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The Role of “Very Important” Nonparental Adults in Adolescent Development

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Two hundred one adolescents of diverse ethnic backgrounds (mean age = 16.7 years) reported whether they considered any adult other than their parents to be a “very important” person (VIP) in their lives, and described various attributes of the VIP and their relationship with this individual. Perceived VIP characteristics—especially perceived involvement of the VIP in behavior that is uniformly illegal (e.g., theft) or illegal for adolescents (e.g., alcohol use)—were robust predictors of boys’ self-reported misconduct and had modest links with their level of self-reported depressive symptomatology. In contrast, VIP attributes showed their strongest linkages to girls’ depressive symptoms, with perceived VIP warmth and acceptance related to a lower incidence of depressed mood. Regression analyses indicated that these VIP attributes contributed uniquely to the explanation of misconduct and depressive symptoms even when analogous parental and friend attributes were included in the models. In view of the findings of this exploratory study, several future research directions are suggested, including research on the mechanisms through which VIP “effects” may be transmitted.

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INTRODUCTION

The possible benefits to adolescents of having a nonparental adult who serves as a source of comfort, guidance, or inspiration—among other possible functions—are intuitively obvious. Biographies, fiction, ethnographic studies by anthropologists, and clinical case histories often point to the influence on youth of older siblings, grandparents, other relatives, neighbors, teachers, and even historical figures. Of course, nonparental adults may also exact costs to adolescents' development, as when they model deviant behavior.

Systematic research on the role of nonparental adults in young people's lives derives from three related but conceptually distinct sources. Garmezy (1985, 1991) and Rutter (1985, 1989, 1990) and Werner and Smith (1977, 1982) conducted pioneering research on the characteristics of children who, despite the risks entailed by parental illness or extreme poverty, had positive developmental outcomes. Research on "resilience," as this phenomenon became known, indicated that the ability to engage the interest of, and respond to the interest shown by, nonparental adults was one of several factors that contributed to better-than-expected outcomes of youth living in dire circumstances (Herrenkohl *et al.*, 1994). Similarly, in reviewing the findings of her longitudinal study of Hawaiian children who had experienced poverty and family disruptions, Werner concluded, "Without exception, all the children who thrived had at least one person that provided them consistent emotional support—a grandmother, an older sister, a teacher, or neighbor" (cited in Goleman, 1987, p. C11).

Other researchers have examined the role of "mentors" in individuals' lives. Within this research tradition, one line of inquiry concerns the part played by mentors in young men's occupational development—a research theme launched by Levinson (1978) in his study of key phases of men's lives and pursued more recently by Hamilton (1990) in a study of the German apprenticeship system. A second line of inquiry within this tradition has expanded beyond the boundaries of occupational socialization and formal mentoring arrangements to include the role of naturally occurring mentors in young people's lives. Studying an at-risk sample, Rhodes *et al.* (1992) showed that young, single African American mothers who indicated they had a mentor reported more support from their social networks, a factor which in turn was associated with less depressed mood. (Mentors were defined as individuals at least 8 years older who respondents indicated had inspired them to do their best and had influenced their decisions.) The authors suggested that mentors, 85% of whom were female and about 42% of whom were relatives, may help young women to extract helpful support from others that buffers them against stressors associated with a difficult life situation. In another study, Hamilton and Darling (1989) found that

37% of a college student sample described at least one unrelated adult as a mentor—that is, a teacher, challenger, and role model; and that males were more likely than females to have a mentor.

A third line of research has explored the existence and effects of a broad range of nonparental socializers that include but are not limited to individuals who meet the stringent criteria of a mentor. Thus, Blyth *et al.* (1982), in a study that focused on peer as well as adult "significant others," found that adolescent females listed a greater number of such persons (adults and peers combined) than did males; of all significant others, nearly two-thirds were of the same sex; and more than one-half were not related by kinship. The sex differences found in this study, opposite in nature to those identified by Hamilton and Darling (1989), may be due to the older sample studied by Hamilton and Darling as well as to sex differences in the nature of the target individual: a "mentor" as opposed to a "significant other" in one's life.

As this review indicates, studies of the frequency, nature, and, especially, the *effects* of adolescents' relationships with adults other than parents are still quite sparse. The purpose of the current exploratory study is to deepen our knowledge of the role of nonparental adults in adolescent development by detailing the demography of such relationships (who are the important adults in adolescents' lives?); the reasons their VIPs are important to adolescents (i.e., the functions they perform); and the linkages between having a nonparental adult whom the adolescent considers to be a VIP and two indicators of adolescents' psychological well-being: depressed mood and involvement in misconduct

In addition to providing descriptive data, we test the following hypotheses:

1. Females will be more likely than males to report having a very important person (VIP) in their lives who is not their parent. This hypothesis is based on previous research by Blyth *et al.* (1982) concerning "significant others" in boys' and girls' lives, and on an extensive literature indicating that girls are more oriented toward the development of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Gilligan, 1982). We also anticipated that adolescents' VIP choices would be sex differentiated, with boys typically identifying their VIP as male and girls typically identifying their VIP as female. This prediction is based on previous findings concerning girls' same-sex preference in naming significant others and mentors (Blyth *et al.*, 1982; Rhodes *et al.*, 1992), and on the grounds that midadolescents' developmental needs for identity clarification and future role exploration may be particularly well served by same-sex adults.

