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CHAPTER 9: PEER CHARACTERISTICS

In this chapter, we summarize our findings for both positive aspects of peer relationships (Peer Communication, Peer Support, and Positive Friends) and negative aspects of peer relationships (Negative Friends and Peer Drug Norms). These different measures were chosen, in part, to parallel our parent measures. For example, we have parent and peer measures of support and communication as well as assessments of positive and negative aspects of both types of relationships. This allowed us to assess the nature of changes in our adolescents' relationships with their parents versus their peers. Although there is great deal of interest in the changes in these two social contexts, very few studies have looked at changes over time in both contexts. This is quite odd given the amount of rhetoric linking these two systems and suggesting that adolescence is largely about the conjoint declines in connections with one's parents and increases in one's connections with one's peers. One of our main goals was to help to fill this void. Our results are shown in Tables 17 and 18 and Figure 6.

Peer Communication

As with their communication with their parents, we asked the adolescents how often they talked with their friends about important matters using exactly the same questions. Unlike their communication with their parents, which remained stable during adolescence, there was a significant positive linear slope and a significant negative quadratic slope for peer communication (see Table 17). On average, these adolescents' communication with their peers increased from 14 to 16 years, remained

stable from 16 to 18 years, and then decreased from 18 to 20 years (see Figure 6). There were no significant differences in either of the slopes according to gender, race/ethnicity, the gender by race/ethnicity interaction, SES, or parents' marital status.

At age 14 (the intercept), females reported more frequent conversations with their peers than did males. These gender differences are consistent with other studies of peer communication (Belle, 1989; Keijsers & Poulin, 2013; McNelles & Connolly, 1999). In terms of actual frequencies, the average adolescent talked with friends about important issues between a few times per week to once per week (controlling for the covariates). This is the same number of times they talked with their parents about these issues. Thus, although we found an increase in the frequency of these types of communication with one's friends over adolescence, this did not result from a concomitant decline in the frequency of such communications with one's parents. Instead, peers became an additional source of communication.

Peer Support

Again, we tried to assess social support in a similar manner across parents and friends to make comparisons more meaningful, focusing on emotional support. There was a significant positive quadratic trend for adolescents' perceptions of peer support (see Table 17). Furthermore, the linear trend was significantly moderated by gender. On average, these adolescents' ratings of support from their peers declined from 12 to 14 years and then increased from 15 to 18 years (see Figure 6). This pattern was shown for females who reported higher levels of perceived peer support at age 18 than at age 12. In contrast, on average, males' perceptions of peer support were fairly stable from 12 to 15 years, with an increase from 16 to 18 years.

At 14 years, female adolescents reported having more peer support than did male adolescents. None of the other demographic variables were significant, where $p <$

.01, at the intercept. In terms of the mean levels, adolescents at age 14 felt that they received good support “about half the time” (controlling for the covariates) from their peers. This support increased to levels between “about half the time” to “fairly often” by age 18. Interestingly, their perceptions of peer support were lower at all ages than these same adolescents reported for receiving support from their parents. So again, increasing peer connections were not being made at the expense of parental connections.

Prevalence of Positive and Negative Peers

Increasingly, discussions about peer influences during adolescence include mentions of the need to describe the exact nature of the adolescents’ group of friends (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). What adolescents do with and learn from their friends and peers will depend on what these friends and peers are doing as well as what they value. Thus, the costs and benefits of peer influence depend on the nature of one’s friends and peers. Accordingly, we asked our participants to rate the proportion of their friends who exhibited a wide set of both positive and negative behaviors, goals, and values. We then factored these items and developed two comprehensive scales – one for positive behaviors, goals, and values and one for negative behaviors, goals, and values. We did not collect data on the negative peer characteristics at age 20 because the specific items were no longer age appropriate.

Positive Peers. There were significant negative linear and quadratic trends for reports of the prevalence of positive peers amongst one’s friends (see Table 17). On average, these adolescents’ reports of the proportion of their friends who exhibited positive behaviors and values remained stable from 12 to 14 years and then decreased from age 14 onwards, with a steep decline in late adolescence (see Figure 6). The linear slope was moderated by family SES. Lower-SES adolescents experienced a steady

decrease in prevalence of positive peers from 12 to 20 years, whereas higher-SES adolescents experienced a slight increase over time. Thus, the decline in proportion of positive peers amongst one's friends is only true for adolescents living in low-SES households. This likely reflects the decrease in the proportion of their friends expecting to go to college and being academically engaged.

