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Associations between friend conflict and affective states in the daily lives of adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the associations between friend conflict, defined as arguments with friends, and affective states using a daily diary design in a community sample of adolescents. Participants were 100 U.S. adolescents (13–17 years; 40% girls; 79% white). Adolescents completed an online survey on 14 consecutive evenings. Adolescents reported significantly higher anger/hostility, confusion, and tension/anxiety and less friendliness on days during which they experienced friend conflict relative to no-conflict days. However, no same-day associations for depressed affect, fatigue, or vigor were found. Adolescents experiencing friend conflict reported increased next-day anger/hostility, depressed affect, and tension/anxiety, but not other affective states. Higher levels of anger/hostility and depressed affect predicted an increased likelihood of next-day friend conflict. Conversely, higher levels of friendliness and vigor predicted a decreased likelihood of next-day friend conflict. These findings suggest that directional relationships between adolescents' friend conflicts and their affective states vary by affective domain.

As part of normative maturation, there is a marked social re-orientation in the focus of adolescent relationships and social behaviors as youth strive to establish autonomy from parents, seek out peer relationships, and highly value close friendships (Nelson, Jarcho, & Guyer, 2016; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). As such, it is unsurprising that conflicts with friends, defined as oppositional interactions such as arguments stemming from the oppositional definition of conflict put forth by Laursen and Collins (1994), are common experiences among adolescents as they establish personal identities and values and negotiate new, complex social contexts (Bukowski & Sippola, 2005; Laursen & Collins, 1994). The heightened emphasis on forming and maintaining friendships also increases the likelihood that adolescents will experience distress surrounding conflicts (e.g., arguments) with friends (Bukowski & Sippola, 2005; Laursen & Collins, 1994). Additionally, the enhanced biological propensity for elevated emotional intensity, coupled with immature cognitive abilities to support affect regulation during adolescence, can contribute to conflicts with friends and elevated distress surrounding such conflicts (Nelson et al., 2016). As friendships and affective states are in constant flux during adolescence (Nelson et al., 2016; Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003), they also likely influence each other on a daily basis. Yet, the nature of these proximal daily relationships remains largely unknown.

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1. Stress models

Friendship conflict is multi-dimensional, encompassing aspects such as frequency, emotional intensity, initiation, and resolution strategies (Laursen & Collins, 1994). However, the unilateral perception of whether or not an oppositional conflict occurred with a friend (e.g., an argument) alone can be conceptualized as a potent daily stressor, following appraisal theory which states that an individual's subjective assessment of a situation is of primary importance when considering effects on socio-emotional well-being (Lazarus, 1966). As such, several stress models have proposed directional pathways that may illuminate the nature of the relationships between perceived friend conflict and affective states in adolescents.

According to stress exposure models (Brown & Harris, 1978; Lazarus & Cohen, 1977), the experience of negative life events or daily stressors contribute to increases in a range of negative affective states, such as anxiety and depression, and decreases in positive affect. Stress exposure models suggest that these subsequent shifts in affective states are precipitated by negative inferential styles, cognitive biases, and/or maladaptive beliefs about oneself that are activated by stressors (Brown & Harris, 1978; Lazarus & Cohen, 1977). For example, having an argument with a friend may trigger negative thoughts related to worthlessness or rejection, which then increases depressed affect or anxiety. In particular, day-to-day frustrating, distressing, and stressful events (i.e., *daily hassles*) and their accumulation in frequency over time often exert a greater impact on negative and positive affect than discrete major negative life events (Chamberlain & Zika, 1990; Folkman, 2013, pp. 1913–1915; Monroe, 1983; Pettit, Lewinsohn, Seeley, Roberts, & Yaroslavsky, 2010; Rowlison & Felner, 1988). As such, friend conflict, which is a common and stressful experience in the daily lives of adolescents, likely influences subsequent affective states in youth.

