

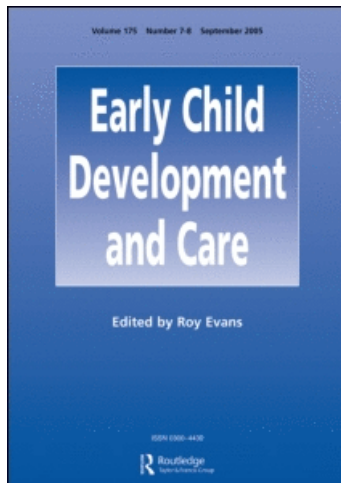
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### Quality of Mother-Child Interaction, Differences in Sexual Attitudes, and Inter-generational Disagreement on Sexuality

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## Quality of Mother-Child Interaction, Differences in Sexual Attitudes, and Inter- generational Disagreement on Sexuality

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The current paper examines the frequency of inter-generational disagreement reported by mothers and adolescents as a function of the quality of their interaction, and the match between their sexual attitudes. We expected that the quality of family interaction would act as a "family asset" that would enable members of families to manage and control the tensions caused by differences in (sexual) attitudes. Data on 319 British adolescent-mother pairs were analysed using structural equation modelling, revealing good support for these expectations: differences in sexual attitudes were more strongly linked to inter-family disagreement in low quality of mother-child interaction families than in high quality of mother-child interaction families. Implications of the study are discussed.

**Key words:** Mother-child communication, sexuality, inter-generational disagreement, adolescent sexuality

The current study examines how the frequency of mother-child disagreement about sexual matters varies as a function of (a) the match between the sexual attitudes of mother and child, and (b) the quality of their interaction. At the heart of this research lies the assumption that a large difference between mother and child's sexual attitudes will lead to much inter-generational disagreement about sexual issues – an almost trivial assumption – but that a high quality of mother-child interaction (in terms of mutual understanding, respect, and openness) will buffer the impact of a bad match between the sexual attitudes of mother and child on the frequency of inter-family disagreement. Thus, a high quality of family interaction is presumed to be a "family asset" that enables families to cope effectively with the tensions that are caused by different sexual standards held by the members of a family.

While it is acknowledged that parents influence the attitudes of their children (e.g., Delameter & MacCorquodale, 1979; Fisher, 1986; Jessor & Jessor, 1974; Taris, Semin & Bok, 1996) and that such attitudes influence the frequency of inter-generational disagreement (Taris & Semin, in press-a), the impact of the *difference* between mother-child attitudes upon inter-generational disagreement has hardly been examined. It appears that a large difference in attitudes between mother and child has the potential for – possibly severe – inter-generational disagreement, but the question whether this potential is also being realised has remained unaddressed. In the current study we therefore focus upon the possible moderator effect of the *quality of mother-child interaction*

upon the relation between differences in attitudes upon inter-generational disagreement. We assume that tensions created by differences in mother-child attitudes will translate themselves more readily into disagreement when the resources to deal with such tensions effectively are absent. One such resource is the way mother and child interact with each other. Thus, the current research aims to provide evidence regarding the impact of difference in attitudes upon inter-generational disagreement, taking into account the quality of mother-child interaction.

This research question is examined in the context of teenage sexuality. One reason why sexual behaviour is often understood as one of the more serious adolescent *problem* behaviours (e.g., G.M. Barnes & Farrell, 1992, p. 765) is its potentially severe consequences (having a teenage pregnancy/getting a girl pregnant, infection with sexually transmittable diseases such as HIV). Of course, parents will want to protect their children from such problems. Secondly, sexual behaviour in general is deeply embedded in socio-religious institutions like love and marriage (as acknowledged early on by Goode, 1959). This implies that the issue of adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviours transcend the personal level, and that they can be judged in the moral (and ill-defined) terms of good and evil. Given that the sexual *mores* differ from one generation to another with parents generally being less permissive than their children, (Fisher, 1986; Harding, 1988; Taris *et al.*, 1996), adolescent sexual behaviour and attitudes offer ample opportunities for parent-child discussions to derail into heated family arguments, with one party defending and the other challenging traditional values. As a consequence, the domain of adolescent sexuality seems well suited to study the questions formulated above; the influence of the participants' resources to manage the tensions that result from their differences in views on sexuality may well become apparent here.

