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## Friendships and Romantic Relationships of Black and White Adolescents

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### Abstract

Prior research on adolescent peer relationships has focused on interpersonal dimensions of friendships but not of romantic relationships, and has rarely examined minority groups. We used a random sample of 122 adolescents to examine race and gender differences in friendships, romantic relationships, and the congruence between closest friendship and romantic relationship on five interpersonal domains: mutual support, self-disclosure, hurtful conflict, fear of betrayal, and interpersonal sensitivity. Significant race by gender differences in the difference between relationship type for both positive and negative dimensions of relationships were found. White girls reported significantly higher levels of self-disclosure in their friendship ties in comparison to romantic relationship, whereas white boys reported nearly equivalent levels. In comparison to white adolescents, Black adolescent girls and boys had similar levels of self-disclosure in their romantic relationships as their same-sex friendships. With regards to negative elements of relationships, girls reported more hurtful conflict in romance than friendship, whereas boys reported an opposite pattern. Results highlight the importance of consideration of race and gender influences on youth interpersonal skills within peer and romantic relationships.

### Keywords

Friendship; Romance; Adolescents; Race; Gender

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Peer relationships play a critical role in the lives of adolescents, facilitating their exploration of social identities, individuation from the family, and tolerance of stress (Harter, 1999; Hirsch & DuBois, 1992; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Most studies on peer ties have examined friendships (Brown, 2004); only recently have empirical investigations of precollege romantic relationships begun in earnest (Bouchey & Furman, 2003; Florsheim, 2003).

Prior studies in these areas have typically examined White, suburban populations. The lack of comparative research among diverse demographic groups has several drawbacks (Giordano, 2003; McLoyd, 1990). First, conclusions may have been drawn prematurely that may not be generalizable across race. This may be especially true regarding gender

differences in friendship. Second, our understanding of minority youth is incomplete, and perhaps biased, given the focus on problematic sexual behavior and the inattention to core interpersonal relationship dimensions.

Adolescents experience both closeness and conflict in close peer relationships. Self-disclosure and the provision of mutual support play important roles in the development of intimacy (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Savin-William & Berndt, 1990; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Conflict can lead to closer ties and new understandings of others (Youniss & Smollar, 1985) or to fear of betrayal and interpersonal sensitivity (Downey, Bonica, & Rincón, 1999; Way, 1998).

Gender differences have been consistently found in research on friendships among White adolescents, with higher levels of intimacy in friendships between girls in comparison to boys (Brown & Klute, 2003; Giordano, 2003). Whereas the majority of girls appear to have close friendships that involve symmetrical understanding and mutual intimacy, almost one-third of boys have friendships characterized by an absence of intimacy and a sense of defensiveness (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Without the expression of hurt and painful feelings, boys may dwell on unresolved conflict and form resentments more so than girls. Adolescent girls may be less likely to hold onto negative feelings because of their greater willingness to disclose emotional reactions, which may allow them to ameliorate the source of stress as well as provide catharsis.

Although studies of the friendships of Black adolescents are rare, several initial investigations have not replicated the gender effect. Two studies demonstrated the gender difference among White friendships, but failed to find a significant gender differences in levels of self-disclosure and social support among Black friendships (DuBois & Hirsch, 1990). These findings would be consistent with the hypothesized greater gender role flexibility among Blacks (e.g., Bowman, 1993). Some scholars, for instance, have asserted that gender role socialization is less specific in Black as compared to European American homes (Harris, 1996; Reid & Trotter, 1993).

Empirical research on the interpersonal dimensions of adolescent dating relationships is surprisingly scarce given that 65% of adolescents (ages 12–18) report having had some type of romantic relationship in the prior 18 months (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Romantic relationships, like friendships, are characterized by positive attributes, such as companionship, closeness, and commitment, as well as negative ones, including conflict and jealousy (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Expectations and skills for intimate heterosexual relationships may develop from close friendships with same-sex friends (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999; O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlberg, 2003; Taradash, Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Costa, 2001). This has led a number of investigators to expect congruence in relationship profiles across friendship and romance: adolescents with more intimate friendships should be able to develop more intimate romantic ties, and those who find difficulty in developing supportive friendships are likely to face similar challenges in romantic relations (e.g., Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Seiffge-Krenke, 2000).

