

**Differential effects of identification with family and peers on coping with developmental tasks in adolescence**

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*Abstract*

*Adolescents from three Italian cities responded to a questionnaire concerning the particular peer-group with which they were associated and identification with their family, aspects of the process of coping with seven developmental tasks, and demographic characteristics. The participants were 1600 male and female teenagers, with a mean age of 16.28 years, who were approached at schools and various meeting places in three Italian cities. The study shows that effective coping with developmental tasks depends largely on the degree of identification with both family and peer-group. Those who identify with both social groupings show advantages in various critical situations. Adolescents only identifying with either family or peers get emotional and instrumental support from that group but not from the other, thus, they are supported in some critical situations but not in others. Adolescents who are unwilling or unable to identify with their family and/or their peers are less successful in managing the transition to*

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*adulthood than others who are close to their parents and peers. Consistent with the findings of previous studies, the type of group adolescents join, be it a formal group or an informal street group, has no significant effect on their coping strategies.*

## INTRODUCTION

### Social changes during adolescence

Adolescence defines a period involving a number of personal and relational changes. Peers play an important function in the adolescents' emergence from the family towards independence. During adolescence, the peer-group increases in size and complexity, adolescents spend more time with the peers, enjoy being with them, are more involved and intimate with peers than are children, and increasingly share thoughts and feelings with them (Coleman and Hendry, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984; Crockett and Petersen, 1987; Hartup, 1983; Petersen, 1988; Youniss and Smollar, 1985).

This redefinition of the relationship with peers and friends has often been conceived as a challenge to the adolescents' relationships with their parents, and as the cause of a significant rupture between the generations. The notion of a serious divergence of attitudes and beliefs between teenagers and parents has favoured the assumption that increased involvement with the peer-group inevitably leads to a rejection of parental values.

Recently, many scholars have cast doubt on the supposed conflict in attitudes and values between parents and peers. Rather than assuming an either/or phenomenon, Coleman (1980) forwarded the hypothesis of adolescents' commitments to both the family and the peer-group. Brittain (1969) found that whether an adolescent chooses a course of behaviour that conforms to the parents' wishes or behaves according to peer-group pressures depends primarily on the specific situation. Moreover, Larsen (1972) specified that adolescents follow their parents' wishes in circumstances which have future implications, such as issues to do with school or work. On the other hand, they follow their peers if the problems concern current status and identity needs. Also, Coleman and Hendry (1990) held that parents' influence prevails in future-oriented domains, whereas the peers' influence centres around current events and activities, such as misunderstandings with a partner or conflicts with friends (see also Kandel and Lesser, 1972; Hunter, 1985). A similar finding has been described by Seiffge-Krenke (1985): adolescents indicated they talked most often to the family as a strategy in coping with problems concerning school, work, and the future. When the problem concerned social relations, such as interactions with family, peers or friends, or the self, adolescents indicated they talked to both family and peers. Thus, adolescents perceive both parents and peers as competent guides in different areas.

Rather than being a source of difficulty, the family has been shown to provide significant support to adolescents in reorganizing intra-familial relationships (Seiffge-Krenke and Olbrich, 1982). Connectedness with the family was found favourable for adolescent development in role-taking and identity development if the family left the adolescent enough 'space' for the development of his or her individuality (Grotevant and Cooper, 1985). If parents allow for individuation in the family con-

text, that is, for a balance between connectedness and individuality, then they positively affect the teenagers' transition process. On the other hand, if parents are concerned about changes in their offspring, are shaken and insecure about their needs for autonomy, or are too norm-oriented then they are an obstacle to the adolescents' development.

The peer-group, conceived of as a small group of similar-aged, fairly close friends, sharing the same activities, offers the adolescents multiple opportunities for witnessing the strategies others use to cope with similar problems, and for observing how effective they are. Peers present opportunities for learning to present oneself in society and for accounting for one's behaviour. They present a reference point, a setting which allows the adolescent to explore autonomy without the control of adults and parents (Olbrich, 1985; Weinstein, 1969). Adolescents themselves perceive their peers as providing support in defining identity, interests, abilities, and personality, in building reputations, and in developing a balance between individuality and conformity. Moreover, teenagers perceive the peer-group as providing instrumental and emotional support, as a chance to build and maintain friendships, and as a source of various leisure activities (Brown, Eicher and Petrie, 1986).

Adolescents who do not participate in social activities with peers presumably feel lonely and insecure (Brennan, 1982). However, several authors emphasize that it is not the frequency of social activities with peers which favours the transition process into adulthood, but the quality of those interactions (de Armas and Kelly, 1989). Jones (1981) found that lonely students reported fewer warm and friendly interactions with peers rather than fewer interactions *per se* than students who did not describe themselves as lonely.

### Adolescence as a period of uncertainty

Although the assumption that adolescence necessarily involves crisis and represents a stormy and troublesome period in each individual's life may no longer be widely held, adolescence does define a period when a number of specific issues are faced (Coleman and Hendry, 1990; Olbrich, 1985; Petersen, 1988).

A provisional list of specific developmental tasks during adolescence might be as follows (see Dreher and Dreher, 1985): the teenager (a) has to accept physical changes, bodily changes and changes in appearance, (b) needs to establish relationships with friends and peers of both sexes, (c) needs to accept social roles, that is, learning to behave according to societal norms, (d) should learn to establish close, intimate, and durable relationships with a partner, (e) has to cope with tasks regarding independence and autonomy from parents, (f) needs to develop interests, become committed to his or her goals and be aware of what capacities he or she needs to realize them, (g) needs to develop a personal representation of a future family of his or her own, of a partner, and of taking responsibility, (h) needs to develop a personal self and to accept it, (i) must solve tasks regarding the relationship with social institutions (school, work, etc.), and (j) should plan his or her future.

In previous studies (Palmonari, Pombeni and Kirchler, 1989, 1990; Pombeni, Kirchler and Palmonari, 1991), it was found that the most important tasks during late adolescence concerned relational tasks, personal problems, and socio-institutional problems. The relational tasks that were most often mentioned as causing problems were serious conflicts with a partner or best friend and betrayal by a friend.

Personal problems concerned social isolation and loneliness as well as lack of life-values. Finally, socio-institutional problems were concerned with the school or workplace and minor illegal acts, such as vandalism, drug abuse, shop-lifting etc.

In these previous studies it was hypothesized that the coping processes for different tasks depended on the access adolescents have to a peer-group and the type of peer-group available. The type of peer-group was conceived of in terms of the activities of the group and the degree of formal structure. A distinction was made between informal groups (peer-groups meeting on street corners and various places in the city or at members' homes and not involved in any specific activities) and formal groups (these groups meet in organized settings and are committed to a specific activity, e.g. sports and physical education, religious activities, artistic pursuits, political projects). It should be emphasized that in Italy both formal and informal groups have, in general, a clear boundary and are groups in the strict sense rather than aggregations of teenagers. It was assumed that adolescents meeting in a formal group receive more emotional and instrumental support from their peers than those of informal groups, and are thus more successful in coping with stressful life events. However, the results of all studies cited above revealed that the type of group that adolescents join is of minor importance. It was the relationship with peers which significantly affected adolescents' representations of their social environment and their coping strategies for various problems.