#### *Quality of mother-child interaction*

One central concept in the current study is the quality of mother-child interaction. Parenting styles can usually be assigned to one of two broad dimensions; one of care/involvement versus indifference/rejection (including behaviours and attitudes of accessibility, affection, sensitivity, cooperation, and care), and one of control/overprotection versus encouragement of independence (behaviours and attitudes like strictness, intrusiveness, and control, cf. Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979; Rollins & Thomas, 1979; Taris & Bok, 1996). While the "controlling" parenting style is largely geared towards preventing undesired teenage behaviour (for instance, by setting rules), the "involvement" parenting style is directed towards establishing good parent-child relationships (creating a "bond" between parent and child, Parker *et al.*, 1979). It appears that especially the "involvement" parenting style is conducive for the transmission of parental attitudes to their children (Burgess, 1973; Delameter & MacCorquodale, 1979; Rueter & Conger, 1995; Steinberg, 1990). As the current study seeks to examine the effects of the match between parental and adolescent attitudes on the one hand, and inter-family disagreement on the other, the "involvement" parenting style would seem most relevant here. In the remainder we therefore focus upon the "involvement" parenting style only. Families in which the behaviours of mothers to their children are characterised by "involved" behaviours like openness, affection,

accessibility, and the like are denoted as “high” quality of family interaction families. Conversely, low quality of family interaction families are families in which mother-child interaction is characterised by the absence of these qualities.

*Quality of family interaction, match of mother-child sexual attitudes, and inter-family disagreement*

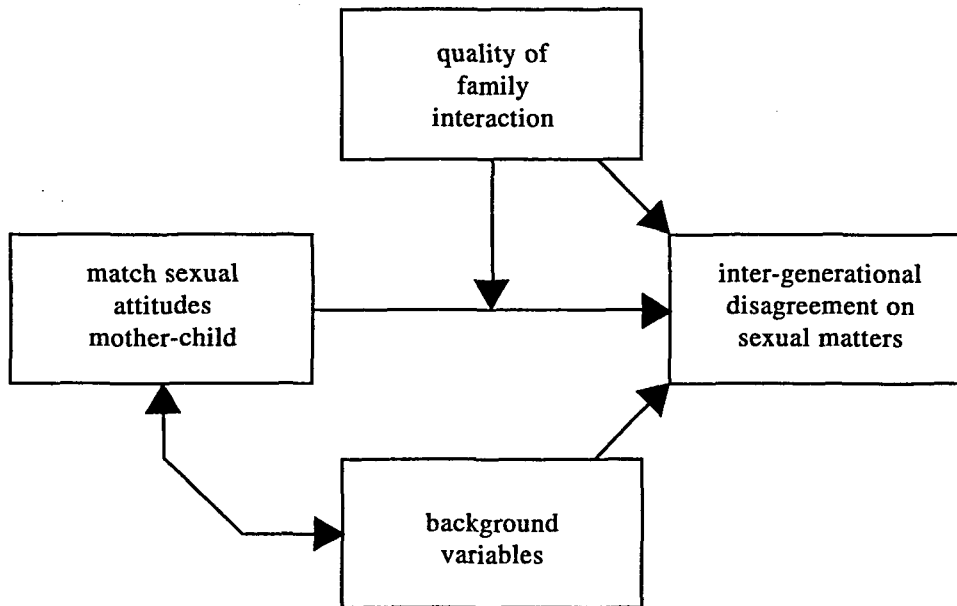
Parental sexual standards are the earliest to which a child is exposed, and thus “... provide the foundation for subsequent sociosexual development” (Delameter & MacCorquodale, 1979, p. 25). Indeed, much research has supported the notion that parents act not so much as transmitters of sex-related information, but rather as a socialising agency. Good parent-child relationships are conducive to the internalisation of parental standards (Inazu & Fox, 1989; Jessor & Jessor, 1974), and parents’ and children’s sexual attitudes have been shown to correspond more closely when their relationship is characterised by openness, understanding, love and respect (Burgess, 1973; Delameter & MacCorquodale, 1979; Taris *et al.*, 1996). As Fisher (1986) summarised, if there is an effect of parents on their children’s sexual activities, it is likely that this works via the transmission of values and attitudes.

