

A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MOTHERS AND ADOLESCENTS

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Communication between mothers and adolescents is a fundamental aspect of the family dynamic that influences not only the development and well-being of the children but also that of their parents. Despite the initial years of adolescence being a difficult time for communication within families, no research has been carried out which explores changes in family communication throughout adolescence. This study has two objectives: on the one hand, to analyze the development of communication patterns throughout adolescence, taking into account possible differences related to adolescents' and parents' gender; and on the other hand, to compare the different perspectives of mothers and adolescents. With these purposes in mind, we assessed the communication with their parents reported by a sample of 101 adolescents for three different time points –early, middle and late adolescence. We also interviewed the mothers at two of these time points. Among the most interesting results is that, in general, mothers and adolescents have a positive view of communication within the family, though mothers perceive more frequent communication than their sons and daughters. On the other hand, both boys and girls say that they talk to their mother more than to their father. These and other results are discussed.

Keywords: Adolescence, Family relationships, Communication between parents and adolescents, Mothers' and adolescents' views.

La comunicación entre progenitores y adolescentes es un aspecto fundamental de la dinámica familiar que influye en el desarrollo y bienestar tanto de los hijos e hijas, como de sus madres y padres. Los primeros años de la adolescencia son un momento difícil en la comunicación familiar, no obstante no existen investigaciones realizadas en nuestro contexto que den cuenta de los cambios en la comunicación familiar a lo largo de los años adolescentes. Los objetivos de este trabajo son dos. Por un lado, analizar la evolución que los patrones de comunicación siguen a lo largo de la adolescencia, teniendo en cuenta las posibles diferencias en función del género adolescente y de sus padres y madres, y por otro, analizar comparativamente las perspectivas de madres y adolescentes. Para ello, se evaluó la comunicación que una muestra de 101 adolescentes tenía con sus madres y padres en tres momentos diferentes, coincidiendo con la adolescencia inicial, media y tardía. Igualmente, se entrevistó a sus madres. Entre los resultados más interesantes cabe destacar que en general, madres y adolescentes tienen una visión positiva de la comunicación familiar, aunque las primeras perciben una comunicación más frecuente que sus hijos e hijas. Por otro lado, chicos y chicas dicen hablar más con sus madres que con sus padres. Estos y otros resultados son discutidos.

Palabras clave: Adolescencia, Relaciones familiares, Comunicación entre padres y adolescentes, Perspectiva de madres y adolescentes.

Data from research on family relations indicate that at some time between childhood and adolescence, communication between children and their parents deteriorates: they spend less time interacting, the children talk about fewer matters spontaneously, interrupting the mother and father –especially the former– becomes much more frequent, and communication becomes more difficult (Barnes &

Olson, 1985; Steinberg, 1981; Steinberg & Hill, 1978). However, there is little data on how communication between parents and their children evolves over the course of adolescence. Although we understand that communication is a central characteristic of good family functioning and that adequate channels of parent-child communication are fundamental to children's development, especially during adolescence, we know surprisingly little about the way in which such communication changes as children move through adolescence (Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra & Bosma, 1998; Laursen & Collins, 2004; Collins & Laursen, 2004).

The few studies on the matter are not comparable in terms of either age group or form of data-collection, and this may be influential in the discrepancy between their

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findings. Thus, works such as those of Jackson (Jackson et al., 1998) or Conger and Ge (Conger & Ge, 1999), which analyze the evolution of communication between early and middle adolescence, point to a deterioration of communication between these two stages. In this line are the results of a cross-sectional study by Moreno, Muñoz-Tinoco, Pérez and Sánchez-Queija (2006) in the Spanish context, which suggests that communication at age 17 is more difficult than in early adolescence. On the other hand, Drury, Catan, Dennison and Brody (1998), who extended the age of the sample to 20, claim that, compared to previous ages, communication shows an improvement in late adolescence.

Research on the topics children talk about with their mothers and fathers appears to indicate that they prefer to talk about their future plans, about what they do in their free time, about family rules and about general problems. On the other hand, they rarely talk about politics, religion, sexuality or drugs (Megías et al., 2002; Miller, 2002; Noller & Bagi, 1985; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). With regard to communication about sexuality there is a curious paradox: parents and children talk extremely infrequently about sex, despite the fact that adolescents would like more communication on the topic at home, and despite the fact that parents would like to be an active source of sexual information for their sons and daughters (Benshoff & Alexander, 1993; Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Jordan, Price & Fitzgerald 2000).

On comparing parents' and adolescents' ideas about the family dynamic, some discrepancies emerge. When we ask mothers, fathers and adolescents about the nature of communication within the family, the children's rating of the communication is poorer than that of their parents (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Hartos & Power, 2000; Megías et al., 2002; Olson *et. al.*, 1983). This more negative perception on the part of adolescents could be explained by social desirability, whereby mothers strive to give an impression of more positive relations with their sons and daughters; such desirability works precisely in the opposite direction for the adolescents, since for them what is desirable and necessary is to reaffirm their independence, perhaps by describing relations as more negative than they actually are (Hartos & Power, 2000).