The congruence hypothesis presents a global understanding of youth behavior across friendship and romantic relationships. A refinement of this hypothesis would consider potential gender and race or ethnic differences into its framework. At early ages, boys learn to avoid behaviors considered “feminine,” which includes social sensitivity, nurturance, and emotional expressiveness (Levant, 1995). In contrast, female identity development takes place in a context of ongoing relationships and attachments (Chodorow, 1974). A woman's role has been that of nurturer and caretaker, with young girls socialized to empathize, care for others, and be emotionally expressive (Gilligan, 1982). If self disclosure, showing

support by listening, and acknowledgment are predictors of successful adolescent heterosexual interactions and relationships (Hanson, Christopher, & Nangle, 1992), girls may bring better interpersonal skills from their same-sex interactions for a romantic relationship than are boys.

There are also good reasons why there might not be congruence in gender profiles across relationships. In childhood, girls and boys often spend little time together in friendship, with negligible learning of the styles of the other gender or skills in relating to them (Maccoby, 1998). This limits the carryover of friendship skills and makes the development of successful romantic relationships more difficult (Leaper & Anderson, 1997). Each gender is likely to confront markedly different communication styles in cross-gender relationships than in same-gender friendships. In same-gender groups, boys are more likely to interrupt one another; use commands, threats, or boasts of authority; and simply refuse to comply with another's demands. Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to express agreement with what the other has said, pause to give the other a chance to speak, and acknowledge a point previously made (Maltz & Borker, 1983). In addition, cross-gender parent-adolescent relationships provide better models for boys than for girls, given higher quality mother-son than father-daughter communication (Larson & Richards, 1994; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). These varied effects may counterbalance possible carryovers from friendships, decreasing the congruence across relationship type.

Few empirical studies have explored gender or racial differences in congruence. Among White adolescents, one investigation reported higher levels of support in both friendships and romantic relationships among females (Connolly & Johnson, 1996) whereas another found boys exhibiting more self-disclosure in romantic relationships than did girls (Shulman, Levy-Shiff, Kedem, & Alon, 1997). The extent of congruence may differ among Black adolescents. A more androgynous orientation toward male-female relationships (Hill, 1972) could result in fewer gender differences in adolescent romantic relationships. Furthermore, the greater involvement of Blacks with extended family adults (Stack, 1996; Taylor & Roberts, 1995; Wilson, 1989) may provide more opportunities to learn how to transfer same-gender relationship skills to cross-gender ties. Thus, it is possible that greater support for the congruence model may be found among Black than White adolescents.

We examined three sets of issues: (1) Do interpersonal dimensions of close friendships vary among Black and White adolescent boys and girls? (2) Do interpersonal dimensions of romantic relationships differ among Black and White adolescent boys and girls? (3) To what extent are experiences in friendships congruent with those in romantic relationships among these race by gender groups?

## Method

### Sample and procedures

As part of a larger study on the long-term adaptations of families of divorce, 122 adolescents took part in this investigation. We conducted this study in the sole public high school in a suburb of a large midwestern city. The school had an overall student population of approximately 2700 in grades 9–12, with nearly equivalent numbers of Black (43%) and White (49%) adolescents. Students in approximately 70 representative English classes were given a brief presentation about the study and asked to fill out an information card if they were interested in participating. Students were then randomly selected from each cell of an 8-cell design: race (Black/White)  $\times$  gender (male/female)  $\times$  family structure (intact marriage vs. divorced, mother-headed household). Phone calls were then made to parents to verify whether the family met the selection criteria, to obtain consent, and to schedule interviews. The participation rate was 86% for Whites and 71% for Black families. There were no

significant demographic differences between the current sample participants and the full sample. The overall design, assessment methodology, and procedures of the larger study are detailed elsewhere (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002).

Age ranged from 14–19 years ( $M = 16$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ). Black families were mostly working and middle class, whereas the White families were primarily middle and upper middle class ( $p < .001$ ). Among Black mothers, 8% dropped out prior to high school graduation, 21% graduated high school, 32% had some college, 35% graduated college, and 4% had graduate education. Among White mothers, 2% were high school dropouts, 5% high school graduates, 18% had some college, 41% were college graduates, and 34% had some graduate education. ANOVA of household income revealed main effects for both race and parental marital status,  $F(1, 84) = 50.22$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $F(1, 84) = 83.54$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively, indicating that Black families had lower incomes than White families, and divorced households had lower incomes than intact households.

## Measures

As part of the larger study, a brief questionnaire was developed that enabled the assessment of common interpersonal dimensions across peer and romantic relationships. In a written questionnaire mailed to their homes a few days before an interview, adolescents were asked to respond to a series of items regarding their best friend and most important romantic partner (if any in the past year). Regarding the best friend, all were of the same gender and 7% were of a different race. They had typically been best friends for 5 years ( $SD = 4.04$ ). Regarding the romantic partner, all were of the opposite sex and 8% were of a different race. The average length of the romantic relationship was 28 weeks ( $SD = 39.61$ ) and exclusive (73%). Romantic relationship ratings were not obtained for 20 adolescents who had not been involved in such a relationship. There were no significant demographic or friendship differences between adolescents who did and did not report a dating relationship in the past year.

