



The development of adolescents' friendships and antipathies: A longitudinal multivariate network test of balance theory



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ABSTRACT

We examined the interplay between friendship (best friend) and antipathy (dislike) relationships among adolescents ($N=480$; 11–14 years) in two US middle schools over three years (grades 6, 7, and 8). Using longitudinal multivariate network analysis (RSiena), the effects of friendships on antipathies and vice versa were tested, while structural network effects (e.g., density, reciprocity, and transitivity) and individual (age, gender, and ethnicity) and behavioral (prosocial and antisocial behavior) dispositions were controlled for. Based on (structural) balance theory, it was expected that friendships would be formed or maintained when two adolescents disliked the same person (shared enemy hypothesis), that friends would tend to agree on whom they disliked (friends' agreement hypothesis), that adolescents would tend to dislike the friends of those they disliked (reinforced animosity hypothesis), and, finally, that they would become or stay friends with dislikes of dislikes (enemy's enemy hypothesis). Support was found for the first three hypotheses, and partially for the fourth hypothesis. Results are discussed in light of adolescents' peer relationships.

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Peer relationships constitute an important context for the social and emotional development of adolescents (for a review, see [Furman and Rose, 2015](#)). Research on peer relationships has increased exponentially over the past two decades, providing much insight into how relationships among children and adolescents develop over time (for a review, see [Brechwald and Prinstein, 2011](#)). Most attention has been drawn to the emergence and maintenance of positive relationships, most prominently friendships (for a review, see [Veenstra et al., 2013](#)). However, positive peer relationships only represent a selective aspect of the peer ecology. Adolescents can also be tied negatively to peers, for example, through dislike, antipathy, or enemy relationships.

Researchers have started to acknowledge the importance of these so-called antipathies in the larger peer group. For instance, [Card \(2010\)](#) showed in a review that about one third of children

and adolescents are involved in mutual antipathies and that such relationships are associated with externalizing and internalizing problems, low academic achievement, low prosocial behavior, victimization and rejection by peers, lower positive peer regard (e.g., social preference), and the absence of friendships, emphasizing the importance of investigating antipathetic relationships during childhood and adolescence.

Although antipathies are inherently relational in nature, in only a few studies have they been treated from a social network perspective in which antipathies were examined together with positive peer relationships, revealing an interplay between the two types of relationships ([Berger and Dijkstra, 2013](#); [Casper and Card, 2010](#); [Huitsing and Veenstra, 2012](#); [Huitsing et al., 2012, 2014](#)). [Casper and Card \(2010\)](#) showed how friendship relationships might turn into antipathetic relationships; four other studies examined the specific network configurations underlying negative and positive peer relationships among students in primary school. Using advanced methods (i.e., social network analyses), [Huitsing and colleagues](#) showed both cross-sectionally ([Huitsing and Veenstra, 2012](#); [Huitsing et al., 2012](#)) and longitudinally ([Huitsing et al., 2014](#)) that victims with the same bullies and bullies with the same

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victims like or defend each other. Berger and Dijkstra (2013) found that friends tend to dislike the same person.

Together, the findings of these studies indicate that positive ties (e.g., friendships) and negative ties (antipathies) are interrelated. In the present study, we add to this previous work by (1) performing a more systematic examination of the interplay between positive and negative peer relationships (i.e., by examining different network configurations); (2) investigating this interplay in two relatively large middle schools covering three years (previous researchers examined them over one year of primary school); and (3) better accounting for alternative selection mechanisms (i.e., accounting for individual and behavioral characteristics that determine selection processes among individuals; see Veenstra et al., 2013).

In sum, the present study was aimed at undertaking a thorough examination of the network configurations that may underlie the way positive relationships (friendships) affect negative relationships (antipathies) in terms of formation and maintenance, and vice versa. Toward this end, the present study examined the simultaneous development of friendship and antipathy networks and their interplay using longitudinal multivariate social network analysis (Snijders et al., 2013).

1. Background

We used balance theory to understand the interplay between adolescents' friendship and antipathy networks (Heider, 1946, 1958; see also Cartwright and Harary, 1956; Davis, 1967; Davol, 1959; Newcomb, 1961). Heider's balance theory (1946, 1958) describes how relationships shape a person's sentiment (e.g., a thought, view, attitude, or feeling) about any 'situation, event, idea, or a thing' (Heider, 1946: 107). That is, the valence of a person's tie to a second person (and how the second person 'feels' about something) influences the focal person's opinion or attitude about others. Hence, Heider (1946) assigned meaning to the influence of a second person to whom the focal person is tied. The key assumption of balance theory is that people prefer balanced configurations over imbalanced ones (Doreian et al., 2005). For instance, having the same opinion about certain objects as those who you are friends with is in line with one's expectations of what a friendship should look like. This leads to configurations that are congruent as they are perceived as comfortable and stable. In contrast, people tend to avoid configurations that are imbalanced as disagreeing with friends causes strain and tension, and hence, people will change their relationship, opinion or attitude.