2. Adolescents whose VIPs are *older*, and who are perceived to *exhibit more conventional behavior* and to *disapprove more of illegal or "deviant"*

behavior on the part of the adolescent, will report lower involvement in *problem behavior*. Similarly, adolescents whose VIPs are perceived as more *warm and accepting* will report less problem behavior. These hypotheses are motivated by several bodies of literature. First, older adults are likely to have a stronger stake in conventional society: for example, they are more likely to have jobs and families whose well-being they are unwilling to risk (Bachman *et al.*, 1997). Older VIPs, on average, also may be more effective in communicating with adolescents about acceptable behavior through their own example, through a combination of reasoning and explanation, and through their willingness to exert social control. The proposed relevance of VIPs' behavior and attitudes to adolescents' behavior is consistent with a well-documented literature indicating that peers' and family members' substance use and deviant social behavior are risk factors for adolescent misconduct (Brown *et al.*, 1986; Jessor, 1992; McCord, 1990); and that negative attitudes of others towards various forms of misconduct may offset tendencies toward misconduct (Iannotti and Bush, 1992). Finally, based on evidence that warm and accepting relationships with parents are associated with less adolescent misconduct (Chen *et al.*, in press; Feldman *et al.*, 1991; Fletcher *et al.*, 1995), it is plausible that adolescents who perceive their VIPs as more warm and accepting will be less likely to become involved in problem behavior. Other researchers have shown that warmth and acceptance increase the likelihood of internalizing others' behavioral standards: in this case, the behaviors and attitudes of the VIP.

A convincing test of this multifaceted hypothesis would demonstrate that VIPs' age is inversely related to less involvement in problem behavior; and that other VIP "effects" (e.g., associations between perceived VIP warmth, behavior, and sanctions and adolescents' level of misconduct) are *independent* of parental and friends' perceived behavior, sanctions, and warmth, and acceptance.

3. Adolescents whose VIPs are perceived as more *warm and understanding*, to whom they report greater readiness to *disclose problems*, and whom they view as conveying a more *positive mood* will report a lower frequency of depressive symptoms. Developmental and social forces often propel adolescents in the direction of greater autonomy and individuation from parents, thus leading youths to seek comfort and guidance from others. Therefore, adolescents who have an important and caring (warm and accepting) nonparental adult in their lives may be "advantaged" with respect to psychological well-being. A recent longitudinal study demonstrated that adolescents both affiliate with peers who are similar to them on internalizing symptoms, such as symptoms of depression—an example of "selection" effects; and influence each others' level of negative affect—an illustration of "socialization" effects (Hogue and Steinberg, 1995). Similar

processes may occur with respect to VIPs. (Although selection effects are not relevant within the family context, certainly genetic similarities and interaction with family members whose mood is negative may influence adolescents' own mood.) Once again, a convincing test of these hypotheses would reveal significant effects of VIP-related variables even when analogous measures of parents and friends have been controlled.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants in the study were 201 11th graders from a high school in southern California (M age = 16.7 years, 53% female). The school was located in a large, ethnically diverse metropolitan area; and the sample for this study was also diverse: 53% European American, 16% Latino, 12% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 11% African American, and 8% mixed ethnicity. The modal parents were high school graduates, with 27% of fathers and 21% of mothers having a four-year college degree or education beyond college. The majority of the sample (58%) were living in their intact biological family, 29% had parents who were divorced or separated, 8% had experienced a parent's death, and 5% reported that their parents had never married each other.

Informed consent of adolescents and their parents was obtained prior to survey administration. Of the 300 enrolled 11th graders, 241 or 83% were present on the day of testing, and 201 (83% of those present; 67% of all enrolled 11th graders) had obtained the necessary consent forms and completed the survey, which had been described as part of a study of adolescent development.

Procedures

Data were obtained by means of an anonymous self-report questionnaire that was administered by the researchers and their assistants during a 50-minute class period at school.

Measures

Parental education was indicated by respondents' checking one of 5 categories, ranging from *9th grade or less* to *Master's or professional degree*.

Students reported their *ethnicity* in response to an open-ended question asking for their ethnic self-identification.

The *existence and functions of a very important person* (VIP) were assessed through a series of questions. Participants first were asked to consider whether they had an “important adult” in their lives other than a parent—“someone at least 21 years old who has had a significant influence on you or whom you can count on in times of need.” To stimulate participants’ thinking on this topic, we provided examples of possible VIPs, such as an aunt, teacher, or friend’s parent. Responses subsequently were coded into 16 categories: no VIP, grandparent, aunt/uncle, cousin, sibling, parent’s significant other, friend’s parent, neighbor, older friend, parent or other relative of boyfriend/girlfriend, teacher, coach, academic or psychological counselor, church representative, and other or uncodable.

Participants also indicated whether they considered the VIP to be like a parent to them (*yes/no*), the VIP’s approximate age, and for our subsequent screening purposes, rated the importance of the person in their lives on a 5-point scale marked *not really all that important* (2%), *somewhat important* (8%), *important* (25%), *very important* (34%), or a *truly key person* for them (31%). Respondents who rated their VIP as not all that important or only somewhat important were dropped from further analyses, leaving a sample of whom nearly three-quarters considered their VIP “very important” or a “key” individual in their lives.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to explain the specific ways in which their VIP was important to them. No examples were given in order that we might better obtain adolescents’ spontaneous explanations. The coding manual was prepared after review of a random sample of 10% of all cases. Resulting codes were as follows: (1) support or motivation for schoolwork and learning (e.g., “He changed my attitude towards school”); (2) support for interpersonal problems, issues, and relationships (e.g., “helped me understand my parents’ divorce,” “helped me learn to respect people”); (3) support for personal development, issues, and problems (e.g., “convinced me I could make something of my life,” “got me to stop taking things so hard”); (4) support for activities and interests (e.g., “got me interested in music,” “got me onto the baseball team”); (5) financial support (e.g., “gave me money so I could do things other kids do”); (6) general support, not elsewhere classifiable (e.g., “listens to me,” “know I can count on him,” “really cares about me”); (7) companionship, fun (e.g., “we do things together”); (8) self-disclosure and intimacy (e.g., “we tell each other things,” “I can tell him stuff that might get me in trouble, and he keeps it in confidence”); (9) role model (e.g., “he’s the kind of person I want to be”); (10) support for individuality or equality (e.g., “respects my