If mothers’ and adolescents’ sexual attitudes correspond closely, there appears less of reason to expect that there will be inter-generational disagreements on sexuality (note that we do not argue that there will be no difference at all between their attitudes, just that this difference will be relatively small). However, when the adolescent is much more permissive than the mother, there is certainly the potential for much disagreement. Here we argue that a high quality of family interaction does not only result in a closer match between mother and adolescent sexual attitudes (Burgess, 1973; Delameter & MacCorquodale, 1979; Taris *et al.*, 1996), but also that good mother-child interaction styles are assets that enable families to effectively manage the tensions that result from an overly large difference between the sexual attitudes of mother and child (cf. Antonovsky, 1979; Parker White, Wright & H.L. Barnes, 1995). When these tensions are not overcome, stress emerges (Chung, 1991). Thus, we consider the quality of family interaction as a family resource for coping with differences in views on sexuality; if the members of a family can cope effectively with these tensions, less disagreement will arise than when they are unable to handle these tensions, resulting in family crisis. Indeed, from a somewhat different perspective our quality of family interaction concept overlaps with Antonovsky’s *family sense of coherence* (Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988) insofar it concerns mutual understanding and interdependence among members of a family (See H.L. Barnes & Olson, 1985, who reported that families with better communication were correspondingly higher in family cohesion).

*A model of the relations among inter-family disagreement, match of mother-child sexual attitudes, and quality of family interaction*

On the basis of the notions outlined above, we propose a model for the relations among quality of family interaction, inter-generational disagreement about sexual issues, and the match of mother-child sexual attitudes (Figure 1). This model may be taken

as a set of largely theory-guided hypotheses regarding the relations among these variables that can be rejected or confirmed.



**Figure 1** Heuristic model for the relations among quality of family interaction and inter-generational disagreement. Arrows pointing to arrows denote interaction (moderator) effects, i.e. the strength of the relation between the match of mother-child attitudes and inter-generational disagreement should vary as a function of the quality of family interaction.

Figure 1 shows that the dependent variable – frequency of inter-family disagreement regarding sexual issues – depends on all other variables in the model, including the match between the sexual attitudes of mother and child, and the quality of their interaction. The degree to which mother-child differences in attitudes towards sexuality lead to inter-generational disagreement is assumed to depend on the quality of family interaction; high quality of family interaction families are expected to have the resources to manage the tensions caused by differences in sexual attitudes effectively (that is, these differences in attitudes will not result in overly much inter-generational disagreement), while in low quality of family interaction families the potential for disagreement offered by these differences in attitudes will fully be realised.

Additionally, several other variables were included into our analyses. These include biographic background variables such as age of mother and adolescent, whether the adolescent has a steady partner relationship, and whether the adolescent is sexually experienced. Finally, we included socio-economic status and family status. Previous research has shown that these variables often relate to adolescent sexual attitudes and/or inter-family relations (e.g., Taris & Semin, in press-a, in press-b; Dyk, Christopherson & Miller, 1991). As a consequence, it is desirable to control the effects of these variables to obtain unbiased estimates of the effects of the other variables

in our model. As they do not form the core interest of the current study, we do not formulate explicit expectations for their effects.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

The data used here were collected in 1989 in the Brighton and Hove area, Sussex, England. 333 Adolescent-mother pairs completed a structured questionnaire administered individually in the presence of an interviewer. The adolescents were 14 to 18 years old,  $Mage = 15.80$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ , and the mean age of their mothers was 43.02,  $SD = 5.33$ . We used random location sampling to obtain a sample that had similar socio-economic characteristics to the population of Brighton and Hove. Within this particular area, there were 603 enumeration districts, of which 594 contained usually resident population. Each of these can be characterised by particular types of housing stock or neighbourhoods (CACI, 1989), which aggregate into 11 neighbourhood groups. This allows people to be categorised according to the type of residential area they live in. This classification system, called ACORN, takes into account 40 different variables in the census, including age, sex, and socio-economic status. A comparison of the ACORN characteristics of the sample with data on the characteristics of all households in Brighton and Hove did not reveal major differences between the two. Thus, there was no reason to assume that the sample was not representative for the larger population.

