



Seeing and being seen: Predictors of accurate perceptions about classmates' relationships



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ABSTRACT

This study examines predictors of observer accuracy (i.e. seeing) and target accuracy (i.e. being seen) in perceptions of classmates' relationships in a predominantly African American sample of 420 second through fourth graders (ages 7–11). Girls, children in higher grades, and children in smaller classrooms were more accurate observers. Targets (i.e. pairs of children) were more accurately observed when they occurred in smaller classrooms of higher grades and involved same-sex, high-popularity, and similar-popularity children. Moreover, relationships between pairs of girls were more accurately observed than relationships between pairs of boys. As a set, these findings suggest the importance of both observer and target characteristics for children's accurate perceptions of classroom relationships. Moreover, the substantial variation in observer accuracy and target accuracy has methodological implications for both peer-reported assessments of classroom relationships and the use of stochastic actor-based models to understand peer selection and socialization processes.

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The classroom is a key social environment in childhood. In the United States, children ages 6–12 are estimated to spend over thirty hours per week in school (Hofferth, 2009; Hofferth and Sandberg, 2001) and interact with the same classroom peers daily (Gifford-Smith and Brownell, 2003). The structure of these classroom peer networks has been linked to a variety of positive and negative behaviors including aggression (e.g., Ahn et al., 2010; Farmer and Xie, 2007; Molano et al., 2013; Neal and Cappella, 2012), and academic engagement and motivation (e.g. Cappella et al., 2013; Kindermann, 1993). However, although much developmental research has focused on attempting to understand the actual structure of classroom peer networks, the *accuracy* of children's perceptions of classroom peer relationships within these networks may also be important to explore. That is, to what extent do children's perceptions of peer relationships match the relationships that actually exist in the classroom?

Based on theory and past research on the accuracy of interpersonal perception, accurate perceptions of classmates' relationships are expected to vary by both the children forming perceptions (observers) and the pairs of classmates about whom perceptions

are formed (targets; see Kenny and Albright, 1987 for review). Certain observers may be better at seeing relationships between their classmates, leading to differences in accuracy between observers. Likewise, certain targets may be seen more easily by observers, leading to differences in accuracy between targets. Thus, in colloquial terms, accuracy about classmates' relationships potentially requires both seeing and being seen. Studying the accuracy of children's perceptions of classroom peer relationships is *theoretically* important because behavior may be more strongly associated with individuals' perceptions of peer relationships than the actual network structure of these relationships (Krackhardt, 1987). Moreover, children's behavior may be more likely to yield intended outcomes when their perceptions of peer relationships are more accurate (Krackhardt, 1990). Examining the accuracy of children's perceptions of classroom peer relationships also fills *empirical* gaps in the current developmental literature on interpersonal perception, which has focused more extensively on children's accurate perceptions about their own personal social status (e.g., Cillessen and Bellmore, 1999; Malloy et al., 2007) or friendships (e.g., Badaly et al., 2012). Finally, studying the accuracy of children's perceptions of peer relationships has *methodological* implications for the peer-reported measurement of classroom networks (e.g., Cairns and Cairns, 1994; Neal, 2008) and the extent to which a critical assumption of stochastic actor-based models – that all actors have some level of accurate knowledge of the network – is violated in developmental research (Snijders et al., 2010).

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The goal of the current study is to understand variation in the accuracy of children's perceptions of classroom peer relationships. We begin by reviewing social network studies that focus on the magnitude of and outcomes associated with accurate perceptions of relationships among adults and children, and discussing methodological implications. Next, we review past literature on four predictors of observer accuracy (i.e., seeing) and target accuracy (i.e., being seen) in childhood: grade, class size, gender, and perceived popularity. We extend the empirical research in this area by examining how each of these predictors are associated with observer and target accuracy among 420 urban African American second through fourth grade students in 33 classrooms. Results suggest the importance of both observer and target characteristics for children's accurate perceptions of classroom relationships. Moreover, the substantial variation in observer accuracy and target accuracy has methodological implications for both peer-reported assessments of classroom relationships and the use of stochastic actor-based models to understand peer selection and socialization processes.

1. Background

1.1. Accurate perceptions of relationships

Network studies of accurate perceptions of relationships have a long history, dating to an influential set of studies conducted by Bernard, Killworth, and Sailor (BKS) (see [Bernard et al., 1984](#); for review). The BKS studies of accuracy focused on adults' reports of their own communication with others, finding that "what people say about their communications bears no useful resemblance to their behavior" ([Bernard et al., 1984](#); p. 499). Since these studies were published, others have argued that while individuals struggle to report specific interactions, they may be more accurate in their recall of long-term stable communication patterns (e.g., [Freeman et al., 1987](#)).

