Continuity and Discontinuity in Perceptions of Family Relationships From Adolescence to Young Adulthood

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The present 8-year longitudinal study examined how multiple aspects of family relationships change across the transition from adolescence (M_{age} = 15 years) to young adulthood (M_{age} = 22 years) among 821 individuals. Results showed that there was more discontinuity than continuity in family relationships across this transition. Whereas a normative decline was evident in all measured aspects of family relationships during adolescence, this decline persisted for only a few dimensions of family relationships during young adulthood. Other aspects of family relationships stabilized or rebounded. There was little variation in these trajectories as a function of ethnicity or gender, suggesting that these changes in family relationships are generally normative. Results suggest that the transition to adulthood is a period of significant transformation in family relationships.

Whereas research on family relationships has largely focused on the adolescent years (e.g., Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Steinberg & Silk, 2002) and a few studies have centered on young adulthood (e.g., Levitt, Silver, & Santos, 2007; Thornton, Orbuch, & Axinn, 1995), limited research has linked these two developmental periods together in order to examine long-term trajectories of family relationships. The existing literature (Steinberg, 1988) suggests that the normative pursuit of autonomous goals and individuation from family during adolescence leads to a decline in parent–child closeness and cohesion. Yet it remains unclear how additional opportunities for independence associated with the attainment of adult legal status continues to shape family relationships beyond adolescence and across the transition to young adulthood. In an 8-year longitudinal study, we examined how children's feelings and values about multiple aspects of their family relationships change as they transition from adolescence into young adulthood and whether their perceptions of family relationships are continuous or discontinuous across this transition.

Family Relationships During Adolescence

Adolescence is a critical period for the development of autonomy. This is a particularly important time during which children begin to explore and establish a sense of their own identity (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents begin to reflect upon who they are and what their goals are independent of what their parents may want for them. During this time, their peers become an important and salient social group. In fact, adolescents spend increasingly less time with family and more time with peers (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Disruptions in family relationships may result as adolescent children begin to establish and assert greater independence from their parents. Concurrently, adolescents perceive diminished emotional closeness, social support, and warmth from parents starting in early adolescence (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000; McGue, Elkins, Walden, & Iacono, 2005; Steinberg, 1988), and both parents and adolescents express more negative and less positive affect during interactions (Flannery, Montemayor, Eberly, & Torquati, 1993; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991).

Despite the lay understanding that adolescence is a great time of "storm and stress" (Hall, 1904), research has shown that various transformations and disruptions in family dynamics across the adolescent years are typically short-lived, and overall, parent–child relationships are appraised positively. For instance, changes in family relationships during

adolescence are generally moderate in size (Shearer, Crouter, & McHale, 2005) and appear to be short term (e.g., Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Although family relationships tend to weaken during early to middle adolescence (ages 10–15 years), the quality of parent–child relationships improves modestly or remains stable toward the later adolescent years (ages 16–19 years; Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007). In fact, adolescents report that daily family conflicts occur infrequently, possibly due to decreases in time they spend at home (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2009).

Continuity and Discontinuity in Family Relationships Across the Transition to Young Adulthood

Little longitudinal research has followed the trajectories of family relationships beyond adolescence and into the transition to adulthood. In contemporary U.S. society, the years after high school often mark the end of adolescence and the beginning of young adulthood. This particular period is referred to as emerging adulthood, which is a distinct developmental period between the years of 18 and 24 during which individuals achieve even greater opportunities to assert their independence and autonomy than during the teenage years (Arnett, 2000). In fact, establishing independence is one of the most important goals reported by college students (Morton & Markey, 2009). This is a critical time when emerging adults have more free reign to assert their independence and begin to seriously contemplate and make decisions that can have important implications for their future career, intimate relationships, and their own family. Young adults continue to spend comparatively less time with family and more time with friends and romantic partners (Fuligni & Masten, 2010). Moreover, many young adults leave home for the first time to attend college, work, or live with friends or their significant other (Arnett, 2000). These social transitions provide young adults opportunities to explore their independence and become more responsible for their own decisions (Arnett, 1998; Shanahan, 2000). Thus, individuals may grow more distant, both psychologically and physically, from their parents, which can have important consequences on family relationships.

Although both periods of adolescence and young adulthood are characterized by the pursuit of individuality in contemporary United States, it is unclear whether family relationship changes present during adolescence continue to persist in the same trend across the transition to young adulthood or whether

young adulthood signifies a renegotiation of family relationships. For instance, do the observed patterns of declines in parent–child cohesion during adolescence persist during young adulthood or is there change and discontinuity in family relationships across the transition from adolescence to young adulthood? On the one hand, as children take advantage of their greater opportunities to establish their individuality during young adulthood, family relationships may feel less close and more distant. On the other hand, children may seek their parents for greater support and guidance as they face challenges of becoming an adult during this critical time, thus potentially strengthening parent–child relationships. Therefore, the developmental task of balancing individual autonomy and connectedness with families occurs during both adolescence and young adulthood, but it is possible that family dynamics may be shaped differently across these two developmental periods.

Limited research that has examined short-term changes in family relationships during young adulthood paints a relatively positive picture of family relationships during this period. In one longitudinal study examining parent–child relationships of children from the ages of 18 to 23 years, both children and mothers characterized their relationship with one another as respectful, caring, and understanding (Thornton et al., 1995). Although young adult children reported being less close to their fathers, father–child relationships were perceived positively nevertheless. Similarly, in another longitudinal study that examined parent–child relationships when children were 16–31 years old, both children and parents reported high ratings of parent–child emotional (e.g., closeness, loving) and interaction (e.g., giving advice, making joint decisions) quality, and these perceptions remained stable over time (Tubman & Lerner, 1994). Lastly, Levitt et al. (2007) found that children's satisfaction with maternal relationships increased from the 12th grade to 2 years later, while satisfaction with father relationships remained stable during this short period.