Our questionnaire addressed, among other topics, mother-child interaction styles, frequency of mother-child disagreement on a number of issues, sex-related attitudes of mother and child, and background factors such as age, sex and socio-economic status. Due to listwise deletion of missing values on some of the variables of interest here, the final sample size was 319 adolescent-mother pairs. Based on their scores on the "quality of family interaction" scale (see below), this sample was divided into two about equally large groups, corresponding to a low ( $N = 155$ ) and a high ( $N = 164$ ) quality of family interaction group.

## MEASURES

### *Inter-generational disagreement*

Mother and child were asked to rate the frequency of disagreement with each other regarding 19 selected issues (1 = "we never disagree about this", 5 = "we very often disagree about this"). Exploratory factor analysis on the adolescent data (varimax rotation) revealed that the eight items measuring sex-related matters tapped two factors, one of which related to "going out" in general, while the other tapped sex-related matters more directly. Together these two factors accounted for 61.7% of the variance of the items. This result was replicated for the mothers. Again, two factors turned up, with the same items loading on each factor. For the mothers the two factors accounted

for 66.5% of the variance.

Typical issues for the five-item "Going out" scale were "not telling them where you are going when you go out", "that you mix with the 'wrong' people", and "that you go out too often" ( $\alpha$  for the adolescents was .79, for the mothers .87). The three items of the "sex-related" scale were "getting into a sexual relationship with the 'wrong' sort of partner", "having sex with somebody", and "having an unwanted pregnancy or getting a girl pregnant" ( $\alpha$ 's were .80 and .72 for adolescents and mothers, respectively).

As we saw no reason to either prefer the mothers' or the adolescents' judgements regarding the frequency of their disagreement, we decided to use both accounts. Using confirmatory factor analysis (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993), we tested whether one latent variable could account for the adolescents' and the mothers' judgements. The loadings of the mothers' and adolescents' accounts regarding their disagreements on either the sex-related or the going out-scales were set equal. The resulting model was empirically tenable.  $\chi^2$  with 5 *df* was 7.00;  $p > .05$ , and thus it was retained in the final (structural) analyses as well.

#### *Quality of family interaction*

Seven items were designed to tap the way mother and child interacted with each other. As these items were measured separately for mother and child, there were in total fourteen responses per adolescent-mother pair available. Again, we saw no reason to favour either the mothers' or the adolescents' judgements over the other. Scale analysis revealed that all fourteen items could be combined into a single quality of family interaction scale with a reliability of .82, and item-test correlations that ranged between .26 to .54 (median .43). Typical items were (in the mothers' version) "I always listen to what my son/daughter has to say", "my son/daughter tells me most of the things that he/she does", and "I try hard to understand my son/daughter". This scale was used to divide the sample in a low and high quality of family interaction group ( $N$ 's were 155 and 164, respectively).

#### *Sexual permissiveness*

This concept was tapped by three separate scales, which were available for both mother and child. The three scales were (1) *Morality in having sex*. This was a six-item scale with a reliability ( $\alpha$ ) of .70 (adolescents) and .75 (mothers), respectively. Typical items were "it is o.k. to have sex with somebody you have recently met and don't know very well, as long as both of you are attracted to each other", "it is alright to have sex before marriage if the partners love each other", and "adultery is sinful under all circumstances" (reversed, 1 = "agree strongly", 7 = "disagree strongly"). (2) *Importance attached to loving the partner before having sex*. This six-item scale tapped the degree to which one felt that particular conditions had to be fulfilled before it was o.k. to engage in a sexual relationship. Three exemplary items of this scale were (in the mother's versions) "they would have to be married to the person", "they would have to be in a long-term, committed relationship with the person" and "they would have to be in love with the person" (0 = "yes", 1 = "no"). For the adolescents the items were slightly reworded, for example, the first item became "I would have to be married to the person".