The possible influence of adolescents' gender on communication in the family context has been considered in various studies. Some claim that communication with daughters is more frequent than with sons, and that girls tend to talk more about their preoccupations and personal matters (Noller & Callan,

1991; Noller & Bagi, 1985; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). However, other works do not find such clear differences, or at least stress the importance of also taking into account the gender of the parent who is rating the communication. The results of the interesting study, mentioned above, by Sandy Jackson (Jackson et al., 1998), suggest that although there may be slight differences between communication with fathers by boys and by girls, the former reporting more open communication especially in early adolescence, communication with mothers tends to be more equal. In a similar line are the data from Moreno et al. (2004), which indicate that communication with mothers by boys and by girls is fairly similar, whilst as far as communication with the father is concerned there are significant differences, communication between fathers and sons being much more frequent than between fathers and daughters.

So, in the family context, is there really more communication with daughters than with sons? According to what we saw in the previous paragraph, while in the case of fathers, communication with sons is more frequent, in the mother's case communication with sons and with daughters is more evenly distributed. In this regard, however, two points should be borne in mind. First, that the conclusions of the studies by Jackson and Moreno are based on information provided by the adolescents, and that if we were to ask the mothers they might indeed report differences between their interaction with sons and with daughters, in the line of findings such as those of Noller or Youniss (Noller & Callan, 1991; Noller & Bagi, 1985; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). And second, as Jackson indeed points out (Jackson et al., 1998), it is also necessary to take into account the methodology used in the different studies: interviews and questionnaires may not always yield the same conclusions. In fact, works such as that of Youniss and Smollar were based on interviews –which may provide more sophisticated information– whilst those of Moreno and of Jackson were based on questionnaires.

It is worth pointing out, however, a point on which there is practically a consensus in the literature: that both boys and girls communicate more frequently with their mothers (Jackson et al., 1998; Miller, 2002; Moreno et al., 2004; Noller & Bagi, 1985; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999), and that mothers are chosen when it comes to discussing difficult subjects such as drugs (Miller, 2002). In fact, the mother is the figure which, according to her sons and daughters, maintains communication in the family (Megías et al., 2002). Thus, mothers are

perceived as more open, understanding and interested in the adolescents' affairs, and tend to more frequently initiate communicative exchanges with their children (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Lanz, Iafraite, Rosnati & Scabini, 1999; Noller & Bagi, 1985; Noller & Callan, 1991).

There are two main goals of this study. The first of these is to explore the way boys' and girls' communication with their mothers and fathers evolves over the course of adolescence, analyzing both the general level of communication and possible changes in communication on specific topics; we shall also try to determine whether there are differences according to gender, taking into account both the gender of the adolescents themselves and that of their parents. Thus, we shall analyze boys' and girls' perceptions of communication with their mothers and their fathers separately. The second main goal is to compare the perspectives of male and female adolescents with that of their mothers, analyzing whether or not they have similar views with respect to family communication. With these two objectives in mind we have opted for a longitudinal design, the only type that allows us to monitor changes at the individual level over a number of years, and to take into account the views of the protagonists of the story: adolescent boys and girls and their mothers.

METHOD

Participants

This study involves a longitudinal follow-up of a group of boys and girls throughout adolescence. It is based on previous research in which, using a cross-sectional design, we analyzed changes in the family dynamic coinciding with the adolescence of sons and daughters (Oliva & Parra, 2001; Parra & Oliva, 2002). In the cross-sectional study the sample was made up of 513 adolescents aged 12 to 19 from 10 schools in Seville (Spain) and its province. The schools from which we recruited were chosen according to the following criteria: rural or urban context, public or grant-assisted private, and socio-economic level of pupils' families.

The second phase of the research consisted in the follow-up of the young people who in the previous study had been in early adolescence (aged 12 to 14, mean of 13.11 and standard deviation of 0.44). This follow-up was carried out over a period of more than five years, until participants had reached the age of 18 or 19. Hence, these young people responded to assessment instruments in their early, middle and late adolescence,

referred to as Time 1 (T1), Time 2 (T2) and Time 3 (T3), respectively. The final sample was made up of 101 adolescents, 38 boys and 63 girls. Mean ages in middle and late adolescence were 15.38 (standard deviation 0.56) and 17.85 (standard deviation 0.52), respectively.

In order to identify possible differences between the young people who continued in our study and those who dropped out, we carried out an *analysis of lost cases*. Our results indicate that of the participants who continued in the study there are more girls than boys ($\chi^2= 4.05$, $p<0.05$), and fewer children of parents with low educational-professional status ($\chi^2= 6.52$, $p<0.05$). However, the two groups are similar with regard to habitat –rural vs. urban– and type of school –public vs. private.

In order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the family dynamic, at Time 2 of the longitudinal study we decided to interview the adolescents' fathers and mothers. Fathers wishing to participate were so few (14 at T2 and 7 at T3) that we decided to leave them out and use only the interviews with the mothers. However, there were a few cases in which we used the interview with the father because he was the principal caregiver. At T2 the sample was made up of 69 participants (66 mothers and 3 fathers), and at T3 by 49 mothers and 1 father. Mothers' age ranged from 32 to 56, with a mean of 44.02 (standard deviation 5.47). Of the total, 43.7% were housewives/homemakers; as regards their educational level, the majority (57%) had no education or only to primary level, 17% had been educated to secondary level, and 26% had a university education.

For ascertaining whether there were differential characteristics between the adolescents whose mothers participated in the study and those whose mothers declined to participate, we made a comparative analysis. The results indicate that the two groups are similar in all variables. Furthermore, analysis of lost cases indicated no significant differences between mothers who only participated at T2 and those who also did so at T3.