Previous findings suggest a general trend that young adult children's perceptions about their relationships with their parents are comparatively stable and positive during young adulthood, compared to the short-term perceived declines and disruptions in the quality of parent–child relationships that occurs during the adolescent years. Perhaps children establish a greater mutual understanding and respect for parents as they mature and become adults themselves. Young adult children may gain new perspectives about the meaning of family and renegotiate their relationships with their families. However, no

studies have linked these two developmental periods together to examine long-term trajectories of family relationships. Thus, our primary goal in this current study was to examine how adolescents' thoughts and feelings about their family relationships change during adolescence and as they transition to young adulthood. We believed that children's perceptions of family relationship trajectories during adolescence and adulthood would be distinct from one another such that children would report moderate declines in family relationships across adolescence, but stability or improvement in family relationships during young adulthood.

Multiple Dimensions of Family Relationships

In addition to critically exploring the possibility of nonlinear trajectories in perceptions of family relationships over time, it is also important to go beyond traditional research that has examined emotional cohesion in dyadic parent–child relationships and to consider additional dimensions of family relationships. For instance, the extant body of literature commonly focuses on parent–child relationships in terms of perceived and behavioral measures of closeness, warmth, support, and level of conflict in parent–child dyads (e.g.,Holmbeck & Hill, 1991; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). Research has also suggested that children's relationships with their mothers and fathers differ (e.g., Collins & Russell, 1991). For instance, mothers spend consistently more time with their children on a daily basis (Phares, Fields, & Kamboukos, 2009), whereas fathers' involvement typically centers around leisure time and provision of financial resources (Paquette, 2004). However, more recent literature suggests that fathers are becoming increasingly more involved in their children's lives (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck, 1997; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). Thus, it is possible that differences in mother– and father–child relationships are diminishing. In the current study, we examined perceptions of mother and father cohesion separately in order to investigate whether children perceive their relationships with each parent similarly or differently. We expect that feelings of closeness to mothers and fathers will both diminish during adolescence and explore the patterns in which perceived mother and father cohesion remains the same or changes across the transition to adulthood.

We also sought to understand other meaningful aspects of family relationships including family identity and the provision of instrumental support and respect for the family. Families are central and integral social groups to which all individuals belong. The extent to which individuals identify with their family reflects upon their feelings of connectedness and sense of belonging as a member of the family, inclusive of not only parents but other family members as well (Fuligni & Flook, 2005). Belonging to a social group is associated with feeling like a valued and important member. Thus, one's sense of family identity is a critical dimension of family relationships that needs to be further explored.

Family relationships can also be characterized by the extent to which children value and provide instrumental support to their family. Particularly in many ethnic minority and immigrant families in the United States, values of family obligation are strongly endorsed (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). Family obligation entails providing current assistance such as helping with household errands and taking care of siblings, but also spending time with family. Additionally, it is important that children respect their family by following advice and doing well for the sake of the family. Lastly, family obligation emphasizes values of future support, such as providing financial assistance and living with parents in the future.

We expected that changes in how children identify with their family and the value placed on family obligation would be similar to changes in their feelings of closeness with their mother and father, such that these dimensions of family relationships will weaken during adolescence, but perhaps stabilize or strengthen during young adulthood. As adolescents first begin to explore their own identity and pursue autonomous goals, they may disassociate from and identify less with their family and have greater disregard toward their present and future family responsibilities. Thus, feelings of connection with their family may weaken. However, as they enter adulthood, the family may become a salient social group to which young adults seek guidance and support as they face the challenges and experiences of adulthood. For example, parental support is a significant predictor of young adult's academic well-being during college (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russell, 1994), indicating that parent–child relationships are important toward young adults' successful transition to adulthood. Moreover, greater reciprocity in family relationships may develop such that young adults begin to feel an equal responsibility toward the well-being of their family. In fact, prior research suggests that values of family obligation may strengthen during the transition from the 12th grade to young adulthood (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). Thus, family connections may strengthen during young

adulthood. We believe that children exercise their independence and autonomy differently across these two developmental periods, and this, in turn, shapes the different trajectories in the way they perceive and value their family relationships across this critical transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

Gender and Ethnic Differences

As consistently found in the literature, we hypothesized that several gender differences would exist across adolescence and young adulthood. We expected that children would feel more close to their mothers than their fathers (Levitt et al., 2007; Thornton et al., 1995). In terms of the gender of the child, we expected females to feel more close to their mothers and males to feel more close to their fathers (e.g., Collins & Russell, 1991; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Similarly, we predicted that females would have a greater sense of family identity and stronger values of family obligation than males (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). Lastly, we explored whether changes in mother and father cohesion, family identity, and family obligation would differ between males and females over time. It is possible that these gender differences may become more exacerbated over time such that any decline in family relationships may be weaker, and improvements in family relationships may be stronger for females than males.

Due to the limited research on ethnic differences in parent–child cohesion and family identity, it is unclear whether there would be ethnic differences in these dimensions of family relationships. The previous literature has suggested that Latino, Asian, and European adolescents report similar levels of family conflict (Fuligni, 1998); thus, it is possible that there would not be ethnic differences in family cohesion or family identity. On the other hand, research has also indicated greater formality in parent–child interactions among Asian families, such that discussions about personal issues and concerns occur infrequently (Cooper, Baker, Polichar, & Welsh, 1993). Thus, perceptions of parental closeness and family identity may be weaker among Asian than European families. Lastly, research has indicated that children from Latin and Asian families are likely to value family obligation more than their European and later generation peers (Fuligni et al., 1999); thus, we expected to see similar trends in the current study and explored whether these ethnic differences persist over time.

