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Talking About Divorce: The Association With Adolescent Adjustment and the Role of Gender

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Naam: Eva Weijdert (6592821) & Zoë Halder (6550037)

E-mailadres: e.l.m.weijdert@students.uu.nl, z.halder@students.uu.nl

Werkgroepnummer: 25

1e beoordelaar: Inge van der Valk

2e beoordelaar: Zoë Rejaän

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Abstract

Adolescents who have experienced divorce are at greater risk for social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and school adjustment problems compared to their peers from intact families. Not sharing feelings and experiences regarding divorce can be harmful, while being open about divorce-related stressors may provide the opportunity to process feelings and to receive emotional support. This study therefore examined whether talking about divorce could be a protective factor. The correlation between talking about divorce and adolescent adjustment (i.e. levels of internalizing and externalizing problem behavior) and whether gender plays a role in this association has been investigated. 250 Dutch adolescents with divorced parents between the age range of 12-18 have filled out a questionnaire about how often they talked about the divorce, with whom they talked and to what extent they were satisfied with these conversations. Two hierarchical regression models were used, one examining internalizing problem behavior, the second one examining externalizing problem behavior and both applied gender as a moderator. The results indicate that the number of persons with whom the divorce was discussed is not related to adolescent adjustment. Furthermore, higher levels of satisfaction were related to lower levels of internalizing problem behaviors. However, contrary to the hypotheses, the more satisfied adolescents were about the conversation, the higher their reported externalizing problems. Finally, results show that there is no significant sex difference in the association between talking and adolescent adjustment. Overall, the results of this study show that it's not the quantity, but the quality of the conversation that matters. Having satisfactory conversations could be an important protective factor for the development of internalizing problem behaviors for both males and females, and may therefore contribute to adolescent adjustment. According to the findings, talking about divorce could simultaneously be an important risk factor for externalizing problem behaviors. Implications for future research therefore consist of further investigation of this association and the possible explanations that may underlie it.

Introduction

About 40% of all children worldwide experience a parental divorce before reaching adulthood (Amato, 2000). A divorce can be a painful and stressful process for parents and children (Kołodziej-Zaleska & Przybyła-Basista, 2016; Leon, 2003). Especially adolescents may experience difficulties after divorce, due to the challenging developmental stage they are in (Ziemer, 2012). This stage involves significant biological, psychological, and social changes that increase the risk for internalizing and externalizing problem behavior. Not only do these adolescents have to cope with the divorce, they are also confronted with identity and autonomy development as emerging adults (Afifi et al., 2015). Therefore, adolescents who have experienced divorce are at greater risk for social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and school adjustment problems (Rodgers & Rose, 2002).

In response to the negative consequences divorce may have on adolescent development, different research studies have been aimed at understanding how adolescents cope with divorce-associated stressors (Amato, 2010). In this respect, research has shown that - among other things - talking about divorce may moderate the negative impact of divorce on adolescents. Talking about divorce refers to sharing experiences and feelings regarding divorce-related stressors (Thorson, 2009). These conversations can have positive effects on adolescent development because it makes adolescents more resilient to the negative effects of divorce and can create relational closeness and communication satisfaction (Afifi et al., 2015; McManus et al., 2011). Adolescents who report meaningful interactions with friends, family members, relatives, and community members, seem to have fewer psychological complaints and less behavioral problems (Meland et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2009; Weaver & Schofield, 2015). On the other hand, keeping feelings and experiences regarding divorce in can have negative consequences for adolescent adjustment because they bottle up feelings and miss out on emotional support. This may in turn create a bigger risk for internalizing and externalizing problem behavior (Armistead et al., 1990).

Unfortunately, only little research focused on the association between talking about divorce and adolescent adjustment in the context of divorce during adolescence, which emphasizes the scientific and societal relevance of further research (Wolchik et al., 2000). Therefore, the objective of this study is to obtain insights in the association between talking about divorce and adolescent adjustment. The subsequent paragraphs will consist of a further elaboration of important concepts, research questions, hypotheses, research plan, results section, the conclusion and discussion.

Adolescent adjustment after divorce

Adolescents whose parents got divorced can experience negative effects on their adjustment. They are at higher risk for multiple negative developmental outcomes like

problems in academic performance, behavioral problems and emotional problems in comparison to their peers whose parents did not experience a divorce (Lansford, et al., 2006). In this thesis, adjustment will be defined as low levels of two types of psychosocial problem behaviors: internalizing and externalizing problem behavior (Stratham & Chase, 2010).