The relationship between adolescents and their peer-group, concerning friendship and closeness to peers, was operationalized as degree of identification. It was shown that the higher the identification of an adolescent with his or her peers the more likely he or she was to reveal his or her problems to peers, parents, a friend or an adult. In turn they were better able to cope with developmental tasks, and were more positive in their social representations of other peer-groups.

A separate analysis of a part of the sample presented in this study (Kirchler, Pombeni and Palmomari, in press) supported the assumption that both family and peers are sources of support during adolescence. Also, identification with peers was positively correlated with identification with the family. However, the correlation was small ( $r(770) = 0.18$ ), indicating that a high proportion of adolescents are able and willing to identify with both family and peers. But there are also many others who identify either with family or peer-group or with neither.

In this paper we describe a survey of 1600 adolescents conducted in three Italian cities. Its aim was to study the impact of identification with peers and the family on the process of coping with developmental tasks. Beside the six problems which were found important in previous studies (conflict with one's best friend, betrayal by a friend, feelings of loneliness, lack of life-values, problems at school, and delinquency), a situation representing a conflict with the family was also presented to the participants.

It was anticipated that those adolescents who receive emotional and instrumental support from both their families and their peer-group derive more advantages in 'turbulent' situations. If adolescents strongly identify with both their peer-group and family, they should have more success when facing personal, relational, and socio-institutional problems. If they identify strongly with their peers but not with their parents, coping with future-oriented problems (such as frustration at school) should be more difficult. On the other hand, if identification with the peer-group is low, these teenagers should more often have relational and personal problems

(such as feeling socially isolated, not being able to share the problems with somebody) and consequently will more often fail to find a satisfying solution.

## METHOD

### Subjects and procedure

The participants were 1600 boys and girls from the cities of Campobasso, Bologna, and Vicenza, Italy. The sample represents an opportunity sample that cannot be assumed to be representative for adolescents from all Italian regions. Several student researchers and social workers approached the adolescents during December 1989 and January 1990 at various schools and youth centres. In the judgement of the collaborating social workers the participants are representative concerning socio-demographics of college students in Italy.

After having described the scope of the study and invited the adolescents to participate, the researchers distributed the questionnaires. Complete anonymity of data handling was assured. According to the reports of the social workers and student researchers less than 3 per cent of the adolescents approached refused to participate. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 30 to 40 minutes.

Most of the adolescents indicated they belonged to an informal or street-group. The others were members of formal groups, such as sport groups, religious groups and scouts, groups engaged in artistic performances, and political groups. Often the adolescents indicated that they belonged to more than one type of group. In such cases the participants were asked with which group they affiliated most frequently and to refer to that group when answering the subsequent questions. Almost all adolescents indicated they met with their peers fairly regularly. All participants from Campobasso and Vicenza and 94.8 per cent of those from Bologna were students between 14 and 18 years. The remaining 5.2 per cent from Bologna were employed and slightly older (15 to 20 years). The employed adolescents were contacted at youth centres in Bologna. Most of the participants were living with their parents, with employed fathers and mothers who were housewives or in paid employment. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the sample and the subsamples from the three cities.

### Material

A questionnaire was developed on the base of the results of a previous interview study (Pombeni *et al.*, 1991). As well as questions on demographic data, subjects were asked to indicate the peer-group with which they regularly associated and define it; that is, indicate whether it was a group meeting informally, for example, on street corners, or a formal group with scheduled meetings. Identification with the group was assessed by Brown's identification scale. The scale for the group was modified to measure, in addition, the importance of own family, school mates, and best friend. Answers were given on five-point scales. The English wording of the four scales is printed in the Appendix. Cronbach alpha for the group identification scale was 0.80. The  $r$  of the corresponding reliability coefficients for the family identification, best friend identification and school mates identification scales were  $r = 0.88$ , 0.90, and 0.80, respectively.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the subsamples from three cities

Characteristics	Campobasso	Vicenza	Bologna	Total
<i>n</i> of subjects	444	422	734	1600
Age (mean, standard deviation)	16.07 (1.565)	16.44 (1.091)	16.32 (1.373)	16.28 (1.370)
Sex				
Male	46.3%	28.9%	37.7%	37.8%
Female	53.7%	71.1%	62.3%	62.2%
Family status				
Living with both parents	94.5%	90.8%	91.0%	92.0%
Living with a single parent	5.5%	9.2%	9.0%	8.0%
Working status of subject				
Student	100.0%	100.0%	94.8%	97.6%
Employed	0.0%	0.0%	5.2%	2.4%
Working status of father				
Employed	94.8%	94.7%	95.1%	94.3%
Unemployed	6.2%	5.3%	4.9%	5.7%
Working status of mother				
Housewife	54.9%	57.1%	37.3%	47.5%
Employed	45.1%	42.9%	62.7%	52.5%
Meeting with a peer-group				
Regularly	93.4%	82.8%	86.9%	87.6%
Sometimes	6.6%	17.2%	13.1%	12.4%
Type of peer-group				
Informal	78.3%	75.9%	63.8%	71.5%
Religious	3.9%	7.4%	14.6%	9.5%
Scouts	3.6%	4.5%	10.5%	7.0%
Sport	10.4%	9.6%	8.7%	9.5%
Artistic	1.9%	1.9%	1.9%	2.0%
Political	0.5%	0.6%	0.6%	0.5%

In the final part of the questionnaire, seven problems were presented, three relational conflicts, two personal problems, and two socio-institutional problems: The relational conflicts read as follows: (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. The personal problems read as follows: (4) Have you ever felt lonely and socially isolated? (5) Have you ever felt empty, lacking life values? Finally, there were two socio-institutional problems: (6) Have you ever had serious problems at school which threatened to result in your leaving 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 events as vividly as possible and then indicate how often each had occurred to them (scale from 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often). If the event had occurred sometimes or often the participants specified how serious a problem it had been (1 = not serious, 4 = very serious), what they had felt at the time (the participants indicated one or two of 12 listed emotions, e.g. anger, loneliness, shame, with whom they had talked about the problem (peer-group, best friend, parents, school mates, other adults, nobody), how useful talking about it had been (scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = very useful), why it 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 (I 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 future life (1 = it helped change my mood state, 2 = I changed my behaviour, 3 = I matured).

## RESULTS

### Overview

The analysis focuses on the influence which high versus low identification with the family, the peer-group or both has on experiences with seven developmental problems.

