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THE EXAMINATION OF PEER SUPPORT ON PSYCHOLOGICAL AND

ACADEMIC FUNCTIONING IN A SAMPLE OF INNER-CITY LATINO STUDENTS

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Dissertation Approval

This is to certify that the thesis presented to us by _Carly Bosacker_

on the _20th_ day of _April_, 20_16_, in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology, has been examined and is

acceptable in both scholarship and literary quality.

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Abstract

Research has shown that peer relationships influence both psychological and academic functioning (Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck & Pronk, 2012). Peer relationships have also been found to be important components of a child's emotional and behavioral functioning across cultures (Ladd, 1999; Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2007; Parker et al., 2005; Parker & Asher, 1993; La Greca & Harrison, 2006)). However, there is a lack of research on peer relationships in minority youth, specifically Latino youth (Way & Chen, 2000). This study examined the relationship between peer support and psychological and academic functioning in a sample of Latino middle-school students. Self-report questionnaires as well as school grades were utilized to examine the influence that level of peer support has on symptoms of anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-esteem, as well as school achievement. The Perceived Social Support for Friends Scale (PSS-FR; Procidano & Heller, 1983) was used to measure peer support; this study appeared to be the first to utilize the PSS-FR with a sample of youth younger than 14 years (Way & Greene, 2006). The results showed a non-significant relationship between levels of peer support and psychological and academic functioning in this sample of Latino youth. These results are likely due to a low sample size and subsequently, a lack of statistical power. Limitations of the study are addressed and future directions are explored.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Friendship can serve as one of the most crucial aspects of psychological well being in youth; it provides a non-familial context for intimacy, affection, emotional security, and companionship (Parker, Rubin, Erath, Wojslawowicz, & Buskirk, 2005). The nature of friendships also gives children and adolescents the opportunity to establish lasting relationships through which they develop an understanding and appreciation of other points of view, fostering their sense of empathy (Dewalt, Thissen, Stucky, Langer, DeWitt, E., Irwin, Lai, Yeatts, Gross, Taylor, & Varni, 2013). Furthermore, youth with friends are more sociable, less lonely, and have higher self-esteem than those without friends (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Positive friendships play an important role in both academic and non-academic functioning (Liem & Martin, 2011). For example, individuals who describe their friendships positively tend to possess high self-esteem and adjust well to school (Furman, 1996).

Positive relationships with friends also provide stable friendships throughout school and into adulthood (Zimmer-Gembeck & Pronk, 2012), and close friendships are likely to cultivate prosocial behavior, leadership skills, and emotional support (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). In contrast, problematic friendships are associated with maladjustment such as social anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and negative school attitudes (Zimmer-Gembeck & Pronk, 2012). Children without friends report being lonely and depressed (Parker, Rubin, Price, & de Rosier, 1995), and may fail to acquire the social skills necessary to form and maintain relationships with others as adolescents and adults (Sullivan, 1953). At the extreme, difficulties with peers in childhood may result in

mental health problems later in life (Parker, Rubin, Erath, Wojslawowicz, & Buskirk, 2005).

Friendships provide peer support, and children without support may be at risk for being victimized or bullied because those who experience peer victimization tend to have a limited number of friends (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). Research has shown that children who were nominated by peers as being victimized or who reported themselves as victims were less liked by peers, perceived themselves as less socially accepted, and reported symptoms of anxiety and low self-worth (Bouman, van der Meulen, Goosens, Olthof, Vermande, & Aleva, 2012). Moreover, associations have been found between peer victimization and aggression, delinquency, and drug use in middle school-aged students (Sullivan, Farrell, Kliewer, 2006). Furthermore, youth who are victimized by their peers appear to experience psychological distress such as depression and low self-esteem, which in turn can impact academic success in school (Hoglund, 2007).

Much of the research on peer relationships and friendships has focused on the use of objective assessments such as peer rankings or sociometric assessments (Parker, Rubin, Erath, Woislawowicz, & Buskrik, 2005). However, an objective assessment of relationships may not be as important as one's perceptions of their relationships (Foster, Inderbitzen, & Nangle, 1993). Even if, objectively, a child or adolescent is reported to have friends or is nominated by others as being well-liked, if that individual perceives that he or she is not well-liked or does not have friends, these perceptions have an influence on his or her thoughts and behaviors (Liem & Martin, 2011). Research on peer perceptions has shown that adolescents' perceptions of negative peer relationships are related to low social status among peers and to mental health symptoms such as

depression (Rudolph et al., 1997). Conversely, adolescents who perceive their

friendships as supportive are more likely to be socially competent, be involved in school,

and have high achievement scores (Vaquera & Kao, 2009). Last, perceptions of

friendships with peers appear to predict academic performance, general self-esteem, and

school engagement (Liem & Martin, 2011).

      The perceived quality of adolescent friendships can be shaped by psychological

variables such as self-esteem and depressive symptoms, as well as by contextual

variables such as culture, social class, and school environments (Way & Chen, 2000).

However, most of the research examining aspects of adolescent friendships has been

among middle class, European American youth (Way & Chen, 2000). Given the lack of

research on peer relationships with minority youth and the increase of ethnic minorities in

U.S. schools, specifically Latinos (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004), the

importance of including a growing population of ethnic minority youth in studies of peer

relationships is significant.

      Attention is especially needed in examining the friendships of school-aged

Latinos because research involving Latino youth has revealed that peer relationships

influence academic achievement (Woolley & Bowen, 2007) and feelings of loneliness

(Storch, Nock, Masia-Warner, Barlas, 2003). Moreover, negative friendships in Latino

adolescents have been shown to predict social anxiety and depressive symptoms (Le

Greca & Harrison, 2005). Additionally, Latinos have been shown to experience higher

levels of depression and lower levels of academic achievement, compared with youth

from other ethnic groups (Zychinski, & Polo, 2012). Overall, friendships appear to

influence psychological and academic functioning, thus it is likely that studying the role

that friendship plays in the functioning of school-aged Latino children will offer

additional insight into the importance of Latino peer relationships.

Purpose of the Study

Friendships have been found to be important components of a child's emotional

and behavioral functioning across cultures (Ladd, 1999; Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm,

2007; Parker et al., 2005; Parker & Asher, 1993; La Greca & Harrison, 2006), and appear

to have a significant impact on functioning for Latino youth (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002;

Way & Chen, 2000). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of literature that specifically

examines friendships in a Latino population. The main purpose of this study is to explore

the relationships between friend support, and psychological and academic functioning in

a sample of Latino middle school students. Specifically, self-report measures will be

used to examine students' perceptions of peer support in relation to anxiety, depression,

self-esteem, and loneliness. In addition, the relationship between peer support and

academic functioning will be explored.

Theories on Peer Relationships

Attachment theory. The empirical study of children's friendships is based on

more than one accepted theory (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). In fact, various

theories hypothesize that social relationships have a significant influence on development

(Ladd, 1999). One of these theories is attachment theory. This theory highlights the

biological function of intimate emotional bonds in attaining or maintaining proximity to

an individual who is viewed as better able to cope with the world (Bowlby, 1988).

According to attachment theory, infants develop expectations about their caregivers'

availability and responsiveness, based on the quality of parental care they receive

(Bowlby, 1973). These expectations serve as the basis for the development of mental representations of the self and others, and influence later psychosocial functioning (Troisi, Lorenzo, Alcini, Nanni, Pasquale, & Siracusano, 2006).

Moreover, attachment theory postulates that individuals have the need to establish close, enduring emotional bonds with others in order to feel secure and explore the world with confidence (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby 1973). These bonds include forming two types of relationships, one with a parent and one with peers, both of which are necessary for children's development (Hartup, 1989). For example, when children are infants, they initially form attachments with an adult, and then around the age of three years, they form attachments with peers; these are marked by reciprocity and egalitarian expectations (Hartup, 1989). Children continue to form friendships throughout childhood, including internal representations of those relationships, with familiar people other than caregivers (Howes, 1996). These internal representations occur through multiple recursive interactions such as playing together or eating lunch together (Howes, 1996). Last, once a child enters adolescence, peers may become more influential than adults because adolescents begin to rely on peers more often than parents as sources of supports (Furman & Buhmester, 1992).