While answering these items, the mothers were asked to keep in mind the son or daughter who was also participating in the study in mind, and not any of their other children. This scale was shown to have good psychometric properties, with reliabilities (Guttman's  $r$ ) of .80 (mothers) and .83 (adolescents). This scale is referred to as the "need to love" scale.

(3) *Importance of knowing the partner well before having sex.* This two-item scale tapped the degree to which one felt that one had to know the partner well before engaging into a sexual relationship with this person. The items of this scale were (for the mothers) "they would have to know some things about the persons sexual history (how many partners they had had, for example)", and "they would have to know the person very well" (0 = "yes", 1 = "no"). Again, for the adolescents the items were slightly reworded. The reliabilities of the scale ( $r$ ) were acceptable for mothers and adolescents, namely .49 and .46, respectively. This scale is referred to as the "need to know" scale.

For each of these three scales, the difference between mothers' and adolescents' responses was taken. As the adolescents were virtually always more permissive than their mothers (Fisher, 1986 & Harding, 1988, report similar results), we felt it was unnecessary to take the absolute difference; it would seem improbable that in the (unlikely) event that mother is more permissive than her child, major mother-child disagreements would result. Confirmatory factor analysis showed that the resulting three differences scores could be considered indicators of one latent construct, which is referred to as "a differences in attitudes" in the remainder.

### *Other variables*

Apart from the variables mentioned above, we included the adolescent's *age* and *sex* (high = male) into the analyses, together with whether the adolescent had a *steady partner relationship* at time one (high = yes), and whether the adolescent already *was sexually experienced* at time one (high = yes). Finally, the *mother's age*, *socio-economic status*, and *family status* (1 = intact, 0 = not) were also included.

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the variables used in this study, separately for the low and high quality of family interaction group.

Table 1 reveals that low and high quality of family interaction families differ from each other on a number of aspects. First, members of low quality of family interaction families report higher levels of mother-child disagreements than members of high quality of family interaction families; this difference is significant in three out of four instances. Adolescents in high quality of family interaction families appear less permissive than adolescents in low quality of family interaction families; this difference is significant in two out of three cases (Need to love, and Morality). Finally, high quality of family interaction families have a slightly higher SES than other families.



**Table 1** Means and standard deviations of all variables for low ( $N = 155$ ) and high ( $N = 164$ ) quality of family interaction families.

variables		Quality of family interaction		F(1,306)
		low	high	
disagreement sexual issues (adolescent)	M	1.98	1.82	1.58
	SD	1.13	1.16	
disagreement sexual issues (mother)	M	2.01	1.69	3.78*
	SD	1.54	1.36	
disagreement general (adolescent)	M	2.39	1.93	22.44***
	SD	.81	.89	
disagreement general (mother)	M	2.19	1.81	13.82***
	SD	.77	1.01	
need to love (adolescent)	M	.59	.51	7.50**
	SD	.23	.26	
need to know (adolescent)	M	.85	.80	2.53
	SD	.33	.28	
need to know (mother)	M	.91	.91	.17
	SD	.21	.24	
morality (adolescent)	M	4.27	4.54	4.49*
	SD	1.14	1.14	
morality (mother)	M	3.71	3.77	3.20
	SD	1.36	1.34	
SES	M	2.27	2.57	4.48*
	SD	1.22	1.27	
Age adolescent	M	16.69	16.90	3.13
	SD	1.05	1.11	
Age mother	M	43.11	42.92	.11
	SD	5.51	5.24	
percentage females <sup>a</sup>		49	48	.02
percentage with steady partner <sup>a</sup>		28	36	1.91
percentage sexually experienced <sup>a</sup>	37	33	3.06	
percentage intact families <sup>a</sup>	81	81	3.23	

<sup>a</sup>Dichotomous variable, a chi-square test (with two *df*) was applied.