Instruments

1. *Identification data*. The adolescents responded to a series of demographic questions referring to age, sex, school and school year or grade. They also indicated their parents' educational level and occupation. Mothers who participated were required to indicate their educational level, age and occupation.
2. *Family communication* (Parra & Oliva, 2002). We used a scale designed for the present study made up of 22 items, 11 referring to the father and 11 to the

mother, for assessing the frequency of family communication on a range of topics –friends, free time, sexuality, drugs, future plans, etc. We used a Likert-type scale from 1 to 4, on which 1 means that they never talk about the matter in question, 2 that they rarely do, 3 that they speak about it sometimes, and 4 that they talk about it frequently (Cronbach's alphas for communication with mother at T1=0.78, at T2=0.78, and at T3=0.83; Cronbach's alphas for communication with father at T1=0.79, at T2=0.82 and at T3=0.82).

Procedure

The first data collection (T1) took place during the school year 1998-1999, the second (T2) in 2000-2001 and the third (T3) in 2002-2003. The first step was to select the schools and contact them to explain the study and request their cooperation. Once they had agreed to be involved, we chose the classrooms in which we would collect the data. We then sent a letter to the parents of the adolescents, requesting permission for their children to take part. Once we had obtained their permission, we proceeded to apply the questionnaires anonymously and in groups. So as to facilitate subsequent follow-up, each participant was given an identification number corresponding to their name and surname, and which only the researchers knew. At the third data-collection point, T3, some adolescents were no longer at school, or had changed schools since T1. In such cases, once we had contacted them and they had agreed to continue participating in the study, we arranged an appointment for them to complete the questionnaire in the Department of Developmental Psychology and Education at Seville University.

As regards the mothers and fathers, the first step was to contact them by telephone, explain the goals of the study and request their participation. Once they had agreed, a time and place was set for the interview. Interviews were always carried out by a member of the research team in the family home.

RESULTS

With a view to clarifying the presentation of the results we shall divide them in two broad blocks according to the objectives. We shall begin by analyzing the development of communication with mothers and fathers from the perspective of their children throughout adolescence, moving on to compare this view with that of the mothers.

In order to address the first goal we shall present the

results distinguishing the *absolute* and *relative* stability of boys' and girls' communication with their mothers and fathers. *Absolute stability* refers to its consistency over time, and involves analyzing the behaviour of its average value at the different time points. On being based on mean scores, absolute stability does not inform us about individual changes and does not take into account possible different courses followed by groups of participants. In order to go deeper into these aspects we shall present results on the *relative stability* of communication. The relative stability reveals the consistency of the participants' position with respect to their reference group across time, and allows us to determine if they are situated similarly at the different observation points in comparison to their group. The procedure most commonly used for measuring relative stability of the variables is based on the coefficients of correlation between the different measurement times (Alder & Scher, 1994).

To identify possible changes in the means of the variables over the course of adolescence, that is, to assess their absolute stability, we will use the model of *analysis of variance* (ANOVA) with *repeated measures*. This model permits us to study the effect of one or more factors when at least one of them is a *within-subjects* factor, so that it is very useful in analyses of longitudinal designs, which involve the effect of the time factor on variables of the same group of participants. In repeated-measures models it is necessary to meet the assumption that the variances of the differences between each two levels of the within-subjects factor are equal. This assumption involves affirming that the variance-covariance matrix is circular or spherical. There are different statistics for measuring the effect of the within-subjects factor on the dependent variable, some univariate (*Sphericity Assumed*, *Greenhouse-Geisser*, *Huynh-Feldt*) and others multivariate (*Pillai's Trace*, *Wilks' Lambda*, *Hotelling's Trace* or *Roy's Largest Root*). The multivariate statistics, on being more conservative, make it possible to check the null hypotheses referring to the effects involving the time factor without the need for the assumption of sphericity. Consequently, in the analyses shown here we shall present the *F* value of the *Pillai's Trace* statistic and its significance, which will inform us to whether the time factor is significant and whether the levels of communication are similar or not at the different time points (early, middle and late adolescence).

In addition to considering the absolute and relative stability, in order to look deeper into the way the

participant groups evolve we carried out cluster analyses to identify groups of adolescents that are similar with regard to the course of their communication frequency. Thus, this information indicates whether the courses or profiles observed via the absolute stability are common to all participants or whether we can identify different groups; this helps to complement the data obtained from the analysis of relative stability. For carrying out the cluster analysis we used two successive procedures. First, we performed an analysis of *clusters with K means*, which permits us to reduce the initial number of participants to just 10 groups (a number we chose at random) in accordance with the similarities of the courses (of communication) followed during adolescence. Once we had reduced the number of cases, we used the *hierarchical clusters* procedure to arrive at the final number of groups we considered homogeneous with regard to the courses of the participants making them up.

1. Communication over the course of adolescence

1.1. Communication with the mother

The assessment instrument listed 11 topics, with the adolescents required to indicate the frequency with which they talked about each one to their mothers. In order to obtain a single measure of the general frequency of communication at each time point we generated a new variable through the means of participants' responses to the 11 communication topics. The range of scores in this variable for T1, T2 and T3, respectively, is: 1.45-4, 1.73-4 and 1.55-4. Means for T1, T2 and T3 are: 2.66, 2.82 and 2.85, and standard deviations are 0.54, 0.52 and 0.56, respectively.