views," "treats me like an adult"). Two coders rated each participant's responses and were instructed that each participant could receive a maximum of three codes. Disagreements occurred in relation to about 8% of responses and were resolved by consultation with the senior members of the research team.

The measure of *adolescent misconduct* was developed from a variety of problem behavior lists in the published literature (Arnett and Balle-Jensen, 1992; Feldman *et al.*, 1991; Fletcher *et al.*, 1995), with additional items generated by the researchers and their team of graduate research assistants. Multiple domains of problem behavior or misconduct were assessed, including risk taking ("drove under the influence of alcohol," "deliberately went someplace I knew was dangerous"), school-related deviance ("cheated on a test"), substance use ("smoked marijuana"), status offenses ("ran away from home"), physical aggression ("hit or threatened to hit someone"), vandalism ("painted graffiti on walls"), theft ("took something from a store without paying for it."), and other forms of misconduct (e.g., lied, forged a signature). Respondents indicated whether they had done these things *never*, *once or twice*, or *more often* during the past 6 months. Cronbach alpha for the 69-item scale was .92.

Depressed mood was assessed by the 20-item CES-D scale (Radloff, 1977, 1991). Symptom-frequency over the past month (e.g., "I could not get going") was reported by adolescents on a 5-point scale ranging from *never* to *always*. Cronbach alpha was .89.

Perceptions of the extent to which friends, parents, and VIPs engaged in behaviors that comprise misconduct when engaged in by adolescents was assessed as follows. Respondents indicated whether *none*, *some*, or *many* of their friends had engaged in 10 behaviors over the past 6 months, including school deviance, physical aggression, theft, and substance use, among others. The 10 items were a subset of the 69-item adolescent misconduct scale and formed a scale with alpha = .90. Respondents also indicated (*yes/no*) whether a family member or their VIP had engaged in frequent substance use (e.g., alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, or other illegal drugs), or engaged in physical aggression or theft in the past 6 months. Alpha for these 7-item scales was .62 for family members' perceived behavior and .78 for VIPs' behavior.

Identical 11-item scales were used to assess the *sanctions or reactions* adolescents believed their misconduct would elicit from VIPs, parents, and peers. The 11 items were drawn from the previously described misconduct scale and represented all categories of behavior surveyed. Respondents recorded their perceptions of parents' likely reactions on a 3-point scale: *would not care*, *would be somewhat upset*, or *would be very upset*. For VIPs

and peers, the comparable measures reflected whether they would approve or “say nothing” (scored as 1) vs. express disapproval (scored as 2). Cronbach alpha for Parental Sanctions was .84, for Peer Sanctions, .85; and for VIP Sanctions, .87.

With little basis in the literature for obtaining adolescents’ *perceptions of significant others’ depression*, we constructed identical 3-item scales for exploratory purposes based on CES-D scale items (e.g., “acted depressed”; Radloff, 1977). The items on the VIP and family member scales were answered *yes* or *no*, and the number of “yes” responses was totaled. On the friends’ version of the scale, respondents indicated whether *none*, *some*, or *many* of their friends had exhibited each behavior. Cronbach alpha for the VIP mood scale was .72; for the Family Members’ Mood scale, .72; and for the Friends’ Mood scale, .69.

Participants rated the *perceived warmth and acceptance of VIPs, parents, and friends* as follows. For their parents and friends, adolescents completed identical 11-item scales, based on Greenberger and Chen’s (1996) Parental Warmth and Acceptance scale. Sample items, answered on a 6-point continuum of disagreement/agreement were “I know that my [parents/friends] will ‘be there’ for me if I need them” and “I find it hard to please my [parents/friends].” Cronbach alphas for the parental and peer warmth scales were .88 and .82, respectively. Construct validity of the original parental warmth and acceptance scale was suggested by its substantial association with Moos and Moos’s (1986) measure of Family Cohesion (Greenberger and Chen, 1996). Data from the present study indicated that respondents who scored higher on peer warmth and acceptance reported more problem disclosure to their friends, as would be expected ($r = .35, p < .001$), thus providing some support for the scale’s validity. VIP warmth and acceptance was assessed by means of 5 items from the parental warmth and acceptance scale. Cronbach alpha for this scale was .83.

Adolescents indicated whether they would engage in *problem disclosure to their VIP, their mother, their father, and a close friend* about five potential problems (schoolwork, family-related problems, peer-related problems, sadness or anxiety, and uncertainty about right and wrong). Disclosure was assessed by a “yes” or “no” in response to each issue. The separate father and mother scales were summed to create a combined disclosure-to-parents scale. Cronbach alphas for the resulting VIP, Parent, and Peer Disclosure scales were .82, .84, and .74, in that order. As noted above, disclosure to peers was positively associated with perceived peer warmth and acceptance. Disclosure to VIPs and parents was also significantly correlated with the respective warmth and-acceptance measures, r s

$> .40$, $p < .001$, thus providing some support for the validity of these scales.