Research Goals and Hypotheses

In sum, we had three key aims in the present study: (a) describe the pattern of changes in percep-

tions of family relationships (e.g., mother and father cohesion, family identity, family obligation) that children experience during adolescence and young adulthood, (b) explore whether children's feelings and values about their family relationships remain stable or change as they transition from adolescence to young adulthood, and (c) examine any gender and ethnic differences in these perceived family relationship changes.

Method

Participants

Ninth-grade students were recruited from three public high schools in the Los Angeles area. The first high school enrolled students primarily from Latin American and Asian backgrounds who came from families of lower to middle educational and occupational statuses. This school fell in the lower to middle range of the achievement distribution of schools in California. The second school tended to have average achievement levels and primarily served students from Latin American and European families who were of lower-middle- to middle-class backgrounds. The third school included students primarily from Asian and European backgrounds whose families were of middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds. This school tended to have above average achievement levels.

Data collection took place across 8 years at six different time points: every year in high school (Waves 1–4), 2 years post high school (Wave 5), and 4 years post high school (Wave 6). In two of the schools, the entire ninth grade was invited to participate in the 1st year of the study, and in subsequent high school years, all students in the correct grade were invited to participate. The participation rate ranged from 57% to 63% and 63% to 69% at the first and second schools, respectively. In the third school, approximately half of the ninth graders were invited to participate due to the large size of the school and only participants who were invited in the ninth grade were followed up in subsequent years. Of the students who were invited, 53% agreed to participate. In all three schools, students who had participated in earlier years but were no longer enrolled in their original school were contacted by mail and invited to participate in the following years. At the 12th grade, participants provided their contact information, including their home address, phone number, e-mail, and contact information of two people who would likely know their whereabouts. For Waves 5 and 6, we invited all individuals who had

participated in the 12th grade via e-mail, telephone, and mail to participate in the study.

The final sample in the present analyses included 821 individuals who participated in at least two of the six waves of the study, with the effective sample size at each wave being 632 (Wave 1), 716 (Wave 2), 668 (Wave 3), 717 (Wave 4), 525 (Wave 5), and 594 (Wave 6). Students were able to participate in the study at any time during Waves 1–4, regardless of whether they participated in prior waves of the study. Of the total sample of 632 individuals who began the study at Wave 1, 96% participated in Wave 2, 85% participated in Wave 3, 86% participated in Wave 4, 65% participated in Wave 5, and 73% participated in Wave 6. Of the total sample of 716 students who participated in Wave 2, 87% participated in Wave 3, 86% participated in Wave 4, 63% participated in Wave 5, and 71% participated in Wave 6. Of the 668 students who participated in Wave 3, 91% participated in Wave 4, 66% participated in Wave 5, and 75% participated in Wave 6. Of the 717 students who participated in Wave 4, 73% participated in Wave 5 and 83% participated in Wave 6. Of the 525 students who participated in Wave 5, all but 1 individual participated in Wave 6.

Within our analytic sample of 821 individuals, the average age was 14.86 ($SD = .38$), 15.80 ($SD = .37$), 16.86 ($SD = .38$), 17.79 ($SD = .37$), 20.16 ($SD = .36$), and 22.05 ($SD = .35$) years at each sequential wave of the study. The sample was split almost evenly between males (46%) and females (54%). As shown in Table 1, participants were from Latin American, Asian, European, and other ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the Latin American participants were from Mexican backgrounds (89%), and the majority of the Asian participants were from Chinese backgrounds (79%). The European participants came from a mix of backgrounds including Irish, Italian, and German. Participants included in the other ethnic group consisted of individuals from various backgrounds (e.g., Middle Eastern, mixed) not classifiable as Latin American, Asian, or European. The majority of the participants from Latin American and Asian backgrounds were of the first (i.e., participant was foreign-born) or second (i.e., participant was born in the United States and at least one parent was born outside the United States) generation. Most of the participants from European backgrounds were of the third generation or higher (i.e., participant and parents both were born in the United States). Individuals from the other ethnic groups were of the second or third generation. Of the participants who participated in either Waves 5 or 6, almost all the participants (98%) were enrolled in school at either time point. The majority of these individuals (72%) attended a 4-year college while the rest attended a 2-year college.

Participants reported their mother's and father's highest level of education by selecting one of the following categories: *elementary or junior high school, some high school, graduated from high school, some college, graduated from college,* or *graduated from law, medical, or graduate school.* Parents of participants with European and other backgrounds were more likely to have received college degrees than parents of individuals from Asian backgrounds, who, in turn, were more likely to have at least attended college than the parents of participants from Latin American backgrounds, $F(3, 807) = 81.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .23$ (Bonferonni contrasts, $p < .001$).

Participants reported their parents' marital status each year of Waves 1–4 by selecting one of the following categories: *married, separated, never married, divorced, widowed,* or *other*. A variable was created to distinguish between participants with parents who were married throughout Waves 1–4 and those with parents who fell in the other categories at least 1 of the 4 years ($1 = always\ married,$ $-1 = other$). Overall, 60% of participants had parents who were married across Waves 1–4. More adolescents from Asian (73%) backgrounds had parents who were married compared to individuals from Latin (57%), European (53%), and other ethnic backgrounds (48%), $F(3, 807) = 11.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$ (Bonferonni contrasts, $p < .001$).