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### *Procedure: Specification and fitting of the model*

The model presented in Figure 1 was tested using structural equation modelling (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993). After preliminary analyses of the two measurement models of the latent variables (inter-family disagreement, and Mismatch of mother-child attitudes, see above), the full model was tested, including the structural relations among the variables. The loadings of the observed indicators on the two latent variables were constrained to be equal across groups to avoid interpretation problems (cf. Taris, Bok & Meijer, in press), as was the Phi-matrix for the relations among the exogenous

(independent) variables). Otherwise no across-group constraints were imposed. The null model fitted the data rather well,  $\chi^2$  with 137 *df* was 166.68;  $p > .01$ , NNFI = .91. Table 2 presents the fully standardised parameter estimates for this model; these estimates can be compared across groups, as they are expressed in a metric common to both.

**Table 2** Fully standardised effects upon Inter-family disagreement for the null model (structural model only.)  $\chi^2$  with 137 *df* = 166.68, NNFI = .91.

variables	quality of family interaction	
	high ( <i>N</i> = 164)	low ( <i>N</i> = 155)
differences in attitudes	-.21*	-.31***
socio-economic status	.19	.16
age of adolescent	-.25*	-.23**
age of mother	-.18	.03
gender adolescent	.00	.01
adolescent has partner (high - yes)	.18	.27**
adolescent sexually experienced (high = yes)	-.03	.05
family intact (high = yes)	.32**	.01
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.25	.37

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 2 suggests that some of the variables included in the null model are hardly relevant in the explanation of *inter-family* disagreement on sexual issues. This applies to the adolescent's gender, whether or not the adolescent is sexually experienced, and - to a somewhat lesser degree - to the mother's age. For other variables the parameter estimates have about the same magnitude in both groups, even though one or both of these do not significantly differ from zero (age adolescent, SES, whether the adolescent has a steady partner relationship) - constraining these effects to be equal across groups may result in significant effects here.

Table 2 reveals two remarkable differences in effect size. First, it appeared that family status (whether the family was intact) was much more important in determining *inter-family* disagreement in high quality of family interaction families than in low quality of interaction families; indeed, while we expected that any effect of family status on *inter-family* disagreement would be negative, it turned out to be positive instead. Second, we found the expected difference in the effect of differences in attitudes upon *inter-family* disagreement: in low quality of family interaction families differences in attitudes are much more strongly related to *inter-generational* disagreement than in high quality of family interaction families.

We then tested the above notions regarding the difference or equality of parameters across groups by constraining all effects presented in Table 2 to be equal across groups (which is in effect a moderator analysis). This resulted in an increase of 16.94 chi-square points with 8 *df* extra, which is significant decrease of fit ( $p < .05$ ).

Thus, there are important differences between the groups for at least one effect. Inspection of the modification indices revealed that the effects of differences in attitudes,

whether the family was intact, and age of the mother differed strongly across groups, and these were consequently released. Thus, these effects are moderated through the quality of family interaction. After omitting all non-significant effects we obtained a model with a chi-square value of 173.17 with 147 *df*;  $p > .05$ , NNFI=.93. This model was accepted as the final model, and is discussed in the next section.<sup>1</sup>

## RESULTS

Table 3 presents the fully standardised parameter estimates for the final model. First, the mother's age, and the adolescent's gender and sexual experience were not relevant in predicting the frequency of inter-family disagreement on sexual issues. Whether or not the adolescent had a steady partner relationship was systematically related to the frequency of disagreement; if the adolescent had a partner, mother and child reported an increase in inter-family disagreement. Members of high-SES families reported more disagreement than low-SES families (a small but significant effect of .17,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, there was a negative effect of the adolescent's age upon inter-generational disagreement; the older the child, the less disagreement was reported. None of these effects was moderated by the quality of family interaction.

