The Significance of Friendships and Peer Difficulties during Early Adolescence

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The Study of Peer Experiences as Risk and Protective Factors

Sullivan: Close relationships are important determinants of psychological well-being across the life span

Late childhood: Peer acceptance and rejection

Early adolescence (10-14 years): Chumships or same-sex best friendships
Piaget: Peer interactions are critical for healthy social-cognitive growth and development

Peer interactions provide a unique context to learn about conflict, negotiation, and compromise.

- perspective taking
- social skills
- moral development

**Children and adolescents who fail to interact with their peers, for whatever reason, may “miss out” on important learning opportunities.**
Significance of Friendship and Peer Difficulties during Late Childhood and Early Adolescence

Friendship = high self-esteem and positive self-worth (Berndt & Keefe, 1995)

Friendship = protection from peer victimization (Hodges et al., 1999)

Friendless youth: loneliness, depression, anxiety, socially unskilled (Parker & Asher, 1993; Wojlawowicz Bowker et al., 2006)

Peer rejection, victimization, and exclusion = psychosocial maladaptation (Dodge et al., 2003)

Socially withdrawn youth = lacking social skills and psychological distress (Rubin, Wojlawowicz et al., 2006; Rubin et al., 1993)
The Study of Early Adolescent Friendship and Peer Experiences

Robert Hinde (1987)
Individual Level

Characteristics of individuals that are relatively stable and that impact their social interactions and adjustment.

**Individual-level characteristics**

Sex (male, female)

Race and ethnicity

Temperament/personality (e.g., sociability; shyness; negative emotionality; aggression)

Physical characteristics (e.g., obesity, appearance)
Interaction Level

1.) Movements *toward* others

2.) Movements *against* others

3.) Movements *away* from others
Most *interactions* are embedded in longer-term dyadic *relationships*, which involve two individuals with a history of interaction.

**Dyadic-level peer experiences:**

Friendships

Antipathies

Romantic relationships
Group Level

Group experiences involve a large peer or reference group.

**Group-level peer experiences:**

- Popularity
- Peer rejection
- Peer exclusion
- Peer victimization
My Research Program

- REJECTION
- VICTIMIZATION
- EXCLUSION
- POPULARITY
- POSITIVE PEER TREATMENT
- SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL
- OBESITY
- AGGRESSION

- GROUPS
- RELATIONSHIPS
- INTERACTIONS
- INDIVIDUALS

- DYNAMIC FRIENDSHIP EXPERIENCES
- MIXED-GRADE FRIENDSHIPS
- QUALITY OF FRIENDSHIPS
- FRIEND CHARACTERISTICS

Robert Hinde (1987)
Having a friendship is significant, especially a best friendship. BUT, most studies of friendship utilize “STATIC” measurements.

- Does the adolescent have a friend or not?

Considerable changes do occur in adolescents’ friendship involvement.

- Losing friendships
- Gaining new friendships

One study found that losses in best friendship, without new best friendship replacement, led to increased peer victimization (Wojslawowicz Bowker et al., 2006).
Different Types of Best Friendship Dissolution

Complete dissolutions

Downgrade dissolutions
Study 1: Two Types of Best Friendship Dissolution

77 6th grade students reported on their current best friends (68% were reciprocated) and loneliness.

**Complete dissolutions:** “Have you ever had a close best friend of the same-sex with whom you are no longer friends?”

**Downgrade dissolutions:** “Have you had a best friend of the same-sex with whom you are now only a good friend?”

Happy, sad, angry emotional reactions

**Most were recent (3-6 months)**

Studies 1: Two Types of Best Friendship Dissolution: Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Total (N = 77)</th>
<th>Boys (n = 32)</th>
<th>Girls (n = 45)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete dissolution</td>
<td>36 (28)</td>
<td>18 (6)</td>
<td>49 (22)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Downgrades</td>
<td>55 (42)</td>
<td>28 (9)</td>
<td>73 (33)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Either type of dissolution</td>
<td>66 (51)</td>
<td>41 (13)</td>
<td>84 (38)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both types of dissolution</td>
<td>25 (19)</td>
<td>6 (2)</td>
<td>38 (17)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Values outside parentheses represent percentages; values inside parentheses represent frequencies.