RESULTS

Gender and VIP

As predicted, girls were more likely than boys (83% vs. 68%) to report that they had a nonparental important adult in their lives, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 6.50$, $p < .05$. As was also predicted, adolescents' choices of a VIP were highly sex differentiated: Males reported a male VIP almost twice as often as a female VIP (65% compared to 35%); females reported a female VIP, as opposed to a male VIP, by an even wider margin—73% to 27%, $\chi^2(1, N = 152) = 21.89$, $p < .001$.⁴

A family member but *nonparental* adult VIP was claimed by 48% of boys and 52% of girls. The most common choice for both boys and girls was a sibling or aunt/uncle. Among girls, a grandparent was also a common VIP choice (see Table I).⁵ Boys more often than girls identified an older friend—the majority, between 21–30 years old, as their VIP (18% vs. 8%). Teachers were mentioned by 10% of boys and girls. Girls' VIPs were older on average (38.7 vs. 34.0 years) than those of boys, and more girls than boys regarded their VIP as like a parent to them (76% vs. 53%).

The most common function of the VIP or reason given for his/her importance to the adolescent involved "support" of some kind. Although most descriptions of support provision were quite general (see Measures), about 12% of boys and 23% of girls specified support for personal development (problems, concerns, efforts to mature); and about 5–10% of respondents mentioned support for dealing with interpersonal problems and academic goals. More boys than girls (12% vs. 6%) said their VIP was important as a source of fun and companionship, which calls to mind the

⁴Exploratory analyses based on analysis of variance revealed no ethnic differences among European Americans, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, Latinos, and African Americans on VIP age, perceived warmth, behavior, sanctions, mood, or likelihood of disclosure to VIPs. There also were no ethnic differences in the proportion of youth who reported having a VIP, a grandparent VIP, or an older friend VIP. There were, however, significant ethnic differences in the proportion of youths who cited a relative as their VIP, $\chi^2(3, N = 139) = 8.32$, $p < .05$, due mainly to the contrasting tendency of Latinos to select relatives and European Americans to select unrelated persons. Groups were too small to permit Gender $\times$ Ethnicity analyses.

⁵Under 3% of the youths in this sample who said they had a nonparental VIP specified an individual who was formally serving *in loco parentis*: e.g., a grandmother, in a household where the mother and father were absent.

Table I. Percent of Respondents with VIPs in Various Role Relationships

	Boys	Girls
Grandparent	5	18
Aunt/uncle	16	16
Cousin	10	3
Sibling	18	15
Parent's significant other	0	1
Friend's parent	8	8
Neighbor	5	2
Older friend	18	8
Relative of boyfriend/girlfriend	0	5
Teacher	10	10
Coach	5	5
Counselor	0	2
Church representative	5	7
Other/uncodable	2	0

fact that boys more often identified an older friend as their VIP. Only 6–9% of respondents' spontaneous answers clearly suggested that they considered their VIP to be a role model.

Sex Differences in Perceived Characteristics of VIPs, Parents, and Friends

As a prelude to testing hypotheses about VIPs' contributions to variation in adolescent misconduct and depressive symptoms, we examined sex differences in the perceived warmth, behavior, sanctions, and mood of VIPs, as well as adolescents' problem disclosure to VIPs. We also compared means for the VIP measures with those for parents and peers. Girls scored significantly higher than boys on perceived VIP warmth and the extent to which they would reveal a range of problems to their VIP, $F(1,148) =$

25.27, $p < .001$, and $F(1,144) = 4.16$, $p < .05$. As well, girls reported less involvement of their VIPs in antisocial or other potentially problematic behavior, $F(1,149) = 22.55$, $p < .001$, and expected more negative sanctions for their involvement in misconduct, $F(1,144) = 26.89$, $p < .001$. There were no sex differences in perceived VIP mood.

On measures pertinent to family members, the only significant sex difference was that girls reported more negative sanctions for misconduct than did boys, $F(1,144) = 7.43$, $p < .01$. On measures pertinent to friends, there were several sex differences: Girls reported greater peer warmth and understanding, $F(1,149) = 7.66$, $p < .01$; more problem disclosure to friends, $F(1,145) = 11.22$, $p < .001$; and less involvement of friends in problem behavior, $F(1,144) = 5.50$, $p < .05$. There were no sex differences in perceptions of friends' disapproval of misconduct or in perceived mood of friends.

Using t -tests for paired comparisons within the boys' and girls' samples, we compared adolescents' perceptions of their VIPs and parents on the key variables of this study. Boys rated their VIPs and parents as virtually the same on conventionality of behavior ($M_s = .23$ and $.27$) but viewed their parents as more disapproving of adolescent misconduct, $t(57) = 5.94$, $p < .001$. (For the purposes of this comparison, scales for parental sanction items were recoded to be comparable to those for VIP sanctions; thus, 2 = *upset/very upset*, 1 = *would not care*.) Boys' ratings of VIPs vs. parental warmth and understanding (based on the 5 items common to both measures) and of VIPs' vs. family members' mood did not differ significantly. In contrast, girls portrayed their VIPs in exemplary terms *vis-à-vis* parents and family members, rating VIPs significantly lower on unconventional behavior, $t(85) = 5.65$, $p < .001$; higher on disapproval of adolescent misconduct, $t(86) = 5.06$, $p < .001$; higher on warmth and acceptance, $t(88) = 8.75$, $p < .001$; and lower on negative mood, $t(85) = 4.69$, $p < .001$.