Adolescent peer attachments play a unique role in serving as sources of emotional support and safe havens (Farley and Davis, 1997); peers have been shown to be more influential than parents on adolescent adjustment in terms of aggression, sympathy, and depression (Laible, 2000). Additionally, research has shown that children's attachments to their best friends are more strongly associated with their experiences of loneliness than their attachments to their parents (Chipuer, 2001). Similar results hold true for

adolescents entering adulthood because a secure attachment to friends in college has been shown to inhibit or reduce loneliness (Doumen et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the importance of peer attachment has been shown in other mammals. For example, Harry Harlow found that young rhesus monkeys that were reared by their mothers, but deprived of peer contact failed to develop essential social skills and displayed abnormal developmental trajectories (Ladd, 1999). Additionally, Suomi and Harlow (1975) established that rhesus monkeys reared with adequate adult contact but with impoverished peer contact displayed inappropriate social, sex, and aggressive behavior. Overall, it is clear that forming an attachment or bond with peers is crucial for healthy development and functioning.

Sullivan's interpersonal theory. Similar to attachment theory is Sullivan's (1953) theory of interpersonal development. Sullivan (1953) postulated that people form personifications or mental representations of the self and others, based on accumulated experiences interacting in personal relationships. His theory of interpersonal development described the emergence of five basic social needs that emerge in a sequential and cumulative fashion across the period from infancy to adolescence (Sullivan, 1953). These include: tenderness, co-participation in playful activity, acceptance by others, interpersonal intimacy, and sexual contact (Parker, 2005). The core component of the interpersonal development theory is that people need certain forms of social input or social interaction to remain happy and psychologically healthy (Buhrmester, 1996). Positive regard, loving affection, entertaining interaction, and assistance in coping with stress are a few examples of social inputs that are needed for well-being, and without these social inputs, people are likely to experience distress and

maladjustment (Buhrmester, 1996). Furthermore, Sullivan's theory of interpersonal development states that without friends and without the opportunities for collaboration and intimacy that they afford, children would fail to acquire the social skills necessary for later successful relationships with others (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

Additional theories of peer relationships. Additional theories have also touched on the influence that peers have on psychological well-being. For example, Parker (2005) suggested a causal model to account for the link between peer relationship problems and later disorders. This causal model states that many disturbances can be traced to children's failure to establish effective and positive relationships with peers in childhood (Parker, 2005). Problems with peer relationships occur because youth are deprived of important socialization experiences (Parker, 2005). The lack of social support subsequently results in less mature and less flexible social and cognitive skills and more idiosyncratic patterns of thought and behavior (Parker, 2005).

The direct influence of peers can also be explained through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, which indicates that every individual is influenced by relational systems, and that multiple microsystems (family, peers and school) influence youth development (Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009). For example, relational systems such as peer relationships influence adjustment in adolescence by shaping the contexts or environment in which the child develops, in turn influencing adjustment outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). If an individual has quality peer relationships, the environment of the peer group is likely to be positive, which is likely to influence better adjustment (Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008).

Last, theories of social support also recognize the importance of peer relationships. Social support has been conceptualized as information or feedback that leads an individual to believe that he or she is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation (Cobb, 1976). The social constructionist or social-cognitive model holds that an individual's perception of support influences his or her self-esteem and identity, which then indirectly influences overall health (Vaux, 1990). The positive benefits of social support are interrelated with companionship, intimacy, social skills, and low conflict (Thompson, Flood & Goodvin, 2006) and influence one's perceived social support and actual well-being (Lyons, Perrotta, & Hancher-Kvam, 1998). One of the key factors of this conceptualization is that it is the individual's own appraisal of support, versus the actual support received that is strongly linked to overall well-being (Lopez & Cooper, 2011). Additionally, this theory is consistent with Sullivan's (1953) ideas that when youth enter adolescence, they begin to look to their friends for support, and research shows that middle school-aged youth report help and support as the most important aspect of friendship (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hoza, 1987).

Developmental Trends and Central Components of Childhood Friendships

Childhood can be divided into three periods: early childhood (ages 3-7 years), middle childhood (8-12 years), and adolescence (13-19 years) (Kerns, 1996). Within each time period peer relationships change and serve different purposes, and growing older produces new demands and opportunities for social and emotional growth (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2002). Specific friendships can be observed as early as 18-36 months of age (Schnieder, 2000) and are marked by mutual interaction, preference, and shared

affect (Howes, 1996). Around the age of four years, 75% of children who play in group

settings are observed to have frequent, reciprocal, cooperative, positive interactions with

selected peers (Howes, 1996).

Children who enter preschool are likely to engage in sustained bouts of positive,

coordinated play in dyads or small groups (Parker & Gottmann, 1989), whereas children

entering middle childhood have peer interactions based on personal characteristics and

shared norms (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). The emergence of cliques, or voluntary

friendship-based social groups also occurs during middle childhood (Henrich,

Kuperminc, Sack, Blatt, & Leadbeater, 2000), with many children above the age of

eleven years spending the majority of their interactions with peers in the context of a

clique (Chen, Chang, & He, 2003). Overall, friendships in early and middle childhood

revolve around playmate activities and group acceptance, and it is not until adolescence

that friendships become more intimate in nature (Buhrmester, 1990).

Intimate friendship emerges during the first part of adolescence, between age 12

and age 16 (Berndt, 1982) because this is the time when youth start to develop close

bonds with individuals external to their family systems (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987;

Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Sullivan (1953) argued that interpersonal relationships

proceed through developmental stages (i.e., infancy, childhood, juvenile era, pre

adolescence, adolescence, and adulthood) and that the purpose of the stage that occurs

during adolescence is to find a "chum" or close friend of the same gender with whom

intimacy needs can be met (Sullivan, 1953). Sullivan proposed that these chumships, or

favored peers, promote the development of interpersonal skills and sensitivity to other's

thoughts and feelings, foster self-concept and self-esteem, and prevent loneliness

(Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Sullivan also acknowledged that the quality of peer

relationships is more important than the quantity, and it is the quality that contributes to

psychological well-being (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

Mutual liking, affection, and intimacy characterize friendships even at young ages

(Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). However, it is not until late childhood and

adolescence that intimacy and emotional support become key components in friendships

(Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Wilkinson, 2004). These key components are demonstrated

through intimate, dyadic exchanges that feature openness, honesty, and affection (Parker

& Gottmann, 1989) and involve feeling understood, validated, and cared for (Reis and

Shaver, 1988). Additionally, children's perceptions of their competence with peers

become more central to self esteem in preadolescence (Harter 1999), which may explain

the reason why Sullivan argued that friendships are essential at one period in

development: the years just before and during adolescence (Berndt, 1996). Specifically,

same-sex friendships are closer and more intense in early adolescence than at any other

phase of life and have a major influence on the development of personality, social skills,

and social behavior (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Shatabany et al., 1981; Crockett et al.,

1984). Because friendships occur almost exclusively with same-sex peers during middle

childhood, youth during this period who have friendships primarily with opposite sex

peers tend to be less well-liked, less socially skilled, and more aggressive (Kovacs,

Parker, & Hoffman, 1996).

Individual Differences in Forming Friendships

School-age children like and befriend others who are similar to themselves in age,

gender, and physical appearance (Epstein, 1986), as well as those who encompass traits

of humor, politeness, sociability, and sensitivity (Rubin, Hymel, Lemare, & Rowden, 1989). Research has shown that children in middle to late childhood seek friends who are high in sociability, in prosocial behavior, empathy, and self-esteem and low in aggressiveness and have fewer emotional problems including depression and anxiety (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). Additionally, children's emotionality, reactivity, mood, and arousal influence their social relationships (Parker, 2005). For example, children who engage in prosocial behavior, initiate contact with others, cooperate, and respect peer norms are likely to receive positive responses from peers and make friends (Newcomb et al., 1993).

Moreover, youth's self-appraisals of their social competencies influence the ways they initiate and maintain social exchanges with peers (X. Chen et al., 2004). For example, positive self-appraisals are likely to be advantageous for the initiation of social interaction, whereas negative self-appraisals may prevent social exchanges from occurring (Parker, 2005). Self-control is also a critical skill for adolescents to have in developing social relationships and close bonds with friends (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). One's ability to exhibit self-control is related to anger reactions and socially appropriate behavior (Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000). For example, impulsive, non-planned behaviors have been linked to poor peer acceptance (Hodges & Perry, 1996). Last, interpersonal approaches that involve problem solving and social support-seeking have been linked to lower levels of peer victimization (Baldry & Farrington, 2005; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Visonti et al., 2013).

