a positive outcome, the participants reported that the problem had helped to mature.

As concerns microcriminality, it should be mentioned that with increasing age the frequency of the problem and subjective importance decreased; also the likelihood not to reveal to anybody the problem decreased. The more often microcriminality was experienced as a problem the more often negative and passive emotions were experienced.

Discussion

The scope of the present study was threefold: first, variables affecting identification with the peers were detected; second whether high identification with the peers covaries positively or negatively with identification with other social entities was tested. Third, most attention focused on coping with critical situations during adolescence.

Before discussing the results of the present study, it should be emphasized that the empirical data are collected by means of a questionnaire. The applied technique inherits some restrictions that are common to questionnaires, yet seldom considered carefully. The information found reflects to what extent the adolescents were cognitively able to discriminate among items or to what extent they were motivated to do it. The results need, thus, be read with caution.

Determinants of identification

Identification was found to depend significantly on the similarity of life values of the adolescent and those of the group. The more similar the importance of values such as the work, family, friends, partner, leisure time etc., the more importance was attributed to the group and the higher was the identification with the group. The effect of similarity of values on identification was also found for the relationship of the adolescent with the family (the correlation between identification with the family and similarity of values is $r = -.44$; $p < .001$), the school mates ($r = -.29$; $p < .001$), and the best friend or partner ($r = -.19$; $p < .001$). Although, being statistically significant, the correlations are small. In fact, the similarity of values explains merely 4% of the variance of identification with the peer and approximately 20% of the variance of identification with the family.

Interestingly, sex, age, employment status of the parents, and the family situation (living with one or both parents) had no effect on identification with the peers. Neither was the type of group the adolescents met of great importance. As in previous studies (Palmonari et al., 1990; Pombeni et al., submitted for publication), the mere fact of being member of an informal group did not affect identification with the peers. In this study, adolescents meeting with scouts or sport groups reported higher identification than adolescents meeting informal, religious, artistic, or political groups. When splitting the sample into adolescents joining informal and formal groups, statistical analysis reveals a significant difference on the level of identification. However, in absolute terms the difference is small: while participants of informal groups report a mean identification of $M = 3.98$ on a 5-point scale, members of the formal groups identify in the average $M = 4.13$. The correlation between identification and group type (formal versus informal) of $r = .10$ indicates that only 1% of the variance of one variable is explained by that of the other variable, thus, the effect is of minor importance.

Identification with the peers and with other social entities

With reference to identification with peers and other social entities, the present results support those obtained by Coleman (1980), Coleman and Hendry (1990), Stiksrud (1988) etc. Identification with peers, family, school mates etc. is not an «either or» phenomenon. Rather

it seems that adolescents who are able and willing to attribute importance to a social entity and to identify with it are also able to identify with others. Identification with the peer group does not lead to less room for identification with the family, rather it enables the adolescent to be close to parents, brothers and sisters, school mates, and best friend or partner.

The correlations between identification indexes (Table 2) are rather low. In the average, high identification with peers explains 7% to 8% of the variance of identification with the family, school mates, or best friend. Although, positive correlations and identification indexes may be true for a majority of adolescents, there may be teenagers with serious troubles identifying with peers and family. In some cases adolescents may stick with the family and be unable to establish a close and satisfying relationship with friends, in other cases they may harshly reject the family, move closely to peers and seek for identification with them. Identifying either with peers or with family may indicate a serious problem for the adolescent and be a cause of difficulties in the transition process into adulthood. Adolescents with difficulties to accept the values of the family and frequent conflicts with family members may seek to compensate the lack of identification by identifying highly with the peers. In extreme cases, this may lead to deindividuation. The influence the peers have on the adolescents may vary with the degree of identification or closeness. In case a group of peers tends to deviant behavior, such as vandalism as can be observed in cliques, abuse of substances, etc., high identification with the group likely conducts to social marginalization. Peers influence the abuse of drugs if the adolescents are close to them, that is, if they identify with them (Kandal, 1980; Kaplan, Martin, & Robbins, 1984; Morgan & Griube, 1989). If adolescents are not able to identify with peers but stick with the family they may face problems with forming their own identity as autonomous adults. These speculative interpretations need to be investigated in upcoming studies by taking into account not only the mere fact of high or low identification with peers but the pattern of identification with social entities and its impact on coping with various critical situations.