Procedure

During each year of high school, students who returned parental consent forms and provided their own assent to participate completed an initial questionnaire during class time and a brief demographic questionnaire at home. Two and 4 years post high school, participants completed a questionnaire using a commercial, web-based survey service. At

Table 1

Sample According to Ethnic Background and Generation

	Ethnic background				
Generation	Latino	Asian	European	Other	Total
First	44	94	12	16	166
Second	135	176	10	65	386
Third	46	9	102	78	235
Unknown	19	5	1	7	34
Total	244	284	125	166	821

all six waves of data collection, questionnaires took approximately 1 hr to complete and individuals were compensated for their participation.

Measures

Family Relationships

The following measures were assessed at each wave of the study.

Family cohesion. Participants completed the Cohesion subscale of the Family Adaptation and Cohesion Evaluation Scales II inventory separately for each parent (FACES II; Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979). This measure has shown similar predictive validity across diverse samples (Farrell, Barnes, & Banerjee, 1995; Rivera et al., 2008; Unger, Ritt-Olson, Wagner, Soto, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2009). Participants responded to 10 items that assessed how close they feel and how much time they spend with each parent on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). Sample items included "My mother [father] and I do things together," "My mother [father] and I are supportive of each other during difficult times," and "My mother [father] and I feel close to one another." This measure had good internal consistency across all years of the study (αs = .84–.89 for mother; αs = .85–.89 for father).

Family identity. Participants completed an eight-item scale that assessed the extent to which their family is an important aspect of their identity (Tyler & Degoey, 1995). Using a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), participants responded to items such as "My family is important to the way I think of myself," "I feel a sense that I personally belong in my family," and "I feel that my parents value what I contribute to my family." This measure had good internal consistency across all years of the study (αs = .89–.92).

Family obligation. Three scales measured participants' attitudes toward (a) current assistance to the family, (b) respect for the family, and (c) future support to the family (Fuligni et al., 1999).

Twelve items measured how often participants felt they should assist with household duties and spend time with the family, such as "run errands that the family needs done," "eat meals with your family," and "help take care of your brothers and sisters" (1 = *almost never*, 5 = *almost always*). This scale had good internal consistency across all years of the study (αs = .82–.86).

Seven items measured participants' belief about the importance of respecting and following the wishes, desires, and expectations of family members, such as "do well for the sake of your family," "follow your parents' advice about choosing a job or major in college," and "show great respect for your parents" (1 = *not at all important*, 5 = *very important*). This scale had good internal consistency across all years of the study (αs = .77–.84).

Six items measured participants' beliefs about their feelings of providing support and being near their families in the future, such as "help parents financially," "help take care of your brothers and sisters in the future," and "have your parents live with you when they get older" (1 = *not at all important*, 5 = *very important*). This scale had good internal consistency across all years of the study (αs = .70–.78).

Results

Participation Analyses

Initial analyses were conducted to examine differences between individuals according to their degree of participation in the study. Participants began the study at different years during high school; therefore, an adolescent who entered the study in the 9th grade had the opportunity to participate in a total of six possible waves whereas an adolescent who began in 10th, 11th, or 12th grades could participate in five, four, and three possible waves of the study, respectively. A variable was created to indicate the percentage of possible waves each individual participated in the study. On average, participants took part in the study 84% (SD = 22%) of their possible waves. The sample for the present analyses included individuals who participated in at least two waves of the study and most participated in at least four waves (M = 4.69 years, SD = 1.41). Forty-four percent (N = 365) of the sample participated in all six waves of the study. Differences were found in the degree of participation as a function of gender and ethnicity. Females (M = 85%, SD = 21%) participated in more waves of the study than males (M = 82%, SD = 22%), t(817) = 2.06, p < .05, and individuals from Asian (M = 89%, SD = 22%) backgrounds participated more than individuals from Latin American (M = 80%, SD = 22%) and other ethnic (M = 81%, SD = 24%) backgrounds, F(3, 815) = 8.52, p < .01. There were no differences in the degree of participation as a function of generation.

We then examined whether there were differences in any of the time-varying variables (i.e., mother and father cohesion, family identity, current assistance, respect, and future support) as a

function of participation. Hierarchical linear models (HLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) were estimated using the following equations:

$$\text{Mother cohesion, etc.}_{ij} = b_{0j} + e_{ij} \qquad (1)$$

$$b_{0j} = c_{00} + c_{01}(\text{Participation}) + u_{0j} \qquad (2)$$

Equation 1 represents individuals' scores on the time-varying variable across the waves of their participation in the study and Equation 2 represents the prediction of the individuals' average scores across their waves of participation as a function of their degree of participant (the percent of possible years that they took part in the study). Analyses indicated that there were no differences in the time-varying variables based on the degree of participation.

Correlations Among the Dimensions of Family Relationships

As shown in Table 2, the different measures of perceived family relationships were significantly associated with one another. Despite these associations, we modeled each measure separately because they are theoretically distinct from one another and we wished to be able to connect our findings to previous research that has treated them separately (Fuligni & Flook, 2005; Rivera et al., 2008; Tseng, 2004). In addition, the focus of our analysis was whether there were different developmental trajectories in each aspect of family relationships. Correlations estimate the similarity in the rank ordering of individuals across different measures and there could still be important differences in the developmental changes across measures despite these significant correlations.

Change and Stability in Family Relationships During Adolescence and Young Adulthood

To examine how perceptions of family relationships change over time, analyses were conducted with piecewise growth curve models using HLM, a statistical methodology that estimates changes in a group's average growth trajectory and the correlates of individual differences in the parameters of change (HLM: Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). The following statistical model was estimated for each of our family relationship variables separately (i.e., mother and father cohesion, family identity, current assistance, respect, future support):

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Mother cohesion, etc.}_{ij} = {} & b_{0j} + b_{1j}(\text{Adolescence}) \\ & + b_{2j}(\text{Young Adulthood}) + e_{ij}\end{aligned}$$

$$(3)$$

Equation 3 represents participants' family relationship on a particular year (i) for a particular individual (j) modeled as a function of the average family relationship of the individual at the ninth grade (b_{0j}) and the growth rate of family relationship during adolescence (b_{1j}) and during young adulthood (b_{2j}). Adolescence was coded [0 1 2 3 3 3] and Young Adulthood was coded [0 0 0 0 2 4], which represents the growth rate for the adolescent and young adulthood period, respectively.