The correlation between identification with the family and identification with the peer-group amounted to  $r(1416) = 0.22$ ;  $p < 0.001$  which, although significant, is rather low (about 5 per cent of the variance of one variable is explained by the other). In order to compare adolescents who identify highly with their family and their peer-group with those who identify highly with one entity but not with the other or with none, the sample was split on the medians of identification with the family and identification with the peers into four subsamples. The first subsample groups together participants with low identification with both the family and the peers (28 per cent of the total sample), the second those with low identification with the peer-group but high identification with the family (20 per cent), the third those with high identification with the group but low identification with the family (20 per cent), and the fourth those strongly identified with both the family and their peer-group (32 per cent).

First, we examined the frequency of talking to somebody about a problem, the quality of these conversations, the likelihood of finding a solution, and the long-term effects of the coping process. Then a more concise analysis is presented with a single index of identification: the product between the two identification indexes was taken, among other variables, as a predictor of some aspects of the process of coping with developmental problems.

### Developmental problems and identification with the family and the peer-group

The problems which were most often mentioned as having occurred at least once in the adolescents' lives were relational problems (54 per cent indicated a betrayal by a good friend, 54 per cent of the adolescents mentioned having had serious conflicts with the family, 46 per cent of the cases a serious conflict with the best friend was mentioned) and problems at school (44 per cent). The confidence intervals ( $\alpha = 0.01$ ) for 54, 46, and 44 per cent range from 51.5 to 56.5 per cent, 43.5 to 48.5 per cent, and 41.4 to 46.5 per cent, respectively. Also, these problems with the family, a best friend and school were felt to be rather serious. The average ratings for the four problems on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 = not serious to 4 = very serious, were: 3.20, 3.09, 2.98, and 3.10, respectively.

Overall, 41 per cent of the participants reported having felt lonely and socially isolated and 39 per cent had felt empty and a lack of life values. The confidence limits range from 38.5 to 43.5 per cent and 36.5 to 41.5 per cent, respectively. Also, these problems were rated as rather intense and serious (the average ratings are

3.03 and 3.04 respectively). Responses to the question about having ever committed an illegal act (e.g. drug abuse, act of vandalism or shop-lifting) which they felt was a problem indicate that in only 13 per cent (5 per cent confidence limits range from 9 to 17 per cent) of the cases the adolescents had committed an illegal act which they regretted. Those adolescents who admitted having committed an illegal act did not think this was a serious problem (the mean rating on the seriousness scale, amounting to 2.53, is lower than the rating of all other problems). A multivariate analysis of variance with the scores of seriousness as dependent variable and the problem types as independent variable yielded a significant effect ( $F(7, 88) = 625.30$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) which indicated that relationship problems and frustration at school were perceived as more serious than personal problems and delinquency. Moreover, delinquency was perceived as less serious than the other stressful events.

In most cases, the participants indicated that they talked to somebody about their problems (77 per cent of those who reported on the problem). Problems with their best friend (87 per cent) or betrayal by a good friend (89 per cent), and problems at school (88 per cent) were especially likely to be discussed with others. Conflicts with the family were revealed to others in 76 per cent of the cases. If the problem consisted mainly of social isolation or lack of values, the subjects were less often able to talk to somebody (62 per cent and 73 per cent of the subjects, respectively, indicated having talked to somebody). Also, illegal acts were disclosed to others less frequently (67 per cent of those claiming illegal acts were a problem to them talked to other people). The 5 per cent confidence limits for all seven percentages range from the observed value minus 2.5 per cent to the observed value plus 2.5 per cent. Thus, differences between the percentages that are greater than 5 per cent are statistically significant.

The absolute frequencies of conversations with somebody as dependent on identification with the family and peers were analysed via log-linear analysis. The results indicate that those adolescents who identify highly with their peer-group or with their family or with both entities disclose their problems more often to others than do adolescents with low identification. High identifiers discussed 79 per cent of the cases with somebody as compared to 73 per cent of the low identifiers ( $z = 4.75$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The person to whom the adolescents disclosed their problems most often was their best friend (41 per cent of the cases;  $z = 15.30$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Overall, in 18 per cent of the cases the problem was disclosed to the parents, in 14 per cent of the cases to their peers, in 6 per cent of the cases to other adults, and in 23 per cent of the cases the adolescents did not talk to anybody about their stressful experience. Those teenagers who identify highly with their family talked to other parents most often (24 per cent of the cases as compared to 12 per cent of those who did not identify strongly with their family;  $z = 11.72$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). On the other hand, those adolescents who identify highly with their peers talked more often to their peer-group than did the others (14 per cent versus 10 per cent;  $z = 4.36$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

Table 2 displays the relative frequencies of disclosure to somebody as a function of the problem and the level of identification with the family and the peers. The results show that the teenagers were inclined to disclose different problems to different people. Since the number of linear contrasts which need to be considered in log-linear analysis of the data in Table 2 is extremely high, the standardized differences between observed and expected frequencies were calculated. Standardized residuals are  $z$ -values with  $p < 0.05$  if  $z > 1.96$  and  $p < 0.01$  if  $z > 2.58$ . In Table 2, the observed

Table 2. Relative frequency of talking to somebody by high versus low identification with the family and peer-group and problem type

Discussion partners	Problem type							Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Low identification with both the peer-group and the family								
Peer-group	0.13	0.17	0.07	0.08	0.06-	0.08	0.24	0.11-
Best friend	0.51	0.49	0.44	0.41	0.40	0.27	0.36+	0.42
Family	0.15	0.08-	0.11	0.09-	0.12-	0.36-	0.05	0.14-
Other persons	0.05	0.05	0.08	0.04	0.07	0.15+	0.03	0.07
Nobody	0.16	0.21	0.29+	0.39	0.36+	0.13	0.33	0.27+
Total absolute frequency	247	282	328	289	238	227	114	1725
Low identification with the peer-group and high identification with the family								
Peer-group	0.11-	0.12	0.09	0.05-	0.11	0.06	0.35	0.10-
Best friend	0.39-	0.47	0.41	0.37	0.31-	0.19-	0.25	0.36-
Family	0.31+	0.19+	0.17+	0.24+	0.24+	0.60+	0.08	0.27+
Other persons	0.04	0.07	0.09	0.04	0.08	0.06-	0.02	0.06
Nobody	0.14	0.16	0.24	0.31	0.26	0.08	0.31	0.21
Total absolute frequency	168	198	209	195	160	156	49	1135
High identification with the peer-group and low identification with the family								
Peer-group	0.23+	0.21+	0.13+	0.12+	0.11	0.18+	0.32	0.17+
Best friend	0.50	0.50	0.54+	0.43+	0.47+	0.29	0.31	0.45+
Family	0.09-	0.04-	0.08-	0.07-	0.11-	0.26-	0.05	0.10-
Other persons	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.03	0.05	0.12	0.04	0.06
Nobody	0.12	0.21	0.19-	0.35	0.26	0.15	0.28	0.22
Total absolute frequency	164	219	253	210	180	171	94	1291
High identification with both the peer-group and the family								
Peer-group	0.18	0.12	0.07	0.09	0.13+	0.10	0.27	0.12
Best friend	0.46	0.52	0.47	0.30-	0.40	0.23	0.20-	0.40
Family	0.20	0.16+	0.16+	0.24+	0.21+	0.46	0.04	0.22+
Other persons	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.10	0.07	0.06
Nobody	0.10	0.16	0.24	0.34	0.21-	0.11	0.42	0.21-
Total absolute frequency	228	304	298	272	235	206	71	1614

A = conflict with the best friend, B = betrayal by a friend, C = conflict with the family, D = feelings of loneliness, E = lack of life-values, F = frustration at school, G = delinquency. The signs '+', '-' indicate significant differences between observed and expected frequencies. '+' indicates that the observed frequency is higher than the expected; '-' indicates that the observed frequency is smaller than the expected.

frequencies which are greater than the expected frequencies are marked by '+', those which are smaller are marked by '-'.