Five scales were developed to assess interpersonal characteristics of their best friendship and their most important romantic relationship. The interviewer read each item (inserting the name of the specific friend or dating partner), and adolescents responded using 1–5 frequency ratings (higher ratings reflect greater frequency). The first rating was in reference to the adolescent's best friend; the second rating referred to the adolescent's romantic relationship. Each subscale demonstrated adequate alpha coefficients with regards to friendship (range of .60–.82) and dating (range of .60–.84). The five scales used in the present study were the following: Mutual Support measured the degree to which an adolescent felt she or he received and gave support to the other; Self-Disclosure assessed the level of mutual sharing of personal thoughts and feelings that the adolescent had experienced with the other; Fear of Betrayal reflected how much the adolescent worried that the other would betray trust in the relationship; Hurtful Conflict measured the extent to which the adolescent had unpleasant arguments with the other, as well as the degree to which she or he perceives the other as being provocative in a hurtful manner; and Interpersonal Sensitivity assessed the degree to which the adolescent was bothered by negative interactions with the other. Each subscale consisted of 4 items with the exception of one six-item subscale (Mutual support).

## Results

The intra-relationship correlations reveal mostly moderate intercorrelations, suggesting the distinctiveness of the domains (Table 1). The positive dimensions (mutual support, self-disclosure) are inversely related to the negative dimensions (hurtful conflict, fear of betrayal, interpersonal sensitivity); within each of these two dimensions, the intercorrelations are

positive. Each friendship scale was significantly correlated with the corresponding dating scale. However, only the association between the mutual support scales was of any magnitude.

MANOVAs were conducted to test for mean differences, with follow-up univariate ANOVAs when there was a significant MANOVA finding. After confirmation of sample size equivalence across cells, a factorial design was employed with race and gender serving as independent factors and interpersonal subscales for the reference relationship constituting the dependent variable set. Due to the high proportion of single parent households among Black families, parental marital status was included in all models. A repeated measures MANOVA tested for scale differences across friendship vs. dating relationships. These models were then repeated in covariate analyses that controlled for SES (maternal education and household income). SES had no appreciable effect on the quality of friendships and dating relationships; results remained the same or became only slightly less strong than in analyses without these controls. Accordingly, covariate results will not be reported.

### Friendships

A MANOVA of the five interpersonal dimensions in friendship scales demonstrated a main effect for gender,  $F(5, 90) = 8.60, p < .001$ , with ANOVAs indicating that the effect was significant for mutual support,  $F(1, 94) = 16.60, p < .001$  and self-disclosure,  $F(1, 94) = 28.10, p < .001$ . Girls reported higher levels of mutual support ( $M = 27.60, SD = 2.20$ ) and self-disclosure ( $M = 17.40, SD = 2.20$ ) than boys (support  $M = 25.60, SD = 3.10$ ; disclosure  $M = 14.20, SD = 3.60$ ). There was no main effect for race or race  $\times$  gender interaction effect.

### Romantic relationships

There were no main effects for race or gender on the dating scales. MANOVA revealed only one significant interaction effect, of race by gender,  $F(5, 90) = 2.90, p < .05$ . Univariate tests indicated the significant race  $\times$  gender effect held only for self-disclosure,  $F(1, 94) = 11.00, p < .001$ . Simple effects tests demonstrated a race effect among boys,  $F(1, 48) = 5.20, p < .01$ , with White males reporting higher levels of self-disclosure than Black males (see Fig. 1). A race effect among girls,  $F(1, 50) = 5.00, p < .05$ , revealed that Black girls reported more self-disclosure than White girls. A gender effect among White adolescents,  $F(1, 51) = 5.40, p < .01$ , revealed that White girls reported lower levels of self-disclosure in their dating relationships than White males. However, a gender effect among Black adolescents,  $F(1, 47) = 4.90, p < .05$ , found higher levels among females than males.

### Comparison of friendship and romantic relationships

A repeated measures MANOVA across the five scales, with relationship type (friendship or dating relationship) as the repeated measure, revealed a main effect for peer relationship type,  $F(5, 90) = 28.90, p < .001$ . Univariate tests indicated that the main effect was significant for fear of betrayal,  $F(1, 94) = 107.00, p < .001$ , mutual support,  $F(1, 94) = 37.50, p < .001$ , and self-disclosure,  $F(1, 94) = 23.60, p < .001$ . Adolescents reported much less fear of betrayal in friendships ( $M = 4.70, SD = 1.90$ ) than in dating relationships ( $M = 8.40, SD = 2.20$ ).