With regard to children who experience negative peer interactions, a number of behavioral and social skills deficits have been shown to distinguish those children who

are rejected by their peer group from those better-accepted children (Asher & Coie, 1990). For example, children exhibiting a comorbid behavioral profile that includes aggressive-withdrawn behavior are shown to experience loneliness and social dissatisfaction, have few friends and are likely to be victimized (Ladd & Burgess, 1999). This aggressive-withdrawn behavioral profile may be due to the fact that both behaviors impede relationships with others because peers view aggressive behavior negatively, and social withdrawal reduces the child's opportunities for interaction with others (Galanaki, Polychronopoulou, & Babalis, 2008).

There are also individual factors associated with peer victimization, including children who are withdrawn, depressed, anxious, avoidant of conflict, argumentative, aggressive, impulsive, bothersome of others, and do not follow rules (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001; Jensen-Campbell & Malcoom, 2007). Also, sad or depressed children are likely to be both neglected and rejected by classmates (Harrist et al., 1997). Furthermore, children with excessive sensitivity to rejection by peers, overreact to rejection in ways that may compromise their group standing and social relationships (Parker, 2005).

Definitions of Friendship

Peer acceptance versus friendship. Youth establish a range of relationships with their peers from general group popularity to specific, dyadic friendships (George & Harman, 1996). Unfortunately, researchers have failed to operationalize definitions of friendship consistently across studies. This has limited the understanding of the features and functions of the construct (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). One reason that it is so difficult to define friendship consistently is that childrens'/adolescents' experiences with peers can vastly differ in types of relationships, including general interactions, close

relationships, and peer groups (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1999).

For example, under the umbrella of peer relationships resides the construct of peer acceptance, defined as relationship status in a peer group, indicated by the degree to which he/she is liked or disliked by group members (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). Peer acceptance differs from the construct of friendship, which has been defined as a voluntary, didactic relationship that often embodies a positive affective tie (Ladd, 1999). Friendship also involves reciprocity and a commitment between individuals who see themselves as equals (Hartup 1989). Moreover, friendships serve functions in one's development that are different from group acceptance. Friendships aid in the development of empathy and perspective taking and validate interests, hopes, and positive self-perceptions, whereas group acceptance neither guarantees nor precludes successful friendship experiences (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996). Overall, differences between the two constructs are apparent because friendships are voluntary, intimate, dynamic relationships founded on cooperation and trust, but group acceptance reflects the perspective of peers or classmates (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

Although there is a consensus among researchers that friendship involves some degree of reciprocity and closeness in a dyadic relationship (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989), friendships can also apply to one's peer group. An adolescent's peer group can be defined as an individual's small, relatively intimate group of peers who interact on a regular basis (Brown, 1990). Peer groups are distinct from crowds, which are large collections of similarly stereotyped individuals who are grouped together because of reputation-based traits, but not because they spend time together (Ryan, 2000). Youth in

the same crowd may enjoy each other's company in school but never spend time together outside of school, or consider each other as friends (Parker, 2005).

   Friendship quality. Additionally, the construct of friendship appears to have both quantitative and qualitative dimensions (Demir & Urberg, 2004). Quantitative dimensions include the construct of popularity, the number of mutual friendships, and number of peers chosen by youth as friends, whereas qualitative dimensions include friendship quality (Demir & Urberg, 2004). Previous research is mixed on the relationships between these two constructs. For example, research has shown that youth who are popular are likely to form mutual friendships high in quality (Bukowski et al., 1996; Nangle et al., 2003; Parker & Asher, 1993). In contrast, others have shown that popular adolescents are less likely to have supportive relationships with their friends and that popularity and friendship quality are independent constructs (Eckert, 1989).

   Friendship quality can be described as certain resources or provisions that the friendship offers, including the affective features of the relationship (Bukowski, Hoza, Boivin, 1994). Provisions include the benefits that friendships provide to children/adolescents such as companionship, security, trust intimacy, validation, and support (Ladd & Kchdenderfer, 1996). Additionally, friendships offer processes, which are observable features that influence the quality of the relationship such as self-disclosure, gossip, affection, prosocial behavior, and conflict (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996). High-quality relationships are typically characterized by validation, care, help, guidance, companionship, and recreation (Parker & Asher, 1993). Furthermore, positive friendship quality has been shown to be the best predictor of adolescent emotional adjustment (Demin & Urberg, 2003).

Importance of Friendship

        Positive impact of friendship on psychological functioning. Friendship is important for the following reasons: it provides emotional security in novel or threatening situations, allowing children and adolescents to try new experiences or explore new environments; it enhances self-esteem and helps youth develop and maintain an image of themselves as competent and worthwhile; it also provides informational and instrumental assistance through actual physical help (i.e., reaching and carrying items or sharing belongings) and in providing advice (Parker, 2005). Additionally, friendships provide rich opportunities for emotional support and self-disclosure, and allow for the learning of cooperation (Parker, 2005). Friendship also fosters the ability to understand and appreciate other points of view and the development of a sense of empathy, which builds the capacity for intimate relationships later in life (DeWalt et al., 2013). Furthermore, youth who have friends have been shown to be more socially competent and less troubled than those who do not have friends, and are more cooperative, altruistic, self-confident, and less lonely (Hartup 1993).

        Friendships and social acceptance have been found to play a large role in the development and maintenance of self-esteem and general self-worth (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998; Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). Self-esteem is considered a critical variable that is shaped by adolescents' perceptions of their peer support (Harter, 1999). Additionally, Sullivan (1953) believed that during preadolescence and adolescence, friendship is the driving force behind the maintenance of one's self-esteem and that youth determine their own self-worth through the positive interactions with friends. Sullivan viewed intimate friendships as contributing to self-esteem by allowing

youth to work through doubts and fears with trusted peers who respect their ideas and

value their advice (Townsend, McCracken, & Wilton, 1988). Research on self-esteem

has shown that students with at least one friend report higher self-esteem than those

without reciprocal friends (Bishop & Inderbitzen,1995; Mannarno, 1978). Furthermore,

students with friendships that involve more positive features (i.e., intimate self-

disclosure, prosocial behavior, and self-esteem support) have been shown to have higher

global self-worth as compared with those with negative features (i.e., conflict and

rivalry), who were shown to be generally less happy about themselves (Keefe & Berndt,

1996).

Many youth experience positive interactions within their peer group and develop

close friendships characterized by support, companionship, and intimacy (Tillfors,

Persson, Willen, & Burk, 2012). Having positive friendship experiences and close

relationships with peers is considered a critical determinant of psychological wellbeing

and adjustment during late childhood and early adolescence (Vitaro, Boivin, &

Bukowski, 2009). Positive friendship qualities have been associated with positive

psychosocial adjustment during childhood and adolescence, most likely because high-

quality, positive friendships satisfy social needs and provide emotional support

(McDonald et al., 2013; Rubin, Bukowksi, et al., 2006). For example, adolescents who

rated their friendships as compassionate, disclosing, and satisfying reported themselves to

be more competent and sociable, less hostile, anxious and depressed, and to have higher

self-esteem as compared with those involved in less intimate relationships (Buhremster,

1990).

Moreover, supportive friendships are also critical to psychological adjustment in youth because they provide and enhance positive experiencing of companionship, nurturance, and affection (Furman & Robbins, 1985; Sullivan, 1953). Adolescents who perceive their friendships as supportive are more likely to be popular, motivated, involved in school, have high achievement scores, and be socially competent, compared with less supportive peers (Vaquera & Kao, 2008). Also, when youth report good social support, acceptance, and peer validation, they have been shown to experience lower levels of social anxiety (Festa & Ginsburd, 2011). To summarize, evidence has shown that positive outcomes are most likely in youth who have friends, when youth's friends are well socialized, and when relationships with these individuals are supportive and intimate (Hartup & Stevens, 1997).

Academics. The peer group is also important in understanding motivation and achievement in school (Ryan, 2000). Schools and classrooms are inherently social places and it is likely that peers have an important influence on children and adolescents' academic achievements and motivations (Ryan, 2001). There are several mechanisms that link peer relationships with academic functioning (Wentzel, 2009). These include providing direct assistance with academic tasks, influencing one's motivational response to school, as well as providing emotional support, which promotes engagement in the classroom (Wentzel, 2009; Ladd & Price, 1987; Wentzel, 1991). Prosocial behavior (e.g., cooperating, sharing) also serves as an important link between peer relationships and achievement because "socially competent behavior provides a necessary foundation for learning" (Wentzel, 2009, p. 538).