- Sadness was the most common emotional reaction, likely because both types of dissolution represent interpersonal losses.
Study 1: Two Types of Best Friendship Dissolution: *Findings*

**Importance of new best friendship replacement when downgrade dissolutions occur**
Changes in Friendship Project

350 6th grade students in two middle schools in Buffalo, NY

- Current friendships and best friendship dissolutions
- Friendship quality
- Aggression and social withdrawal
- Loneliness
- Depression
- Stressful life events
- Social information processing (Times 1 & 2 only)
Changes in Friendship Project

**AIM 1:** Extent to which friendships break-up during the school year and after a summer break
- Aggression, social withdrawal, friendship quality

**AIM 2:** Psychological correlates and consequences of friendship dissolution
- Repeated dissolutions

**AIM 3:** Individual characteristics (aggression, social withdrawal) impact how adolescents think about friendship dissolution, and whether adolescents’ thinking explains variability in psychological outcomes (e.g., Abramson et al., 1989)
Changes in Friendship Project

Publications: Markovic & Bowker (2014), Bowker (2014), Bowker & Etkin (2014), Bowker (under review), Bowker & Etkin (under review)

Figure 1. Wave 1 adult intervention as a mediator of the association between Wave 1 friendship dissolution and Wave 2 loneliness.

*p < .05, **p < .001
Mixed-Grade Friendships

Numerous studies have linked friendship to psychosocial adjustment. But, most of these studies focused on same-grade friendships only.

- Assumption that same-grade peers are the primary reference group
- In elementary and middle schools, youth do interact most often with same-grade peers

BUT, in many middle schools, there are increased opportunities for interaction with different-grade peers.

Do these interactions lead to mixed-grade friendships?

ARE WE NEGLECTING IMPORTANT PART OF ADOLESCENTS’ SCHOOL SOCIAL NETWORKS?
179 7th grade and 178 8th grade students in two middle schools

*Mixed grade interaction*: on school bus, morning lunch programs, in hallways, school-based extracurricular activities

**MEASURES**

Same-grade and mixed-grade friendships

Peer nominations of aggression (e.g., Someone who gets into lots of fights), social withdrawal (e.g., Someone who is shy), victimization (e.g., Someone who is hit or kicked by others), rejection (*same-grade*)

Loneliness

7.) Someone who you like least.

Jack Smith
Leslie Jackson

8.) Someone who is very shy.

Andrea Johnson
Mike Jones
### Table 1: Percentages of participants reporting mixed-grade friends and having mutual mixed-grade friendships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>7th grade students</th>
<th>8th grade students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-grade nomination</td>
<td>82.7 (277)</td>
<td>78.0 (131)</td>
<td>75.0 (63)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mutual mixed-grade friend</td>
<td>36.4 (95)</td>
<td>32.2 (47)</td>
<td>30.6 (22)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Same-sex mixed-grade nomination</td>
<td>81.3 (178)</td>
<td>85.3 (87)</td>
<td>77.6 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex mutual mixed-grade friend</td>
<td>77.9 (74)</td>
<td>78.7 (37)</td>
<td>59.1 (13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values outside parentheses represent percentages; values inside parentheses represent frequencies.
Study 2: Mixed-Grade Friendships: Findings

Do mixed-grade friendships contribute uniquely to psychosocial well-being?

- **YES!** Adolescents who made mixed-grade friend nominations and those who had mutual mixed-grade friends reported less loneliness than adolescents without mixed-grade friends.**

Are mixed-grade friendships especially helpful for adolescents who struggle with same-grade peers?

