Psychological Adjustment and Experiences with Peers During Early Adolescence: Reciprocal, Incidental, or Unidirectional Relationships?

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This study examined the relationship over time involving three types of experiences with peers (amount of contact with friends, intimacy with best friend, rejection by peers) and two indices of psychological adjustment (self-perceived social acceptance and depressive affect) using longitudinal and causal analytic procedures developed within the life stress paradigm. Data were collected twice on a sample of 73 young adolescents, with a 6-month interval between measurements. The results provide partial support for a model of reciprocal influences between experiences with peers and adaptation, since adaptation was predictive of change over time in peer experiences in several instances as well as vice versa. Implications for intervention and further research are presented.

Peer relations during childhood and adolescence are widely viewed as one of the more powerful predictors of adjustment later in life. However, empirical validation is scant for the manner in which experiences with peers contribute to increased vulnerability to later problems (Parker & Asher, 1987). Poor peer relations have been viewed alternatively as incidental manifestations of some underlying disturbance, as serving a causal role in the emergence of dysfunction, and as part of a reciprocal process in which symptomatology both leads to and flows from poorer experiences with peers (Parker & Asher, 1987).

Despite limited empirical validation, there are ample reasons to expect experiences with peers to serve important functions during early adolescence (Berndt, 1982). Among the more important of these functions, peers pro-
vide a powerful, and possibly unique, source of information about the self during a period of heightened concern about the imagined judgments of others (Erikson, 1963; Harter, 1983a). Information about many dimensions of the self are conveyed by peers, but the young adolescent’s sense of social acceptance may be particularly susceptible to change based on experiences with peers during this age range as he or she looks outside of the family for information regarding status in egalitarian, voluntary relationships (Youniss, 1980).

There is a growing awareness that different aspects of peer relations influence various elements of self-perceptions (Furman & Robbins, 1985). For example, participating in larger groups of peers may be very important for developing a sense of inclusion, whereas having a close friendship may be more important for maintaining feelings of intimacy (Furman & Robbins, 1985). It is also plausible to expect some interactive effects among various aspects of peer experiences. Active rejection by peers, for instance, might generally be expected to lead to feelings of being less accepted by (and acceptable to) peers, and the influence of this rejection on self-perceptions might be more pronounced in the absence of at least one close peer friendship. To gain a more complete view of an adolescent’s peer relationships, it appears necessary to assess several aspects of experiences with peers. The amount of regular contact with a number of peers, a construct similar to popularity, seems important to measure, as is the closeness of the adolescent’s relationship with a best friend (Furman & Robbins, 1985). In addition, experiences with active rejection by peers have received increasing attention (Asher & Coie, in press).

In addition to conveying information about the self, experiences with peers may play a role in the development of psychological distress. Explanations for this linkage point to the social support functions (e.g., esteem support, improved problem solving) and the opportunities for shared pleasurable experiences provided by friendships (Rook, 1985). This formulation leads one to expect close friendships to exert main effects on psychological well-being by enhancing esteem and providing pleasure, and to provide buffering effects when negative events occur by shoring up esteem and improving problem-solving efforts. The available literature on depressive affect in early adolescence is consistent with this formulation in demonstrating associations between poor peer relationships and depressive symptoms (Feldman, Rubenstein, & Rubin, 1988; Puig-Antich et al., 1985), although the use of single time period designs has precluded the use of longitudinal or causal analyses that might give a clearer picture of the strength and direction of effects. There is also support for the view that depressive affect may contribute to poorer experiences with peers (Faust, Baum, & Forehand, 1985),