Students with positive peer relationships in any context tend to be emotionally

and behaviorally engaged in school (Garcia-Reid, 2007). Additionally, students who

have friendships with positive features such as intimate disclosure, prosocial behavior,

and self-esteem support have been shown to have positive self-perceptions of scholastic

competence (Keefe & Berndt, 1996). Moreover, positive social interactions with peers

facilitate the development of cognitive and intellectual skills that, in turn, promote

academic performance (Wentzel, 1999). For example, when youth collaborate with

friends versus non-friends, they are more efficient problem solvers in creative and oral

tasks and in scientific reasoning problems (Zajac and Hartup, 1997). Furthermore, in two

studies of young adolescents, the adequacy of peer social networks was a significant

predictor of academic success, especially if the peers valued academic achievement

(Clark, 1991).

Alternatively, youth who do not have supportive peer relationships are at a greater

risk for experiencing emotional distress, which can lead to decreased levels of motivation

and engagement in the classroom that, in turn, can contribute to lower academic

achievement (Kinglery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011). Experiencing problems with peers

such as peer rejection increases the risk for less participation and less interest in school,

as well as poor academic achievement (French & Conrad, 2001; Buhs & Ladd, 2001;

DeRosier Kupersmidt, J. B., & Patterson, 1994). For example, victimization has been

linked to academic outcomes such as lower grade point average (Wei & Williams, 2004)

and poorer performance on standardized tests (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

Additionally, peers who are poorly accepted by their classmates or have no friends tend

to achieve lower grades (Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992; Wentzel, 2003;

Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997; Wentzel et al. 2004) and lower scores on achievement tests

(Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Ladd, Coleman, & Kochendorfer, 1997).

Negative Impact of Peers on Psychological Functioning

In light of the manifold benefits of friendship, it is not surprising that youth without friends have been shown to have lower self-esteem and also report being lonelier than those who have at least one friend (Ladd, 1990; Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, & Carpenter, 2003; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995; La Greca & Lopez, 1998; Buhremnester, 1990; Petit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001). Friendlessness also puts children at risk for elevated levels of sadness (Bukowski et al., 2007; Parker & Asher, 1987; Parker et al., 2006) and elevated levels of depressed mood (Brendgen, M., Lamarche, V., Wanner, B., & Vitaro, F. (2010). Additionally**,** Wentzel and colleagues (2004) found that sixth graders who were not involved in any reciprocal friendships had lower academic achievement, higher levels of depression, and lower self-worth than did students who were involved in mutual friendships.

Even if youth do have friends, those who do not have close or intimate friendships may miss out on validating interactions with peers which may leave them feeling less secure, more anxious, and less worthy (Buhrmester, 1990). Research has shown that young individuals lacking in social support, who are without friends or who are experiencing poor or problematic peer relationships are at increased risk for depression (Pederson, Vitaro, Barker, & Borge, 2007; Joiner, 1997; Rudolph, Flynn, & Abaied, 2008; Witvliet, Brendgen, van Lier, Koot, & Vitaro, 2010; Bond, Carlin, Rubin, & Patton, 2001). One study examined the relationship between friendship support and depressive affect and found that adolescents who reported a depressive affect were likely to expect their friends to ignore and embarrass them, and were less likely to expect

understanding, cheering up, help with problems, and acceptance from their friends (Feldman, Rubenstein, and Rubin, 1988). Those lacking close relationships with peers have also been shown to have increases in depressive affect during adolescence (Vernberg, 1990). Furthermore, adolescents whose friendships are characterized by more negative features such as conflict and inequality are shown to have lower self-esteem and be less involved in school than students whose friendships are high in features such as intimacy, loyalty and prosocial behavior (Berndt, 1996).

      Loneliness. Specifically, peer relationships have been found to impact feelings of loneliness, significantly (Goswick & Jones, 1982). Loneliness can be defined as a feeling isolated and distant from others, yet longing for interpersonal contact and closeness (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1999). It is believed that there is an intrinsic need to belong or feel connected to others, and that feelings of loneliness emerge when social contact is lacking or when an individual feels excluded (Baumester & Leary, 1995). Sullivan (1953) believed that during preadolescence, loneliness arises out of the need for intimate exchange with a fellow being whom we may identify as a chum, a friend, or a loved one. Loneliness for children/adolescents reflects interpersonal deficits that are the result of having fewer or less satisfying personal relationships with same-aged peers than desired (Ponzetti, 1990).

      Feelings of loneliness have been shown to correlate with perceptions of having few friends, being socially incompetent, and not having basic friendship needs satisfied (Cassidy and Asher, 1992). Children without best friends have reported greater levels of loneliness than children with best friends (Parker & Asher, 1993), and children who are disliked or rejected by their peers have reported higher levels of loneliness than those

who are more accepted by their peers (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Parree, 1993; Parker &

Asher, 1993; Galanaki, Polychronopoulou, & Babalis, 2008). Moreover, when

investigating peer relationships, loneliness has been found in several studies to coexist

with depressed mood and social withdrawal (Cassidy and Asher, 1992; Crick and Ladd,

1993). For example, youth who were isolated from their group of friends showed an

increase in depression symptoms; loneliness mediated the association between being

isolated and these depressive symptoms (Witvliet et al., 2010).

      Peer victimization. Youth who are lacking in peer support may be at risk for

peer victimization (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). Peer victimization occurs when an

individual is harassed and or chronically abused by another peer or group of peers in a

way that could lead to mistrust, insecurity, and fearfulness (Ladd et al., 1997). Peer

victimization can occur in many forms such as physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual

victimization (Papafratzeskakou, Kim, Longo, & Riser, 2011) and has been related to low

self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Bond et al., 2001; Stroch et al., 2003;

Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Crick & Groptpeter, 1996; Nangel et al, 2001; Bouman et al,,

2012; Oh et al., 2008). One study found that 9-12 year old children who were victimized

by peers were less popular, perceived themselves as less socially accepted, and reported

more anxious and depressive symptoms and lower self-worth (Bouman, Meulen,

Goossens, Olthof, Vermande, & Aleva, 2012). Similar findings were shown through a

meta-analysis of cross-sectional studies on peer victimization that found an association

between youth who are victimized by peers and psychosocial maladjustment, including

depressed or dysphoric mood, loneliness, low social and global self-esteem, and general

and social anxiety (Hawker & Boulton, 2000).

Other evidence has shown that greater peer rejection in 5th grade is associated with lower school performance, vocational competence, aspiration level, and less participation in social activities (Bagwell, Newcomb, Bukowski, 1998). Additionally, one study showed that experiences with peer victimization resulted in psychological adjustment problems such as heightened anxiety and depression and low self-esteem (Ruger & Jenkins, 2013). This study also showed that the impact on psychological adjustment in turn influences academic adjustment through poor school attitudes, attendance, and grades (Ruger & Jenkins, 2013). Even short-term victimization can have a negative influence on psychological and academic outcomes and can continue to effect social-emotional functioning after the victimization ends (Rueger et al., 2011). Overall, children who have little or no support from others are more vulnerable to attack from those who wish to bully or victimize them (Rigby, 2000), and these poor peer relationships have been shown to influence emotional adjustment and academic achievement (Ruger & Jenkins, 2013).

Furthermore, although research has shown that peer relations provide an essential role in children's current emotional, cognitive, and social development, those who experience difficulties with peers may struggle in these areas later in life (Gettinger, 2003). For example, depressive symptomatology in adulthood has been associated with being "chumless" during preadolescence (Bagwell, Newcomb, and Bukowski, 1998). Also, adolescents without close friends at age 16 have been found to present elevated depressive feelings at age 22, even when controlling for previous levels of depressed mood (Pelkonen, Marttunen, & Aro, 2003). Last, studies have shown that having at least one mutual best friend in childhood is critical for successful long-term adjustment

(Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998; Rubin et al., 2009).

Protective Role of Friendship

Despite the negative outcomes likely to emerge from having limited or poor relationships with peers, high quality friendships may play a protective role in buffering the negative experiences that youth have with peers (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). For example, poor quality friendships have been shown to exacerbate the effects that victimization has on levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, whereas high quality friendships have been shown to buffer the impact victimization has on one's levels of psychological functioning (Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007; Woods, Done, & Kalsi, 2009). High quality friendships offer provisions such as emotional support, instrumental aid, and a sense of belonging at school (Wentzel, 2009), and promote resilience for coping both with peer and with developmental challenges (Kingerly et al., 2011).