Absolute stability

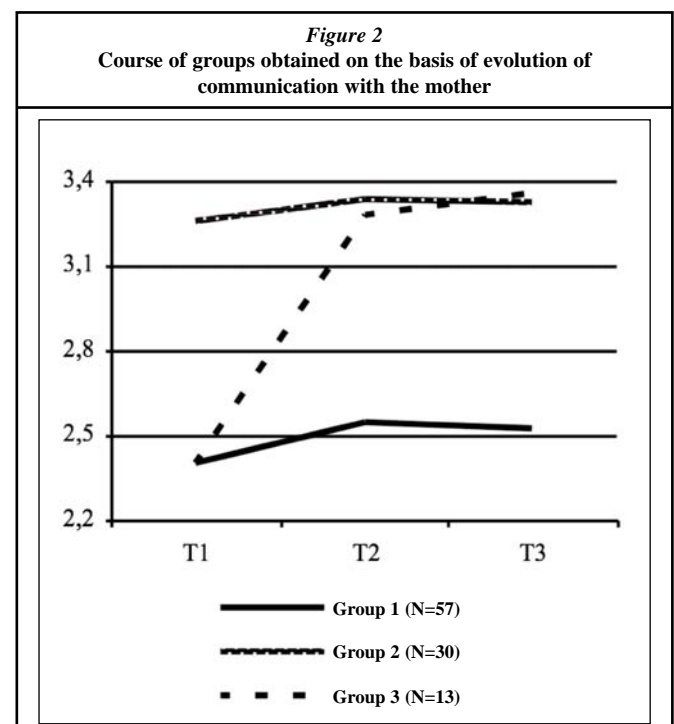
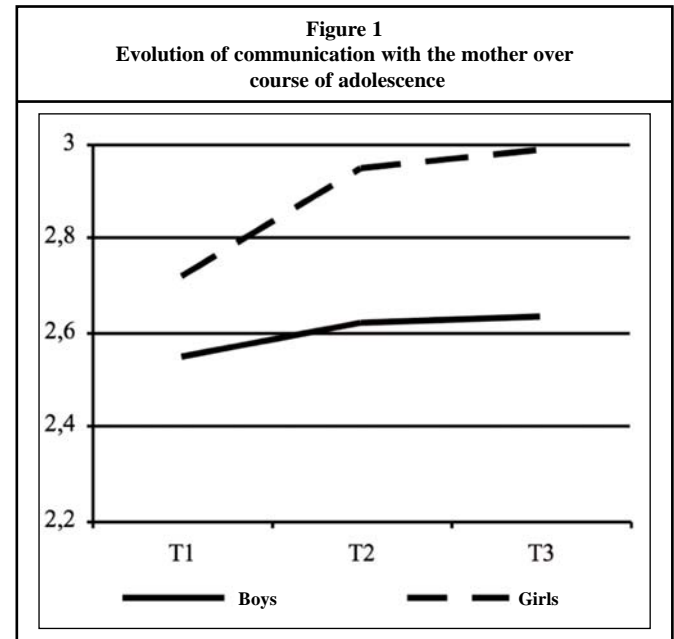
Communication by girls with their mothers showed a significant increase over the years (Pillai's Trace, $F_{(2,97)}=6.36, p=0.003$), principally between early and middle adolescence (significance of difference of means $p=0.005$). In the case of boys no significant changes were found, their scores being similar across the different stages of adolescence, (Pillai's Trace $F_{(2,97)}=0.31, p=0.732$).

It is interesting to point out that, in general, both boys and girls talk to their mothers relatively frequently, since, as can be seen in Figure 1, the means are above 2.5. On the other hand, over the whole course of adolescence it is girls who communicate more with their mothers (Univariate contrasts $F_{(1,98)}=11.50, p=0.001$), though these differences are especially significant in

middle (Univariate contrasts $F_{(1,98)}=10.33, p=0.002$) and late adolescence (Univariate contrasts $F_{(1,99)}=10.64, p=0.002$). (see figure one).

Identification of profiles

In order to analyze in more depth the way participants' communication with their mothers evolves over adolescence and to identify different groups according to this criterion, we carried out a Cluster Analysis,



which yielded 3 groups. Figure 2 shows the way these three groups evolve throughout adolescence. The most numerous group (Group 1) maintains a fairly stable course with increasing age, as does Group 2. On the other hand, Group 3, made up of 9 girls and 4 boys, shows a clear increase in communication with the mother. It is probably the 9 girls in this group who are responsible for this increase, as shown in Figure 1, for the case of early to middle adolescence.

Our results indicate a relationship between the three groups identified and gender ($\chi^2=7.41$, $p=0.025$). Thus, in Group 1 there are more boys than would be expected by chance, while in Group 2 there are more girls. In the third group there are no significant differences between the sexes.

Relative stability

Our data indicate medium and medium-high relative stability across the different stages of adolescence (see Table 1). Moreover, girls show quite high relative stability between middle and late adolescence, higher than that found between early and middle adolescence. It is important to point out here that using the raw correlation coefficients as a measure of relative stability attenuates the value of such stability, since they are based on scales whose reliability is lower than 1 (for example, in the case of communication with the mother the α is 0.80). Thus, the relative stability of communication with the mother is probably greater than that reflected by the correlation coefficients presented.

Evolution of communication with the mother by topics

According to the boys and girls in our sample, the topics about which they speak most frequently with their mothers are those referring to free time activities and friends, family rules, their tastes and interests and future plans. On the other hand, they rarely talk about sexuality in general, and even less about their own sexual behaviour; mention of politics or religion is also scarce. Likewise, girls talk more with their mothers than boys

	T1/T2	T2/T3
Boys	0.48**	0.41**
Girls	0.38**	0.63**
** $p<0.01$		

about the majority of topics, including sexuality in general and their boyfriends or people they like. On topics such as drinking, smoking and other drugs, politics, religion or their own sexual behaviour there are no differences between boys and girls in communication with their mothers, discussion of these topics being very unusual.