On the average, the adolescents judged their conversations with others about their problems as positive. Analyses of variance with the judgements of these conversations (1 = negative, 5 = positive) as dependent variable, and the four classes of identification and the types of groups (informal, religious, scouts, sport, artistic, and political groups) as independent variables revealed for each problem type, except for delinquency, a significant main effect of identification (the respective  $F$ -values for the three relational, the two personal, and the two socio-institutional problems are:  $F(3, 666) = 8.87$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $F(3, 793) = 11.04$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $F(3, 782) = 5.52$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ;

$F(3,594) = 8.08; p < 0.001; F(3,560) = 12.23; p < 0.001; F(3,635) = 10.01; p < 0.001;$  and  $F(3,174) = 0.83; p = 0.480$ ). Neither the main effect of the group type nor the interaction effect were significant. Table 3 shows that the quality of conversations increased with increasing identification with the family or the peer-group and was highest if the adolescents were willing and able to identify with both entities.

Table 3. Success of talks to somebody (1 = negative, 5 = positive) by high versus low identification with the peers and the family and problem type

	Problem type						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Identification with peers: low							
with the family: low	3.27	3.13	3.26	3.25	3.29	3.21	2.90
with the family: high	3.53	3.29	3.33	3.30	3.36	3.49	3.15
Identification with peers: high							
with the family: low	3.52	3.33	3.42	3.56	3.39	3.30	2.79
with the family: high	3.77	3.62	3.63	3.74	3.82	3.77	3.09

A = conflict with the best friend, B = betrayal by a friend, C = conflict with the family, D = feelings of loneliness, E = lack of life values, F = frustration at school, G = delinquency.

Most of the subjects indicated that they were able to solve their problems (76 per cent). Family conflicts (27 per cent of the cases) and problems with illegal acts (25 per cent) were relatively often unresolved. The remaining two relational problems and the two personal problems were unresolved in 23, 23, 21, and 20 per cent of the cases, respectively. Only 16 per cent of the participants were unable to find a solution for problems at school. The confidence intervals range from observed percentage minus 2.5 per cent to observed percentage plus 2.5 per cent. Thus, differences between percentages that are greater than 5 per cent are statistically significant.

The frequency of finding a solution with the support of others or not finding a way out of the stressful event were analysed by log-linear analysis. Absolute and relative frequencies of finding a solution together with somebody as dependent on identification levels and task type are reported in Table 4. Again, the standardized differences between observed and expected absolute frequencies were calculated and are evidenced in the table by '+' and '-'.

Low identifiers reported more often not having found a solution for their problems (27 per cent) than those adolescents who either identify with their peers, their family or with both the family and the peers (22 per cent;  $z = 2.24; p < 0.05$ ), especially if conflicts with the family or personal problems were at stake (28 per cent versus 21 per cent;  $z = 2.87; p < 0.01$ ). As compared to teenagers who identified highly with their peers, low identifiers claimed lack of support from their peers when the problem concerned a conflict with the best friend, social isolation or feelings of no values in their lives (high identifiers reported 14 per cent of the cases support from their peers, whereas low identifiers reported only 5 per cent of the cases having received any support;  $z = 14.80; p < 0.01$ ). Low identifiers also missed the help of their family, when the problem concerned intra-family conflicts (16 per cent of high identifiers reported support from their parents, whereas only 9 per cent of low identifiers reported having received support;  $z = 4.86; p < 0.01$ ). Also, adolescents with high identification with the peers but low identification with the family were often

unable to resolve intrafamily conflicts (32 per cent as compared to 20 per cent of those identifying highly with their family;  $z = 5.67; p < 0.01$ ). They were, in general, missing support from the family (while high identifiers got support from their family — 16 per cent of the cases, low identifiers reported support from their family in only 6 per cent of the cases;  $z = 13.63; p < 0.01$ ). Those teenagers identifying highly with their family but not identifying with their peer-group, received help from their family in resolving problems with the best friend (18 per cent), with the family itself (18 per cent), the school (46 per cent), and illegal acts (11 per cent). High identifiers had the advantage of receiving support both from the family (especially if the problem concerned family relationships (15 per cent) or feelings of loneliness (13 per cent)) and the peer-group (especially if the problem was a serious conflict with the best friend (14 per cent) or lack of values (17 per cent)).

When the adolescents were asked whether the respective problems had a long-term effect on their transition into adulthood, they most often reported that it had helped in changing their behaviour. Log-linear analysis of the absolute frequencies of change of mood, change of behaviour, and maturation as dependent on the four identification groups and the task types shows that those adolescents who identify highly with their peers, their family or both the peers and the family reported more often that the resolution of a stressful event helped them to mature (55 per cent) rather than leading merely to change of mood or behaviour (45 per cent). Low identifiers reported more often change of mood or behaviour (53 per cent) rather than maturation (47 per cent). The interaction effect was highly significant ( $z = 4.96; p < 0.01$ ). The effect is even greater if low identifiers are compared to teenagers who identify with both the family and the peers, who report maturation in 61 per cent of the cases and change of mood or behaviour in 39 per cent of the cases ( $z = 7.19; p < 0.01$ ).

Table 5 displays absolute and relative frequencies of long-term effects as dependent on identification level and task type. It shows that with increasing identification with both the family and the peer-group the probability of a successful resolution of the problems, i.e. maturation, also increases. Adolescents who are unable to identify with both show less positive effects than those identifying with one or both entities. The percentages of reported maturation range from 47 per cent over 50 per cent and 52 per cent to 61 per cent. Frequencies of maturation as a long-term effect are significantly different between low identifiers and the three remaining groups of teenagers ( $z = 8.23; 8.48$  and  $13.74$ ; all  $p < 0.01$ ). Also, the frequencies of maturation and change of mood or behaviour reported by teenagers who identify highly with one social entity but not with the other and those who identify with both entities are significantly different ( $z = 4.49$  and  $4.24$ ; all  $p < 0.01$ ). The observations for adolescents identifying highly with peers but not with the family and the adolescents identifying highly with the family but not with the peers are not significantly different ( $z = 0.25; p > 0.10$ ).