Research has also shown that perceived peer support mediates the association between victimization and academic adjustment, with support being negatively associated with peer victimization but positively associated with academic adjustment (Wang, Iannott, & Luk, 2011). Moreover, peer support and friendship have been shown to play a role in minimizing the risk of depression and of peer victimization (Papafratzeskakou et al., 2011; Bukowski, Lauresen, & Hoza, 2010), and in some cases may help inhibit peer victimization from occurring all together (Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). Overall, theory and research support the notion that positive relationships with significant peers are cornerstones of youth's capacity to function effectively in social, affective, and academic domains (Martin & Dowson, 2009).

Reciprocal Influence of Functioning

Relationships with same-aged-peers appear to influence youth's psychological functioning, and those who experience difficulties in their friendships may struggle in their overall functioning (Gettinger, 2003). However, a reverse causal ordering has been shown to occur, with psychological problems increasing the risk of developing difficulties with peers (Hodges et al., 1999). The argument is that characteristics of the maladjusted child can influence aversive social interaction and limit opportunities for social experiences (Klima & Repetti, 2008). For example, social anxiety can affect the formation of new friendships (Vernberg, Greenhoot, & Biggs, 2006) and the level of support and intimacy in existing friendships (La Greca & Lopez, 1998). Social anxiety makes it difficult for youth to initiate conversations and seek out social opportunities with friends because of fears of rejection and embarrassment, reducing the likelihood of invitations from friends and opportunities to get to know friends intimately (Biggs, Vernberg, & Wu, 2012).

Results remain equivocal with regard to victimization; some studies have suggested a bi-directional relationship between victimization and adjustment (Egan & Perry, 1998), whereas others have reported that children with internalizing problems are at risk of becoming victimized in the first place (Griffin & Gross, 2004). For example, research has shown that social anxiety predicts increases in victimization (Siegel, La Greca, & Harrison, 2009). Socially anxious youth who use self-protective avoidance strategies may evoke irritation in their peers, which may lead to victimization or make it hard to develop relationships with peers (Tiffors et al., 2012). Additionally, depressed children may initiate little prosocial contact and lack motivation to engage in activities

(Caldwell, Rudolph, Troop-Gordon, & Kim, 2004), which may limit their social abilities and lead towards low peer acceptance (Klima & Repetti, 2008). However, some studies have shown that depression in childhood does not influence peer acceptance (Little & Garber, 1995; Nolan et al., 2003).

Adolescence in Context

One of the most complex developmental transitions is moving from childhood to adolescence (Waldrip & Malcolm, 2008). Although psychological turmoil is not a characteristic of all adolescents, research indicates that there is an increased likelihood for psychological unrest in adolescence (Ellis, Marsh, & Craven, 2009). Youth during this time period are faced with novel experiences that may tax their coping resources and impact their well-being (Rudolph, 2002). These include adjusting to changes in school structure and academic requirements, receiving less teacher-student interaction, and experiencing shifts in social support from teachers, peers, and parents (Wang & Holcombre, 2010; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). The transition into middle school is also marked by lowered self-esteem and motivation (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992), by increases in psychological distress (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998) and lower grades (Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

Additionally, schools and classrooms impact adolescents' achievement, beliefs, and behaviors (Ryan, 2000). Specifically, characteristics of the classroom may influence the opportunities for friendships (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). For example, open classrooms may promote more frequent and reciprocated friendships, compared with traditional isolated classrooms; and classrooms that group students by ability level influence friend selection based on shared abilities (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

Moreover, perceptions of school climate (quality of interactions and feelings of trust and respect that exist in the school) have been found to impact students' self-esteem, levels of anxiety, problem behaviors, academic self-concept (Grobel & Schwarzer, 1982), social behaviors and interpersonal relationships (Doll, 1996).

Negative school environments, such as being located in a low-income neighborhood, discrimination, low expectations, and stereotypes, may also impact the social behaviors of students (Epstein & Karweit, 1983; Way & Chen, 2000). For example, schools are known to exhibit cultural bias in their expectations for students' skills and cultural competencies, implicitly requiring White and middle class cultural behaviors (Bloom, 2007). One can expect, then, that ethnic minority students may be viewed by their teachers as lacking academic abilities because they do not interact with classmates and authority figures in this expected way (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Also, many times ethnic minority students, specifically Latinos, are relegated to low track curricula or to silence in high track classrooms (Nunn, 2011).

Overall, early adolescence is a period of rapid physical, cognitive, and social change, and the demands of this stage influence the adaptation abilities of individuals (Feldman, Rubenstein, & Rubin, 1988). Within this period of growth, cognitive abilities continue to develop, during which a new sense of self and identity emerge, along with a more sophisticated understanding of other people (Hill & Palmquist, 1978). Adolescence is also a time when social environments such as school become influential, and play a role in youth's thoughts and behaviors (Ryan, 2000).

Measurement of Peer Relationships

   Sociometric Status. Throughout the literature there have been descriptions of

different ways to measure friendships. (Woods et al., 2009). The majority of studies on

peer relationships have used group-based measures that index popularity and peer group

acceptance, rather than the quality of friendships within a peer group (Woods et al.,

2009). Sociometric measures directly asses peer's feelings of attraction towards the

target child (Foster, Inderbitze, & Nangle, 1993). This usually consists of asking a child

to select a peer (through a class roster of names or pictures of classmates) that he or she

likes best or who he or she likes least as a playmate or friend (Foster et al., 1993).

Popular children are those who receive many positive and few negative peer nominations;

rejected children are those who receive few positive and many negative nominations;

neglected children are those who receive few nominations overall, and controversial

children are those who receive many negative and many positive nominations (Rubin,

Hymel, Lemare, & Rowden, 1989).

   Specifically, past research has focused on the construct of peer acceptance by

looking at the association between peer nominations and psychological adjustment in

childhood (Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason & Carpenter, 2003). However, it has been

shown that psychological adjustment in early adolescence is more dependent on having

close relationships with peers than just being popular with a number of peers (Townsend

et al., 1988). Moreover, feelings about one's social relationships are subjective

experiences, so the relation between peer status (a nonsubjective indication of social

adjustment) and youth's psychological functioning (e.g., loneliness, anxiety) may not be

a reliable measurement of how friendships predict psychological functioning (Asher,

Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984). For example, in a longitudinal study looking at sociometric

status and friendships, it was found that childhood friendships predicted general feelings

of self-worth; depressive symptoms in early adulthood and sociometric status did not

predict these outcomes (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1996).

Moreover, peer nominations are not always suitable in measuring the construct of

friendship. For example, one study examined the relationship between friendship and

peer acceptance and found that over half of all poorly accepted youth had at least one

friend (Asher and Parker, 1989). Additionally, research has shown that highly accepted

children have been shown to lack reciprocal friendships (Parker & Asher, 1993), and that

some children who are voted as popular with peers have reported high levels of loneliness

(Crick & Ladd, 1993). Taken together, these studies support the assumption that

popularity and friendships are not equivalent constructs (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995).

Although sociometric status continues to be an important area of attention for

understanding children's social competence, the volume and focus of sociometic status

measurement has decreased due to the complex and time-consuming methods of

gathering data (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Overall, sociometric classifications

have been used as a tool to index an individual child's place within the large peer group

rather than to describe the interpersonal processes or characteristics of the peer group

itself (Cairns, Xie, Leung, 1998). Interpersonal processes such as one's perceptions of

friendships offer a distinct perspective on relationships with peers and may provide a

better understanding of the influence of friendship on overall functioning (Furman,

1996).

Perceptions of peer relationships. In contrast to sociometric status, youth's perceptions of their friendships are more likely to reveal the nature of these relationships, with many theorists believing that perceptions are the most valid indices of relationship quality (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979; Furman, 1996). For example, an individual's own perceptions reflect the nature and meaning of the affective bond with his or her friends, provide perspectives that no one else shares, and shape their interpretation of their friends' behavior (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Additionally, the use of perceived reports is often justified by the reasoning that what youth think their friends do or provide is more influential than what their friends actually do (Ryan, 2000).

Research has shown that when looking at perceptions of friendships and at peer ratings from classmates on social status and likeability, youth who had negative views of their peers showed higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms (Zimmer-Gembeck & Pronk, 2012). Additionally, youth's perceived friendship quality has been shown to affect levels of depression through its association with loneliness (Nangle et al., 2003), and adolescents who perceived higher peer support, compared with those who perceived less peer support have been shown to report lower levels of depression (Licitra-Klecker & Waas, 1993). Other studies have shown that self-esteem is correlated with perceived friendship quality (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). For example, in a study of over one thousand high school students, results showed that perceptions of the quality of peers directly predicted academic performance and general self-esteem (Liem & Martin, 2011). Also, self-esteem was shown to be associated, significantly, with perceived friendship quality in adolescent youth (Way & Greene, 2006).