Firstly, internalizing problem behavior, which refers to social withdrawal, anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic reactions (Achenbach, 1991; Eisenberg et al., 2001). Research has shown that divorce-related stressors (e.g., interparental conflict, negative parent-child relationships and low parenting quality), which are described as non-normative, increase the risk for internalizing symptoms (Amato, 2014). Normative stressors are developmental obstacles associated with the adolescent's life stage, such as transition from middle to high school. The combination of non-normative stressors and normative stressors has been proven to increase the risk for internalizing symptoms (Kim et al., 2003). This association between adolescence related non-normative and normative stressors and internalizing problems might be explained by the fact that multiple negative life events can be experienced as uncontrollable and may therefore predict depression and anxiety (Leadbeater et al., 1999).

Secondly: externalizing behavior, which refers to aggression, hyperactivity, conduct problems, delinquency, and antisocial behavior (Ormel, et al., 2005). Research has shown that divorce-related stressors can increase externalizing problem behaviors (Kim, et al., 2003). Primarily, this association may be explained by higher levels of conflicts between parents (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Second, this association can be explained by the negative effect divorce can have on parenting (Simons, et al., 1999). Divorce tends to disrupt parenting, which reduces the quality of parenting and increases the probability of problem behavior (e.g., aggression) in adolescents (Kim, et al., 2003). Thus, the negative effects of conflicts between parents and disrupted parenting cause adolescents of divorced parents to be at higher risk for externalizing problem behaviors.

Talking about divorce

As described before, adolescents' adjustment can be positively influenced by high levels of communication (Oliva et al., 2009). Communication is a reciprocal process, whereby emotions and attitudes are bidirectionally exchanged (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2006). Different components of communication are intimacy, receptiveness, depth, and composure (Jones & LeBaron, 2002). Adolescents who have learned to be competent communicators are better able to reframe their stress as something that can be resolved. This makes them more resilient to the negative effects of divorce compared to adolescents who are less skilled or comfortable communicating (Afifi et al., 2017; Thorson, 2009). Research has also shown that substantive conversations

contribute more to wellbeing than smalltalk, which emphasizes the importance of conversation quality over conversation quantity (Milek et al., 2018). Specifically, communication with family members with whom adolescents feel close, is positively associated with their ability to cope positively with the divorce (Amato, et al., 2011; Afifi et al., 2017). Nevertheless, during adolescence, individuals become more peer oriented and less family oriented (Marceau, 2015). Therefore, talking with peers is also important for adolescent development (Brown, 2004). In addition to talking with family members and peers, research also underlines the importance of talking with teachers and other trusted adults (Ehrenberg et al., 2006). This thesis will therefore address the effect of communication with parents, peers, family members, teachers, and professionals.

The role of gender

Regarding the role of communication on adolescent adjustment after divorce, gender differences may play a role. Studies have found that male adolescents are less likely to communicate about their problems with others than their female counterparts (Ehrenberg, et al., 2006; Luedemann, 2004). They feel a stronger urge to solve their problems on their own (without consultation) and are more likely to act out their negative feelings through antisocial responses. On the contrary, female adolescents are more reactive to interpersonal concerns, and more likely to communicate their problems (Oldehinkel et al., 2008; Ledwell & King, 2015). Despite these differences, research shows that there is no significant difference between the sexes in communication skills (Reed et al., 1999). Furthermore, there is a sex difference in mean levels of problem behavior. Externalizing problem behavior is more common in males (Rosenfield, 2000) while internalizing problems excelerate in females (Kim, 2003). Hence, this thesis examines the moderating effect of gender.

This study

Due to the challenging developmental stage in combination with divorce-related stressors, adolescents with divorced parents are at greater risk for internalizing and externalizing problem behavior. It is therefore examined whether talking about divorce could be a protective factor. The association between talking about divorce and adolescent adjustment will be examined. In addition, the role of gender will also be taken into account. Quantitative data collected from the study 'Where do I belong?', consisting of 250 Dutch adolescents between the age range of 12-18, will be analyzed. The following research question will be addressed: What is the association between talking about divorce and the adjustment of adolescents, and to what extent does gender play a role in this? The main question is divided into three sub questions which are 1) Is there a correlation between the quantity of people that adolescents talked with about the divorce, the quality of the conversations that were held and internalizing problem behavior? 2) Is there a correlation between the quantity of people that

adolescents talked with about the divorce, the quality of the conversations that were held and externalizing problem behavior? 3) Does gender play a role in the relationship between talking about divorce and adolescent adjustment?.