The main effects for mutual support and self-disclosure were qualified by higher order interactions. For both measures, there was a significant gender by relationship type interaction effect, which was further qualified by a race by gender by relationship type interaction for mutual support,  $F(1, 94) = 4.90, p < .05$ ; for self-disclosure,  $F(1, 94) = 11.00, p < .001$ .

Figure 1 compares levels of self-disclosure reported in friendships and dating relationships among gender/race groups. White girls reported the greatest difference between best friends and romantic partners, with much more disclosure in best friendships. White boys, by contrast, reported more self-disclosure to girlfriends than to best friends. Black adolescents were between these extremes. Specifically, simple effects tests revealed a significant gender by relationship type effect among Whites,  $F(1, 51) = 38.90, p < .001$ , but not among Blacks. Among girls, and among boys, there were no significant race by relationship type effects. Simple effects tests for mutual support found a similar pattern, except that in this instance, White boys reported slightly more support in their best friendship as compared to their romantic relationship.

A gender by relationship type effect for hurtful conflict,  $F(1, 94) = 5.40, p < .05$ , demonstrated a similarity in gender relationship profiles that go across race. Girls reported significantly higher levels in dating relationships ( $M = 7.90, SD = 1.80$ ) than in friendships ( $M = 6.70, SD = 2.10$ ). By contrast, boys reported slightly lower levels of hurtful conflict in dating relationships ( $M = 7.00, SD = 1.60$ ) than in friendships ( $M = 7.20, SD = 2.00$ ).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to further understanding of the role of race and gender in peer relationships, extending research on friendship and romance to an under-studied population of African-American youth. Regarding close friendships, our results are consistent with numerous other investigations that have found more supportive and self-disclosing relationships among girls rather than boys (Brown & Klute, 2003; Giordano, 2003). Regarding romantic relationships, our findings provide mixed support for the congruence model across friendship and romantic ties that suggest considerable individual differences in congruence across relationships.

Although correlational analyses regarding the same relationship dimension across relationship type were all significant, only one association, mutual support, was of any magnitude. The median intercorrelation reflected merely 9% shared variance. Weak or inconsistent associations have been reported in some (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Shulman et al., 1997), but not all prior research (e.g., Furman & Wehner, 1994). In repeated measures analyses among Whites, we found gender differences that were contrary to the congruence model. White boys, for example, were more likely to have self-disclosing relationships with their girl friends than with their close male friends, whereas White girls reported the opposite profile. This would be consistent with findings from Shulman et al. (1997) regarding males (females did not differ in disclosure across relationships).

What patterns were found to support the congruency hypothesis across relationship type? A congruence model qualified by race and gender was found for positive features of relationships. Black adolescent girls and boys reported similar levels of self-disclosure in their romantic relationships as they did in their same-sex friendships. When we considered alternate variables that could account for the better fit of the congruence model for positive aspects of relationships among Blacks than Whites, we found that findings remained robust regardless of whether adolescents reported on a present or past romantic relationship, year in school, and length of the romantic relationship. One possible explanation draws attention to the role of cross-gender relationships with significant adults. A notable finding from research on parent-adolescent interactions (conducted mostly with White samples) has been the impoverished quality of many father-daughter relationships (e.g., Larson & Richards, 1994; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). These relationships provide weak models to girls for developing supportive, disclosing romantic relationships. Boys, on the other hand, have experienced more positive cross-gender interactions in their relationship with their mother.

Strong kin networks among Blacks, however, may provide additional resources for positive cross-gender ties. In the current sample, Blacks reported more supportive ties with adult kin than did White adolescents, with Black girls reporting the strongest ties among the four race/gender groups (reference deleted for blind review). These ties may provide Black adolescent girls, more so than White girls, with alternative, positive, cross-gender relationships with adults than can serve as models for peer romantic ties. This might lead to less of a disparity between friendship and romantic relationships among Black than White girls.