#### Path analyses of the processes of coping with the developmental problems

The following analyses aim at a more explicative summary of the stress-coping paradigms outlined in the theoretical framework given in the Introduction. A structural model was designed which depicts crucial steps in the problem coping process.

After the adolescents became aware of a problem, the process of coping with it was perceived as moving from the need to talk to somebody, to outcomes of



Table 4. Relative frequency of finding a solution with somebody by high versus low identification with the family and peer-group and problem type

Sources of a solution	Problem type							Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Low identification with both the peer-group and the family								
I myself	0.33	0.32	0.30	0.27	0.28	0.28	0.47+	0.31
Best friend	0.21	0.25-	0.20	0.28	0.17	0.17	0.17	0.23
Peer-group	0.06-	0.08	0.04	0.05-	0.03	0.03	0.11	0.06-
Parents	0.05-	0.05	0.09-	0.07	0.11	0.26	0.03	0.09-
Other persons	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.10	0.00	0.04
No solution found	0.34	0.27	0.32+	0.25+	0.25+	0.16	0.22	0.27+
Total absolute frequency	243	274	308	266	220	214	105	1630
Low identification with the peer-group and high identification with the family								
I myself	0.24	0.29	0.34	0.36	0.36+	0.23	0.41	0.30
Best friend	0.18	0.32	0.24	0.26	0.22	0.15	0.16	0.22
Peer-group	0.04	0.08	0.04	0.05-	0.07	0.01-	0.16	0.06-
Parents	0.18+	0.10	0.18+	0.13	0.15	0.46+	0.11+	0.19+
Other persons	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.03-	0.02	0.03
No solution found	0.33	0.19	0.18-	0.18	0.15	0.11-	0.14-	0.20-
Total absolute frequency	165	191	200	187	149	154	44	1110
High identification with the peer-group and low identification with the family								
I myself	0.28	0.34	0.30	0.31	0.31	0.27	0.29-	0.30
Best friend	0.24	0.27	0.23	0.23	0.30	0.19	0.19	0.24
Peer-group	0.12	0.12	0.05	0.16+	0.09	0.07	0.15	0.10+
Parents	0.03-	0.01-	0.07-	0.05-	0.07-	0.19-	0.04	0.06-
Other persons	0.01	0.03	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.08	0.01	0.04
No solution found	0.32	0.23	0.32+	0.19	0.19	0.21	0.33	0.25
Total absolute frequency	162	215	248	199	175	165	80	1244
High identification with both the peer-group and the family								
I myself	0.26	0.26	0.28	0.28	0.19-	0.19-	0.39	0.25-
Best friend	0.19	0.32	0.26	0.22	0.26	0.17	0.10	0.24
Peer-group	0.14+	0.11	0.04	0.11	0.17+	0.06	0.13	0.10+
Parents	0.06	0.07	0.15+	0.13+	0.15	0.31	0.03	0.14+
Other persons	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.09	0.05+	0.05
No solution found	0.32	0.21	0.22-	0.20	0.19	0.18	0.30	0.22
Total absolute frequency	226	292	286	259	227	198	67	1555

A = conflict with the best friend, B = betrayal by a friend, C = conflict with the family, D = feelings of loneliness, E = lack of life values, F = frustration at school, G = delinquency. The signs '+' and '-' indicate significant differences between observed and expected frequencies. '+' indicates that the observed frequency is higher than the expected; '-' indicates that the observed frequency is smaller than the expected.

talking to somebody, a solution of the problem and long-term effects. This process was operationalized by measuring: (a) the frequency with which the presented problem occurred in the life of the participating adolescents and the seriousness of the respective problem (scale ranging from 1 = not frequent and not serious to 12 = frequent and serious), (b) the evaluation of the conversation with somebody (scale ranging from 1 = negative to 5 = positive), (c) finding a solution or not (0 = no

Table 5. Relative frequency of long-term effects by high versus low identification with the family and peer-group and problem type

Long-term effect	Problem type							Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Low identification with both the peer-group and the family								
Change of mood	0.19+	0.25+	0.28	0.35	0.40+	0.25	0.24	0.28+
Change of behaviour	0.20	0.29	0.25+	0.27	0.20	0.28	0.28	0.25+
Maturation	0.61	0.47-	0.47-	0.39-	0.40-	0.48	0.49-	0.47-
Total absolute frequency	243	274	317	267	223	208	102	1634
Low identification with the peer-group and high identification with the family								
Change of mood	0.14	0.24	0.29	0.32	0.32	0.26	0.13	0.26
Change of behaviour	0.24	0.27	0.22	0.24	0.14	0.22	0.13	0.22
Maturation	0.62	0.49	0.49	0.45	0.54	0.52	0.75+	0.52
Total absolute frequency	164	191	201	186	152	154	48	1096
High identification with the peer-group and low identification with the family								
Change of mood	0.16	0.17	0.34+	0.33	0.31	0.20	0.31+	0.26
Change of behaviour	0.19	0.34	0.20	0.28	0.14	0.33	0.21	0.24
Maturation	0.65	0.50	0.46	0.40	0.55	0.48	0.48	0.50
Total absolute frequency	164	215	244	200	174	162	81	1240
High identification with both the peer-group and the family								
Change of mood	0.09-	0.15-	0.22-	0.26-	0.24-	0.22	0.16	0.19-
Change of behaviour	0.19	0.26	0.16-	0.22	0.16	0.18	0.21	0.20-
Maturation	0.72+	0.60+	0.63+	0.52+	0.60+	0.61+	0.63	0.61+
Total absolute frequency	228	302	289	260	230	198	68	1575

A = conflict with the best friend, B = betrayal by a friend, C = conflict with the family, D = feelings of loneliness, E = lack of life values, F = frustration at school, G = delinquency. The signs '+' and '-' indicate significant differences between observed and expected frequencies. '+' indicates that the observed frequency is higher than the expected; '-' indicates that the observed frequency is smaller than the expected.

solution, 1 = solution found, and (d) long-term effect of the coping process (0 = no maturation, 1 = maturation).

These variables as well as the product of identification with the family and identification with the peer-group, sex (0 = female, 1 = male) and type of group the adolescents belonged to (this variable was dichotomized in order to distinguish between 0 = informal groups and 1 = formal groups; i.e. religious groups, scouts, sports, artistic, political groups) were included in seven path analyses, one for each of the presented developmental problems. The product between identification with the family and identification with the peer-group was calculated for obtaining a score which is high, if the subjects identify highly with both social entities, average if they identify with only one entity and low if identification with the family and the peers is low. Age was not included in the analyses as a predictor because of the narrow variation in the present sample. The results of the LISREL-analyses are presented in Figures 1 to 3. Only significant paths are reported (*t*-values significant on *p* < 0.05). The goodness of fit indexes for all models are close to 1.00.