Meaningful interactions have been found to buffer the negative impact of divorce-related stressors. Therefore it is being hypothesized that communicating about the divorce might function as a moderator for the development of both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors and thus may be beneficial for adolescent adjustment (Afifi et al., 2006; Ehrenberg, et al., 2006). Since research underlines the importance of talking quality over quantity (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Milek et al., 2018), it is expected that conversation satisfaction will have a significant impact on adolescent adjustment and that the number of people talked with is less important. Research has shown that female adolescents tend to communicate more about how they feel, but when they don't, they are at higher risk for developing internalizing symptoms (Ledwell, & King, 2015). Furthermore, male adolescents are more likely to act out their negative feelings through antisocial responses instead of talking (Ehrenberg, et al., 2006). The mean levels of problem behavior may be different between males and females, but talking can be beneficial for the adjustment of both sexes. Thus, there are no gender differences expected in the data.

Method

Participants

The data reported in this study is derived from the 'where do I belong' project. The research has been led by prof dr Susanne Branje. The type of sampling procedure was an aselect convenience sample. In this study a sample of 188 Dutch adolescents between the age of 11 to 19 years old, with an average age of 14,34 (SD = 1.879, Range = 8) has been investigated. The sample consisted of 38,8% males (N = 73) and 61,2% females (N = 115). 71,3% of the adolescent participants indicated that their parents got a divorce after being married (N = 134). And 26,1% indicated their parents separated after living together (N = 49). The age range is 12-18 years old and the average age within this sample for the time since the separation of parents was 7.49 years old. 62% of the adolescents reported living alternately with the mother and with the father (N = 118). 23.4% reported living with the mother but having contact with the father as well (N = 44). 6.4% reported living with the mother without having contact with the father (N = 12) and 2.3% reported living with the father but having contact with the mother as well (N = 6). The participants were mainly from Dutch origin (N = 174), and the rest of the ethnicities were linked to other European countries, South-America and Asia. Furthermore, the education levels most representative for this sample were VWO (N = 33,0%) and HAVO (N = 21,8%).

Procedure

One of the primary methods of recruitment was enlisted via Utrecht University, social partners of 'Where do I belong', schools and social media. This research has been approved by the Faculty Ethical Review Committee (FETC). Within this study, the data collection method consisted of presenting questionnaires at one measurement period. These online questionnaires addressed questions about personal data, living situation, changes after divorce, contact with parents, belonging, adjustment, problem behaviors and talking about divorce. For each participant, a gift voucher worth 10 euros has been given and the measurement period started right after the registration. Furthermore, the additional research consisted of a number of families who have been interviewed during home-visits.

Instruments

The independent variable used in this study is talking about divorce, which is measured in an interval measurement scale. The TADQ (Talking About Divorce Questionnaire) is used to measure this independent variable, which is aimed at with whom one talks about the divorce and how satisfying the talk was. Satisfaction is measured on a 1-10 scale with 1 being not satisfactory at all, and 10 being the most pleasant. The person one is talking to can be a parent, friend, sibling, grandparent, other family member, acquaintance, classmate, juvenile judge, lawyer, divorce mediator, someone from Child Care and Protection Board, teacher or social worker. This questionnaire has no rating of validity and reliability because it is a questionnaire composed by the researchers themselves. The possible moderator gender is characterized by a nominal measurement scale with 3 categories (male, female and other).