When comparing VIPs with their friends, both boys and girls rated their VIPs as more conventional in behavior (based on the 7 items common to both measures) and more disapproving of misconduct, $t(71) = 9.31$, $p < .001$ and $t(90) = 11.55$, $p < .001$. They also rated VIPs as more positive in mood, $t(72) = 6.00$, $p < .001$ and $t(89) = 9.92$, $p < .001$. Adolescents did not perceive their VIPs and friends as differing in level of warmth and acceptance.

Correlations among the VIP, parental, and friend measures are shown in Table II. Inspection of this table suggests that the association among these measures is substantially higher for boys than girls. Instead of comparing sex differences in the correlations of every measure, we compared the overall covariance matrices. This analysis revealed that the apparent gender differences were highly significant, Box's $M = 132.18$, $\chi^2(66) = 120.43$, $p < .001$.

Table II. Correlations Among Major Independent Variables of the Study^a

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. VIP age	—										
2. VIP warm	-.12	—									
3. VIP behavior	-.09	.11	—								
4. Family members' behavior	.13	-.14	.15	—							
5. Friends' behavior	.13	.02	.22 ^b	.14	—						
6. VIP sanctions	.25 ^b	-.09	-.22 ^b	.00	-.23 ^b	—					
7. Parental sanctions	-.04	.14	-.35 ^d	-.18	-.28 ^c	.27 ^c	—				
8. Friends' sanctions	-.02	.03	-.04	-.11	-.56 ^d	.21	.11	—			
9. VIP mood	-.04	-.05	.16	.19	.14	-.01	-.19	-.10	—		
10. Family members' mood	.02	-.22 ^b	.06	.35 ^d	.05	.09	-.20	-.00	.63 ^d	—	
11. Friends' mood	.06	-.01	.14	-.02	.43 ^d	.12	-.03	.02	.20	.15	—

^aFigures above the diagonal are for boys; figures below the diagonal are for girls.^b $p < .05$.^c $p < .01$.^d $p < .001$.

Table III. Correlations of VIP Measures and Analogous Measures of Parents and Peers with Adolescents' Misconduct and Depressive Symptoms

	Misconduct		Depressive Symptoms	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
VIP (no/yes)	-.02	.03	.01	-.12
VIP age	.38 ^c	.04	-.15	.05
Disclose to VIP	.28 ^b	.08	.07	-.15
Behaviors that constitute adolescent misconduct				
VIP behavior	.69 ^d	.21 ^a	.11	.32 ^c
Family members' behavior	.57 ^d	.19	.01	.14
Friends' behavior	.78 ^d	.65 ^d	.08	.31 ^c
Sanctions (disapproval) of adolescent's misconduct				
VIP sanctions	-.59 ^d	-.18	-.16	-.11
Parental sanctions	-.59 ^d	-.14	.02	-.10
Friends' sanctions	-.56 ^d	-.35 ^d	-.09	-.12
Mood				
VIP mood	.42 ^d	.10	.20	.26 ^b
Family members' mood	.43 ^d	.04	.11	.32 ^c
Friends' mood	.27 ^b	.17	.44 ^d	.31 ^c
Warmth and acceptance				
VIP warmth	.03	-.03	.20	-.20 ^a
Parental warmth	-.41 ^d	-.34 ^d	-.25 ^b	-.47 ^d
Friends' warmth	-.16	.09	-.08	-.32 ^c

^a*p* < .07.

^b*p* < .05.

^c*p* < .01.

^d*p* < .001.

VIPs and Misconduct

Do adolescents who have VIPs (especially older ones), attribute greater warmth and understanding to their VIPs, view their VIPs as more "conventional," and see their VIPs as more disapproving of adolescent misconduct report a lower level of problematic behavior? These questions reflect the second major hypothesis of our study. Inspection of the correlations in Table III (row 1) reveals that whether adolescents have, or do not have, a very important nonparental adult in their lives is unrelated to adolescents' involvement in problem behaviors. Further examination of this table suggests that the predicted linkages between adolescent misconduct and the various VIP measures are (a) stronger among males than

females and (b) stronger in relation to measures of VIPs' perceived behavior and sanctions than to other VIP-related measures.

More specifically, among males, perceptions of VIP behavior and VIP sanctions were significantly and substantially related to misconduct ($r_s = .69, p < .001$, and $-.59, p < .001$). Differences in the magnitude of correlations for males and females between these perceived VIP attributes and misconduct were highly significant, $z = 3.78, p < .001$, and $z = 2.95, p < .01$, for VIP behavior-adolescent misconduct and for VIP sanctions-adolescent misconduct, respectively. VIP age had the expected inverse association with boys' misconduct, $r = -.38, p < .01$, but not with girls' misconduct, $r = .04$, ns. Perceived warmth of the VIP and willingness to talk to their VIP about a range of problems were generally unrelated to adolescents' level of involvement in problem behaviors.

Multivariate Analyses

In an initial set of multivariate analyses that was intended to examine the total contribution of the six VIP-related measures to adolescent misconduct, we regressed misconduct on VIP age, perceived warmth, behavior, sanctions, and mood of VIP, and extent of adolescents' likely problem disclosure to VIP. In these analyses, family and peer measures were not controlled. The analyses were conducted separately by sex, because of the obvious differences in VIP-adolescent outcomes for boys and girls (see Table III). The six variables together accounted for 49% of the variance in boys' problem behaviors (Adj. $R^2 = .49$), $F(6,48) = 9.77, p < .001$. Perceived behavior of the VIP was the only variable that contributed uniquely ($p < .001$) to the variance in problem behaviors. In contrast, the same model accounted for only 2% of the variance in girls' misconduct (Adj. $R^2 = .02$), $F(6,77) = 1.34$, ns.