As can be seen in Figure 1, general frequency of communication between boys and their mothers does not change over the years, but they talk more about specific topics, such as their tastes and interests (Pillai's Trace, $F(2,94)=3.70$, $p=0.028$) or family/household rules (Pillai's Trace, $F(2,93)=4.78$, $p=0.001$), and communication increases especially between early and middle adolescence. In the case of girls, communication increases on matters such as family/household rules (Pillai's Trace, $F(2,93)=5.99$, $p=0.004$), future plans (Pillai's Trace, $F(2,94)=13.47$, $p=0.000$), their boyfriends or people they like (Pillai's Trace, $F(2,95)=3.62$, $p=0.031$) and politics or religion (Pillai's Trace, $F(2,93)=4.39$, $p=0.015$).

1.2. Communication with the father

As in the case of communication with the mother, we generated a new variable through the means of participants' responses for the 11 topics of communication. The range of scores of this variable for T1, T2 and T3, respectively is: 1-4; 1-3.64 and 1-3.64. The means for T1, T2 and T3 are: 2.42, 2.44 and 2.52 and the standard deviations 0.56, 0.55 and 0.56, respectively.

Absolute stability

In the case of communication with fathers, boys and girls show different tendencies; in fact, the Pillai's Trace statistic reaches statistical significance for the interaction between communication with the father and gender ($F(2,95)=4.68$, $p=0.012$ (see Figure 3). With increasing age, female adolescents tend to communicate more frequently with their parents (Pillai's Trace $F(2,95)=4.19$, $p=0.019$); however, in the case of boys, communication with the father shows a decrease between early and middle adolescence, appearing to recover slightly in late adolescence. The profile of communication between boys and their fathers seems to fit a quadratic model $F(1,37)=0.366$, $p=0.039$, whilst that of girls would be more linear (see Figure 3).

Furthermore, the results reflect other differences between boys and girls in communication with fathers.

Girls talk more frequently in middle (Univariate contrasts $F_{(1,96)}=6.30, p=0.014$) and late adolescence (Univariate contrasts $F_{(1,96)}=5.50, p=0.021$), but there are no differences between the sexes in early adolescence (Univariate contrasts $F_{(1,96)}=0.240, p=0.625$).

Identification of profiles

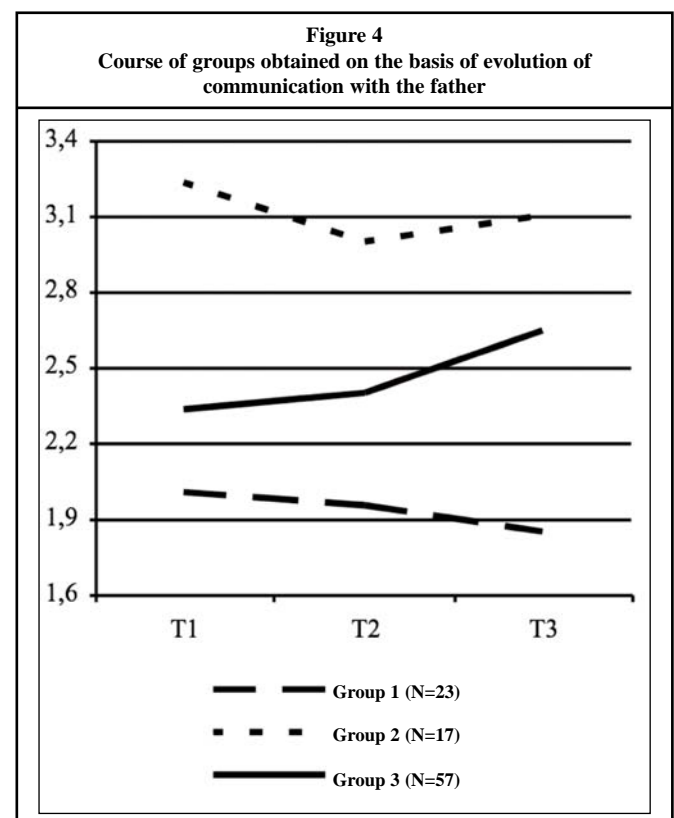
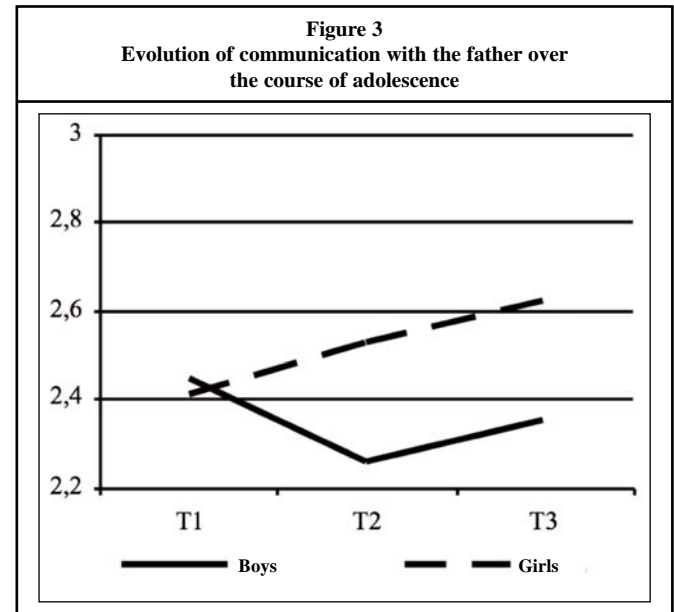
With a view to analyzing in more depth communication with fathers throughout adolescence and ascertaining whether the means shown in Figure 3 represent the profiles of the majority of adolescents or whether there are different tendencies, we carried out a Cluster Analysis. After analyzing the results we opted to consider 3 different groups. As can be seen in Figure 4, participants making up Groups 1 and 2 show a slight decrease in communication with their fathers over the course of adolescence, whilst those in Group 3, the largest group, show a slight increase. In any case, the main difference between the groups resides in the general levels of communication, since, while those in Group 2 report speaking with their parents often, those in Groups 1 and 3 do so less frequently (over the whole course of adolescence). There were no significant differences between gender and membership of these groups ($\chi^2=3.09, p=0.378$).