**Table 3** Fully standardised effects upon inter-family disagreement for the final model (structural model only),  $\chi^2$  with 147 *df* = 173.17,  $p < .05$ , NNFI = 93.

variables	quality of family interaction	
	high ( <i>N</i> = 164)	Low ( <i>N</i> = 155)
differences	-.22*b	-.31***b
socio-economic status	.17*a	.17*a
age of adolescent	-.25***a	-.25***a
age of mother	-	-
gender adolescent	-	-
adolescent has partner (high = yes)	.18**a	.18**a
adolescent sexually experienced (high = yes)	-	-
family intact (high = yes)	.32**b	-b
R <sup>2</sup>	.24	.35

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>effect constrained to be equal across groups.

<sup>b</sup>effect significantly different across groups.

The effects of the other two variables upon frequency of inter-generational disagreement, however, varied systematically as a function of quality of family interaction. As expected, in high quality of family interaction families the impact of differences in attitudes

<sup>1</sup>Further, in preliminary analyses we tested whether the adolescent's gender affected the strength of the relations between the variables in the model. We found no differences between boys and girls, implying that the relations among the variables in the model are the same for both sexes.

upon inter-family disagreement was significantly lower than in low quality of family interaction families. Whereas in low quality of family interaction families differences in sexual attitude between mother and child increase the frequency of disagreement rather strongly (a standardised  $-.31$ ,  $p < .011$ ). In high quality of family interaction families the impact of mother-child differences in attitudes upon disagreement was relatively moderate, though certainly not negligible ( $-.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As the moderator analyses reported earlier show this difference is significant at  $p < .05$ .

An unexpected finding was that in high quality of family interaction families, family status was strongly related to frequency of inter-family disagreement, whereas the corresponding effect was absent in low quality of family interaction families (an effect  $.32$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The current study sought to examine the relations among inter-generational disagreement, differences between mother and child regarding sexual issues, and quality of family interaction. We expected that in high quality of family interaction families, the potential for family stress offered by differences in sexual attitudes of mother and child would not (fully) be realised, whereas in low quality of family interaction families – where the resources to manage these tensions are lacking – such differences in attitudes would result in (possibly severe) inter-generational disagreement.

Our data provided good support for this hypothesis. First, comparison of means showed that the frequency of mother-child disagreement on sexual issues was generally lower in high quality of family interaction families than in other families. Second, our structural analysis revealed that the effect of differences in attitudes upon inter-family disagreement was relatively low – though still considerable – in high quality of family interaction families. Thus, it appears that a high quality of family interaction is indeed a valuable family resource that allows the members of such families to control the tensions that are caused by differences in sexual attitudes. Of course, adolescent sexuality represents just one domain at which differences in mother-child attitudes may result in inter-family stress and disagreement. However, there appears no reason to expect that the finding reported here will *not* generalise to these other domains. As such, the current study provides insights in the practical consequences of a high vs. low quality of family interaction; we could expect that low quality of family interaction families would not be characterised by mother-child disagreements about sexual issues only, but also on other issues.

Of the control variables employed in this study, the adolescent's age was in both groups related to the frequency of family disagreement; the older the adolescent, the less disagreement is reported by the members of the family. Note that this effect was found while controlling whether the adolescent had a steady partner relation, a variable positively related to age. This suggests that a high level of mother-child disagreement on sexual issues occurs during a limited period of time only. One obvious explanation for this finding is that mothers come to accept that their children start living a life of their own, and that they simply cannot monitor their children's attitudes and behaviours

forever. Another interpretation might be that inter-family discussions of sex related matters simply occur less frequently with increasing age of the adolescent; consequently, there is less of an opportunity to disagree with each other.

Whether the adolescent has a steady partner relationship increased the frequency of inter-family disagreement on sexual issues. This is not surprising, as much research has shown that the availability of the partner is strongly related to the transition towards non-virginity, especially among females (Taris & Semin, in press). Thus, for many parents having a steady partner relationship will mean that their child's opportunities to have sex are greatly increased, with the possible negative consequences outlined earlier (teenage pregnancies, infection with venereal diseases). As a result, their concerns with their children's attitudes and behaviour may increase, resulting in higher levels of mother-child disagreement.