At age 14, higher-SES, African American, and female adolescents reported having a higher proportion of positive friends than did lower-SES, European American, and male adolescents. In terms of the mean levels, taking into account the covariates, these adolescents began with a little more than half of their friends being engaged with academics and/or other positive social activities (3 = "half of my friends"). By age 20, adolescents reported that between "a few" to "half" of their friends were academically engaged and prosocial. These results are consistent with the declines we noted earlier in the extent to which the youth themselves are academically engaged. However, although these proportions declined over the adolescent years, the majority of youth maintained a relatively high percentage (close to 50% on average) of prosocial, academically-oriented friends.

Negative Peers. The prevalence of negative peers was assessed by asking about the proportion of one's friends who engaged in various risky or problem behaviors, including smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. There was a significant positive linear slope and a significant negative quadratic slope across time, with the linear trend significantly more marked for males than for females (see Table 17). The negative quadratic slope reflected a decrease in the proportion of one's friends who engage in these negative behaviors in late adolescence. On average, adolescents' proportion of risky friends increased from 12 to 15 years then decreased from 16 to 18 years (see

Figure 6). These results are consistent with our findings showing an increase followed by a decrease in problem behaviors in the middle adolescent years.

At the intercept (age 14), males reported a higher percentage of negative peers than did females. In terms of the means, on average, these 14-year-olds reported having a very small percentage of friends who engaged in risky behavior (i.e., less than 1%), controlling for the covariates. By age 18, the proportion of risky friends had increased to somewhat less than 25%.

Peer Drug Norms

We asked our participants to rate how “cool” or “uncool” their friends would think they were if they used either alcohol or illegal drugs such as marijuana. We found both a significant positive linear slope and a significant negative quadratic slope for perceived peer norms regarding alcohol and drug use (see Table 17). On average, these adolescents reported that peer norms for alcohol and drug use increased dramatically over time, but this increase slowed down in late adolescence (see Figure 6). The significant gender by race/ethnicity interactions for both the linear and quadratic trends were due to the fact that, unlike the other three groups, these trends did not level off for the African American males.

At the intercept, there were no significant differences according to gender, race/ethnicity, the gender by race/ethnicity interaction, SES, or parents’ marital status. In terms of actual ratings, taking into account the covariates, on average, these adolescents began believing that their peers would think they were very uncool if they used drugs. By age 18, they were more likely to believe that their friends had a neutral, although still somewhat negative, attitude toward drug use. This pattern coincides with the average increase in drug use from early to late adolescence seen in our sample.

Summary of Peer Characteristics

As predicted, most of the peer characteristics, with the exception of peer support, peaked during early to middle adolescence and then lessened in later adolescence. These findings support assertions that peers play an especially important role during this period of adolescence (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Hartup, 1996). Although perceived peer support increased in late adolescence, trajectories of the other peer characteristics either declined or stabilized as adolescents matured. This suggests that the influence of peers became less important, and their relationships were more stable yet supportive, as they approached late adolescence.

There were significant differences associated with gender, reflecting variation in the meaning and importance of peer relationships. As expected based on previous research (see Rose and Rudolph, 2006, for a review), young females generally experienced more positive, supportive friendships than did their male peers. For example, females reported more peer communication, prosocial and academically-engaged friends, and supportive friendships than did males. Male adolescents, on the other hand, reported more friends who were engaged in risky or problematic behaviors than did their female counterparts. These findings highlight that females' friendships are more oriented toward relationship intimacy, whereas males' friendships are more focused on agency, power, and excitement (Rose, 2002). Although we did not expect gender differences in the trajectories of peer characteristics, we found that males reported a greater increase in having negative peers than did females, suggesting that males are at a heightened risk for deviant peer affiliation, particularly during middle to late adolescence. Females, on the other hand, reported a greater decrease in peer support over their teenage years compared to males. This latter finding may reflect

females' lessening reliance on their friends for support as they grow older, perhaps reflecting a shift to romantic partners or greater independence as they mature.