The dependent variable used in this study is adjustment, which is measured in an interval measurement scale. As mentioned before, adjustment will be operationalized as: internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Bornstein et al., 2010). This decision is based on the 'Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire', which measures psychosocial problems in 4- to 16-year olds on the basis of 25 items (Goodman, 2006). These 25 items are divided in 5 subscales; hyperactivity/inattention, emotional problems, peer relationship problems, conduct problems and prosocial behavior. The SDQ has two subdimensions of internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors that will be examined. The questionnaire is completed by the adolescents themselves. SDQ provides scores on the subscales conduct problems and hyperactivity/inattention, which refers to externalizing problem behaviors, and emotional symptoms/peer relationship problems, which refer to internalizing problem behaviors. These scores will be converted into a normal distribution comparing common behavior within the age category, by which a percentile comparison, specifically for these two subscales, is made. Adolescents below

the 80th percentile norm score refers to common behavior within their age category. The Cronbach's alpha of the subscale externalizing problems is .508 and of internalizing problems is .287.

Analysis plan

As described before, it is hypothesized that communicating about the divorce is beneficial in terms of both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors and it is expected to be beneficial for both males and females. The hypothesis will be confirmed when there is a significant negative correlation between the dependent and the independent variable and an insignificant moderation effect of gender.

This study is an explanatory research because the above mentioned hypotheses will be tested. To determine the association between talking about divorce and adolescent adjustment, two hierarchical regression models will be used. In the first model, the association between internalizing problem behavior and talking about divorce with sex as a moderator will be investigated. The second model examines the association between externalizing problem behavior and talking about divorce with sex as a moderator. Two aspects of talking about divorce will be taken into account, namely the quantity and the quality of conversations. Talking quantity refers to the number of people talked with, and talking quality refers to the mean satisfaction grade that was given to different conversations with different people. To research which aspect of the conversation (quality or quantity) has the strongest link with problem behavior, the variables are added one by one to see a potential change in significance. To examine the sex difference, both models will include gender as a moderator. This moderator has been added as an interaction term between sex and talking about divorce. Depending on the significance of the effect, it will be determined what aspects of talking will be used when looking at the effect on internalising and externalising problem behavior.

Results

The results will be presented in three sections. First, the analyses for examining assumptions of multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, relation linearity, and outliers will be shown. Second, the sample descriptives will be displayed. Third, the analyses to answer our research questions will be presented.

Assumptions

First, multicollinearity among the predictors was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF) statistic. The VIF of the correlations between the independent variables were all underneath 3.0 (range = 1.00-1.078), which meant the assumption of multicollinearity was met. Second, the presence of outliers in the data was assessed by making a boxplot to visualize outliers. For the mean of talking satisfaction, 10 outliers were found. These outliers refer to the individuals that scored the lowest mean grade on talking satisfaction. For internalizing problem behaviors three outliers were found and for

externalizing problem behaviors no outliers were found. These three outliers can be explained by high levels of problem behavior, which meant that these participants exhibit internalizing problem behaviors. All outliers together did positively affect the significance of the effect, so they were included in the analyses. Third, there is a linear relation between the independent and the dependent variable. Fourth, homoscedasticity was assessed using the Levigne test. The output of this test was for both internalizing and externalizing problem behavior insignificant ($p = .398$, $p = .146$). Therefore, it could be concluded that all assumptions, as well for homoscedasticity had been met.

Sample overview

Table 1 shows how many participants have talked with a certain person and the average satisfaction grade they have given. Talking satisfaction has been displayed in a scale ranging from 1-10, and the overall mean score of talking satisfaction is 7.2. The mean score of the quantity of people talked with about the divorce (range = 15) is 4.59. Participants spoke the most with their mother, in addition they also spoke a lot with friends, siblings and their father. They were the most satisfied about conversations with their friends and second about the conversations with their mother.

Table 1
People talked with about the divorce and corresponding satisfaction grade/

Sample overview			
Talking about divorce	N	Percentage	Mean grade
Mother	121	84,62	7,87
Friends	106	74,13	8,00
Father	90	62,94	7,17
Siblings	81	56,64	7,28
Grandparents	51	35,66	6,73
Teacher at school	48	33,57	5,58
Other family member	47	32,87	6,3
Caregiver	42	29,37	5,83
Acquaintance	30	20,98	4,63
Class or another group	30	20,98	4,30
Juvenile judge	22	15,38	3,14
Divorce mediator	20	13,99	3,40
Child Protection Board	20	13,99	2,95
Lawyer	17	11,89	2,24
Someone else	2	1,40	0,50

Note: 7 participants from the sample did not talk to anyone, therefore they have been excluded in the analyses.