Before discussing the results of the structural analyses, it should be mentioned

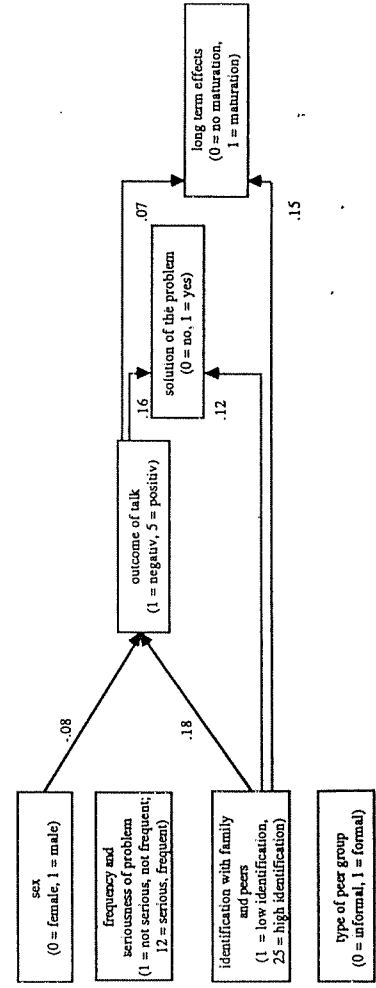
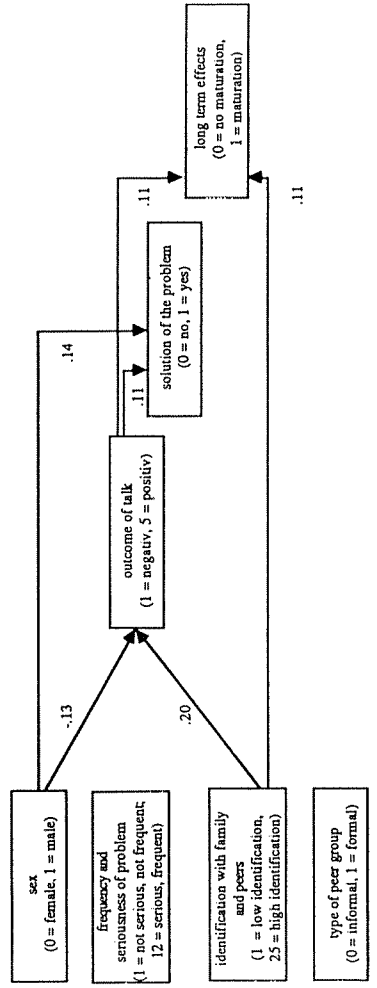
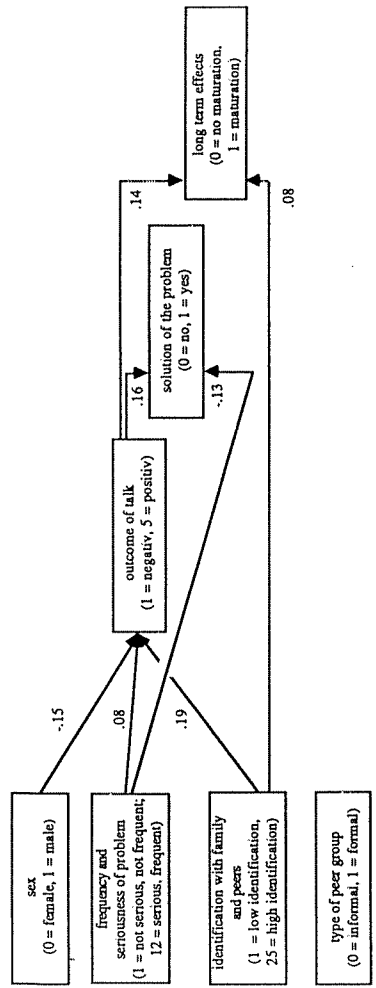


Figure 1. Process of coping with three relational problems

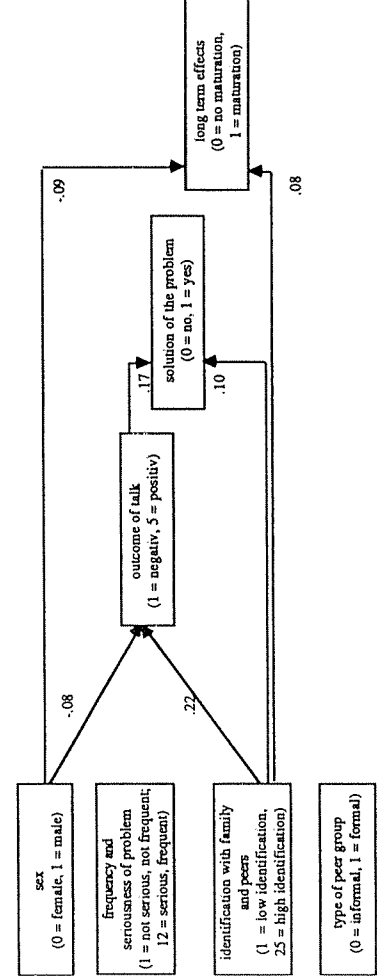
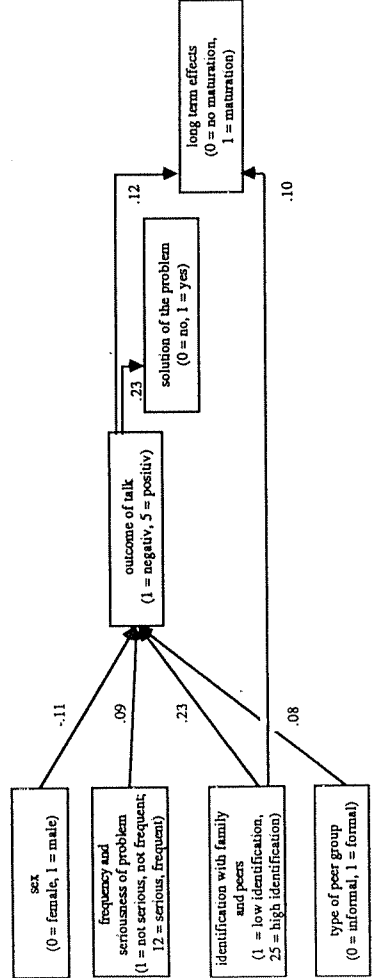


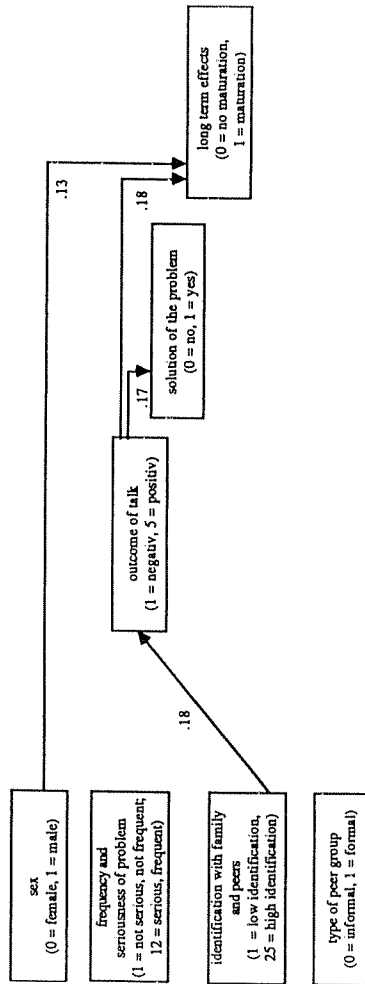
Figure 2. Process of coping with two personal problems

that the correlation between identification with the family and group type was small ( $r(1416) = 0.05$ ;  $p = 0.023$ ); the correlation between identification with the peer-group and the group type was  $r(1421) = 0.11$ ;  $p < 0.001$ . Teenagers in formal groups identify slightly more strongly with the peers than those of informal groups. The correlation between the combined identification index and group type amounted to  $r(1414) = 0.11$ ;  $p < 0.001$ . Although significant, the correlations are small, indicating that less than 2 per cent of one variable can be explained by the other.