These initial studies of accuracy in adults' reports of their own interactions prompted network researchers to begin exploring accuracy in adults' reports of others' interactions and relationships. Specifically, [Krackhardt \(1987\)](#) developed cognitive social structures (CSS) as a method to assess individuals' perceptions of the entire network structure in a setting, arguing that perceptions rather than the actual network structure may be a more critical determinant of behavior. For example, [Krackhardt and Kilduff \(1999\)](#) note that "perceptions of the social network . . . help determine whether the individual takes action and how effective that action is likely to be. The structure of relations can both enable and constrain action, and this social structure rests on the underlying pattern of perceptions in people's minds" (p. 770). That is, consistent with a phenomenological perspective ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979](#)), individuals act based on their own, often imperfect, perceptions of social relationships in a setting. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the accuracy of perceptions of social relationships is key for individuals' ability to behave in a way that leads to an intended effect or outcome ([Krackhardt, 1990](#)). For example, Maya may want to climb the social ladder in her classroom and may perceive that Brittney has lots of friends. Based on this perception, she may try to form a friendship with Brittney. This behavior, based on Maya's perception, will be more effective in achieving her goal (i.e., climbing the social ladder) if Brittney actually does have lots of friends.

CSS provides flexible methods of assessing individual accuracy against confirmed self-reported relationships (i.e., using locally aggregated structures) as well as reports by a consensus of individuals in a setting (i.e., using consensus aggregation) (e.g., [Bondonio, 1998](#); [Brands, 2013](#); [Krackhardt, 1987](#)). CSS studies of adults have primarily focused on both the predictors and outcomes of observer

accuracy, rather than target accuracy, in perceptions of relationships. For example, studies have explored how aspects such as network centrality, perceptions of power, demographics, and personality traits are associated with observer accuracy of the social network structure in workplaces or network experiments (e.g., [Bondonio, 1998](#); [Casciaro, 1998](#); [Casciaro et al., 1999](#); [Simpson et al., 2011](#)). Moreover, consistent with the idea that accurate perception may yield more effective outcomes, additional studies of adults have demonstrated that observer accuracy of social relationships are linked to benefits such as leadership, power, and positive work outcomes (e.g., [Balkundi and Kilduff, 2006](#); [Krackhardt, 1990](#)).

Compared to adult studies, the literature on children's perceptions of classroom peer relationships is more limited and has focused solely on predictors rather than outcomes of observer accuracy (e.g., [Cappella et al., 2012](#); [Neal et al., 2014](#)). This past research on children's perceptions of classmates' relationships has focused on how situational characteristics (e.g., class size, teacher emotional support) and observer attributes (e.g., grade, gender) affect observer accuracy ([Cappella et al., 2012](#)). Like the adult studies, studies of children's perceptions of classroom peer relationships have not yet considered factors that affect target accuracy. Additionally, prior work ([Cappella et al., 2012](#); [Neal et al., 2014](#)) has not yet considered the role of social status as a predictor of the accurate perception of classmates' peer relationships. Being perceived as popular by classroom peers could be associated with increased observer accuracy – but also may affect target accuracy. That is, it may be easier to see relationships between classmates who are perceived as popular in the classroom.

In addition to theoretical and empirical motivations, studying the accuracy of children's perceptions of classmates' relationships has important methodological implications for network measurement and modeling. First, it may help refine peer-reported techniques for measuring children's classroom relationships, including social cognitive mapping ([Cairns and Cairns, 1994](#)) and cognitive social structures ([Neal, 2008](#)). These techniques typically triangulate responses across a set of peer observers to measure the structure of relationships in a classroom or grade. However, each observer and each reported relationship is treated as equally accurate. Studying variation in children's accurate perceptions of peer relationships can help determine whether refinements to these approaches could lead to more precise measurement.

Second, it examines a critical assumption of stochastic actor-based models ([Snijders et al., 2010](#)), which have become increasingly popular in social research for disentangling the effects of selection and influence. In the specific context of developmental psychology, these models have been used to explore network formation among preschool children (e.g., [Schaefer et al., 2010](#); [Martin et al., 2013](#)), ethnic segregation in middle childhood and adolescence ([Leszczensky and Pink, 2015](#)), and were recently used in 15 papers featured in a special issue on network dynamics in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (see [Veenstra et al., 2013](#)). However, depending on the types of effects to be estimated, these models require assuming that network members have some level of accurate information about the network, ranging from "full information about network structure and composition" ([Veenstra et al., 2013](#), p. 402) to "more limited information" ([Snijders et al., 2010](#), p. 46). Studying variation in and predictors of children's accurate perceptions of peer relationships can help illuminate when these assumptions are satisfied, and the severity of their potential violation.

1.2. Predictors of accurate perceptions of relationships in childhood

Many different factors may be associated with children's accuracy in perceiving relationships. Here, we focus on four factors for

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