With regards to negative elements of relationships, notable gender differences were found across relationship type. This expands prior research that has been articulated mostly with respect to positive dimensions (e.g., support), with less discussion of how it might apply to negative dimensions (though see Downey et al., 1999). Girls reported more hurtful conflict in romance than friendship, whereas boys reported an opposite pattern. From an early age, gender-segregated peer relationships lead to different relationship styles (Berndt, 1982; Hanson & Hicks, 1980; Maltz & Borker, 1983), which may clash when young men and women begin to form heterosexual relationships (Maccoby, 1998). Girls may experience the interruptions and challenges of a boyfriend, common among males, as unpleasant and hurtful, in contrast to the more supportive responses received from other girls. By contrast, boys may enjoy the less combative responses of a girlfriend. These findings held across race. It is important to understand ways in which there are similarities as well as differences across race. In this instance, what is most salient is culture that is tied to gender.

There are several limitations to our study. The sample was drawn from a single school, suggesting that there may be limits to its generalizability. Although the scales demonstrated adequate validity overall, the few reliability coefficients that were moderate suggest a need for future psychometric studies of the underlying interpersonal dimensions among minority populations. All of the measures employed were self-report; it would seem valuable to utilize multidimensional assessment approaches to examine whether observed behaviors within interpersonal relationships demonstrate the same profile as the self-report measures. It may be, for instance, that there are gender differences in the reference points that inform judgments of self-disclosure. In addition, longitudinal data would be helpful in tracking developmental changes in relationships over time. White adolescent girls, for example, may become increasingly skilled at applying their interpersonal skills to romantic life, leading to a more congruent profile across relationships in later years.

This research offers a refinement of the congruence hypothesis suggested by Connolly et al. (2000). Skills developed in friendship can be utilized in a romantic context, but not necessarily in a straightforward manner. Careful attention needs to be paid to how expectations and behavior forged in same-gender friendship groups can provide misleading guidelines for cross-gender relationships. Learning how to relate successfully to the other gender in friendships may be a very useful step on the road to successful romantic ties (Connolly et al., 2000). The fostering of such relationships is not only of intrinsic value, but given sexually transmitted diseases, dating violence, and teenage pregnancies, may well serve an important preventive function as well.

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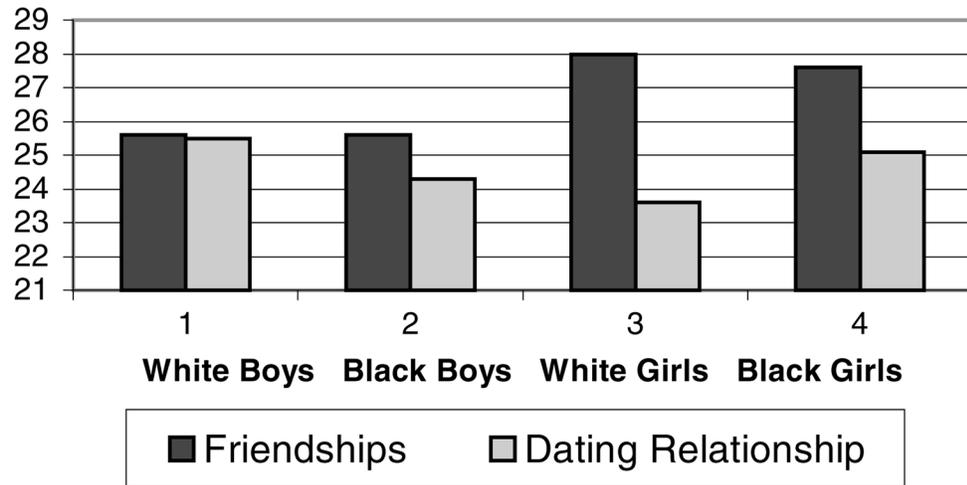
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**Fig. 1.** Self-disclosure in friendship and romantic relationships among gender and race groups

Table 1

Correlations of interpersonal dimensions in friendship and romantic relationships<sup>a</sup>

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
Friendship										
1. Mutual support	-	.65***	-.30**	-.30**	-.33***	.50***	.22*	-.18*	-.03	-.27**
2. Self-disclosure		-	.15	-.20*	-.22**	.21*	.19*	-.12	.01	-.17*
3. Fear of betrayal			-	.42**	.36***	-.23**	-.04	.31***	.06	.11
4. Hurtful conflict				-	.29***	-.10	.02	.18*	.19*	.15
5. Interpersonal sensitivity					-	-.11	.12	.10	.21*	
Romantic										
6. Mutual support						-	.67***	-.22*	-.17*	-.23**
7. Self-disclosure							-	-.14	-.03	-.16
8. Fear of betrayal								-	.32***	.45***
9. Hurtful conflict									-	.34***
10. Interpersonal sensitivity										-
Sensitivity										

<sup>a</sup>N's for correlations range from 102–122;\*  $p < .05$ ;\*\*  $p < .01$ ;\*\*\*  $p < .001$