A first inspection on the path analyses shows that the type of group that adolescents join had no effect on the process of coping with developmental problems. There is only one path in the last figure, concerning delinquency, which indicates that teenagers in informal groups report maturation more often when they successfully copy with their problem ( $\beta = -0.15$ ;  $t = 2.07$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). In all other path analyses



Problem: Frustration at school



Problem: Delinquency

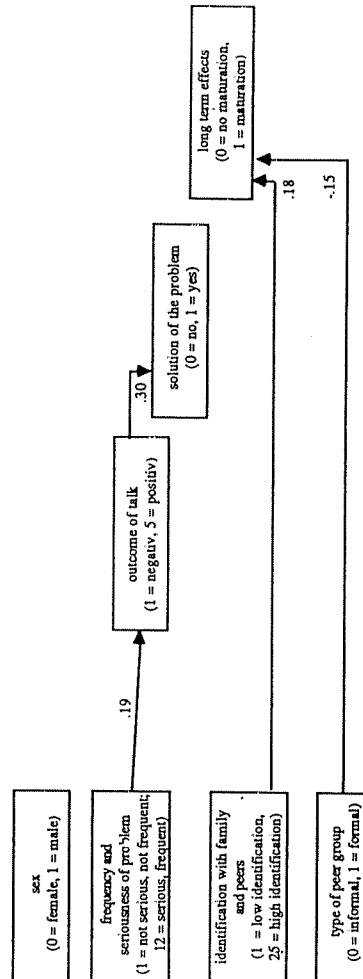


Figure 3. Process of coping with two socio-institutional problems

the effect of the group type is close to 0. An overall analysis combining all seven problem types revealed a total effect of group type on maturation of  $\beta = 0.001$ .

Whereas the group type proved to be irrelevant, identification with both the family and the peers, was found to be the most important factor in the coping process. The higher the identification with both entities the more likely the adolescents reported maturation is the result; conflicts with a best friend ( $\beta = 0.08$ ;  $t = 2.00$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), betrayal by a friend ( $\beta = 0.11$ ;  $t = 2.89$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), conflicts with the family ( $\beta = 0.15$ ;  $t = 4.07$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ); feelings of loneliness ( $\beta = 0.10$ ;  $t = 2.28$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , lack of life-values ( $\beta = 0.12$ ;  $t = 2.77$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), frustration at school ( $\beta = 0.05$ ;  $t = 1.28$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), and problems with illegal acts ( $\beta = 0.18$ ;  $t = 2.57$ ;

$p < 0.05$ ). A path analysis combining all seven task types revealed a highly significant direct effect on maturation ( $\beta = 0.10$ ;  $t = 6.63$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and a high total effect which considers direct and indirect paths ( $\beta = 0.13$ ). Identification was also important as a predictor of the likelihood of finding a solution in conflictual situations with the family or when life-values are lacking. The most significant path was found between identification and the outcome of talking to somebody. High identifiers were more likely to report a positive outcome than low identifiers. The beta weights for the three relational, two personal, and two socio-institutional problems are  $\beta = 0.19, 0.20, 0.18, 0.23, 0.22, 0.18$ , and  $0.03$ , respectively. Except for delinquency, all beta weights are significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). The direct effect of identification on the outcome of talking about problems, calculated for all seven problems together, amounted to  $\beta = 0.19$  ( $t = 12.79$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

Beside the level of identification, sex proved to be a fairly important predictor of the outcome of talking about relational and personal problems. As the figures show, females reported a more favourable outcome of talking to somebody than males. A path analysis which combined the three relational problems showed that females reported a positive outcome more often than males ( $\beta = -0.12$ ;  $t = 5.59$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Also, females were more likely to report a favourable outcome of talking to somebody if personal problems were at stake ( $\beta = -0.10$ ;  $t = 3.54$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). This gender difference was not found for socio-institutional problems ( $\beta = -0.05$ ;  $t = 1.45$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ).

With increasing frequency and seriousness of a problem, talking to somebody about delinquency, a conflict with a best friend, or feelings of loneliness were judged as more profitable. However, the effects were small.

Finally, the path analyses show that finding a solution of the problem and maturation strongly depend on the outcome of talking to somebody. Those adolescents who had the opportunity to disclose their stressful experiences to somebody and judged these discussions as positive were more likely to find a solution for their problems and also more often reported maturation as a long-term outcome of the resolution process. An overall path analysis combining all seven tasks revealed a significant path from outcome of discussions to the likelihood to find a solution ( $\beta = 0.12$ ;  $t = 7.30$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and outcome of discussions to maturation ( $\beta = 0.16$ ;  $t = 10.45$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

## DISCUSSION

This study started with the assumption that successful coping with developmental tasks requires the adolescent to be close to their family and at the same time to establish a fruitful relationship with peers. If adolescents associate with their family but are unable to identify with peers and friends, or if they reject their family, move close to peers and seek for identification with them, then they may have difficulties with developmental tasks. Adolescents with difficulties in accepting the values of family and who have frequent conflict with family members may seek to compensate for this lack of identification by strongly identifying with their peers. In extreme cases, this may lead to deindividuation. If a group of peers tends to deviant behaviour (e.g. vandalism as can be observed in cliques, abuse of substances) then high identification with the group and 'distance' from their family can lead to social marginalization

(Kandel, 1980; Kaplan, Martin and Robbins, 1984; Morgan and Grube, 1989). If adolescents are not able to identify with peers but stick with their family they may face problems in forming their own identity as autonomous adults. Although, this study has not the 'power' to prove these hypotheses in full, the results show that those adolescents who identify highly with both family and peers are most likely to manage the transition to adulthood successfully. In other words, it demonstrates that the quality of relationship with family and peers is more important during adolescence than the type of peer-group association.

