

The Associations Between Having a Popular Friend and Psychological Adjustment



in Early Adolescence
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Introduction

• **Popularity** is a type of peer experience that becomes extremely influential during early adolescence (10-14 years), when increased emphasis is placed on getting along with peers.

• Research indicates that young adolescents benefit *socially* from associating with popular peers. However, it is not known whether they also benefit *psychologically*. This study examines, for the first time, whether having a popular *friend* can influence adolescents' psychological well-being.

• I hypothesized that having a popular friend might impact psychological well-being due to the extant literature showing the importance young adolescents place on popularity (e.g., Eder, 1985), as well as research showing the social benefits from associating with popular peers (e.g., "basking in reflected glory" effect; Marks et al., 2012).

• Based on past research (e.g., Benenson & Benarroch, 1998; Nangle et al., 2003), three moderators were considered and expected to moderate the associations between having a popular friend and psychological well-being.

• Of interest were the adolescent's own level of popularity, mutuality of the friendship, and gender as moderators.

• I predicted that friends' popularity (regardless of mutuality) would be associated negatively with loneliness and depression; and that this association would be stronger for *girls* more than boys, when the friendship is *mutual* (or reciprocated; e.g., both adolescents view each other as friends), and for adolescents who are *not popular* themselves.

Participants & Procedure

• Participants were 271 (48% female; *M* age = 11.54 years) 6th grade students from two middle schools in Buffalo, NY.

• The ethnic make-up of the sample was comparable to the overall ethnic composition of both schools. Participants' self-reports were as follows: 58% Caucasian, 21% African American, 12% Biracial, 4% Hispanic, 3% Arabic, 1% Native American, and 1% Asian.

• Students were part of a larger longitudinal study. Of interest in this study were the questionnaires completed at Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2).

Tables

Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations & Descriptive Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Friend Popularity	-	.11	-.16*	-.27**	-.10	-.15	-.04	.11	.04
2. Adolescent Popularity		-	-.23**	-.14	-.14	.05	.14	.11	.10
3. Loneliness Time 1			-	.76**	.55**	.35**	-.14	-.15*	.14
4. Loneliness Time 2				-	.45**	.58**	-.14	-.08	.03
5. Depression Time 1					-	.64**	-.05	-.03	.02
6. Depression Time 2						-	-.13	-.07	.06
7. Mutuality							-	.18*	-.00
8. Sex								-	.03
9. Ethnicity									-
Mean	0.17	0.00	1.64	1.59	0.30	0.30	0.57	0.48	2.33
SD	1.05	1.00	0.65	0.64	0.31	0.33	0.50	0.50	2.36

Table 2. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Loneliness from Friend Popularity, with Sex and Adolescent Popularity as Moderators

Outcome, Step, Predictors	Loneliness Time 1		β	Loneliness Time 2		
	B	β		B	β	
1. FPOP	-0.09	-0.16*		1. LONT1	0.69	0.73**
2. ADPOP	-0.11	-0.19**		2. FPOP	-0.07	-0.13*
Sex	-0.12	-0.10		3. ADPOP	-0.03	-0.07
3. FPOP x ADPOP	-0.03	-0.06		Sex	0.02	0.02
FPOP x Sex	0.03	0.02		4. FPOP x ADPOP	0.03	0.05
ADPOP x Sex	-0.12	-0.11		FPOP x Sex	-0.03	-0.03
4. FPOP x ADPOP x Sex	0.28	0.15		ADPOP x Sex	-0.07	-0.07
				5. FPOP x ADPOP x Sex	0.29	0.17*

Note. LON = loneliness, DEP = depression, FPOP = friend popularity, ADPOP = adolescent popularity; T1 refers to Time 1; T2 refers to Time 2; Sex was coded as 0 = boys, 1 = girls. **p* < .05, ***p* < .01.

Measures

Peer nomination items were used to assess:

• **Popularity (T1)**; with the items "Someone who is very popular" and "Someone who is not popular." The formula, # of "popular" nominations - # of "not popular" nominations, was used to determine popularity scores for the adolescent and his/her first nominated "very best friend."

• **Friendship (T1)**; identified by "very best friend" nominations. Mutuality determined by reciprocal "very best friend" nominations (e.g., Jane nominated Jessica, Jessica nominated Jane).

Self report measures were used to assess:

• **Depressive symptoms (T1 & T2)** (10-item Children's Depressive Inventory; Kovacs, 1992) were assessed by calculating the mean score across all items with higher scores indicating more symptoms ($\alpha = 0.76$).

• **Loneliness (T1 & T2)** (16-item Asher Loneliness Scale; Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984) was assessed by children's self-reports of loneliness and social dissatisfaction with higher mean scores indicating greater loneliness ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Results

• **Correlations (see Table 1)**: Loneliness and depression were relatively stable across time points, and associated with each other. Friend popularity was associated with T1 and T2 loneliness. Adolescent popularity was associated with T1 loneliness. Sex was negatively associated with loneliness and positively associated with mutuality.

A series of hierarchical linear regression analyses revealed the following (see Table 2):

• No main or interaction effects were found for the mutuality variable, therefore, it was dropped from subsequent analyses.

• **Main effects**: Friend popularity was associated with both T1 and T2 loneliness.

• **Interaction effect**: When predicting T2 loneliness, an interaction between friend popularity, adolescent popularity, and sex emerged, such that friend popularity was associated with T2 loneliness for *girls* low in popularity ($\beta = -0.46, p = .006$), but not for boys who were high in popularity ($\beta = -0.06, p = .16$), boys who were low in popularity ($\beta = -0.07, p = .23$), or girls high in popularity ($\beta = 0.14, p = .23$).

Conclusions

• Generally, findings suggest that many young adolescents may experience psychological benefits from having a popular friend, and that the benefits may be especially strong for girls with low social status.

• It is well-established that girls are more influenced by their friendships and social relationships than boys, while at the same time placing strong value on popularity (Rose & Rudolph, 2004). Thus, it is possible that girls lower in popularity experience the greatest psychological benefits from having popular friends because their friends helped them socially (which in turn, improved their feelings of acceptance). Additional research however is needed to test this hypothesis.

• A likely reason that mutuality did not matter for the findings is that the mere *perception* of having a popular friend may make one feel connected to the larger popular peer group, leading the individual to feel inclusion, and therefore, less lonely and depressed.

• Future research could focus on the *mechanism* through which associations with popular friends are psychologically beneficial, perhaps revealing new insight into ways to help kids without popular friends to garner the same benefits.

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