We did not make any predictions regarding R/E differences, due to lack of evidence, but found some differences according to race/ethnicity. At age 14, African American adolescents reported having more positive peers than did European American adolescents. European American males, furthermore, experienced a greater linear increase in having friends who endorsed the use of drugs compared to the other three groups, following a similar pattern to their actual reported marijuana use. At age 17, however, the extent to which European American males reported their friends thought drugs were "cool" decreased; whereas, at the same time, friends' endorsement of drugs increased sharply for African American males. This finding highlights that the timing of risk regarding the negative influence of friends using drugs may differ for European American versus African American males.

There were few significant differences according to SES, with the exception of having positive peers. Our higher-SES adolescents generally reported having more positive peer relationships than did our lower-SES adolescents. Lower-SES adolescents reported lower levels of, and a greater decline in, the proportion of prosocial and academically engaged friends than did higher-SES adolescents. There were no significant differences, where $p < .01$, associated with parents' marital status.

Overall, most of the variance in these measures was attributed to within-person differences, with between 8% (Peer Drug Norms) and 38% (Peer Communication) of the variance explained by between-person differences (see Table 18). Of the within-person variation, between 8 and 37% was accounted for by age, with the most variance explained in Peer Drug Norms (37%) and Negative Peers (36%). Demographic differences accounted for up to 21% of the variance in the intercept, with the greatest

percentage of variance being explained for Peer Communication (21%) and Peer Support (18%). For the linear slope, the demographic differences accounted for 20% of the variance for Positive Peers.

Table 17

Growth Models for Peer Characteristics

	Peer Communication	Peer Support	Positive Peers	Negative Peers	Peer Drug Norms
For Intercept					
Intercept	3.71***	2.78***	3.36***	1.48***	1.98***
SES	.13*	.00	.08***	-.00	.04
Gender	.97***	.33***	.31***	-.13**	-.10
Ethnicity	-.08	.03	-.07**	-.04	.12
GXE	.43*	.22*	-.04	-.09	-.20
Single	.22	-.19*	.00	-.04	-.06
Intact	-.06	.04	.05	-.01	-.12
Age	.02	-.04	-.03	-.16	-.16
Age ²	-.01	.02	.00	.03*	.03
For Linear slope					
Intercept	.27***	-.04*	-.03**	.15***	.31***
SES	-.02	.00	.05***	-.01	.01
Gender	-.00	-.06**	.02	-.06***	-.02
Ethnicity	.10	-.03	.00	-.01	.07**
GXE	-.12	-.08	-.04	.01	-.09**
Single	-.32*	-.06	.05	.02	.03
Intact	-.04	.01	.00	.02	-.01
For Quadratic slope					
Intercept	-.04***	.04***	-.01**	-.04***	-.03***
SES	.00	.00	-.01*	-.00	-.00
Gender	-.00	.03*	-.01	-.00	-.02
Ethnicity	-.03*	.03*	-.00	.00	-.02
GXE	.03	-.01	.01	.01	.05**
Single	.04	.01	-.02	.01	.01
Intact	.01	.00	.01	-.00	.01

