



The role of friends in help-seeking tendencies during early adolescence: Do classroom goal structures moderate selection and influence of friends?



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Selection and influence of friends
Help-seeking tendencies
Classroom goal structures
Early adolescence

ABSTRACT

Research has evidenced that help-seeking is an important self-regulatory strategy of learning. However, the role of friends in help-seeking has been underexplored. In the current study, we examined the longitudinal associations between early adolescents' selection and influence of friends and help-seeking tendencies, and whether students' perceived classroom goal structures moderate these associations among fifth and sixth graders ($N = 736$ at Wave 1, $N = 677$ at Wave 2). With longitudinal social network analyses, results indicated that friends were similar to each other in adaptive as well as avoidant help-seeking tendencies, and this similarity was explained by selection and influence of friends, while controlling for students' gender and achievement, and classroom goal structures. Students chose friends who were similar to themselves in adaptive help-seeking behavior. Friends influenced one another in their avoidant help-seeking behavior over time. Further, students' perceived classroom goal structures moderated these processes. Students who perceived higher mastery emphasis (i.e., the development of competence) in their classroom were more likely to select friends who seek adaptive help, and were more influenced by their friends' adaptive help-seeking behavior. Conversely, students who perceived higher performance emphasis (i.e., the demonstration of competence) in their classroom were more likely to select friends who avoid seeking help.

1. Introduction

Help-seeking is a crucial self-regulatory strategy that contributes to students' learning (Karabenick & Newman, 2009). When students face ambiguity, challenge or difficulty in their schoolwork, asking teachers or peers for help would be an adaptive strategy to continue the learning process (Ryan & Shim, 2012; Ryan & Shin, 2011). Although seeking help from teachers is known to be associated with desirable learning and academic adjustment (Karabenick & Newman, 2006; Ryan, Patrick, & Shim, 2005), seeking help from peers has been less extensively examined. However, students often turn to their peers for help when they are faced with academic difficulties as they provide valuable academic and social support (Altermatt, 2007). Further, giving and receiving academic help among peers would play a substantial role in students' academic engagement and achievement, especially during early adolescence, when friends and peers have increased significance (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008).

Prior theory and research permits an expanded understanding of students' personal characteristics and social contexts that are related to help-seeking behavior. Researchers have highlighted the roles of perceived academic and social competence (e.g., Karabenick & Knapp,

1991; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997), achievement goal and social goal orientations (e.g., Ryan and Pintrich, 1997; Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997) on help-seeking behavior. The rules and norms teachers establish in the classroom (e.g., Karabenick & Sharma, 1994), classroom goal structures (e.g., Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998), parents' achievement goals (e.g., Gonida, Karabenick, Makara, & Hatzikyriakou, 2014), and parents' sensitivity to their children's needs (Puustinen, Lyyra, Metsapelto, & Pulkkinen, 2008) have been evidenced to matter on students' help-seeking tendencies. In contrast to the characteristics of students, teachers, and parents, there has been limited attention to the role that friends may play in influencing students' help-seeking behavior in the classroom. Given students' classroom experiences are shaped by their interactions with teachers and classmates (Pianta & Hamre, 2009), and seeking help involves social interactions with peers, friends are likely to be an important source of influence on early adolescents' help-seeking behavior.

Thus, in the present study, we examine how early adolescents' interactions with friends are related to the development of their help-seeking behavior in the classroom. Specifically, we examine how students' help-seeking tendencies shape friendships through processes in which students select peers who similarly seek academic help as friends

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(i.e., *friend selection*), and how friendships may shape individual help-seeking behavior, through friendship socialization (i.e., *friend influence*) processes. Further, given friend selection and influence processes do not operate in a vacuum, but take place in broader peer contexts, such as classrooms (Veenstra & Dijkstra, 2011), we examine if students' perceived classroom goal structures moderate friend selection and influence processes on help-seeking behavior. Classroom goal structures reflect the salient goal-related messages (i.e., emphasis on understanding and personal improvement vs. ability demonstration and comparison) in the classroom (Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan, & Midgley, 2002). Given collected values or beliefs affect friendship dynamics in the classroom (Laninga-Wijnen, Ryan, Harakeh, Shin, & Vollebergh, 2018; Shin & Ryan, 2017), classroom goal structures may play a role in determining whether help-seeking tendencies are salient attributes for friend selection and influence processes.

1.1. Help-seeking from peers during early adolescence

Students often turn to their peers for help when they are faced with academic difficulties in the classroom (Altermatt, Pomerantz, Ruble, Frey, & Greulich, 2002). Although students' help seeking from peers has been less extensively examined, prior work on help seeking from teachers has consistently evidenced that help-seeking enhances students' academic motivation and achievement (Karabenick & Newman, 2006; Ryan et al., 2005). Help exchanges among peers may also play a crucial role in students' academic adjustment in many regards. Getting instrumental support from peers could alleviate students' current difficulties in learning and affect engagement and achievement over time (Newman, 1990). Peers often explain in a language that is easily understandable to students (Webb, 1991), and help exchanges among peers would make learning more enjoyable (Newman, 1998). Further, modeling and reinforcement regarding students' engagement are likely to occur during help-seeking interactions (Ryan & Shim, 2012). Interactions around academic help-seeking would provide one another invaluable opportunities to observe peers' values, expectancies, and efforts regarding the task through communication and working together. Thus, help seeking from peers is likely to be an important learning strategy that bolsters students' motivation, engagement, and achievement.

