



## Intermediate peer contexts and educational outcomes: Do the friends of students' friends matter?



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### ABSTRACT

Sociologists of education have long been interested in the effects of peer relations on educational outcomes. Recent theory and research on adolescence suggest that peers on the boundaries of students' friendship networks may play an important role in shaping behaviors and educational outcomes. In this study, we examine the importance of a key "intermediate peer context" for students' outcomes: the friends of a student's friends. Our findings indicate both friends' and friends' friends' characteristics independently predict students' college expectations and their risk of dropping out of high school (although only friends' characteristics predict GPA). Our models suggest the magnitude of students' friends-of-friends' characteristics are at least as large their friends' characteristics. Together, the association between the peer context and students' outcomes is considerably larger when accounting for both the characteristics of students' friends and the friends of their friends.

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Sociologists of education have long been interested in the effects of peer relations on educational outcomes. Indeed, some of the earliest studies of adolescents in American schools were centrally focused on the importance of peer relationships in students' lives. [Hollingshead \(1949\)](#) focused on the importance of "cliques" in reproducing class boundaries among adolescents, and [Coleman \(1961\)](#) examined how members of the "leading crowd" affected students' social lives and expectations regarding school performance. Interestingly, subsequent research has focused overwhelmingly on two types of "peer" influences: (1) students' friends, or (2) students' schoolmates (e.g., SES or race-ethnic composition of the school). At one extreme, researchers have studied students' most immediate and affectively intense social relationships (friendship ties), while at the other, scholars have focused on the broadest and most encompassing peer context (school composition). Many fewer studies by sociologists examine the importance of "intermediate" peer relationships and contexts that lie between friendship networks and school composition for student outcomes.

While the effects of friends' characteristics have received much attention from researchers, recent research suggests a different set of social ties – relations with the friends of one's friends – is both theoretically interesting and substantively important to study. Researchers have found the characteristics of the friends of one's friends are important for physical health ([Christakis and Fowler, 2007, 2008](#)), mental health ([Baller and Richardson, 2009](#)), and deviant behavioral outcomes ([Kreager and Haynie, 2011; Payne and Cornwell, 2007](#)). Recent work on adolescence ([Frank et al., 2008; Giordano, 2003; Steinberg, 1996](#)) suggests that students may be influenced by both their immediate friendship ties, but also their more distal ties

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that lies just beyond their friendship network. For example, some researchers (e.g., Frank et al., 2008; Payne and Cornwell, 2007) have argued that students may use conformity as a strategy to establish new friendship ties with peers.

In this paper, we investigate how the characteristics of a student's friends and his/her friends' friends are related to three academic outcomes: grades, college expectations, and high school completion. We hypothesize that students can directly benefit from their friends' knowledge and academic skills to improve their own academic performance, but friends-of-friends characteristics should be less important for this outcome. In contrast, we expect friends-of-friends characteristics should matter more for outcomes such as college expectations and high school completion because students may use attitudinal and behavioral conformity to their friends' friends to solidify their existing friendship ties, and also to establish new friendship ties. Overall, our findings indicate that the characteristics of students' friends' friends had the strongest association with the student outcomes for which attitudinal and behavioral conformity should matter most: high school completion and college expectations.

## 1. Friendships, peers, and academic outcomes

Although the terms “friends” and “peers” are frequently used interchangeably by researchers, it is important to distinguish between them. A “friendship” is an affective tie between individuals that entails a social role, with accompanying expectations of trust, reciprocity, privacy, altruism, favoritism, etc (Call and Mortimer, 2001; Savin-Williams and Berndt 1990). Friendships may be reciprocal (i.e., both individuals consider each other a friend) or asymmetrical (i.e., one individual considers the other a friend, but s/he does not reciprocate). Friendships may also differ in intensity: some friends are “best” friends, and others are casual friends. In contrast, we define “peers” as non-friends who attend a given student's school. Unlike friendships, there is no social role associated with peer relations: expectations of trust and reciprocity that are typical in friendships are not applicable with peers (Giordano, 2003). Students know some of their peers by name and/or appearance, and interact with them fairly regularly, while others remain strangers.

Measures of school composition (e.g., percent minority, percent free lunch) combine a student's friends and peers into the same group. In heterogeneous schools, a student's friendship network will likely differ from the overall composition of the school due to homophily (Flashman, 2012; Kandel, 1978) and within school sorting practices such as curricular tracking (Moody, 2001). In contrast, measures of friendship networks and friends' characteristics focus on a subset of the school population: the group of friends that is specific to each individual student.<sup>1</sup>

Numerous studies suggest that the characteristics of a student's friends are related to his/her academic achievement (test scores and grades) (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Cook et al., 2007; Vaquera and Kao 2008), academic engagement (Berndt and Keefe, 1995; Vaquera and Kao, 2008), chances of finishing high school (Cairns et al., 1989; Jimerson et al., 2000; Ream and Rumberger, 2008; South et al., 2007), and educational expectations (Hauser et al., 1983). A voluminous literature on peers also documents the importance of a school's racial, socioeconomic, and ability composition for student outcomes (see Hanushek and Rivkin, 2006; Konstantopoulos, 2006; Perry and McConney, 2010; Willms, 2010). In this paper, we argue that “intermediate” groups of peers, who occupy the social space between friends and schoolmates, are both theoretically interesting and relatively understudied.

## 2. Intermediate peer contexts: between friendship and school composition effects

Coleman's study of the “adolescent society” in high schools of the late 1950s is a classic example of research on the intermediate peer context. His research includes a detailed description of the important subgroups (and accompanying subcultures) within the school that extended well beyond students' immediate friendship networks. Steinberg (1996) found that almost all students belong to a “crowd,” which consists of “like-minded individuals who share certain features in common with each other but who are not necessarily each other's friends” (p.139). Thus, the crowd serves as a reference group that provides a shared identity (rather than intimacy) for adolescents as they judge which behaviors and choices are “appropriate” for themselves and others like them (also, see Brown et al., 1994). Numerous qualitative studies (Carter, 2007; Eckert, 1989; Kinney, 1993; MacLeod, 2010; Milner, 2006; Ogbu, 2003) have identified similar social boundaries within schools that separate students into different subgroups that are characterized by their own values, norms, and cultures.

Frank et al. (2008) examined a different intermediate peer context in their research. Using network data from the Add Health data set, Frank et al. (2008) identified clusters of students across classes within schools, which they called “local positions.” Frank et al. argue students are more likely to have regular contact with members of their local position, and new friendships and social ties will likely emerge from this broader peer context. Female students who shared the same local position were more likely to experience similar math course sequences by the end of high school (Frank et al., 2008).

In this paper, we focus on an intermediate peer context that has been virtually ignored in educational research: the friends of a student's friends. In Fig. 1, we present a hypothetical sociogram that shows a student (“ego”) who has a direct tie to three friends (“friend one,” “friend two,” and “friend three”). “Friend one” and “friend two” also share a friendship tie with each

<sup>1</sup> Generally, studies of friends and school composition focus on one group to the exclusion of the other (e.g., Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Berndt and Keefe, 1995; Cairns et al., 1989; Farmer et al., 2003; Hallinan and Williams, 1991; Ream and Rumberger, 2008; Rumberger and Palardy, 2005; Vaquera and Kao, 2008).

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