



The role of emotion identification skill in the formation of male and female friendships: A longitudinal study



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ABSTRACT

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The present study explored the relationship between emotion identification skill (EIS) and friendships in adolescence. Students from five Australian high schools completed questionnaires annually from Grade 8 to Grade 12 including subjective measures of EIS and a peer-based objective measure of social functioning (e.g., friendship nominations). The total sample of participants was 795 (406 males; 389 females) with 468 (225 males; 243 females) completing questionnaires in Grade 12. EIS in early adolescence was predictive of friendships for females in late adolescence. Specifically, girls starting out with low EIS in Grade 8 tended to have fewer female friendships and more male friendships in Grade 12. There were no effects for males. Lower initial EIS was associated with significant improvements in awareness over time, but these improvements had no effect on friendships in Grade 12. The EIS that girls enter high school with may influence their friendship composition into late adolescence.

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Emotion identification skill (EIS) is the ability to identify and describe one's emotions and plays an important role in well-being (Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Supavadeeprasit, 2008; Ciarrochi, Kashdan, Leeson, Heaven, & Jordan, 2010; Taylor & Bagby, 2004). It has also been studied in conjunction with a variety of mental and physical conditions and low awareness is linked with many clinical disorders (e.g., depression, Bankier, Aigner, & Bach, 2001; eating disorders, Corcos et al., 2000; social phobia, Cox, Swinson, Shulman, & Bourdeau, 1995).

Despite the significance of this construct, there is limited research on the effect it may have on social relationships, which, especially during adolescence, are critical for development and psychological adjustment (Brown, 2004; Collins & Steinberg, 2008). The present study sought to examine the association between EIS and friendships in adolescence.

The ability to establish positive social relationships (e.g., friendships) is essential for health and well-being (Barrera, 1986; Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999; Hartup, 1992; Parker & Asher, 1993; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). In adolescence, friendships are some of the most important relationships (Hartup, 1992). Social network size (e.g., Hartup, 1996; Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, & Carpenter, 2003) and having at least one friend (e.g., Parker & Asher, 1993) are important for development, adjustment, and buffering against loneliness and social dissatisfaction. Being liked by peers is an antecedent to friendship development (Bukowski, Pizzamiglio, Newcomb, & Hoza, 1996). Those who are popular and accepted by peers are more likely to form friendships and report higher quality friendships (Bukowski et al., 1996; Parker & Asher, 1993).

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There are many benefits of friendships, such as increased self-esteem (Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999), buffering against the risk of psychopathology (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994), reduced loneliness (Jobe-Shields, Cohen, & Parra, 2011), depression and other forms of maladjustment (Clark & Ayers, 1992; Rubin, Bubowski, & Parker, 2006).

Friendships are fundamental for social maturation during adolescence (Youniss & Haynie, 1992). This is a time when people start spending more time with peers and friendships become more intimate (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Clark & Ayers, 1992). Friendships allow adolescents to satisfy their need for intimacy and self-disclosure (Clark & Ayers, 1992) while providing a social context for the development of interpersonal skills, such as collaboration, perspective taking, empathy and altruism (Buhrmester & Furman, 1986; Hartup, 1992).

Social relationships are of heightened importance during adolescence because it is critical for learning how to form and maintain satisfying and long-lasting relationships (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Hays, 1988). Since social relationships at this time may be particularly important in protecting against psychosocial problems (Clark & Ayers, 1992; Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999; Hartup, 1992; Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000; Parker & Asher, 1993), it is important to understand skills (e.g., emotional awareness) related to friendships during this developmental stage.

Emotion identification skill

EIS is a critical initial component of emotional competence (Buckley & Saarni, 2006; Saarni, 1999), emotional intelligence (EI, Ciarrochi, Forgas, & Mayer, 2006; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 2002) and meta-emotion (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996, 1997), since it is difficult to act appropriately or control one's behaviour when unclear about what emotions you are experiencing (Dawda & Hart, 2000). Alexithymia is a condition in which there is an inability to recognize and understand one's own emotional state (Kerr, Johnson, Gans, & Krumrine, 2004; Salovey et al., 2002) and is inversely related to EI, particularly, the intrapersonal intelligence component (Dawda & Hart, 2000; Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 2004).