As illustrated in Figures 1–3, there was a normative decrease in all of our measures of family relationships across the adolescent years. Adolescents felt less close to both their mothers and fathers, identified less with their family, and felt a weaker sense of family obligation during adolescence. However, as individuals enter young adulthood, most of these family relationship variables showed different trajectories over time. Mother cohesion (Figure 1) and family respect and future obligation (Figure 3) stabilized, and family identity actually reversed direction and strengthened during young adulthood (Figure 2). Only father cohesion and attitudes toward current assistance to the family continued to decline during young adulthood (Figures 1 and 3).

To directly examine continuity versus discontinuity across the transition, we tested whether the coefficients representing change during adolescence and young adulthood were significantly different from one another. We reestimated the model described in Equation 3 by changing the coding of the terms representing adolescence and young adulthood to [0 1 2 3 5 7] and [0 0 0 0 2 4], respectively. As a result, the coefficient for young adulthood (b_{2j}) became an estimate of the size and significance of the difference in slopes between adolescence and young adulthood. A significant difference suggests significant discontinuity in change between adolescence and young adulthood.

Results indicated that changes in perceived mother cohesion, family identity, respect, and future support during young adulthood were significantly different than the changes that occurred during adolescence, bs = 0.04–0.12, ps < .01, indicating that changes in these aspects of family relationships were discontinuous over time. Feelings of father cohesion and attitudes toward current assistance weakened during adolescence and young adulthood, and the rate of decline did not differ between the two

Table 2
Correlation Matrix of Family Relationship Dimensions Averaged Across Six Waves

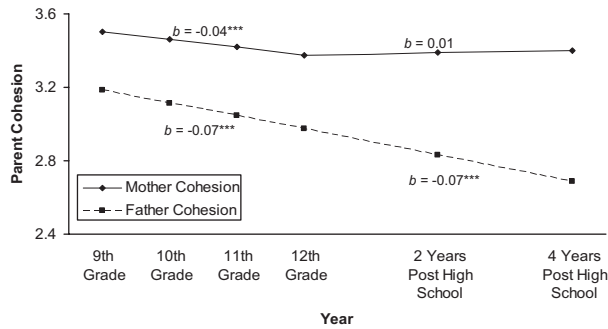|	Mother cohesion	Father cohesion	Family identity	Current assistance	Respect	Future support
Mother cohesion	1					
Father cohesion	.194***	1				
Family identity	.569***	.354***	1			
Current assistance	.340***	.224***	.373***	1		
Respect	.344***	.192***	.478***	.639***	1	
Future support	.276***	.142***	.325***	.630***	.677***	1

***$p < .001$.

Figure 1. Perceptions of mother cohesion declined during adolescence but remained relatively stable across young adulthood. Father cohesion declined over time across both developmental periods.
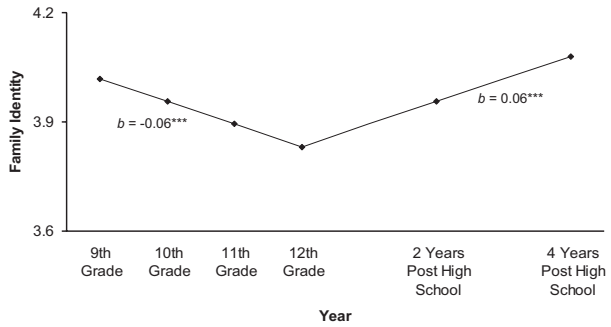***$p < .001$.

Figure 2. Family identity weakened during adolescence but strengthened during young adulthood.
***$p < .001$.

developmental periods, $bs = 0.00–0.02$, $ps > .05$, thus indicating continuous change across adolescence and young adulthood.

Changes in Family Relationships as a Function of Gender, Ethnicity, Socioeconomic Status, Generation, and Parents' Marital Status

Additional models were analyzed to examine whether changes in family relationships during adolescence and young adulthood differed by gender and ethnicity. The models included the same equation described in Equation 3, but with the inclusion of the following individual level equations:

$$b_{0j} = c_{00} + c_{01}(\text{Gender}) + c_{02}(\text{Latino}) + c_{03}(\text{Asian}) + c_{04}(\text{Other}) + u_{0j} \tag{4}$$

$$b_{1j} = c_{10} + c_{11}(\text{Gender}) + c_{12}(\text{Latino}) + c_{13}(\text{Asian}) + c_{14}(\text{Other}) + u_{1j} \tag{5}$$

$$b_{2j} = c_{20} + c_{21}(\text{Gender}) + c_{22}(\text{Latino}) + c_{23}(\text{Asian}) + c_{24}(\text{Other}) + u_{2j} \tag{6}$$

Equations 4, 5, and 6 illustrate how family relationships and the effect of time at both periods were modeled as a function of participants' gender and ethnicity. Gender was effects coded such that, $-1 = males$ and $1 = females$. Latino, Asian, and Other were dummy coded such that $1 = participants'$ ethnic group and $0 = not$ in ethnic group. The ethnicity coding resulted in participants with European backgrounds being the baseline group. Identical models were conducted to predict changes in each of the family relationship variables separately.