Relative stability

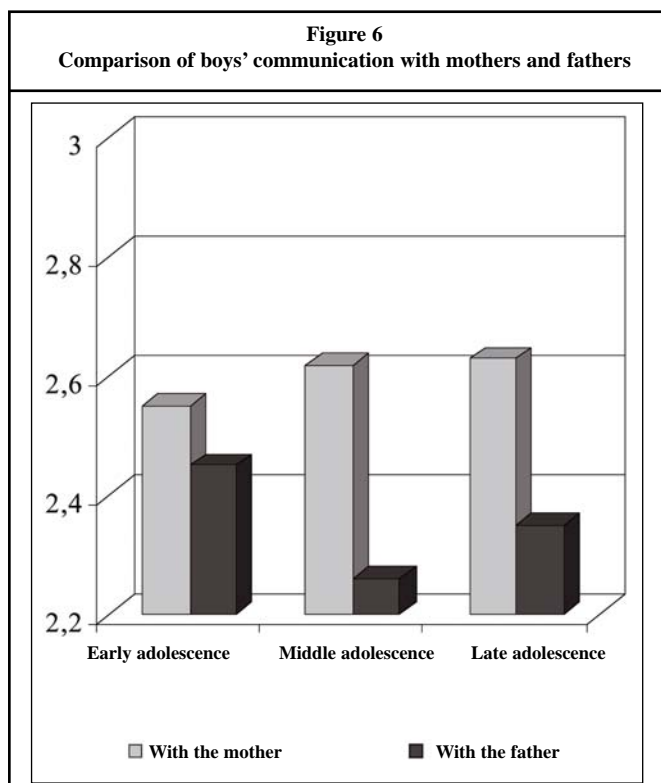
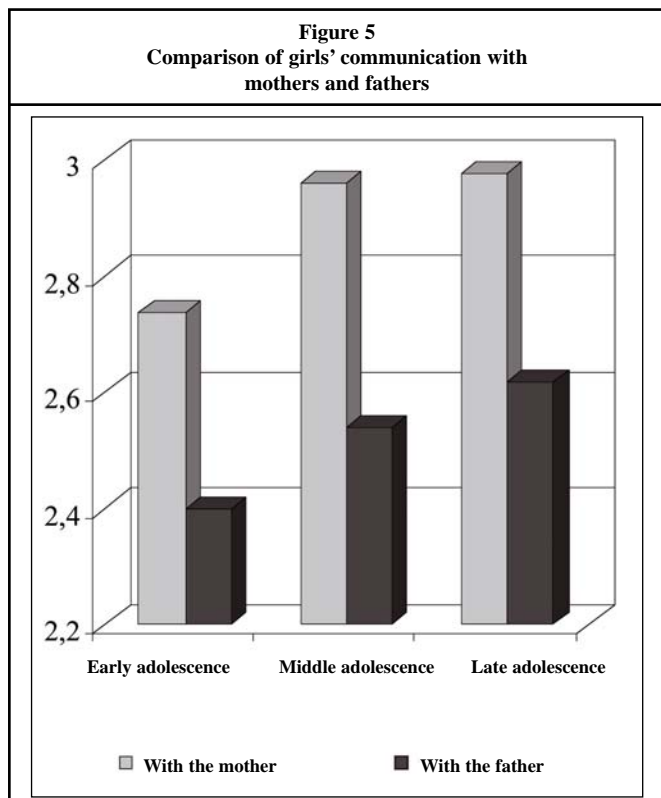
As Table 2 shows, communication with fathers presents medium-high relative stability; moreover, as we mentioned earlier, the correlations, being based on measures whose reliability never has a value of 1, tend to minimize the value of such stability. This high stability suggests that boys and girls tend to maintain their relative positions with respect to the reference group over the years; in other words, those who report the highest levels of communication in early adolescence are those who tend to still present high levels in middle and late adolescence.

Table 2		
r values of correlations between T1 and T2 (early and middle adolescence) and between T2 and T3 (middle and late adolescence) in boys' and girls' communication with their father		
T1/T2	T2/T3	
Boys	0.50**	0.67**
Girls	0.57**	0.60**
**p<0.01		

Evolution of communication with the father by topics
 The topics about which young people of both sexes talk most to their fathers are very similar to those they discuss with their mothers –friends, family rules, future plans and tastes and interests; likewise, the topics they discuss least are similar –sexuality, politics, religion and drugs. Also, and again comparable to the case of



communication with mothers, the topics most talked about are in general discussed more by girls than by boys –family/household rules, future plans, friends and



tastes/interests–, whilst there are no significant gender differences for the topics least often discussed –politics, religion, drugs and sexuality.