Internalizing problem behaviors

The intercorrelations between the variables and internalizing problem behaviors used in the study are presented in Table 2. The correlations of talking satisfaction and internalizing problem behaviors were significant ($p = 0.004$). There is a very small negative correlation between these variables, which means that a lower talking satisfaction is related to more internalizing problem behavior and vice versa. The correlations between the quantity of people talked with about the divorce and internalizing problem behaviors were not significant ($p = 0.144$).

Table 2

Bivariate correlations between all study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Internalizing problems SDQ	-					
2. Externalizing problems SDQ		-				
3. Talking satisfaction	-.22*	.18*	-			
4. Talking quantity	.09	.13	.56**	-		
5. Sex dummy	.25**	-.01	.03		-	
6. Talking satisfaction*SexDum	-.09	-.07	.			-

* $p > .05$ ** $p > .01$

Note: dummy 0 = male, 1 = female

Results of the hierarchical regression analyses are shown in Table 3. The first model consists of one predictor, which is talking satisfaction, together with the dependent variable internalizing problem behaviors. This model turned out to be significant ($p = 0.008$). Adding the predictor quantity of people talked with about the divorce in the second model however shows that there is still a significant regression coefficient ($p = 0.025$). Even though the second model is significant, the variable quantity of people talked with about the divorce is not significant ($p = .610$). Therefore the first model will be used.

Table 3

Regression analyses of study variables

model		Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(constant)	1.726	.099		17.424	<.001
	Talking satisfaction	-.036	.013	-.223	-2.713	.008

Externalizing problem behaviors

As can be seen in Table 2, the intercorrelations between the variables and externalizing problem behaviors are presented. The correlations of talking satisfaction and externalizing problem behaviors were significant ($p = .017$). There is a very small positive correlation between these variables, which means that talking with more people about divorce is associated with more externalizing problem behavior. The correlations between the quantity of people talked with about the divorce and externalizing problem behaviors were not significant ($p = .061$). This shows that the correlation between these variables was very weak or not existent.

Furthermore, the hierarchical regression of externalizing problem behaviors has also been examined. The first model consists of one predictor which is talking satisfaction, together with the dependent variable externalizing problem behaviors. The first model shows a significant effect ($p = 0.035$). Adding the predictor quantity of people talked with about the divorce results in the second model not being significant ($p = 0.098$). Therefore only the first model will be used.

These results show that it's not about the quantity of people that adolescents talk with about the divorce, but it's about the mean satisfaction score, which significantly predicts internalizing problem behaviors as well as externalizing problem behavior after divorce.

Table 4

Regression analyses of study variables

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(constant)	1.818	.104		17.433	<.001
Talking Satisfaction	-.030	.014	-.177	-2.130	.035

a. Dependent Variable: Externalizing problems SDQ

The role of gender

To measure the interaction between gender, talking about divorce and internalizing problem behavior, a dummy variable of sex and talking satisfaction have been combined into an interaction variable. The correlations between this interaction variable and internalizing problem behaviors are presented in Table 2. The correlations of the interaction variable and internalizing problem behaviors were not significant ($p = .06$). The correlation between sex and internalizing problems is significant ($P = .001$). Also, a regression analysis with sex x talking satisfaction, sex and talking satisfaction as predictor and internalizing problem behaviors as a dependent variable was performed. As shown in Table 2, this regression turned out to be not significant ($p = .189$).

The intercorrelations between the interaction variable and externalizing problem behaviors are presented in Table 2. As shown, the correlations of sex x talking satisfaction and externalizing problem behaviors were not significant ($p = .219$). Furthermore, a regression analysis with sex x talking satisfaction as predictor and externalizing problem behaviors as a dependent variable was performed. This regression also turned out to be not significant ($p = .246$). These findings indicate that there is no sex difference with regard to the association between talking satisfaction and adolescent adjustment.