As shown in Table 3, there were several gender and ethnic differences in family relationships at the baseline (i.e., ninth grade). Females felt closer to their mothers but less close to their fathers compared to males. Whereas only adolescents from Asian backgrounds were less close to their mothers compared to their European peers, adolescents from Asian, Latin American, and Other ethnic groups were less close to their fathers compared to their European peers. Asian individuals also
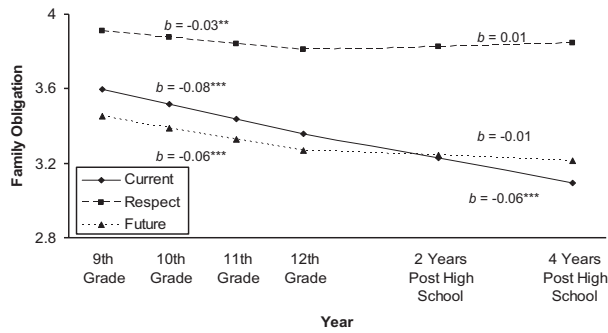
Figure 3. Attitudes toward current assistance, respect, and future support weakened during adolescence. Only attitudes toward current assistance continued to decline during young adulthood, whereas beliefs about respect and future support remained stable during young adulthood.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

reported a weaker family identity than European adolescents. Lastly, adolescents from Asian and Latin American backgrounds had a stronger sense of family obligation than their peers from European backgrounds.

As shown in the latter two columns of Table 3, there were only 3 of 12 potential gender differences in change that were significant. Although females perceived a weaker sense of father cohesion and family identity at the ninth grade compared to males, males reported a greater decline in father cohesion and family identity across adolescence (see Figures 4a and 4b), and females' sense of family identity strengthened more than males' during young adulthood (see Figure 4b). As evident by the slopes in Figures 4a and 4b, by 4 years post high school, females no longer reported a weaker sense of father cohesion, and females' sense of family identity actually surpassed that of males' family identity despite having a weaker sense of family identity at the ninth grade. Finally, only 1 of a potential 36 ethnic differences in change over time was significant. During young adulthood, change in values toward future support weakened more for those from other ethnic backgrounds as compared to those from European backgrounds.

A final set of models included participants' generation status and parents' educational and marital status as predictors at the individual level. The indices of generation, parents' educational and marital status were added to Equations 4–6, which also included ethnicity and gender. Each of the gender and ethnicity findings described above and summarized in Table 3 remained the same with these indices in the model. Results indicated that at baseline (i.e., ninth grade), first-generation adolescents reported stronger values of respect ($b = 0.22$), and

Table 3

Changes in Family Relationships According to Gender and Ethnicity

	Intercept		Adolescence		Young adulthood	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Mother cohesion	3.65	(0.06)***	−0.04	(0.02)*	0.02	(0.02)
Gender	0.09	(0.03)**	0.01	(0.01)	−0.00	(0.01)
Latino	−0.06	(0.08)	−0.02	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)
Asian	−0.31	(0.08)***	0.01	(0.03)	−0.02	(0.03)
Other	−0.11	(0.09)	−0.02	(0.03)	−0.01	(0.03)
Father cohesion	3.48	(0.08)***	−0.10	(0.02)***	−0.05	(0.03)*
Gender	−0.16	(0.03)***	0.02	(0.01)*	0.02	(0.01)
Latino	−0.32	(0.10)**	0.01	(0.03)	−0.04	(0.04)
Asian	−0.33	0.09)**	0.04	(0.03)	−0.02	(0.03)
Other	−0.38	(0.11)**	0.06	(0.04)	−0.06	(0.04)
Family identity	4.13	(0.07)***	−0.06	(0.03)*	0.09	(0.02)***
Gender	−0.06	(0.03)*	0.03	(0.01)**	0.02	(0.01)*
Latino	0.01	(0.09)	−0.03	(0.04)	−0.05	(0.03)
Asian	−0.24	(0.08)**	0.01	(0.03)	−0.02	(0.02)
Other	−0.11	(0.10)	−0.00	(0.04)	−0.03	(0.03)
Current assistance	3.38	(0.06)***	−0.11	(0.02)***	−0.06	(0.02)**
Gender	0.04	(0.02)	0.01	(0.01)	−0.00	(0.01)
Latino	0.32	(0.07)***	0.01	(0.03)	0.03	(0.02)
Asian	0.28	(0.07)***	0.05	(0.03)	−0.02	(0.02)
Other	0.10	(0.08)	0.03	(0.03)	−0.02	(0.03)
Respect	3.71	(0.06)***	−0.07	(0.02)**	0.03	(0.02)
Gender	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.01)	−0.00	(0.01)
Latino	0.31	(0.08)***	0.03	(0.02)	−0.00	(0.02)
Asian	0.25	(0.07)**	0.04	(0.02)	−0.04	(0.02)
Other	0.10	(0.08)	0.05	(0.03)	0.00	(0.02)
Future support	2.97	(0.06)***	−0.09	(0.02)***	0.02	(0.02)
Gender	0.03	(0.03)	0.01	(0.01)	−0.01	(0.01)
Latino	0.66	(0.08)***	0.02	(0.03)	−0.04	(0.03)
Asian	0.66	(0.07)***	0.03	(0.03)	−0.03	(0.03)
Other	0.27	(0.09)	0.05	(0.03)	−0.06	(0.03)*