Not only does awareness play an influential role in well-being (e.g., Cox et al., 1995; Kerr et al., 2004; Taylor, Parker, Bagby, & Bourke, 1996), awareness and sharing of emotions are cornerstones for the development and maintenance of social relationships (e.g., Fitness, 2006; Spitzer, Siebel-Jurges, Barnow, Grabe, & Freyberger, 2005). Understanding, labeling and regulating emotions are associated with positive social relationships (e.g., Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Lopes et al., 2004). Low EIS may lead to fewer relationships because having difficulty empathizing and distinguishing others' emotions, which are key aspects of successful social behaviour, are also associated with alexithymia (FeldmanHall, Dalgleish, & Mobbs, 2013). Deficits in the ability to identify and describe emotions have been associated with interpersonal problems in adulthood, but very little research has explored this relationship in adolescence. Adults high in alexithymia engage in less social sharing of emotions, particularly when facing negative events, compared to those who are more aware of their own emotions (Pennebaker, Zech, & Rime, 2001; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). Alexithymia is also linked with having difficulty regulating emotions within social interactions (Spitzer et al., 2005), less social contact and fewer acquaintances (Kauhanen, Kaplan, Julkunen, Wilson, & Salonen, 1993), less perceived social support (Posse, Hallstrom, & Backenroth-Ohsako, 2002), smaller social networks and fewer close relationships (Lumley, Ovies, Stettner, Wehmer, & Lakey, 1996).

EIS is correlated with social support network size and quality for adolescents and adults (Ciarrochi et al., 2008; Ciarrochi, Scott, Deane, & Heaven, 2003; Fukunishi & Rahe, 1995; Lumley et al., 1996; Posse et al., 2002). For adults, difficulty describing one's emotions is associated with reduced intimacy, romantic relationship quality (Foran & O'Leary, 2012; Humphrey, Wood, & Parker, 2009), lower peer acceptance (Saarni, 1999), lacking a steady partner or best friend, and having fewer close friends (Lumley et al., 1996). In adolescence, low EIS is associated with fewer and lower quality social support (Heaven, Ciarrochi, & Hurrell, 2010) and predicted decreased perceived quality and quantity of social support over a one-year period from Grade 8 to Grade 9 (Ciarrochi et al., 2008).

EI is correlated with positive social interactions and functioning (e.g., Di Fabio & Kenny, 2012; Mestre, Rocio, Lopes, Salovey, & Gil-Orlarte, 2006), such as, quality of social interactions with friends and with members of the opposite sex, perceived self-presentational success in social interaction (Lopes et al., 2004) and reduced loneliness (Zysberg, 2012). Individuals who perceived themselves to be better able to identify their emotions and express these to others reported greater availability of social support (Austin, Saklofske, & Egan, 2005; Di Fabio & Kenny, 2012; Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007).

Research on meta-emotional theory has found that awareness and openness to emotions and encouragement of emotional expression is beneficial for emotion socialization (Denham, 1997), behavioural adjustment (Gottman et al., 1997), and peer acceptance and social competence (Saarni, 1999). At present, little research has examined focused specifically on emotional self-awareness and friendship.

Given that awareness may be necessary for the development of social support and friendships (Lumley et al., 1996; Spitzer et al., 2005), it is somewhat surprising that there is little research on the effects of awareness on social functioning in adolescence, and especially research that focuses on objective measures of friendship.

The present study

To date, no studies have assessed the relationships between awareness and a peer-based measure of social functioning, in this instance, friendships amongst adolescents. This study examined the link between the way people identify and understand their emotions – EIS – and peer nominated friendship over four years during adolescence.

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