In subsequent hierarchical regression analyses, we examined VIP effects on misconduct when controlling for analogous measures of parents and friends. The plan of these analyses permits us to determine whether measures of VIP effects on misconduct persist after the effects of similar measures pertaining to family members and friends have been taken into account and also allows us to examine interactions between VIP-related measures and gender. In these analyses, we included only those VIP measures (a) that had a significant zero-order correlation with boys' or girls' misconduct, (b) for which we also had made *a priori* predictions. We then tested two models with relatively small numbers of independent variables (see Cohen, 1990)—one model that focused on perceptions of VIPs', family members', and peers' behavior, and another that focused on perceptions

Table IV. Regression of Misconduct and Depressive Symptoms on the Perceived Behavior, Sanctions, and Moods of Significant Others^a

	Misconduct			Depressive Symptoms	
	Beta	<i>t</i>		Beta	<i>t</i>
Perceived behavior of others			Perceived mood of others		
(Sex)	-.05	.80, ns	(Sex)	-.21	2.67 ^c
(VIP age)	-.10	1.78, ns	VIP	.05	0.43, ns
VIP	.24	3.50 ^d	Family	.13	1.24
Family members	.09	1.44, ns	Friends	.29	3.48 ^d
Friends	.56	9.28 ^d			
Adj. $R^2 = .61$, $F(5, 135) = 45.48^d$			Adj. $R^2 = .17$, $F(4, 138) = 8.27^d$		
Sex × VIP behavior	.12	1.79, ns			
Sex × VIP age	.14	2.31 ^b			
Perceived sanctions of others			Perceived warmth of others		
(Sex)	-.11	1.51, ns	(Sex)	-.22	2.64 ^c
(VIP age)	-.05	0.75, ns	VIP	.07	.89, ns
VIP	-.23	2.97 ^c	Parents	-.33	4.30 ^d
Parents	-.30	3.02 ^c	Friends	-.19	2.45 ^b
Friends	-.25	4.25 ^c			
Adj. $R^2 = .40$, $F(5, 136) = 19.71^d$			Adj. $R^2 = .20$, $F(4, 144) = 10.13^d$		
Sex × VIP sanctions	.14	1.73, ns	Sex × VIP warmth	.19	2.58 ^c
Sex × VIP age	.20	2.69 ^c			

^aSex and VIP age were included in these models when they had significant zero-order correlations with the dependent measure.

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .01$.

^d $p < .001$.

about the likely reactions or *sanctions* of others should the respondent engage in misconduct.

Perceived Behavior of Significant Others. As indicated above, the first model included analogous measures of perceived VIP behavior, family members' behavior, and friends' behavior. VIP age was incorporated into these analyses because it met our theoretical and empirical criteria for inclusion. Sex was also included in order that we could examine its possible interaction with those VIP measures on which correlations with misconduct had shown significant gender differences. (As well, examination of our data indicated strong and significant mean sex differences in misconduct, $t[196] = 4.52$, $p < .001$, consistent with the findings of numerous other studies that reveal greater involvement of boys than girls in problematic behavior

[see, for example, Petersen *et al.*, 1991]). Thus, after the 5 variables noted above had been entered on the first step, each of two interaction terms was entered singly in successive analyses on the second step: Sex $\times$ VIP Age and Sex $\times$ VIP Behavior (see Table IV).

Together, sex, VIP age, and the three measures of perceived behavior of others accounted for 61% of the variance in adolescents' self-reported problem behavior. Of special importance to this study, however, that perceived VIP behavior made a *unique* contribution to the explained variance in adolescents' misconduct, $\beta = .24$, $t(130) = 3.50$, $p < .001$. The perceived behavior of friends also made an independent (and considerably stronger) contribution, $\beta = .56$, $t(130) = 9.28$, $p < .001$.

Addition of the Sex $\times$ VIP Behavior interaction term to the model did not increase the prediction of misconduct significantly. However, when added to the model on the second step, the Sex $\times$ VIP Age interaction term was significant, reflecting the previously noted stronger association for boys than girls between VIP age and VIP behavior (see Table III).

Perceived Sanctions of Significant Others. Following the strategy outlined earlier, the model we tested included perceived parental, peer, and VIP sanctions, together with VIP age and respondents' sex. As shown in Table IV, these 5 variables accounted for 40% of the variance in adolescents' self-reported misconduct. It is important to note that each of the three measures of sanctions made independent, and roughly equal, contributions to the explanation of problem behaviors, $\beta_s = -.23, -.25, -.30$, all $p < .01$. Inclusion of VIP sanctions in the model reduced the effect of sex on adolescent misconduct to nonsignificance, as was the case in the previous analysis that focused on VIP behavior. The Sex $\times$ VIP Age interaction term, when added to this model on Step 2, was significant at $p < .01$, and indicated that boys' misconduct was more strongly linked to VIP age than was girls': The younger their VIP, the more boys engaged in misconduct. The Sex $\times$ VIP Sanctions interaction term did not attain statistical significance.