Interestingly, in both groups SES was positively related to the frequency of family disagreement; in low SES families there was less sex-related disagreement than in high SES families. One tentative explanation might be that parents in high-SES families tend to maintain stricter sexual standards than low-SES parents, resulting in higher levels of disagreement regarding sexual issues. Some support for this assertion may be found in the fact that low-SES adolescents tend to experience their first intercourse earlier than high-SES adolescents (cf. Dyk *et al.*, 1991), which would be due to higher levels of sexual permissiveness (e.g. Reiss, 1967). Insofar mothers' and adolescents attitudes correspond (Taris *et al.*, 1996), this would mean that low-SES mothers are more permissive than high-SES mothers, and that low-SES mothers *ceteris paribus* tolerate more from their children than high-SES mothers.

Finally, one unexpected finding was that living in an intact family greatly increased the likelihood for much mother-child disagreement on sexual issues, but only for the high quality of family interaction group. If anything, we would have predicted that living in a non-intact family would *increase* the chances of experiencing much inter-family disagreement; previous research has shown that adolescents not living with both biological parents are significantly more likely to display problem behaviours, including early sexual activity (Hayes, 1987; Newcomer & Udry, 1983). On second thoughts, however, a possible interpretation of this effect becomes apparent. In intact families, there are two parents available to have sex-related discussions with, which means that the opportunity to disagree to doubled. The fact that this effect was found only in high quality of family interaction families may be explained by assuming that there simply is not all that much discussion of sex-related issues going on in low quality of family interaction families.

*Limitations of the study.* While the evidence presented here is compelling, some comments upon the limitations of the study are in order. Most importantly, correlation is not causation, and the results of a cross-sectional study cannot demonstrate that a high quality of family interaction is causally predictive of low levels of family disagreement. The data alone cannot demonstrate that quality of family interaction indeed precedes inter-family disagreement; this can only be tested using a longitudinal design. Indeed, in real life one might expect reciprocal relations; while a high quality of family interaction appears to foster low levels of inter-family disagreement, inter-family disagreement in turn may lead to a deterioration of the quality of inter-family

relations; a downward spiral may be anticipated here. To study this process over time is indeed a challenge for research.

A second shortcoming of the current study is its exclusive reliance of self-report data. We have tried to overcome this deficiency by using reports of both mother and child, but one may anticipate that for example the frequency of inter-generational disagreement will be underestimated by both parties, as a result of social desirability. To the degree that this resulted in a restriction of range, the correlations between differences in attitudes and frequency of inter-family disagreement would seem to be conservative; however, we do not expect the difference between the effect of differences in attitudes upon inter-family disagreement to disappear, would we have used observational data.

A third possible shortcoming of the current study is the operationalization of quality of family interaction. Mothers' and adolescents' accounts were combined into a single scale, which was then used to divide the sample in two about equally large groups. Though scale analysis revealed that empirically this was a viable procedure, one might wonder whether using the mothers' and adolescents' accounts separately would have led to different results. We therefore checked whether the composition of the two quality of family interaction groups was different, depending on whose perspective (mother or adolescent) was chosen. Cross-table analysis subsequently revealed that the composition of the groups was virtually identical across different operationalizations. Thus, it appeared that our results were not influenced by this specific operationalization of quality of family interaction.

All in all, the current study suggests that the quality of mother-child interaction is of some importance in influencing levels of inter-family disagreement. The skills that lead to high quality of family interaction - showing concern and affection for, and understanding of one's teenager - are valuable resources that enable one to manage the tensions produced by differences in mother-child attitudes. The implications of our findings are not merely of academic interest in terms of understanding the role played by quality of family interaction as a resource. Indeed, the analysis offered here can be of considerable interest to diverse types of family therapy. Further, a future research agenda that is of critical importance as a consequence of these findings is a more detailed analysis of the precise skills that mothers and children invest in mediating the quality of their interaction.

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