Considering that students spend a substantial amount of time with friends and report seeking the advice and support of friends (Altermatt et al., 2002), it seems likely that the nature of students' interactions with friends is related to the development of their help-seeking tendencies. Examining friend interactions around help-seeking may be particularly important during early adolescence, given students place increased importance on peer approval and advice, and look to their peers as a source of identity (e.g., Bukowski, Sippola, & Newcomb, 2000). Surprisingly however, scant attention has been paid to the nature of students' interactions with friends around help-seeking or the role that friends may play in influencing students' help-seeking behavior in the classroom. Given the lack of research on the role of friends in help seeking, the present study will fill the gaps of knowledge in the literature of help-seeking and friendship dynamics during early adolescence.

1.2. Friend selection and influence processes around help-seeking behavior

Different theoretical perspectives have been applied to understand the role that friends play in students' academic beliefs and behaviors. One way friends matter for students' academic adjustment in the classroom is that they provide a context where beliefs and behaviors are socialized (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Kindermann, 2007; Ryan, 2001). The predominant approach to investigating how friends socialize academic outcomes has examined students' social networks in their natural peer context at school. Research has examined a range of academic outcomes and similarity is seen for motivation (e.g., Altermatt &

Pomerantz, 2003; Ryan, 2001), engagement (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Kindermann, 2007) and grades (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Berndt & Keefe, 1995). This phenomenon of similarity among friends is known as homophily.

However, similarity among friends' academic characteristics is not evidence that friends influence each other. Contributing to homophily is both *friend selection*, the extent to which peers with similar characteristics seek one another as affiliates, and *friend influence*, the degree to which affiliates become more alike in attitude and behavioral tendencies because of their frequent interaction (Veenstra & Steglich, 2012). Students form friendships that they find compatible and in turn, those friendships create a context that affects their developmental trajectories (Ryan & Shin, 2018).

Recent times have seen great advances in the methods available to researchers to investigate similarity among friends through disentangling friend selection and influence effects. Longitudinal Social Network Analyses such as SIENA are increasingly being used (Burk, Steglich, & Snijders, 2007). With such an approach, the handful of studies have found evidence that students seek out friends who are similar to themselves in regards to academic self-efficacy, academic achievement, externalizing behaviors and academic absences (Flashman, 2012; Fortuin, van Geel, & Vedder, 2014; Rambaran et al., 2017; Shin & Ryan, 2014a) and students are influenced by their friends for academic motivation and engagement (Shin & Ryan, 2014a; Shin & Ryan, 2014b), achievement (Flashman, 2012; Rambaran et al., 2017; Shin & Ryan, 2014a), and externalizing behaviors and academic absences (Fortuin et al., 2014; Rambaran et al., 2017).

Based on the current body of research, it can be expected that friend selection and influence processes may play a role in the development of early adolescents' help-seeking behavior. Students may select friends who are similar to them regarding on help-seeking as it may meet their academic goals and be consistent with their prior behavioral tendencies. Such similarity-based selection is consistent with interpersonal attraction theories (Byrne & Griffitt, 1973), which highlight that people prefer balanced relationships that provide positive reinforcement. Students would tend to feel more comfortable expressing their need for academic help and support when they share similar attributes. When friends have similar help-seeking tendencies, students would be less concerned about self-disclosure and threat to self-esteem. In a context marked by familiarity, students would find it easier to manage the social demands of interactions and be better able to focus on task-related academic issues of learning and problem solving (Newman, 2000). Thus, we hypothesize that early adolescents would select peers with similar help-seeking tendencies as friends in the classroom.

When students have increased interactions with friends, they may become more similar over time via socialization. Friends are theorized to socialize early adolescents' academic behaviors through such processes as information exchange, modeling, and reinforcement of values (Kindermann & Gest, 2009). Friends provide students with suggestions and options of ways to think about and to engage in academic work, and their reactions and evaluations serve to affirm, sustain, or change an individual's behavior. When academic help seeking from peers is discouraged or evaluated negatively by friends, it would weaken the likelihood that a student will engage in help-seeking behavior in the future. In contrast, when seeking academic help from peers is encouraged or positively received by their friends, it would strengthen the likelihood that a student will engage in help-seeking behavior again (Bandura, 1986; Sagotsky & Lepper, 1982). Based on theory and research that suggest friend influence on a wide range of academic beliefs and behaviors, we hypothesize that early adolescents would be influenced by their friends' help-seeking behavior.

1.3. Stochastic actor-based modeling of social networks

We take advantage of recent developments in stochastic actor-based modeling of social networks to investigate our questions about students'

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