Coping with critical situations

In a previous investigation on adolescents' coping processes with various developmental problems, based on in depth interviews (Pombeni et al., submitted for publication), the type of group adolescents met was much less important than expected. The way adolescents handled their problems was mainly affected by the identification with their peer group. Being merely a member of an informal street group or of a structured group with social engagement and religious programs was unimportant. Adolescents who identified highly with their peer group not only were more inclined to ask other people, peers as well as friends, parents, and other adults, for support, to accept their offers of support, and to talk about their problems but they also were more often able to resolve their problems in a more positive way than low identifiers, to reach more favorable long term outcomes and to derive advantage for their future. Low identifiers were rather alone with their problems, often unable to find a way out, and consequently rather often dissatisfied with the outcomes.

The importance of identification is confirmed also by the present study. Moreover, the results show that the type of group adolescents join, be it formal or informal, has little impact on their handling with critical situations. In sum, the results show that with increasing identification the likelihood of favorable outcomes of a relational conflict increases. Both the adolescents are more likely to talk to their peers about their problems, judge talks to somebody, be it parents, peers, or best friend, more positively, and perceive the critical events as finally contributing to maturation.

Since identification with peers is correlated with identification with the family, school mates, and the best friend, it can be assumed that those adolescents who consider others as important and identify with them are able to trace advantages from them and may, thus, have less serious problems on their ways to adulthood. Depending on the type of problem, they can contact different social entities for instrumental and emotional support. The family

can be consulted in case of future oriented problems, whereas the peers help in resolving relational problems. As Table 3 shows, the best friend and the peers are consulted often when relational or personal problems were at stake. As found in previous studies, the family was approached when the problem concerned the school (Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Seiffge-Krenke, 1985). As already mentioned above, indexes of identification with various social entities were positively correlated, however, the correlation was low. In upcoming studies attention should be paid on the one side:

- a) to those teenagers who are able to identify highly with peers and their family,
- b) on the other side, to those unable to identify with the peers but highly identified with the family and vice versa,
- c) to those reporting high identification with the peers but low identification with the family, as well as
- d) to teenagers unable to identify with others. Also the degree of identification with peers needs to be studied in more detail.

Until now it is assumed that the higher the identification the better critical situations will be resolved. However, it can be assumed that identification ends with deindividuation so that adolescents risk to lose the capacity to distinguish between themselves and the group. In such cases identification can have deleterious effects on the individual's development. For example the family needs to leave enough «space» for adolescents to develop their own identity (Cooper et al., 1983; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985), the peers need to leave «space» for the adolescents' idiosyncrasies.

In this survey, adolescents from 15 to 18 years were included. As path analyses show, this age range is of no significant importance in adolescents' dealing with the seven problems, except for microcriminality. Young teenagers reported a minor criminal act more often than older ones and were unable to disclose the problem to others.

Sex was of importance. Females reported, in general, to experience relational problems more often than males, and disclosed their troubles to their best friends. Moreover, as stereotypes hold, females experienced more often passive negative emotions; such as shame, sadness, fear; whereas male teenagers reported experiencing emotions such as anger and hate more often. The outcome of talks and long term effects were not affected by sex. This results resemble those found in former studies with the females being more emotional and relationship oriented, and males being more active and action oriented (Coleman & Hendry, 1990).

In conclusion, this study shows that adolescents frequently experience the problems that were presented in the questionnaire (the percentage of adolescents sometimes or often experiencing a relational problem amounts to 69.8%; personal problems were experienced by 64.5% of the participants; serious problems at school were reported by 56.7% while microcriminality was a problem to 20.2% only). The probability of a positive solution of these problems, especially of positive impacts on maturation, depends largely on the ability and possibility of the adolescents to identify with peers as well as to be close to other social entities. In general, those teenagers who reveal the problem to somebody, be it the peer group, family, or best friend, get support from the respective sources, are more often able to find a solution and to trace advantages out of the critical situation for their future.

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