The problems experienced by most of the participants were relational problems, especially misunderstandings with a friend, concretely a betrayal; and conflicts with parents. The most severe problems are misunderstandings with friends and problems at school. Delinquency was mentioned by a rather small percentage of participants as being a problem. It was also perceived as a rather minor problem. The results indicate that at the age of about 16 to 17 years, teenagers have to cope essentially with their future life perspectives as they are defined by school, and with the establishment of relationships with friends. An intimate partner seems to be less important, and personal problems are not very evident at this age.

It is interesting to note that adolescents had difficulties talking about their personal problems and delinquency, while they did not seem to be inhibited in revealing relational conflicts. These results may indicate that at the age of the participants of this study, teenagers are beginning to experience personal problems but have not yet the necessary maturity and capacity to verbalize them or lack the courage to disclose them to others. At that age the focus is on relationships with the same and opposite sex.

Also, illegal acts seems to be a matter to be concealed from others. Interestingly, adolescents reported not talking with their family about delinquency but doing so more often with peers or their best friend. The outcome of conversations about delinquency was, in general, negative, except for those adolescents who identify highly with their family and disclosed illegal acts to their supportive parents. Those adolescents also reported relatively often finding a solution to their problems and deriving advantage from the resolution process. What is surprising is that these results hold only for those adolescents who identify highly with their family but not with their peer-group and do not hold for adolescents identifying strongly with both their family and their peers. It seems that the troubles caused by illegal acts cannot be coped with satisfactorily if teenagers have strong ties with peers or lack ties to their family. It is most likely that illegal acts, such as vandalism, abuse of 'soft' drugs, shop-lifting, etc. are sometimes committed together with peers and are perceived as a sign of maturity and adulthood by the peer-group. In fact, Emler, Reicher and Ross (1987) found, delinquency by boys and girls is, usually committed with peers. In that case, peers are more of an obstacle than a source of support in resolving the problem of delinquency. It is clearly the family that has the resources to help in such situations and the effect of its support is more powerful the weaker the teenagers' bonds to their peers. These results could explain the widespread belief in a generational gap. Illegal acts are in general much more visible than the personal problems of adolescents or relational conflicts and the process of coping with them. Thus, the peers may often be perceived as risky for the adolescents' development and as a stimulating youngsters to commit illegal acts. Summarizing, the results indicate that (a) adolescents do not talk much about problems of delinquency, particu-

larly with their families, (b) they do not regard their own delinquency as a major problem, and (c) because minor crime is visible, public opinion regards it as a problem, whereas for the adolescents concerned other less 'visible' matters are experienced by them as greater problems. These results hold for the few adolescents who committed minor criminal acts, who did not report on them, and thought they were of some concern to them. In this study, there are no data available for those teenagers who claimed that their criminal acts presented no personal problem for them. They may, as a study by Emler (1990) suggested, talk about their behaviour more freely with their peers and perhaps also with their parents.

When adolescents decided to reveal a developmental problem to somebody then they most often chose their best friend; or, depending on the level of identification, their family, their peers, or both. The level of identification also influenced the outcome of these discussions. Those adolescents with low identification with both groupings reported less satisfaction than other adolescents. Except for problems with illegal acts, those teenagers with high identification with their family and peers reported the highest degree of satisfaction with conversations. According to the results reported in other studies, those teenagers who strongly identified with their peers judged discussions concerning relational and personal problems more positively than those who only identified highly with the family. On the other hand, if these adolescents felt close to their family, conversations about problems at school were reported to be more useful (e.g. Coleman and Hendry, 1990; Hunter, 1985; Kandel and Lesser, 1972; Larsen 1972; Seiffge-Krenke, 1985). Similar results were obtained concerning the frequencies of finding a solution and with respect to long-term effect of problematic situations: adolescents need to be close to both parents and peers to progress successfully through their problems.

The path analyses support the presented results. Identification was positively related to the outcome of discussions and to maturation as a long-term effect. In case of an illegal act, the outcome of conversations did not depend on the degree of identification. However, high 'identifiers' believed they had derived more long-term advantages from the situation than others. More frequently they reported maturation goals rather than a mere change of mood or behaviour following the resolution process. As the previous, more detailed, analyses showed, this was due to support coming from their family.

As in all our previous investigations on adolescents' coping processes with various developmental problems (Palmonari *et al.*, 1990; Pombeni *et al.*, 1991), the type of group adolescents joined was of minor importance. Being a member of an informal street group or of a structured group with social commitments or religious programmes seems to be of little importance. There is no significant relationship between group type and coping strategies, and only a small positive correlation between group type and identification.

The importance of identification does not vary across sex and age levels of adolescents. However, it should be emphasized that young women reported experiencing relational and personal problems more often than young men. The percentages reporting a conflict with their best friend, betrayal by a friend, conflict with the family, feelings of loneliness, and lack of life-values were 63, 78, 84, 78 and 67 per cent, respectively. The respective percentages for young men were: 48, 61, 67, 58 and 47 per cent (Chi-square values with 1 degree of freedom: 35.36, 47.96, 65.44, 69.43, and 64.72; all  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, females were more realistic about developmental

tasks, such as relational and personal problems, they were also more inclined to talk about them, and, as the path analyses show, they judged these discussions more positively than young men.

These sex differences held good only for relational and personal problems. In cases of a socio-institutional problem, sex was a rather poor predictor of the coping strategies involved. Young women reported less often having experienced a problem with a minor criminal act (16 per cent) than did young men (33 per cent; Chi-square (1) = 64.83;  $p < 0.001$ ). No difference was found in the frequency of feelings of frustration at school (54 per cent for males and 54 per cent for females). These young men seemed to get more advantages out of a successful coping process than young women. They more often reported maturational goal as a long-term effect than did young women. However, socio-institutional problems were rather poorly explained by the predictors considered in this study. It seems that the process of coping with relational and personal problems can be explained to some extent, whereas handling frustrations at school and delinquency were less successfully explored.

Since identification with peers was found to be correlated with identification with family, school mates, and best friend (Kirchler *et al.*, in press), it can be assumed that those adolescents who are close to others and identify with them are able to derive advantages from this in a range of situations and may thus have less serious problems on their transition to adulthood. Depending on the type of problem, they may obtain the necessary instrumental and emotional support to overcome it.

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## APPENDIX: ITEMS OF THE FOUR IDENTIFICATION SCALES

### Group identification scale

1. My peer-group is very important to me
2. I identify with my peer-group
3. I feel close to my peer-group
4. I am happy to have my peer-group
5. I consider myself a member of my peer-group.

### Family identification scale

1. My family is very important to me
2. I identify with my family

3. I feel close to my family
4. I am happy to have my family
5. I consider myself a member of my family

**Best friend identification scale**

1. My best friend is very important to me
2. I identify with my best friend
3. I feel close to my best friend
4. I am happy to have my best friend
5. I consider myself a member of my best friend

**School mates identification scale**

1. My school mates are very important to me
2. I identify with my school mates
3. I feel close to my school mates
4. I am happy to have my school mates
5. I consider myself a member of my school mates

(Answers: 1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = don't know, 4 = agree, 5 = completely agree).