Explanation of Normative Declines in Parents’ Knowledge about their Adolescent Children

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Background

• Parental knowledge: “Do your parents know about what you do in your spare time?” Knowledge about child’s whereabouts, school, and spending allowances

• In the past, parental knowledge used as measure for “monitoring”: Correlations with low levels of problem behavior seen as result of parenting style

• But knowledge stems to the largest part from adolescent disclosure and not from parental control (Stattin & Kerr, 2000)

• This literature misses the developmental aspect: Parental knowledge declines as a norm (Masche, 1998, 2006)

• Why declines knowledge on average, although high levels of knowledge are related to positive development?
Parental knowledge might decline because...

- Adolescents try to become autonomous
  - Own territories (Youniss & Smollar, 1985): areas that parents do not any longer know about
  - Own decisions
- Parents might adapt to adolescents’ autonomy needs (Hofer, 2003)
  - Reduced control
- Adolescents establish new relations outside the family, which might detract them from close family relations
Logic of analyses

Age → Mediator$_t$ → Knowledge$_{t+1}$
Logic of analyses

- Age → Mediator\(_t\) → Knowledge\(_{t+1}\)
- Knowledge\(_t\) → Mediator\(_t\) 
- Knowledge\(_t\) → Knowledge\(_{t+1}\)
- Mediator\(_t\) → Knowledge\(_{t+1}\)

+ and - indicate positive and negative relationships.
### Sample

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<tbody>
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<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
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**Cohort**

- 1984: 17
- 1985: 16
- 1986: 15
- 1987: 14
- 1988: 13
- 1989: 13
- 1990: 13
- 1991: 13

**N = 2,415**

1,222 boys, 1,193 girls

4,875 questionnaires, with further questionnaire even at t + 1
## Sample

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<td>1984</td>
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</table>

### Cohort Counts

- **N = 2,415**
  - 1,222 boys, 1,193 girls
  - 4,875 questionnaires, with further questionnaire even at t + 1

- **N = 1,223 parents**
  - 1,442 questionnaires, with further adolescent questionnaire even at t + 1

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Multi-level analyses

- **Level 1: within individual**
  Mediation analysis as shown before

- **Level 2: between individuals**
  Effects of cohort and gender on intercepts and regression weights

- This implies...
  - Main effects of cohort and gender are controlled
  - Interactions of cohort and gender with study variables are tested
  - Test of mediation effects at varying numbers of occasions per individual
Age decline of parental knowledge

Even controlling time 1 knowledge, each year, knowledge declines by \(1/10\) SD.
Test of mediation: I. Private territories

Adolescents’ information management and claims of increased autonomy, but not secrecy, explain normative decline of parental knowledge.
Test of mediation: II. Parental monitoring, etc.

Ambiguous effect: Decreasing control reduces knowledge, but bothering adolescents less with overcontrol and asking them more slows down the decline in knowledge.
Test of mediation: III. Relations outside family

Although adolescents enhance their relations outside the family, this rather contributes to parental knowledge, thus, slows down the age-decline.
Test of mediation: IV. Parent-reported mediators

- Age → Mediator
- Mediator → Knowledge

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age→Mediator</th>
<th>Mediator→Knowledge</th>
<th>Mediation</th>
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<tr>
<td>disclosure:</td>
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<td>+ ns</td>
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<td>trust:</td>
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<td>worries:</td>
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<td>ns</td>
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<td>avoidance of</td>
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<tr>
<td>confrontation</td>
<td></td>
<td>ns</td>
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<tr>
<td>giving up:</td>
<td></td>
<td>ns</td>
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</table>
Why do parent-reports not explain knowledge decline?

• In subsample with parent data, no significant age decline in knowledge (-.02 ns)
  – restricted sub-group
  – restricted age-range

• Parents do not perceive changed relationship
  – same reasons as above
  – smaller sample-size, most parents assessed only once
  – largely “pathologic” scales
Unique and combined mediation effects

- Three mediators explained age decline of parental knowledge: Adolescent disclosure & defiance, parent control
- But they might overlap and might actually not be independent.
- When entering all of them in the regression equation, do they still predict parental knowledge?
  - Disclosure: .17***
  - Defiance: -.04*
  - Control: .06 ns
- Combined, these variables explain 38.7% of age decline in parental knowledge.
Gender

- Somewhat mixed gender main effects and age-by-gender interactions
- For 2 out of 14 potential mediator variables, differential effects at $p < .05$: Effects of disclosure and low secrecy on parental knowledge somewhat weaker in girls
- Still, all mediation effects which are significant in general, are so for each gender
Cohort

- Nothing that would affect the mediation analyses
- Some main effects, independent of age:
  - parents know less about later-born youth
  - more control & solicitation with later-born youth, less avoidance of confrontation (parent-report), better friendships
  - cohort main effects and cohort-by-age interactions which actually reflect curvilinear age trends (see next slide)
Cohort

Age-by-Cohort Interaction on Defiance

Defiance

Age

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Discussion

• Longitudinal multi-level analysis of mechanisms that lead to decreased knowledge
• Adolescents’ establishment of private territories leads to reduced parental knowledge: less disclosure of information, more defiance
• Also reduced parental control explains less knowledge, but is spurious if controlling disclosure and defiance
• Families also slow down loss of parental knowledge:
  – Parents reduce overcontrol and increase solicitation: adaptation towards more lenient ways of control (Hofer, 2003)
  – More satisfied peer relations: Transferring peer experiences to parent relationships (Youniss & Smollar, 1985)?
• Core results largely gender and cohort independent
Take-home message & outlook

- Parental knowledge mirror of parent-adolescent relationships
- Adolescents drive their development towards autonomy
- Both generations also slow down this development: driving and delaying processes are balanced and maybe coordinated
- Precociously low levels of parental knowledge might indicate lack of balance & coordination and need to be distinguished from the normative development towards autonomy

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