VIPs and Depressed Mood

Do adolescents who have a VIP, perceive their VIP as being warmer and more understanding, disclose more to their VIP, and view their VIP's mood as more positive report fewer symptoms of depression? These questions reflect the third major hypothesis of our study. Inspection of the correlations in Table III indicates, first of all, that simply having an important nonparental adult in one's life was not related to differences in symptom level for either boys or girls. Further examination of the table indicates

that the predicted inverse association between VIP warmth and depressive symptoms was found marginally for girls, $r = -.20$, $p = .06$; in contrast, the association between perceived VIP warmth and symptoms of depression was *positive* (although nonsignificant) for boys, $r = .20$, ns. These correlations differed significantly, $z = 2.41$, $p < .05$.

Extent of self-disclosure to VIPs, which we had predicted would be related to a lower frequency of depressive symptoms, was unrelated to this measure. Finally, the predicted positive association between perceived mood of the VIP and adolescents' depressive symptomatology attained significance only for girls, $r = .26$, $p < .05$.

Multivariate Analyses

In initial multivariate analyses, we regressed depressive symptoms on the set of six VIP-related measures (as we had done earlier in relation to misconduct). These measures together explained a significant proportion of the variance (19%) in girls' symptoms (Adj. $R^2 = .19$, $F[6,77] = 4.29$, $p < .001$), with perceived behavior and depressed mood of the VIP each contributing independently (the effect of VIP warmth fell slightly short of significance [$p = .06$]). In contrast, VIP measures accounted for virtually none of the variance in boys' depressive symptoms (Adj. $R^2 = -.03$, $F[6,48] = .77$, ns).

Following the general strategy described earlier, we then tested two models that examined hypothesized relations between VIPs' perceived mood and VIPs' perceived warmth on adolescents' level of depressive symptoms with controls for analogous measures of parents and friends.

Perceived Mood of Significant Others. This model included respondents' reports of VIP mood, family members' mood, and friends' mood. Sex was also included in this analysis in order that we might examine the Sex $\times$ VIP mood interaction; and because our data indicated significantly greater depressive symptomatology among girls than boys, $t(198) = 3.86$, $p < .001$, consistent with an abundant literature on this topic (see, for example, Petersen *et al.*, 1991). This model accounted for 17% of the variance in adolescents' symptoms of depression. Of particular interest to this study is the finding that VIP mood made only a trivial nonsignificant contribution to the explanation of depressive symptoms (see Table IV). In contrast, friends' perceived depression contributed uniquely to the variance in depressive symptoms ($\beta = .29$, $t[134] = 3.48$, $p < .001$), as did sex ($\beta = .21$, $t[134] = 2.67$, $p < .01$). The Sex $\times$ VIP Mood interaction term was not tested, as the magnitude of the correlation between VIP mood and depressive symptoms did not differ by sex.

Perceived Warmth of Significant Others. In this model, perceived warmth of VIP, parents, and friends were included together with sex of respondent. These four variables accounted for 20% of the variance in adolescents' frequency of depressive symptoms. VIP warmth, however, did not contribute uniquely to the variance in this measure. In contrast, parental and peer warmth both contributed independently to the explanation of symptoms (p s < .001 and .05, respectively). Sex of respondent also had an independent effect on depressed mood, with girls reporting more symptoms (see Table IV). Additionally, the Sex $\times$ VIP Warmth interaction term was significant at p < .01, reflecting a significant sex difference in the direction of association between VIP warmth and depressed mood.

In an effort to better understand the unanticipated positive correlation between VIP warmth and boys' depressive symptoms, we divided the sample into youths whose VIPs are family members and those whose VIPs are not kin. The unanticipated positive association was found only among boys whose VIPs were relatives ($r = .52$, $p < .001$, compared to $r = -.22$, ns, for boys with nonkin VIPs; $z = 3.00$, $p < .01$). Parenthetically, dividing the sample of girls into those with kin vs. nonkin VIPs did not produce significant differences in the association between VIP warmth and depressed mood.

Post Hoc Analyses

An intriguing feature of Table III is the hint of an unpredicted "crossover" association between perceived VIP *mood* and boys' *behavior* (misconduct), $r = .42$, $p < .001$: Boys who perceived their VIPs' mood more negatively reported more misconduct. (The correlation between VIP mood and girls' behavior was considerably lower, $r = .10$.) We explored the nature of this crossover effect by regressing adolescents' misconduct scores on their sex, VIP's age, and the perceived mood of parents, peers, and VIPs (Step 1), and the Sex $\times$ VIP Mood interaction (Step 2). Consistent with the correlational data on VIP mood and misconduct, the Sex $\times$ VIP Mood interaction was significant ($p < .05$), indicating that boys' misconduct tended to be more closely linked than that of girls with perceptions of their VIP's mood. VIP mood (and sex of adolescent) also contributed independently to this model. When a model was tested that included the Sex $\times$ VIP Age interaction, this interaction term also contributed uniquely to the equation ($p < .001$), most likely because VIP behavior (among boys, a correlate of VIP age) was not controlled in the model. Sex of respondent, as well as VIP age, also maintained a significant association with misconduct in this model.

In a similar crossover analysis of the effects of VIP *behavior* on adolescents' level of depressive symptoms, a significant Sex $\times$ VIP Behavior interaction emerged ($p < .05$). Girls' depressive symptoms were more closely associated with their VIPs' behavior than was the case for boys: That is, girls who perceived their VIPs' behavior as less conventional reported a higher frequency of depressive symptoms.

