



Forms of friendship: A person-centered assessment of the quality, stability, and outcomes of different types of adolescent friends



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ABSTRACT

Friendships differ in terms of their quality and participants may or may not agree as to their perceptions of relationship quality. Two studies ($N = 230$ and 242) were conducted to identify distinct and replicable categories of friendship among young adolescents ($M = 11.6$ years old) using self and partner reports of relationship quality. Same-sex friendships were identified from reciprocated friend nominations. Each friend described perceptions of negativity and social support in the relationship. Cluster analyses based on reports from both friends yielded 4 friendship types in each study: a high quality group, a low quality group, and two groups in which friends disagreed about the quality of the relationship. High quality friendships were most apt to be stable from the 6th to the 7th grade. Participants in high quality friendships reported the highest levels of global self-worth and perceived behavioral conduct and the lowest levels of problem behaviors. Dyads reporting discrepant perceptions of quality differed from dyads who agreed that the friendship was high quality in terms of stability and individual adjustment, underscoring the advantages of person-centered strategies that incorporate perceptions of both partners in categorizations of relationships.

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1. Introduction

Friendships are critically important to adolescent development, providing validation and camaraderie, insight and emotional support, instrumental assistance and social skills training (Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski, 2009). But not all friendships are created equal. Variable-centered studies offer clues about distinctions between adolescent friendships, through descriptions of mean level differences in relationship characteristics. Friends differ along dimensions such as companionship, aid, security, and closeness (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). Variable-centered approaches are not, however, well-suited to describe different forms or types of adolescent friendships. Typologies derived from person-centered approaches are unique in their ability to identify different forms of adolescent friendship. Rarely undertaken, typologies have yet to describe properties of friendships using reports from both participants in a relationship. As a consequence, we do not know the degree to which friendships differ in terms of participant

perceptions, nor do we know the consequences of converging and diverging perceptions. Two studies are presented that describe high quality and low quality adolescent friendships, and distinguish these from friendships in which participants disagree as to the quality of the relationship.

Variable-centered and person-centered approaches are designed to answer different research questions, and the answers from one set of questions do not readily transfer to the other. Most of what we know about adolescent friendships comes from variable-centered studies, which are designed to describe mean-level differences in and rank-ordered associations between characteristics of individual participants. In a typical variable-centered study, the focus of interest is on processes that are assumed to be present to a similar degree in all members of a population (Laursen & Hoff, 2006). Variable-centered research questions tend to emphasize universal processes described in terms of associations between variables. Four questions illustrate how the approach has been used to describe adolescent friendships. To what extent are perceptions of relationship quality similar across adolescent friends? Results suggest that friend reports of relationship features are only modestly correlated (e.g., Spencer, Bowker, Rubin, Booth-Laforce, & Laursen, 2013). To what extent are adolescent perceptions of

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friendship quality stable over time? Results suggest that views of friendships are not fixed, with autocorrelations for perceived satisfaction between 0.3 and 0.4 across one year (Branje, Frijns, Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2007). To what extent are adolescent friendships stable over time? One study suggests that between 1/3 and 1/2 of all middle school friendships do not survive from one academic year to the next (Bowker, 2004). To what extent do perceptions of friendship quality predict individual adolescent outcomes? Results suggest that reports of poor quality friendship are associated with lower levels of self-worth (e.g., Laursen, Furman, & Mooney, 2006) and higher levels of behavior problems (e.g., Adams & Laursen, 2007).

Person-centered research differs from variable-centered research in that it concerns the identification of individuals who resemble one another and who differ from other groups of individuals. Sweeping generalizations about adolescents and their friends are avoided. Instead, the focus of interest is on processes assumed to be specific to individuals who share particular attributes. When person-centered approaches are applied to the study of friendship, categories of dyads may be created on the basis of the unique perceptions of one or both friends. Person-centered research questions emphasize processes specific to each form of friendship. Do friends differ in terms of perceptions of the quality of their relationship? Although most friends share similar views, a sizable minority disagree as to whether they would describe their relationship as high or low on friendship quality (Brendgen, Little, & Krappmann, 2000). What are the most common forms of friendship? One study, relying on reports from a single member of each dyad, suggests that the most typical type of friendship involved high levels of social support and low levels of negativity (Way, Cowal, Gingold, Pahl, & Bissessar, 2001). Are some forms of friendship more stable than others (Becker, 2013)? Do adolescent outcomes vary across different forms of friendship? In general, adolescents in high quality relationships (e.g., high support and low negativity) report the fewest adjustment difficulties and those in low quality relationships (e.g., low support and high negativity) report the most adjustment difficulties (e.g., Berndt, 2002). One study that included reports from both members of each friend dyad found that adjustment problems for those who disagreed about the quality of the relationship rivaled those in which both friends agreed the relationship was of poor quality (Burk & Laursen, 2005).