Note. Gender was coded −1 = *males*, 1 = *females*. Ethnicity was dummy coded with participants from European backgrounds serving as the reference group. Values in the Intercept column represent perceptions of family relationships at the 9th grade. Values in the Adolescence column represent family relationship changes from the 9th to 12th grade and values in the Young Adulthood column represent changes from the 12th grade to 4 years afterward.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

first- and second-generation (bs = 0.17–0.37) adolescents had stronger values of future support compared to their third-generation peers, ps < .05. Whereas adolescents with parents who had completed higher levels of education reported closer relationships with their mothers ($b = 0.07$), they
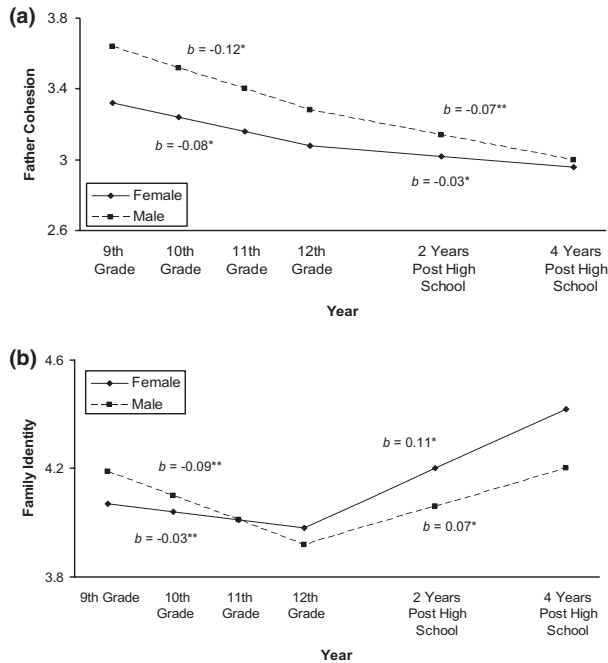
Figure 4. (a) Males felt closer to their fathers at baseline (i.e., ninth grade) and experienced greater decline in father cohesion during adolescence, but not young adulthood, compared to their female peers. (b) Males identified with their families more at baseline (i.e., ninth grade), but experienced a stronger decrease in family identity during adolescence and a weaker increase in family identity during young adulthood, compared to their female peers.

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

reported lower sense of future support ($b = -0.08$), ps < .01. Lastly, at the baseline, adolescents with parents who were married had closer relationships with their fathers, $b = 0.16$, $p < .001$.

Across the adolescent years, individuals with parents who had completed higher levels of education experienced less decline in mother and father cohesion and family identity during adolescence, bs = 0.01–0.02, ps < .05. During this period, adolescents with parents who were married reported less decline in mother ($b = -0.01$) and father ($b = -0.10$) cohesion than those with parents who were not married (mother cohesion: $b = -0.09$; father cohesion: $b = -0.16$), ps < .01. Across young adulthood, individuals with parents who were married ($b = .05$) did not experience a decline in father cohesion, whereas those with parents who were not married did ($b = -0.17$), $p < .001$.

Discussion

In the current 8-year longitudinal study, we examined how perceptions of multiple aspects of family

relationships change across adolescence and young adulthood and found that there is more discontinuity than continuity across different dimensions of family relationship trajectories throughout the span of adolescence and young adulthood. Whereas a linear decline in perceived father cohesion and values about current assistance was evident over time, trends in family identity and values about respect and future support weakened only during adolescence and increased or stabilized across the transition to young adulthood. Therefore, the transition from adolescence to young adulthood appears to be a critical period in which important transformations in children's perceptions of their family relationships occur.

Given that adolescence and young adulthood are periods characterized by the exploration and pursuit of autonomy in contemporary U.S. society (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968), it was unclear whether these developmental tasks would shape children's thoughts and feelings about their family relationships in a same or different way across these two developmental periods. Although we found a normative decrease in perceptions of family relationships across adolescence, this decline only persisted for children's feelings of closeness with their father and their values about current assistance during young adulthood. Thus, results suggest that children's transition to adulthood, a period marked by even greater opportunities to exercise their independence, does not necessarily harm family relationships. As autonomous goals first become salient during adolescence, children become more focused on developing friendships with their peers and establishing a sense of their own identity (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Consequently, commitment to and quality of family relationships weaken as they individuate from their family during this period, a similar pattern found in prior research on family relationships during adolescence (e.g., Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). On the other hand, when children become young adults, they seem to be oriented toward maintaining and strengthening family relationships even during a period in which the pursuit of individualistic goals is central for many young adults in contemporary U.S. society (Arnett, 1998, 2000).

In particular, there seems to be a shift in emphasis to family identity and sense of obligation that goes beyond day-to-day assistance to the family during young adulthood. Although feelings of emotional closeness in dyadic relationships remained the same with mothers and weakened with fathers, young

adults' connection to their family more generally strengthened across young adulthood. Additionally, even though values about current assistance declined over time, young adults' beliefs about respecting and providing future support to their family stabilized. As children mature into adults, they may identify more with their role as a family member, as indicative with the increase in family identity, and thus feel greater responsibility for the well-being of their family. Given our sample of college students who may be limited in their availability to assist with household tasks and spend time with their family on a day-to-day basis, they nonetheless still believe it is important to respect and provide future support to their family. Indeed, obtaining a college degree is a common way by which children from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds believe they can honor and assist their families in the future (Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, 2006). Therefore, entrance to adulthood does not necessarily signify complete emancipation from the family, but a greater sense of responsibility for oneself and one's family, which can strengthen children's instrumental connection to their family.