- **YES!** Participation in mutual mixed-grade friendships was linked to less victimization for 8th grade same-grade friendless adolescents, and also socially-withdrawn boys.
My Research Program

Robert Hinde (1987)
Social Withdrawal

Socially withdrawn youth actively avoid and withdraw from peers (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009).
Social Withdrawal as an Individual Vulnerability

Social withdrawal is related to:

- Peer rejection, victimization, and peer exclusion (Oh et al., 2008; Rubin et al., 2006)

- Loneliness, anxiety, depression, poor self-concept (Hymel et al., 1993; Rubin et al., 1993)
Social Withdrawal Subtypes

Approach and avoidance models of social withdrawal:

**SHYNESS**: Strong Approach, Strong Avoidance

**UNSOCIABILTY**: Weak Approach, Weak Avoidance

**AVOIDANCE**: Weak Approach, Strong Avoidance

Most studies of social withdrawal focus on:

a.) shyness
b.) during childhood
c.) in Western societies

“Meaning” of social withdrawal may vary across societies due to variability in cultural values and responses to social behaviors.
Study 3: Subtypes of Social Withdrawal

Participants: 194 adolescents (100 boys, $M$ age = 13.35 years) from Surat, India

Language at home: 53% Hindi, 36% Gujarati

Religion: 90% Hindu

Upper to middle class

Peer nominations of peer rejection, acceptance, victimization, and exclusion and self-reported loneliness

Measure of Social Withdrawal Subtypes

15-item revised version of the Child Social Preference Scale (Coplan et al., 2004)

- Self-report
- Age-appropriate
- Avoidance and peer isolation items added

**SHYNESS**: e.g., “Although I desire to be with other kids, I feel nervous about interacting with them” ($\alpha = .65$).

**AVOIDANCE**: e.g., “When given the choice, I always choose to play by myself because I don’t like playing with others” ($\alpha = .67$).

**UNSOCIABILITY**: e.g., “I don’t have a strong need to be with other kids” ($\alpha = .67$).
### Study 3: Subtypes of Social Withdrawal: Findings

#### Table 2: Descriptive statistics and zero-order intercorrelations among study variables

<table>
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<th>CSPS-R scales</th>
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<th>Adjustment outcomes</th>
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<td>1. Shyness</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
<td>0.56**</td>
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<td>2. Unsociability</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
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<td>3. Avoidance</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
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<td>4. Isolation</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<td>5. Shyness-P</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
<td>0.76**</td>
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<td>6. Sad affect</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
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<td>7. Nervous affect</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
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<td>8. Verbal reticence</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
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<td>9. Rejection</td>
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<td>1.98</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>1.00-4.31</td>
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Shyness-P refers to peer nominations for “Someone who is shy”; Degrees of freedom for correlations = 193. *p<0.05. **p<0.001
Study 3: Subtypes of Social Withdrawal: **Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1: Exclusion</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>F, ΔF</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>f²</th>
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<td>0.22**</td>
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<td>0.12</td>
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<th>f²</th>
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<td>Avoidance</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.46**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
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</table>
Brief report: Perceptions of social withdrawal during emerging adulthood in Lagos, Nigeria

Julie C. Bowker a, *, Adesola Adebusola Ojo b,1, Matthew H. Bowker c,2

a Department of Psychology, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, 224 Park Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260-4100, USA
Positive Peer Treatment

YES, when considering *dyadic* level variables (Oh, Rubin, Bowker et al., 2008)

BUT, social anxiety literature raises possibility of harm
Study 4: Anxious-withdrawal and Positive Peer Treatment

- 264 young adolescents ($M$ age = 12.08 years)

- Positive peer treatment (Wave 1): being the recipient of many nominations for “Someone you are nice to”

- Outcomes (Waves 1, 2):
  - Anxious-withdrawal (or shyness)
  - Peer victimization
  - Depression

- Control variables (Wave 1):
  - Acceptance
  - Friendship

Bowker (2014). Special issue on Withdrawal in Infant and Child Development
Study 4: Anxious-withdrawal and Positive Peer Treatment: **Findings**

![Graph showing the relationship between W1 Victimization and W1 Anxious-Withdrawal for different groups.]
Study 4: Anxious-withdrawal and Positive Peer Treatment: Findings
SUMMARY: Being the recipient of prosocial behavior from any peers strengthened the stability of anxious-withdrawal as well as the concurrent and predictive associations between anxious-withdrawal and victimization (for boys).
Other studies

Adolescent crushes  
(Bowker et al., 2012, Bowker & Etkin, in press)

Mixed-grade group level peer experiences  
(Bowker & Etkin, 2014)

Same- versus other-sex peer experiences  
(Bowker et al, 2015)

Rejection sensitivity  
(Bowker et al., 2013; Thomas & Bowker, 2015)
Thank you!

Any questions?