In a study of 5th, 7th, and 8th grade adolescents, participants who perceived themselves as having many friends, being highly accepted by peers, and having high-quality friendships, showed better adjustment than those who reported low levels in each of these peer relationship domains (Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008). Adjustment in this study was assessed by teacher reports that measured students' internalizing (anxiety and depression, withdrawal), externalizing (rule-breaking and aggressive behavior), and social problems (Waldrip et a., 2008). Additionally, perceived peer quality was an important buffer against adjustment problems when peer acceptance and number of friends were low (Waldrip et al., 2008).

Another study revealed that children who perceived themselves as more socially accepted (have classmates who like them and spend time with them) reported lower levels of social anxiety and felt supported (have friends to talk to when having problems) and validated (my friends make me feel good about my ideas) by their friends (Festa & Ginsberg, 2011). Last, a study also looked at the link between aspects of peer relationships and social anxiety and found that adolescents (ages 12-19) who perceived themselves as having low levels of peer acceptance and low friendship quality demonstrated increases in social anxiety (Tillfors, Persson, Willen, & Burk, 2012). Overall, the results of these studies coincide with evidence that perceptions of friendships are more directly associated with mental health in youth than classmate assessments of peer status or acceptance (Cole and Turner, 1993; Rudolph et al., 1997; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2009).

Friendship in Ethnic Minority Youth

  Need for more research with Latinos. There appears to be a great number of studies looking at peer relationships with youth (Way & Chen, 2000). However, most of these studies have focused on White, middle-class adolescents and few studies have examined peer relationships with racial/ethnic minority or low income adolescents (Way & Chen, 2000). With Latinos being one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States as well as the largest nondominant ethnic group in the public schools (Llagas & Snyder, 2003), more research is needed on this population of youth. In terms of psychological functioning, Latino youth have reported perceived discrimination from peers as a salient stressor; other stressors include community violence, pressure to join gangs, lack of parental support for academic success, and having to leave school to work (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011). Moreover, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Filipino adolescents have reported the highest levels of depression and the lowest levels of psychological well-being, as compared with adolescents from other racial and ethnic groups (Harker, 2001).

  There is also a need for examining victimization in minority youth because bullying and victimization are prevalent among urban, low socioeconomic status Latino students (Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006). Additionally, overall rates of overt and relational victimization in Latino children have been shown to be higher than those reported in studies using primarily Caucasian samples (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Storch et al., 2003). Although most studies on peer victimization have been conducted with Caucasian, middle-class samples (Stroch, Phil, Nock, Masia-Warner, & Barlas, 2003) research shows that Latino youth are impacted by victimization. For example, one study

found that in a sample of Latino youth, a significant, positive relationship was found

between victimization and general anxiety (Hanish & Guerra, 2002). Also, in a study of

ethnically diverse adolescents (67.1% Latino), it was found that relational victimization

and negative interactions with best friends predicted social anxiety and depression (La

Greca & Harrison, 2005). Last, research on Latino children has shown that relational

victimization is associated with depression and social avoidance in girls (Storch et al.,

2003).

There is also a lack of research on social contextual factors impacting Latinos

students' school outcomes (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004). Despite attention to

improving Latino educational outcomes, achievement gaps with this population continue

to persist (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Additionally, Latino

students are more likely to attend impoverished schools, demonstrate lower performance

in math, science, and reading, and to be more frequently retained and disciplined than

their White peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003a). Latino students also have been shown to

display lower academic achievement in high school, compared with Caucasian students

(Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

Latino Peer Relationships. Because Latinos tend to value communalism and

interdependence, social relationships are held in high regard (Triandis, 1988).

Additionally, Latino adolescents have been shown to establish and maintain friendships

for a longer time than adolescents from other cultural backgrounds (Way et al., 2005).

Moreover, the cultural values that emphasize the importance of social relationships can

be applied to valuing close relationships with peers (Balagna, Young, & Smith, 2013;

Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). For example, cultural values such as *simpatia,*

personalismo, and *respeto* pertain to the importance of smooth, pleasant, and harmonious social interactions (Simoni & Perez, 1995).

Simpatia includes respecting others, sharing information with one another, empathizing with others, and avoiding negative interpersonal conflicts (Triandis, Marin, Lisansky & Betancourt, 1984; Simoni & Perez, 1995). *Personalismo* reflects a strong preference for relating to persons personally and amicably rather than through formal, distant interactions (Padilla et al., 1975) and *respeto* reflects empathy, respect, and intimacy in relationships (Simoni & Perez, 1995). Taken as a whole, these cultural values may play an important role in the formation of friendships during early adolescence because this time period is marked by increased time spent with peers and greater intimacy with friends (Parker et al., 1995).

Despite the cultural values that may promote close relationships with peers, other Latino values may deter the formation of relationships outside of the family. Although the notion of collectivism has been examined within African-American, Asian-American and Latino population groups, collectivism is particularly evident in Latinos who emphasize constructs such as *familismo* and *confianza* (e.g., Campos, Schetter, Abdou, Hobel, Glynn & Sandman, 2008; Clark & Huttlinger, 1998; Escobar & Randolph, 1982; Gaines, 1997; Triandis, 1994; Golding & Baezconde-Garbanati, 1990; Sarkisian, Gerena & Gerstel, 2006). The concept of *familismo* or familism refers to placing family at the center of emotional and material support; the needs of the individual may at times be placed secondary to the needs of the larger family group (Clark & Huttlinger, 1998; Rosado, 1980). Also, the concept of *familismo* is *confianza* relates to the strong reliance that Latinos place upon turning to trusted family members versus less familiar individuals

for support and to fulfill various needs (Cervantes & Castro, 1985). Additionally, when examining immigration status, first and second generation Latino youth have been shown to have many family responsibilities, which may preclude their chances of spending time with friends (Vaqueara & Kao, 2008).

These culturally-based beliefs and attitudes are likely to be reflected in the social support of Latino youth as well (Lopez & Cooper, 2011). For instance, Latinos have been found to report generally lower levels of perceived social support, relative to other groups (Turney & Kao, 2009). Evidence has shown that social relationships are not as positive for Latino youth, and that these relationships can contribute to depressed mood (Gore & Aseltine, 2003). Conversely, others have reported that middle school aged Latinos highly value their peers, and look to their friends for support, protection, and strength (Balagna, Young, & Smith, 2013). Psychological well-being has also been shown to be positively associated with general friendship support in Latino youth (Way & Chen, 2000).

Research on Latino youth has also shown that relationships with peers are associated with school behavior, beliefs and attitudes about school, and ultimately, achievement (Alfaro, Umana-Taylor, & Bamaca, 2006). One study found that in a sample of Latino middle school students, self-reported friend support and friends' school behaviors were predictive of academic performance and satisfaction with school (Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009). Also, in a study of Latino adolescents, it was found that school connectedness, which included feeling connected to peers, was predictive of higher school satisfaction and positive behavior at school (Loukas, Suzuki, and Horton, 2006). Last, in a sample of Latino youth, friend support was linked to school behavior,

school satisfaction, time spent on homework, and grades (Woolley et al., 2009). The results of these studies illustrate the fact that friendships influence academic success in Latino youth. Moreover, the Latino cultural values including simpatia, personalismo, and respeto may play a role in the occurrence of friendship support in Latino youth, and coincide with Sullivan's theory that children need friends to experience well-being and to function effectively.

Overall, it is clear that interpersonal relationships are an important part of the Latino culture, and that peer relationships in Latino youth influence psychological and academic functioning. However, with the dearth of research in this area, combined with the growing Latino population, more research is needed to understand the role that peer relationships play in the overall functioning of this populations' youth.

Chapter 2: Hypotheses

The study examined how perceived quality of friendship support relates to levels of psychological functioning in a sample of Latino youth. Levels of psychological functioning included: anxiety, depression, loneliness, and self-esteem. Perceived quality of friendship support was also examined in relation to academic achievement.

Specific hypotheses included:

1. Participants with positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by high scores on the Perceived Social Support for Friends Scale (PSS-FR) will report less anxiety as measured by the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED) than participants with less positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by low scores on the PSS-FR.

2. Participants with positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by high scores on the PSS-FR will report less depression, as measured by the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI) than participants with less positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by low scores on the PSS-FR.

3. Participants with positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by high scores on the PSS-FR will report less loneliness, as measured by the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (LSDQ) than participants with less positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by low scores on the PSS-FR.