Conversely, stress generation models suggest an alternative directional pathway regarding the relationship between daily stressors, such as conflicts with friends, and affective states (Conway, Hammen, & Brennan, 2012; Hammen, 2006). These models acknowledge that adolescents actively influence their interpersonal experiences via their behaviors, which often are linked to their mood states. According to stress generation models, individuals with elevated negative affect are more likely to generate their own daily hassles and stressors as a result of interactions between personal characteristics linked to their psychopathology (e.g., excessive reassurance seeking, negative self-focus) and environmental contexts (Conway et al., 2012; Hammen, 2006). For example, adolescents who feel irritable or depressed may be more likely to perceive their friends' behaviors as rejecting, annoying, or hostile, leading them to lash out verbally at their friends and start arguments over otherwise innocuous interactions. Indeed, such interpersonal stress generation, such as conflicts with friends, occurs frequently among adolescents with elevated negative affect in long-term prospective studies (Hankin, Stone, & Wright, 2010; McLaughlin & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Morris, Kouros, Hellman, Rao, & Garber, 2014; Rose, Glick, Smith, Schwartz-Mette, & Borowski, 2016a; Rudolph et al., 2000). However, it remains unclear as to how affective states impact subsequent friend conflicts on a proximal, daily level.

Finally, transactional stress models emphasize that the relationship between stressors and affective states likely manifests as a dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments (Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003). As such, according to transactional stress models, the mechanisms involved in both stress exposure and stress generation models operate simultaneously (Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 1994; Coyne, 1976; Hankin & Abramson, 2001). Mutual, reciprocal influences are hypothesized to exist between stressors and affective states (Cicchetti et al., 1994; Coyne, 1976; Hankin & Abramson, 2001). Interpersonal stressors, such as conflicts with friends, may therefore serve as both proximal antecedents and consequences of negative affective states. Similarly, positive affective states may be affected by friend conflicts and also influence the likelihood of subsequent friend conflicts. However, these temporal relationships rarely have been considered on a daily level.

1.1. Empirical work supporting stress models in adolescents

Stress models hold promise for conceptualizing the daily relationships between the occurrence of friend conflicts and affective states in adolescents, but little empirical work on their bidirectional relationship has been conducted. One prospective study assessed daily negative peer events using diary methods in 14-year-old adolescents from families with a low socioeconomic status (Herres & Kobak, 2015). Findings suggested that higher levels of depressive symptoms at age 13 predicted more frequent daily negative peer events at age 14, which in turn predicted increases in depressive symptoms at age 15 (Herres & Kobak, 2015). Notably, this study relied on global retrospective reports of negative affect collected at intervals spaced apart by years. Yet, as mentioned previously, friend conflict frequency and affective domains (e.g., positive and negative affect) can change markedly from day-to-day. Thus, prior longitudinal work may have missed important opportunities for studying bidirectional effects within naturally occurring daily cycles. Moreover, the use of structured diary designs to evaluate such daily associations are more ecologically valid and provide more reliable and accurate estimates of individuals' experiences than traditional retrospective reports because constructs are assessed frequently, in close proximity to actual events and emotional states, and in real world settings (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013).

Initial daily diary studies in adolescents suggest that peer conflict is associated with negative affect at the within-person level. One study of ninth graders found that the experience of conflict with friends or romantic partners predicted increased negative affect the following day relative to days following no conflict (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2011). In another study among economically disadvantaged 14-year-olds, adolescents reported increased negative affect on days during which they experienced negative peer events, relative to days without negative peer events (Herres, Ewing, & Kobak, 2016). One diary study in a community sample of adolescents found that conflicts with best friends were associated with same-day and next-day decreases in relationship satisfaction, but affective states were not examined (Van Doorn, Branje, Hox, & Meeus, 2009). Taken together, existing daily diary studies suggest that friend conflict may be associated with increases in same-day negative affect, and that friend conflict may predict increases in next day negative affect. These findings provide preliminary support for the stress exposure model as applied to daily friend conflict. However,

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