The first goal of this investigation was to identify categories of adolescent friendships that were distinct and replicable, drawn from cluster analyses conducted on reports of relationship quality provided by both friends in the dyad. Replicating results from cluster analyses using reports from a single member of the dyad (Way et al., 2001), we anticipated unique groups that described high and low quality relationships. Confirming conceptual categories created using reports from both members of the dyad (Burk & Laursen, 2005), we expected to find at least one cluster that described friends who disagreed about the quality of their relationship. The second goal of this investigation was to describe the over-time characteristics and outcomes associated with each of the different types of friendship. Individual perceptions of friendship quality tend to be stable over time (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009), so we expected that this stability would translate into consistency in the classification of dyads into relationship quality groups. As has been found in romantic relationships (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995 for review), we expected that friendships described by both participants as high quality (i.e., high social support and low negativity) would be least likely to dissolve. Finally, consistent with correlational results for variable centered studies (e.g., Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008), we expected that adolescents in high quality friendships would have fewer behavior problems than adolescents in low quality friendships.

2. Study 1

2.1. Participants

Participants included 230 adolescents (90 boys, 140 girls) in 115 same-sex, same grade friend dyads. Target adolescents were in the 6th grade and ranged in age from 11 to 13 years old ($M = 11.44$, $SD = 0.52$). Of this total, 52.2% were European American ($n = 60$), 13.9% were Asian American ($n = 16$), 8.7% were Hispanic American ($n = 10$), 7.8% were African Americans ($n = 9$) and the remainder were mixed or other ethnic backgrounds. Using parent reports of education and occupation, Hollingshead four factor (1975) socioeconomic scores ranged from 9 to 66 ($M = 54.48$, $SD = 9.75$) out of a potential range of 8 (e.g. laborers with a primary school education) to 66 (e.g. executives with a post-baccalaureate education).

Participants were drawn from a larger study of children's peer relationships. As part of this larger study, parent letters and consent forms were sent home with all students in three public middle schools in the Washington DC metropolitan area; those who returned consents (84%) completed a best friend nomination measure. Participants in this larger study were asked to identify their very best friend and their second best friend (Bowker, Rubin, Burgess, Booth-LaForce, & Rose-Krasnor, 2006). Nominations were limited to same-sex same-grade school friends. Reciprocated best friends were defined as dyads who nominated one another as first or second best friends. A random subsample of participants from the larger study was selected to take part in a longitudinal follow-up ($n = 283$). In one portion of this longitudinal study, participants were invited to bring their reciprocated best friend to the laboratory and 115 did so; these participants are hereafter referred to as "target adolescents". There were no instances in which target adolescents were nominated as friends. The same friend was not nominated by multiple target participants. There were no greater than chance differences on any demographic, friendship, or peer nomination variable between target adolescents with reciprocated best friends who did and did not participate in the longitudinal study, or between those who did and did bring a reciprocated best friend to the laboratory.

2.2. Instruments and procedure

Target adolescents and friends separately completed the *Network of Relationships Inventory* (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), a 33-item instrument describing 11 characteristics of the friendship. Previous studies indicated that items load on 3 scales (Burk & Laursen, 2005; Furman, 1996): negativity, social support, and relative power. The present study focuses on *social support* (companionship, instrumental aid, intimacy, nurturance, affection, admiration, reliable alliance, and satisfaction) and *negativity* (conflict and annoying behavior). Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*little or none*) to 5 (*the most*). Internal reliabilities were high ($\alpha = 0.85$ – 0.92). *t*-Tests ($p < .01$) indicated that boys reported less social support ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.41$, $d = 0.23$) than girls ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.52$), so scores were standardized within sex prior to cluster analysis to avoid clusters based primarily on sex.

Target adolescents completed an abbreviated version of the *Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents* (Harter, 1988), assessing perceptions of interpersonal competence. The present study included the subscales of *global self-worth* and *behavioral conduct*, chosen because they were included in both studies. Each scale included 5 items, rated on a 4-point structured alternative format scale ranging from 1 (*really true* for the negative alternative) to 4 (*really true* for the positive alternative). *Behavioral conduct* measures comportment (e.g., "Some teenagers often do not like the way they

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