4. Participants with positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by high scores on the PSS-FR will report higher levels of self-esteem, as measured by the Global Self-

Worth subscale of the Self-Perception Profile for Children than participants with less

positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by low scores on the PSS-FR.

5. Participants' perceptions of peer support, as measured by scores on the PSS-FR will be

correlated with participants' academic achievement, as measured by an average score of

participants' current subject grades.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview/Design

The study is a cross-sectional, correlation, between subjects design. This study examined how perceived quality of friendship support relates to psychological and academic functioning in a sample of Latino youth.

Participants

Participants included 42 middle school-aged students in 6th through 8th grade, who currently attend an urban school in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The school is located in a low-income neighborhood. Many of the students who attend the school have experienced trauma and deal with neighborhood violence. The student population is predominantly Latino. There were 42 total participants (57.1% female and 42.9% male), all of whom are Latino/Latina. The mean age was 12.76 years, ranging from age 11 to age 15 years (11.9% were 11 years old, 23.8% were 12 years old; 42.9% were 13 years old; 19% were 14 years old, and 2.4% were 15 years old). The mean grade level was 7th grade, with 6th graders accounting for 26.2%, 7th graders for 40.5%, and 8th graders for 33.3% of the sample. The country in which the participants were born included: 90.5% born in the USA; 7.1% born in Puerto Rico, and 2.4% born in Central America. For the participant's parents, 42.2% of their parents were born in the USA, 31.0% in Puerto Rico, 11.9% in the Dominican Republic, 7.1% in Central America, and 4.8% in Mexico. In terms of language spoken at home, 45.2% of participants speak English at home; 35.7% speak both Spanish and English, and 19.0% speak mainly Spanish at home.

Inclusion criteria. The criterion for inclusion in this study was that each student was Latino, English-speaking, and enrolled in 6th, 7th, or 8th grade. Additionally, written assent from participants and written consent from their parents was required for participation.

Exclusion criteria. There were no exclusion criteria once inclusion criteria had been met.

Recruitment. The school counselor sent a letter explaining the purpose of the study and also sent consent/assent forms to the homes of students identified as Latino. The letter indicated that a graduate student would call the parent/caregiver to explain the study further and answer any questions. Additionally, participants were informed that if they decided not to participate in the study or complete the questionnaires, they could withdraw at any time. For those families that agreed to participate, parents had to provide written consent and children had to provide written assent on forms that were returned to the school counselor.

Measurement of Variables

Friendship quality. The Perceived Social Support for Friends Scale (PSS-FR; Procidano & Heller, 1983) assesses the quality of students' friendships. Emphasis of the measure is on emotional support and satisfaction in friendships (Lopez & Cooper, 2011). The PSS-FR contains 20 items concerning experiences with friends to which participants answer either "yes", "no", or "I don't know" (Lopez and Cooper, 2011). The total number of positive responses is summed to create a score for perceived quality of general friendships (Way & Greene, 2006), with higher overall scores indicating higher perceived social support from friends (Procidano & Heller, 1983). Past studies have established

"high" and "low" categories of perceived support by calculating the average score of

each participant, and using the median point of the participants' scores to determine who

is categorized as having high or low perceived social support from friends (Tezel,

Karabulutlu, & Sahin, 2011).

The PSS-FR was developed and validated through a series of studies on college

students' social relationships; the authors report good reliability (Cronbach's = .88) for

the measure (Prodidano & Heller, 1983). Additionally, the PSS-FR was shown to have

good divergent validity (Procidano & Heller, 1983). Results indicate that there were no

significant relationships between PSS-FR and positive or negative life events, and no

significant relationship was found between friend social support and social desirability

(Procidano & Heller, 1983). Furthermore, a significant, positive relationship between

friend social support and measures of social assets (including social competence &

sociability) was found (Prodidano & Heller, 1983).

Researchers have used the PSS-FR with samples of ethnically and racially diverse

adolescents and they found the measure to be both reliable and valid (Tardy 1985; Way

& Leadbeater, 1999). For example, one longitudinal study looked at perceived friendship

quality using the PSS-FR with a sample of urban, ethnic minority adolescents (48%

Latino) and found the PSS-FR to have good reliability at each of the four time points

(Cronbach's = .80, .86, .87, and .88 at Times 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively) (Way & Greene,

2006). Additionally, Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza (2003) modified the

PSS-FR so that response choices are within a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1

(Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). In their sample of Latino college students,

Rodreiguez and colleagues (2003) found that their modified version of the PSS-FR had

good internal consistency (.92) and that students who reported greater friend support experienced less psychological distress (Rodriguez et al., 2003). The adapted version by Rodriguez and Colleagues (2003) with response categories on a 5-point Likert scale may provide greater measurement precision (Lopez and Cooper, 2011); it is the version used in the current study. The PSS-FR has been used with youth as young as 14 years (Way & Greene, 2006); however, it appears that the measure has yet to be used with middle school-aged youth.

Depressive symptoms. The Children's Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs, 1985) is a 27-item self-report questionnaire that assesses the cognitive, affective, and behavioral symptoms of depression (Storch, Phil, Nock, Masia-Warner, & Barlas, 2003). Participants are asked to choose one of three statements that fits how they have been feeling in the previous 2 weeks (I am sad once in a while, I am sad many times, I am sad all the time) and responses are scored on 3 point scale ranging from 0 (symptoms absent) to 2 (symptoms present most of the time) (Nangle et al 2003). Total scores of 65 or above identify potentially clinically depressed individuals (Kovacs, 1985). The measure has excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha =.90) (Nangle et al., 2003) and has been shown to have good reliability and validity with samples of children and adolescents (Weiss, Weisz, Politano, Carey, Nelson, & Finch, 1991; Carey, Faulstich, Gresham, Ruggiero, & Enyart, 1987; Saylor, Finch, Spirito, & Bennett, 1984; Kovacs, 1985).

Anxiety symptoms. The Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED; Birmaher, Khetarpal, Brent, Cully, Balach, Kaufman, & Neer, 1997) is a measure of pediatric anxiety, which differentiates between clinically anxious and non-anxious youth. The scale consists of 41 questions on a 3-point Likert scale (0= not true or hardly ever

true, 1 = somewhat true or sometimes true, 2 = very true or often true) with a total score

of 25 or above indicating the presence of an anxiety disorder (Birmaher, Khetarpal,

Cully, Balach, Kaufman, & Neer, 1997). The measure also consists of subscales that

include: panic disorder/somatic symptoms; generalized anxiety disorder; separation

anxiety disorder; social anxiety disorder; and significant school avoidance (Birmaher et

al., 1997). The SCARED has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha

= .93), test–retest reliability (interclass correlations coefficent total = .86), and good

discriminative validity both within anxiety disorders and between anxiety and other

nonanxiety psychiatric disorders (Monga, Birmaher, Chiappetta, Brent, Kaufman, Bridge,

& Cully, 2000). The SCARED has shown good construct validity as well as good

convergent and divergent validity (Monga, Birmaher, Chiappetta, Brent, Kaufman,

Bridge, & Cully, 2000). Furthermore, the SCARED has been utilized as a screening

instrument for anxiety disorder symptoms in children and adolescents from various

cultures (Hale, Crocetti, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2011).

     Loneliness*. The Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (LSDS;

Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984) assesses children's loneliness and social dissatisfaction

and is specific to peer-related loneliness (Goosens and Beyers, 2002). The questionnaire

is composed of 24 items, using a five point Likert scale (1= always true, to 5= never true)

(Woods, Done, & Kalsi, 2009). The 16 primary items focus on children's feelings of

loneliness (I'm lonely), feelings of social adequacy versus inadequacy (I'm good at

working with other children), or subjective estimations of peer status (I have lots of

friends) (Asher et al., 1984). The eight filler items focus on children's hobbies or

preferred activities (I like to paint and draw) (Asher et al., 1984).

Only the 16 primary items are summed to create a total loneliness and social dissatisfaction score, ranging from 16 (low loneliness) to 80 (high loneliness) (Findlay, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). The 16-item scale has been found to be internally consistent (Cronbach's alpha = .90) and internally reliable (Spearman-Brown reliability coefficient = .91) (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984). Additionally, the LSDS has been used with ethnic minority children (Bagner, Storch, & Roberti, 2004). For the present study (and in line with Bagner and Colleagues, 2004) only the 16 items that focus on feelings of loneliness, social adequacy, and subjective estimations of peer status were included to minimize time needed for participants to complete the assessment.