Heider's balance theory (1946, 1958) has been used to explain a wide range of socio-psychological phenomena (e.g., relative deprivation, political opinions, conflict management, job mobility, social comparison processes, leadership and group effectiveness, social behavior, communication; see Davis, 1963), showing that an individual's positive (or negative) attitude about a situation or issue depends on the individual's relationship with a friend and that friend's positive (or negative) attitude toward the situation or issue. Although balance theory was rooted in (social) psychology, the main principles also have been applied to sociometric triplets of three individuals who share ties to one another (Davol, 1959; Newcomb, 1961). The best-known example of such a configuration is transitivity (Davis, 1970); the tendency to call a 'friend of a friend as one's own friend.'

Balance theory research has been divided into two main groups (Hummon and Doreian, 2003): cognitive balance theory to explain individuals' cognitive reasoning (Heider, 1946, 1958), and structural balance theory to explain structurally determined social relationships (Cartwright and Harary, 1956). We place ourselves in the latter category but recognize that relationships are formed and maintained in the presence of cognitive functioning. We consider

such processes by taking an actor-based social choice approach similar to that taken in recent structural balance research as outlined by Hummon and Doreian (2003), which takes the group dynamics of social balance processes into account. We assume that (1) actors have pre-existing knowledge, whether accurate or not, about each other's tie choices and preferences, (2) actors have some awareness of the wider group structure, and (3) tie choices made by actors to achieve balance are based on what they know at the time they make a choice, and that their social knowledge changes as they learn about and react to their social environment (see for a discussion Hummon and Doreian, 2003).

Although the line of balance theory research, both structural and social, is long and extensive (for reviews see Forsyth, 1990; Opp, 1984; Taylor, 1970), the theory only infrequently has been explored in dynamic contexts (e.g., Abell and Ludwig, 2009; Doreian et al., 1996; Doreian and Mrvar, 1996; Hummon and Doreian, 2003). It is important to note here that a cross-sectional design is insufficient (see Abell and Ludwig, 2009), because structural balance theory is a theory of change (Doreian et al., 2005). It assumes an interrelation and interchangeability between positive and negative relationships (Doreian and Mrvar, 1996; Hummon and Doreian, 2003). Moreover, empirical studies in which a 'complete dynamic network' approach was taken, and in which important alternative selection mechanisms (i.e., structural tendencies and selection homophily) were controlled for, are scarce (e.g., Berger and Dijkstra, 2013; Huitsing et al., 2014).

To enhance our knowledge of balance mechanisms, we examined multiple social networks (positively and negatively tied) simultaneously over time as well as their mutual dependence, while controlling for the roles of the individual (i.e., age, gender, and ethnicity) and behavioral dispositions (i.e., prosocial and antisocial behavior) of individuals in the formation and maintenance of relationships with others, using the stochastic actor-oriented model (SAOM) (Snijders et al., 2013). This allowed us to examine the main principles of balance theory, which are described below.

1.1. Hypotheses

According to structural balance theory (Cartwright and Harary, 1956; see also Heider, 1958), relationship constructs are balanced when they are characterized by three positive ties or by two negative ties and one positive, resulting in stable relationships among the three individuals in the group. Conversely, relationship constructs involving two positive ties and one negative are considered unstable and imbalanced. Based on these principles, we tested eight configurations between friendships and antipathies.

In the first configuration, balance is achieved when two individuals share the same negative tie with a third person (Fig. 1). In this configuration, it is likely that the first person's relationship with the second becomes or stays positive over time (e.g., *i* dislikes *h* and *j* dislikes *h*, then *i* likes *j*). This balanced state tells us that when two individuals both dislike a third person they are likely to become or stay friends. We call this the *shared enemy hypothesis*, indicating that sharing the same antipathy may result in friendship formation or maintenance; expressed proverbially, 'when my enemy is your enemy, we're (staying) friends.' This effect can be explained in two ways: an initial situation of friends disliking the same people persisted over time (friendship maintenance); alternatively, a friendship formed because two persons disliked the same person (friendship formation). The former indicates that sharing the same enemy stabilizes or strengthens friendship. The latter indicates that disliking the same person fosters the formation of friendship. In both cases, we expect that the configuration is held together by balance: the 'cost' of not gaining a new friend or losing an existing one,

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