It is interesting that despite the recent progression toward the increased involvement in father care taking (Cabrera et al., 2000; Yeung et al., 2001), results from the current study still indicate that children perceive closer relationships with their mothers than fathers as observed in earlier research (e.g., Collins & Russell, 1991). In fact, this differential pattern existed during adolescence and persisted across the transition to young adulthood. Whereas feelings of closeness to mothers and fathers declined during adolescence, closeness to mothers stabilized and closeness to fathers continued to decline beyond the adolescent years. It is possible that this differential decrease in father cohesion is particularly pronounced due to this developmental transition. Research (e.g., Collins & Russell, 1991; Youniss & Ketterlinus, 1987) suggests that adolescents perceive less reciprocity in their relationships with their fathers than with their mothers, and these feelings continue to increase across adolescence. During the critical transition to young adulthood when expectations for autonomy and independence are heightened, low reciprocity between father and child can lead to greater emotional distancing in this relationship. Indeed, low reciprocity is associated with poorer parent–child relationship quality (Chen & Berdan, 2006). On the other hand, reciprocity between mothers and adolescents can provide a foundation in which children can explore their independence, yet maintain a close relationship with their

mother. Thus, we did not see the same persistent decrease in mother cohesion across the transition to adulthood. Future research should continue to examine mother– and father–child relationships separately in order to better understand the differential changes with mothers and fathers during this period.

Little Variation in Family Relationship Trajectories Over Time

There appears to be surprisingly little variation in these family relationship changes over time with the exception of a few gender differences. It is possible that as children mature, females work harder to maintain positive family relationships. For instance, although males reported closer relationships with their father and a stronger identification with their family at the ninth grade, the decline in these dimensions was weaker for females than males during this period. Moreover, by the 4th year out from the 12th grade, females felt equally close to their fathers and identified more with their family compared to males. As the literature (e.g., Lytton & Romney, 1991) suggests, parents often encourage their daughters to be nurturing and assign them activities and chores that keep them close to home whereas sons are given more freedom to engage in activities outside the home. Such gender socialization practices intensify during adolescence (Huston & Alvarez, 1990) and may contribute to females becoming more family oriented than males during young adulthood.

Little ethnic variation in family relationships was observed and most of the ethnic differences were evident only at baseline (i.e., ninth grade). As hypothesized, children from Asian and Latin American backgrounds endorse stronger values of family obligation than their peers from European backgrounds. Among Asian and Latin American families, it is important that children provide current and future instrumental support as a means to remain connected to and show respect to their families (Fuligni et al., 1999; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006).

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Future Directions

The current, 8-year longitudinal study followed up adolescents at multiple time points across high school and into their transition to young adulthood. Thus, we were able to examine and compare perceptions of family relationships at two different developmental stages and more importantly, to explore the impact of this critical transitional period

on family relationships. Although prior research has examined changes in family relationships across adolescence (e.g., Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Steinberg & Silk, 2002) and a few researchers have focused on short-term changes during young adulthood (e.g., Levitt et al., 2007; Thornton et al., 1995), the current study linked two important developmental periods together in order to better understand long-term changes in family relationships. Moreover, we had a diverse sample with great ethnic group representation within the sample. The lack of variation in family relationship trends over time suggests that changes in family relationships are relatively uniform and a normative phenomenon. Moreover, the nonlinearity (i.e., discontinuity) in family relationship trajectories offers support that the adolescent years are qualitatively different from young adulthood, and this transition to young adulthood is a critical period in which changes are likely to occur.

Nevertheless, there were some weaknesses in the study. One limitation of the study is that we only had self-report data from the children in the family; thus, we were able to only examine individuals' perceptions, as opposed to observed, behavioral measures of family relationships. It also would have been valuable to examine how participants' parents perceived their parent–child relationship to change over time and whether there may be discrepancies between children's and parents' report of their relationship with one another. Additionally, more precise and nuanced measurements of parents' educational and marital status could have been used to better assess how changes in family relationships may have varied as a function of these indices.

Another limitation is the high enrollment of participants of students at 4-year colleges, which may not be fully representative of the emerging adult population. We also had a small sample size of individuals who did not attend college after high school. Thus, we were not able to examine differences between college and noncollege students, a population that remains understudied in psychological research. The lack of a noncollege sample could explain a divergence in findings from Fuligni and Pedersen (2002), who reported a normative increase in different aspects of family obligation from the 12th grade to 3 years post high school. The sample in Fuligni and Pedersen (2002) had a greater representation of noncollege youth, who are more likely to work and contribute financially to the family as part of their family obligation. Future research would need to include individuals who do not attend college in order to obtain a more complete picture of family relationship change over the transition to young adulthood.

The current study focused only on positive aspects of family relationships and did not examine negative dimensions, such as parent–child conflict. Given that the literature has primarily centered on dyadic relationships between parents and children, an additional dimension of family relationships worth pursuing in future research is sibling relationship. Further longitudinal research on both positive and negative family interactions (e.g., parent–child conflict) as well as dynamics with siblings will provide a more complete picture of the different transformations that occur within families over time. Additionally, future research should examine how different trajectories in family relationships are linked to children's well-being and adjustment and to tease apart the reciprocal relationship between parents and children. Lastly, it would be interesting to understand how children's interactions with different ethnic groups, such as their peers at school, can spill over and affect family relationships during this transitional period.

Conclusion

The current, 8-year longitudinal study linked two important developmental periods to examine perceptions of family relationships over time. Although adolescence and young adulthood have been conceptualized as important periods centered on the pursuit of autonomy and individualistic goals, these developmental tasks appear to have different consequences on perceptions of family relationships across these two periods. In particular, the current study illustrates that developmental trajectories of perceptions of family relationship are not necessarily linear over time. Whereas feelings about father cohesion and beliefs about current assistance decline across adolescence and young adulthood, feelings about mother cohesion and values regarding respect and future support for the family weakened only during adolescence but stabilized across young adulthood. Lastly, family identity decreased during adolescence but strengthened across young adulthood. These patterns in family relationship trajectories are fairly normative with little variation in changes over time observed across gender, ethnicity, and social experiences during young adulthood. Overall, the present study provides support that the developmental transition from adolescence to young adulthood is a period of significant transformation in individuals' lives.

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