DISCUSSION

The results of this exploratory study indicated that a substantial majority of the middle-to-late adolescents in our sample could identify a nonparental adult who currently plays an important role in their lives. As expected on the basis of previous research on related topics, boys' and girls' VIPs were strongly differentiated along same-sex lines; also as hypothesized, girls were significantly (although not strikingly) more likely to report having a VIP. That approximately one-third of VIPs are neither family members nor school personnel, and that an appreciable portion of boys' VIPs are older friends in the 21–30 age range, suggests that young people may form important relationships in settings other than those typically examined by developmental psychologists. The considerable number of girls who attributed VIP status to a grandparent (typically, a grandmother) also deserves note. As indicated earlier (see footnote 4), these patterns did not differ by ethnicity as examined in this study.

Although these descriptive data are of interest in their own right, the finding that differences in VIP attributes, as reported by adolescents, are associated with differences in young people's psychosocial adjustment heightens their potential importance. Perceived VIP characteristics were robust predictors of boys' misconduct and had modest links with their level of depressive symptomatology. The relative importance of VIP characteristics for girls' adjustment followed the reverse pattern: VIP-related measures showed modest associations with girls' reports of depressive symptoms, but somewhat weaker associations with their level of misconduct. Adolescents' perceptions of key attributes of their important nonparental adult were consequential for behavior and mood even after similar attributes of family members and peers had been taken into account.

The Social Context of Adolescent Misconduct

Young people's involvement in substance use and other forms of risky behavior, in school-related deviance, and in antisocial behavior are sources of concern to adults, although the magnitude of these problems and their

uniqueness to adolescents often are exaggerated (Males, 1996). The importance of VIP characteristics for understanding variations in adolescents' level of misconduct—especially variations in boys' misconduct—merits special attention. The younger their VIPs, the higher boys' self-reported level of misconduct, an effect that seems to be due to boys' perceptions that younger VIPs engage in more antisocial or other potentially problematic behavior. In turn (and for boys and girls alike), perceptions of VIP behavior are significant predictors of adolescent misconduct, second only in magnitude to perceptions of friends' behavior. That boys' misconduct has somewhat stronger links with VIP attributes than is the case for girls is especially noteworthy and merits further investigation.

The significant crossover association between VIPs' mood and boys' misconduct (after controlling for parents' and friends' mood) also merits continued exploration. Although it is possible that more depressed mood of VIPs might prompt youths to become involved in more problematic activities—perhaps by decreasing VIPs' psychological engagement with their adolescent “partners”—it is equally plausible that depressed VIP mood might be a response to greater adolescent misconduct.

When considered separately from measures of perceived behavior, perceived disapproval (sanctions) of adolescents' misconduct by VIPs, parents, and friends each contributed independently and in approximately equal measure to problem behavior: the more sources of sanctions, the less misconduct. This finding supports the popular view that families face greater difficulties in keeping their adolescents “on track” in the face of other sources of encouragement of, or indifference to, adolescent misconduct. It is noteworthy, however, that adolescents' perceptions of the *behavior* of significant others are better predictors of their misconduct than are the perceived attitudes or reactions of others. Adolescents appear to be more likely to do what others do than to do what others say.

Regarding adolescents' frequency of depressive symptoms, it is interesting that friends' mood (along with respondent's gender) was the only significant predictor. It may be, as Hogue and Steinberg (1995) have shown, that both selection and socialization effects are operative in the friendship arena. The absence of family member effects on adolescents' mood obviously cannot be due to selective processes. As is often remarked, we do not choose our parents. The apparent absence of socialization or contagion effects might be due, at least in part, to measurement problems. It is possible that a mood measure targeting “parent or parents” would produce different results from the measure we used, in which we referred more inclusively to “family members.” The absence of a unique effect of VIP mood on adolescents' mood may be due to the fact that interactions with VIPs occur with less frequency or are of shorter duration. As a conse-

quence, VIP mood may be less accurately judged by adolescents as well as less consequential for their own affective state.

The dynamics that underlie a positive association between VIP warmth and boys' level of depressive symptoms appear to differ as a function of whether the VIP is a kin-group member. The positive and quite strong association between VIP warmth and boys' depression *when the VIP is a relative* suggests that boys who are psychologically distressed may elicit (or may be proffered) greater warmth and acceptance from VIPs who have a long-term investment in the target adolescent's well-being.

Limitations of the Study

This exploratory study had a number of limitations. All data were collected at a single point in time. Thus, we cannot infer that perceived VIP behavior or sanctions preceded and thus might be causally related to differences in adolescents' misconduct and depressed mood. All data, furthermore, were obtained from a single source—adolescents. In future studies it would be desirable to obtain additional data about adolescents and their parents, friends, and VIPs from other sources or by means of methods other than self-report. Although the 3-item scales for assessing VIPs', parents', and friends' moods were reasonably internally consistent, their validity has not been established. Weak measurement of others' perceived mood may have played a part in the less substantial associations we found between others' affect and adolescents' own depressive mood, compared to the associations between others' behavior and adolescents' misconduct.

Future Directions

We believe the findings of this study merit further examination of the role of VIPs in young people's lives. In research now underway, we are examining the natural history of adolescents' relationships with their VIPs, with special attention to the circumstances in which these relationships were formed and how they have evolved over time. Two issues are central to our research agenda. Using information about stressful life events in adolescents' histories, we plan to examine the possible stress-buffering role of VIPs with respect to adolescents' mood and behavior. Through interviews and additional survey data, we hope to investigate in more depth the mechanisms through which VIPs' behavior might influence boys' level of problem behavior. Better understanding of these issues would advance theory and research on adolescent development and provide information of

practical value to those who work directly with both normal and at-risk youths.

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