As age increases, communication by boys with their fathers becomes more frequent on topics such as use of free time (Pillai's Trace, $F_{(2,93)}=3.06, p=0.052$), tastes or interests (Pillai's Trace, $F_{(2,92)}=3.83, p=0.025$), sexual behaviour (Pillai's Trace, $F_{(2,91)}=5.26, p=0.007$) and politics and religion (Pillai's Trace, $F_{(2,93)}=6.47, p=0.002$). In the case of girls, as they get older communication with fathers increases on use of free time (Pillai's Trace, $F_{(2,93)}=3.50, p=0.034$), future plans (Pillai's Trace, $F_{(2,93)}=14.45, p=0.000$), family rules (Pillai's Trace, $F_{(2,93)}=4.15, p=0.019$) and their boy/girlfriends (Pillai's Trace, $F_{(2,90)}=3.86, p=0.025$).

1.3. Comparison of communication with mothers and fathers

We now compare frequency of communication with mothers and fathers from the point of view of the adolescents. At all stages of adolescence our young people communicate more with their mothers than with their fathers (early adolescence $t_{(98)}=5.65, p=0.000$; middle adolescence $t_{(97)}=8.10, p=0.000$; late adolescence $t_{(97)}=6.79, p=0.000$).

Analyzing this in more depth, we observe that whilst in the case of girls communication with the mother is more frequent than with the father at all stages –early adolescence $t_{(60)}=7.76, p=0.000$; middle adolescence $t_{(59)}=6.73, p=0.000$; late adolescence $t_{(59)}=6.38, p=0.000$ – for boys in early adolescence there are no differences in the general frequency of communication with fathers and mothers ($t_{(37)}=1.17, p=0.24$); on the other hand, there are indeed significant differences in favour of communication with mothers in both middle ($t_{(37)}=4.51, p=0.000$) and late adolescence ($t_{(37)}=3.16, p=0.003$). (see figures 5 and 6)

2. Comparison of the adolescents' view with that of their mothers

It should be borne in mind that although we have

Table 3
Differences in frequency of communication perceived by mothers and by adolescents in middle and late adolescence

Adolescence	Mothers	Adolescents	t
Middle (T2)	2.99	2.70	3.98**
Late (T3)	3.07	2.86	2.45*

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

information from the boys and girls at three stages of their adolescence—early, middle and late—, their mothers were interviewed at just two of these (middle and late), so that comparisons can only be made for these two stages.

First of all, and as shown in Table 3, in both middle and late adolescence mothers claim to communicate with their sons and daughters more frequently than they themselves report, though the greatest differences emerge in middle adolescence.

Likewise, we feel it important to highlight that for both mothers and adolescents the level of communication in the home is high, since the majority of the means are around a value of 3.

When we compare mothers' and adolescents' perceptions according to the frequency of communication on specific topics, we observe once more that the greatest discrepancies appear in middle adolescence. At this stage, mothers claim to talk to their sons and daughters more than the children claim to do so on the topics of politics and religion ($t_{(67)}=2.09$, $p=0.040$), alcohol and smoking ($t_{(67)}=5.81$, $p=0.000$), other drugs ($t_{(67)}=5.60$, $p=0.000$), the adolescents' future plans ($t_{(67)}=2.70$, $p=0.009$), sexuality in general ($t_{(67)}=2.91$, $p=0.005$) and their boyfriends and girlfriends ($t_{(67)}=1.89$, $p=0.063$). In late adolescence the most pronounced differences appear with regard to political and religious ideas ($t_{(43)}=2.19$, $p=0.034$), smoking and alcohol ($t_{(43)}=3.86$, $p=0.000$) and other drugs ($t_{(43)}=2.94$, $p=0.005$).

DISCUSSION

The results on communication with mothers suggest that while girls speak with their mothers more as they progress through adolescence (especially those who report least communication in early adolescence), frequency of communication in boys does not undergo significant changes with age. In any case, both groups show a relatively constant position with respect to their reference group, and those occupying the highest positions in the "ranking" of communication in middle adolescence appear to still occupy them in late adolescence. As regards communication with fathers, taken on the whole, the data on absolute and relative stability indicate that the slight increase occurring in girls' communication with their fathers during adolescence seems to involve the majority, since the relative positions tend to persist over time. In the case of boys the majority perceive a decrease in the frequency

of communication with their fathers between early and middle adolescence, with a subsequent increase. It is worth pointing out that, as occurred in the case of communication with the mother, girls talk more frequently with their fathers than boys in middle and late adolescence. On the other hand, our data identify different groups of participants according to the frequency of communication with parents. Participants in these groups can be distinguished, not so much by their communication profiles over time, which are similar and show great stability, but by the general levels of communication they maintain. Thus, there is one group which reports talking frequently to their parents throughout adolescence, whilst the other two report talking less often.

Our results with regard to the way communication evolves with age concur with those of Drury et al. (1998), insofar as they suggest more frequent communication with parents over the course of adolescence. As Mason and Gibbs (1993) suggest, this could be related to the increase in important experiences for adolescents and their growing cognitive capacities, which enable them to better understand their parents' point of view and improve communication with them. This is in line with the results of studies claiming that in the majority of homes conflicts are most frequent during early adolescence, after which their frequency tends to decrease (Conger & Ge, 1999; Holmbeck & Hill, 1991; Parra & Oliva, 2007; Steinberg, 1987; 1988). In any case, continuity and stability in relations appear to characterize our results, probably reflecting a dynamic that has been well established since childhood.