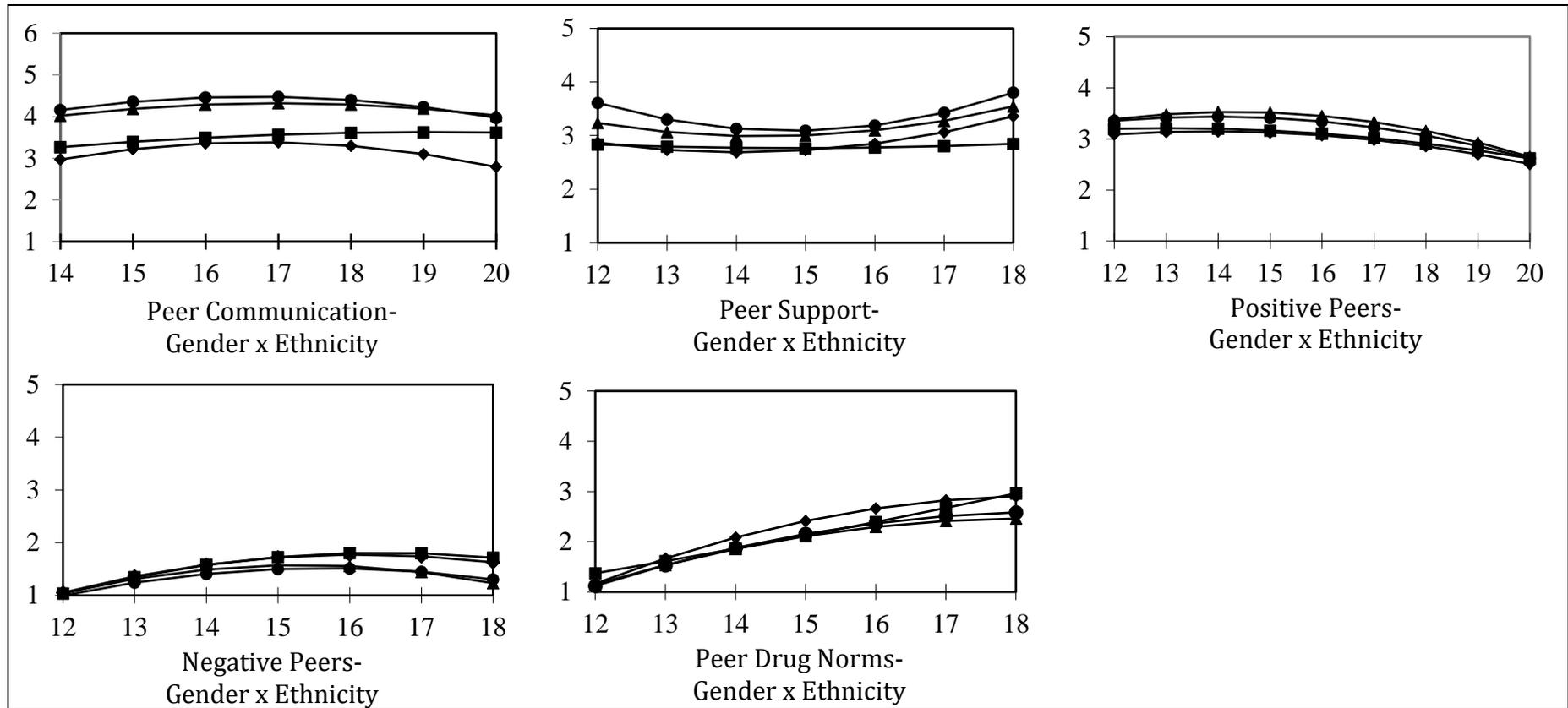
Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Table 18

Residual Variance for Peer Characteristics

	Unconditional Means Model	ICC	Unconditional Growth Model	R ² Level 1	With Level 2 Predictors	% Explained
Peer						
Communication		.38		.19		
Level 1	1.060		.855			
Intercept	.652***		.969***		.763***	21%
Linear Slope			.029***		.029***	<1%
Peer Support		.25		.08		
Level 1	.585		.540			
Intercept	.199***		.220***		.181	18%
Linear Slope			.008**		.008**	<1%
Positive Peers		.29		.23		
Level 1	.452		.346			
Intercept	.187***		.225***		.194***	14%
Linear Slope			.005*		.004*	20%
Quad Slope			.000		.000	<1%
Negative Peers		.13		.36		
Level 1	.271		.173			
Intercept	.039***		.073***		.069***	5%
Linear Slope			.006***		.006***	<1%
Peer Drug						
Norms		.08		.37		
Level 1	1.044		.658			
Intercept	.091***		.213***		.207***	3%
Linear Slope			.010***		.010***	<1%

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.



Note. The x-axis represents age in years, whereas the y-axis represents the mean of the scale, controlling for the covariates. For the gender and race/ethnicity growth curves, European-American females are represented by the circle, European American males are represented by the diamond, African American females are represented by the triangle, and African American males are represented by the square.

Figure 6. Growth Curves for Peer Characteristics.