Conclusion & Discussion

Divorce can have negative consequences for the whole family (Kołodziej-Zaleska & Przybyła-Basista, 2016; Leon, 2003). Specifically adolescents, who face a challenging developmental stage wherein a variety of biological and psychological changes occur (Ziemer, 2012). The accumulation of divorce and puberty related stressors can result in experiencing major stress. The combination of stressful life events, like divorce and the challenging developmental stage puts adolescents at higher risk for externalizing and internalizing problem behavior (Rodgers & Rose, 2002; Afifi et al., 2015). To cope with these stressful changes and to make adolescents more resilient for these risks, talking about divorce can be a protective factor (Afifi et al., 2015; McManus et al., 2011). Having a satisfactory conversation can create relational closeness and communication satisfaction and decrease the risk for problem behavior (Meland et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2009; Weaver & Schofield, 2015). Therefore, in this conclusion the research question 'What is the association between talking about divorce and the adjustment of adolescents, and to what extent does gender play a role in this?' will be answered. First, the research questions will be answered. Second, the discussion regarding this study will be elaborated after which limitations, practical implications and future research will be discussed.

Internalizing problem behavior

The first sub question was 'Is there a correlation between the quantity of people that adolescents talked with about the divorce, the quality of the conversations that were held and internalizing problem behavior?'. It was expected that the quality of talking about divorce would be associated with a lower level of internalizing problem behavior, and therefore to better adjustment. Our findings show that being more satisfied with the conversation about divorce was indeed related to less internalizing problem behavior while lower levels of talking satisfaction are related to higher levels of internalizing problems. As expected, the quantity of talking was not significantly associated with internalizing problem behaviors. This is in line with the literature because it's the conversation quality that matters instead of the conversation quantity (Carmichael et al., 2015). In addition, meaningful interactions buffer the negative impact of divorce-related

stressors and may therefore be beneficial for adolescent adjustment (Afifi et al., 2006; Ehrenberg, et al., 2006).

Externalizing problem behavior

The second sub question was 'Is there a correlation between the quantity of people that adolescents talked with about the divorce, the quality of the conversations that were held and externalizing problem behavior?' Our findings show that indeed talking quantity did not have a significant impact on externalizing problem behaviors. In addition, findings were contradictory with our hypothesis that talking about divorce could function as a protective factor for externalizing problem behavior. According to the data, being more satisfied with the conversation about divorce actually related to higher levels of externalizing problem behaviors. This relation can be explained by co-rumination, which is defined by repetitive, problem-focused talking which can nevertheless still be experienced as satisfactory (Tompkins et al., 2011). Research shows that this type of communication is associated with behavioral problems, because it exacerbates pre-existing anger (Peled & Moretti, 2007; Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). It may also increase the chances of an angry response (Bushman et al., 2005), because it worsens the pre-existing mood and amplifies the interplay between mood and cognitions (Ciesla & Roberts, 2007). Thus, conversations can be experienced as positive, but can also provoke negative behaviors.

Gender

The last sub question was 'Does gender play a role in the relationship between talking about divorce and adolescent adjustment?'. In line with the hypothesis, there was no sex difference found in whether talking satisfaction was associated with internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors. In other words, being satisfied about the conversations adolescents have regarding divorce is just as important for males as for females (Reed et al., 1999). However girls tend to self-disclose in their same-sex friendships and enjoy closer friendships more than boys (Tompkins, et al., 2011). Therefore boys may be less familiar with sharing problems, but they experience the same positive consequences when they do decide to share (Afifi, 2015).

General findings

Talking about divorce has been divided into talking quantity (e.g. how many people the adolescent has talked with about divorce) and talking quality (how satisfying the talk was). The quantity of people talked with did not seem to be associated with internalizing- and externalizing problem behavior. Therefore it can be concluded that the quality of a conversation about divorce is more important than the quantity in relation to internalizing and externalizing problem behavior.

With regard to whom the adolescent talked with, the data showed that adolescents talked mostly about divorce with their mothers, and these were overall

satisfactory conversations. This can be explained by the fact that the mother is involved with the divorce herself and thus understands what impact stressors can have (Wolchik et al., 2000). This can provide a feeling of mutual understanding (Laursen, 2009). However, the father is also involved with the divorce, but mothers are often more strongly involved with their adolescent lives than fathers (Phares et al., 2009). This could be caused by the fact that mothers are more reactive to interpersonal concerns, and more likely to communicate about feelings than fathers (Oldehinkel et al., 2008; Ledwell & King, 2015). This can be explained by the fact that these parents have more traditional family roles wherein mothers provide more emotional support and fathers more financial support (Hombrados, 2012).