Our analyses have revealed a somewhat less dramatic image of family communication in adolescence than that which seems to prevail in today's society. In the opinions of mothers and adolescents, communication in the family is relatively frequent during this phase, and, as we have noted elsewhere, conflicts are not especially numerous (Parra & Oliva, 2007). The popular image emphasizing conflict as a central feature of the family dynamic during the children's adolescence does not appear to have much empirical support (Steinberg, 2001), and may be attributable to the high profile of certain families with problems who more than likely already ran into difficulties before their children reached adolescence.

Although in general our families report frequent communication, it is nevertheless true that they do not talk to the same extent about all topics. Coinciding with the results of studies carried out both in Spain and

elsewhere, mothers and adolescents report talking little about politics, religion, sexuality in general or the adolescent's own sexual behaviour (Megías et al., 2002; Miller, 2002; Noller & Bagi, 1985; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). Almost certainly, the reasons for such insufficient communication are different for the case of political and religious matters than for sexual ones. Probably, the former are not often discussed because in the majority of homes they are not considered high-priority subjects, and if it is mothers and fathers who are to initiate exchanges they tend to bring up aspects of more concern to them, such as family rules, the adolescent's friends, their future plans, alcohol or smoking. In contrast, if sexuality as a topic does not come up at home (and even less the sexual behaviour of the boys and girls themselves), it is partly due to the fact that for some families it is still a taboo subject. A subject which, moreover, fathers and mothers do not always know how to tackle, and which clearly belongs to the adolescent's private sphere.

In the same line as previous work, the results of our study confirm that boys and girls communicate more with their mothers than with their fathers, though the topics they speak most about are similar in the two cases. From our data we cannot infer the reasons for the different levels of communication with mothers and fathers, though some research has claimed that the relationship with mothers is more symmetrical and egalitarian, permitting bi-directional communication, authentic dialogue (Lanz, et al., 1999; Noller & Callan, 1991).

As far as adolescents' gender is concerned, our results indicate that in early adolescence boys and girls talk to their parents with similar frequency, though in middle and late adolescence differences appear, so that girls talk more frequently to both mothers and fathers. Why do gender differences increase as the years go on? There is probably no single explanation, the differences being due to a combination of factors. In our view, one such factor is that girls are perceived as more vulnerable than their brothers, so that they have to be more closely controlled, and frequent communication, especially through self-disclosure (Stattin & Kerr, 2000), is one of the best forms of control. A different explanation refers to the fact that girls may have more communicative skills –such as empathy– and that they actually speak more spontaneously to their fathers and mothers without needing so much prompting from them. Perhaps in childhood and the early years of adolescence these

differences are not so evident, since it tends to be the parents who initiate exchanges. When initiating conversations starts to depend on the adolescents themselves, it may be easier for girls.

With regard to the comparison of the views of mothers and adolescents, two points should be highlighted. First, it is interesting to note how for both mothers and adolescents the level of communication in the home is relatively high. On the other hand, mothers consider that they talk more to their sons and daughters than is perceived by the children themselves, especially about topics such as alcohol, smoking and other drugs, politics and religion, or sexuality. These results suggest that mothers and adolescents have somewhat different perspectives of the family reality, the former tending to give a more optimistic picture of relations in the home than the latter.

There is considerable agreement on the view that the early years of adolescence are a difficult time for family communication, which see its decline. However, it is important to stress that adequate patterns of communication are essential, both for good functioning of the home and for the well-being of the adolescents themselves (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986, Hartos & Power, 2000; Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Jackson et al., 1998; Parra, Oliva & Sánchez-Queija, 2004). The family is a fundamental context not only for learning healthy behaviours but also for developing communication strategies (Miller, 2002). Mothers and fathers should take advantage of the opportunity they have to deal with difficult topics such as sexuality or drugs, not only so as to educate their children about these matters, but also to show them how to talk about everything in a positive and constructive way. Moreover, it is important not only to do so in adolescence, but indeed to begin in childhood, which will in any case make subsequent communication much easier.

One of the most interesting aspects of the present work is that it involves the longitudinal follow-up, over more than 5 years, of 101 adolescents. Although this is a not inconsiderable number of participants, taking into account the longitudinal nature of the research, it is true that the numbers could be higher, and this small sample size partly compromises the statistical analyses. Hence, we are aware of the difficulty of generalizing our results. Likewise, using greater numbers of mothers and fathers would have allowed us to compare their views of family communication and analyze their perception according to the gender of their children.

This study presents a much less dramatic and rather more normalized picture of family communication during adolescence than that presented in society in general. These results, moreover, concur with those of many other studies which for some years now have been reflecting a more moderate image of adolescence. However, and as Steinberg (2001) points out, there is a tremendous discrepancy between what parents hear from research and what they hear from the media. Unfortunately, the latter have much greater social influence than the former, and the image that prevails in the end is that of adolescence as a difficult period. This unfavourable image can generate intense social prejudice toward adolescents and affect relationships between adults and young people, making intergenerational conflict more frequent, in both the family and school contexts (Moreno & del Barrio, 2000). Furthermore, it may bias the interpretation of some social problems involving young people, and serve to justify certain political decisions of a repressive nature (Oliva, 2003). We hope and trust that the present work goes some way towards creating a more positive and realistic image of family relations when sons and daughters reach adolescence.

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