Other important interlocutors are friends, they received the highest satisfaction grade of the conversations about divorce. During adolescence, friends exceed parents in their role as primary providers of social support (Brown et al., 2006; Tompkins et al., 2011). Friends are important during adolescence because they provide different social support and deeper understanding than parents. This deeper understanding can be explained by peers being the same age which puts them in a similar situation (Brown, 2004). Having friends to talk with during negative experiences buffers the effect of negative life events (Way, 2013). Thus, given the developmental stage of adolescents, wherein friends become more important than parents, the high satisfaction rate corresponds with the literature (Brown, 2004).

Furthermore, grandparents and teachers were talked to less often, but the conversations were still graded satisfactorily. This means that grandparents are not the most common conversation partners for this topic, but whenever they are talked with, the conversations were satisfying. Lawyers, the child protection board, divorce mediators, and juvenile judges were talked with the least and generally graded unsatisfactorily. This might have to do with the fact that adolescents have no personal relation with these formal institutions which makes the talks less satisfactory (Afifi, 2015). In superficial, non intimacy exchange, mostly occurring in contact with a stranger, reciprocity will decline as the relationship advances. This means that strangers disclose less than acquaintances who in turn disclose less than friends (Doyle, 1982). Also, conversations with staff of formal institutions are mostly involuntary. Thus, even when the staff of formal institutions possess good communication skills, due to the mandatory nature of it, adolescents might still experience the conversation as unsatisfactory (Cashmore, 2009).

Strengths & limitations

The strength of this study is that it examines an under-researched topic, namely the positive effects of talking about divorce in adolescent adjustment (Wolchik et al., 2000). In addition, in existing literature talking is most often investigated as a rather

broad concept. It therefore stands out that this study made a distinction between quantity and quality of talking (Milek et al., 2018). The final strength is that random sampling was used, in order to improve generalizability. Furthermore, the findings of this study must be set within the limitations of this investigation. The representativeness of this study population is limited due to its relatively small sample size (N = 188) and particularly a fewer number of men (N = 73). Also, the topics that appealed to internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors, could have been experienced as sensitive topics. It could therefore increase the chance of giving answers that are socially desirable (Grimm, 2010), which could have impacted the reliability of the results.

Future research

The knowledge gathered in this research can be valuable for adolescents personally, for both boys and girls, to realise the importance of talking about their feelings and experiences regarding divorce. Talking about one's feelings is something females are more familiar with than males (Oldehinkel et al., 2008; Ledwell & King, 2015), but for males it is just as important (Way, 2013). As supported in this thesis, talking about divorce is important for both sexes, thus it is suggested that future research lays emphasis on the similarities between males and females with regard to the importance of high-quality conversations. In addition, instead of the hypothesis that more satisfactory conversations would be related to less externalizing problem behavior, in this study it was found that talking can have a negative impact on externalizing problem behavior. Future research should therefore focus on externalizing problem behavior specifically, to indicate what circumstances contribute to the positive correlation between talking and externalizing problem behaviors. Subsequently, additional explanations for this association can be discovered.

Practical implications

The findings of this research offer valuable insights that can be used in pedagogical practice. Having valuable conversations about divorce has proven to be important for a healthy adjustment in terms of internalizing problem behaviors. By sharing feelings, experiences and emotions, adolescents can process their negative feelings and become more resilient to the negative effects of divorce (Afifi et al., 2015; McManus et al., 2011). Furthermore, different formal institutions in this study, like the child protection board, divorce mediators and juvenile judges did not seem to provide conversations that were experienced as satisfactory by the adolescents. If adolescents are eligible for formal institutions regarding divorce, it could be beneficial for them if they felt supported and understood. Despite the fact that low satisfaction grades for conversations with formal institutions can be explained by its mandatory nature, it could also be valuable to improve communication skills of staff in this sector.

On the basis of this study, it can be concluded that with regard to adolescent adjustment, it's not the quantity of the conversation that matters, but it's about the quality of the conversation (Milek et al, 2018). Internalizing problem behaviors might be reduced by creating more positive and satisfactory conversations. It is therefore of great importance that people take the responsibility to verbally support adolescents who experience a divorce (Afifi et al., 2006; Ehrenberg, et al., 2006). This in turn could contribute to their level of adjustment (Afifi et al., 2015). To conclude, the power of talking should not be underestimated in assisting adolescents who are going through a rough time due to divorce (afifi et al, 2006).

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