Self-esteem. The 6-item Global Self-Worth subscale of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SSPC; Harter, 1985) assesses the perceptions that children have of their own self-worth. Questions are presented in a 4-point structured, alternative format so that respondents first chose which type of child they are more like and then decide whether or not they are "sort of" or "really" like this child (Harter, 1985). A mean of the items is computed, with higher scores reflecting greater self-worth (Klima & Rena, 2008). The SSPC has been found to be a reliable and valid measure (Harter, 1985) and The Global Self-Worth Scale has been shown to have good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .83) (Klima & Repetti, 2008).

Academic success. Participants' most recent subject grades were collected via student report cards. Students receive number grades for each class (math, science, English, Spanish). An average of these grades was calculated and used as an overall measure of the most recent academic achievement.

Demographics. Participants were given a demographics questionnaire in which they reported their ages, grades, genders, the countries in which they were born, and their parents' countries of origin.

Procedure

Data collection took place at the school. Consent forms were sent home with the students explaining the purpose of the study. The consent forms explained that the investigator was looking at how peer relationships influence the feelings and behaviors, as well as academic achievement of middle-school aged students. Additionally, the consent forms indicated that a researcher would be contacting the parents to explain the study and answer any questions.

After consent was granted, data were collected. Graduate students who have received their CITI training certification in human subjects' research administered the questionnaires to participants in a group-format during school hours. The participants were told that the information they provide on the questionnaires will be used in a study that is looking at how the peer relationships in middle-school influence how students think and feel and how well they do in school. Participants were informed that their names will be de-identified and replaced with a number so that their answers will remain confidential. Participants were told that it will take about 30 minutes to complete the measures, and that they may chose not to participate at any point during data collection or after the data are collected. When participants completed the measures, they were thanked for their participation.

Academic information was acquired through participants' report cards, which were provided by the school counselor. The current grades for each participant were

recorded in a de-identified, separate spreadsheet, and the report cards remained at the

school. Participants' names were de-identified from all questionnaires and replaced with

a number during data collection while at the school. The data were then securely

transported from the school to the university and entered into an SPSS file. Raw

participant data were stored in a file cabinet in a locked room at the university.

Chapter 4: Results

Hypotheses Restated:

Hypothesis I. Participants with positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by high scores on the PSS-FR will report less anxiety, as measured by the SCARED than participants with less positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by low scores on the PSS-FR.

Hypothesis II. Participants with positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by high scores on the PSS-FR will report less depression, as measured by the CDI than participants with less positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by low scores on the PSS-FR.

Hypothesis III. Participants with positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by high scores on the PSS-FR will report less loneliness, as measured by the LSDQ than participants with less positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by low scores on the PSS-FR.

Hypothesis IV. Participants with positive perceptions, as measured by high scores on the PSS-FR will report higher levels of self-esteem, as measured by the Global Self-Worth subscale of the Self-Perception Profile for Children than participants with less positive perceptions of peer support, as measured by low scores on the PSS-FR.

Hypothesis V. Participants' perceptions of peer support, as measured by scores on the PSS-FR will be correlated with participants' academic achievement, as measured by an average score of participants' current subject grades.

Statistical Analysis

To test hypotheses I, II, III, and IV, the median total PSS-FR score was used to divide participants into low and high support groups. A total score of 65 and below allocated participants to the low support group, and a total score of 66 and above allocated the participants to the high support group. Although there were more participants allocated to the high support group, both groups showed equal variability between their range of scores (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Group Descriptives for PSS-FR

Support Group		Descriptives			
	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
High Support	25	66	78	70.18	2.90
Low Support	17	52	65	60.24	4.30

Note. Low vs High support group (cutoff score based on median of total score on PSS-FR: 65 and below is low, 66 and above is high).

Independent t-tests were conducted to test the hypotheses that there would be differences between peer support groups on the variables of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and self-esteem. Results showed that there was a non-significant difference in anxiety scores for low support (M= 21.72, SD= 15.94) and high support (M= 27.65, SD= 13.47) groups; t(40)= -1.28, p= .216. There was also a non-significant difference in depression scores for low support (M= 53.08, SD= 10.10) and high support (M= 52.53, SD= 11.01) groups; t(40)= .159, p= .874. Moreover, there was a non-significant

difference in loneliness scores for low support (M= 32.64, SD= 11.51) and high support

(M= 30.41, SD= 9.08) groups; t(40)= .668, p=.508 and a non-significant difference in

self-esteem scores for low support (M= 18.76, SD= 9.48) and high support (M= 18.76,

SD= 5.27) groups; t(40)= -.003, p= .997).

To test hypothesis V, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was

conducted to determine if there was a significant relationship between perceptions of peer

support and academic achievement. Results of the Pearson correlation showed an

extremely low, positive correlation that was not significant between peer support and

academic achievement (overall GPA), *r*(40)= .021, p= .897.

Notable group differences

Although there were no statistically significant findings related to level of peer

support and psychological functioning, there were some notable group differences.

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted, looking at participants' ages, races,

genders, grades, languages spoken at home, and birthplaces of the participant and of their

parents. The median of participants' total PSS-FR score was used to divide participants

into low and high support groups. There were 25 participants in the low support group,

and 17 in the high support group. There were more boys than girls in the low friend

support group (boy= 16; girls= 9), and more girls in the high support group (girls= 15,

boy= 2). Additionally, there were more participants born in the USA in the low support

group (n=24) than in the high support group (n=17) (See Table 2).

Table 2.

Group Differences Descriptives

	High vs Low Support	
Descriptives	Low (n=25)	High (n=17)
Gender		
Male	16	2
Female	9	15
Grade		
6th	6	5
7th	9	8
8th	10	4
Birth Country		
USA	24	14
Puerto Rico	0	3
Central America	1	0
Parents Birth Country		
USA	11	8
Puerto Rico	6	7
Dominican Rep	4	1
Central America	2	1
Mexico	2	0
Language at home		
English	12	7
English and Spanish	11	4
Spanish	2	6

Moreover, the mean loneliness score was higher in the low friend support group (M= 32.64, SD=11.5) than the mean loneliness score for the high peer support group (M= 30.41, SD=9.08), and the mean depression score was higher in the low peer support group (M= 53.08, SD=10.10) than in the high peer support group (M= 52.52, SD=11.01). The reverse was true for anxiety because the mean anxiety score for low support group (M= 21.72, SD= 15.94) was lower than the high peer support (M= 27.65, SD= 13.49). Finally, there were no differences between the low support group (M= 18.76, S.D= 4.32) and high support group (M= 18.76, S.D= 5.28) in self-esteem (See Table 3).

Table 3.

Group Differences of Variables Measured

Variables Measured	High Support		Low Support	
	M	SD	M	SD
Depression (CDI)	52.52	11.01	53.08	10.10
Loneliness (LSDQ)	30.41	9.08	32.64	11.5
Anxiety (Scared)	27.65	13.49	21.72	15.94
Global Self-Esteem	18.76	5.28	18.76	4.32
GPA	88.00	6.78	83.48	9.48

Due to non-significant findings related to levels of peer support, as well as results showing more boys than girls in the lower support group, further analyses were done to investigate differences in scores, based on gender. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-esteem, and total GPA scores by gender. There was a non-significant difference between girls (M= 26.21, 14.64) and boys (M= 21.33, SD= 15.70) for anxiety scores t(40)= -1.04, p= 3.07; a non-significant difference between girls (M= 52.42, SD= 10.27) and boys (M= 53.44, SD= 11.90) for depression scores t(40)= .300, p= .766; a non-significant difference between girls (M=30.83, SD= 9.94) and boys (M=32.94, SD= 11.47) for loneliness scores t(40)= .638, p= .527; a non-significant difference between girls (M= 18.83, SD= 4.84) and boys (M= 18.67, SD= 4.58) in self-esteem scores t(40)= -.113, p= .911; and a non-significant difference between girls (M= 87.33, SD= 7.41) and boys (M= 82.61, SD= 9.72) in GPA; t(40)= -1.79, p= .081. (See Table 4 for gender means across the measured variables).

Table 4.

Gender Comparisons Across Variables

Variables Measured	Males		Females	
	M	SD	M	SD
Depression (CDI)	53.44	11.90	52.42	10.27
Loneliness (LSDQ)	32.94	11.47	30.83	9.93
Anxiety (Scared)	21.33	15.70	26.21	14.64
Global Self-Esteem	18.67	4.58	18.83	4.83
GPA	82.61	9.72	87.33	7.41

Furthermore, discrepancies were shown between peer support groups in the number of boys and girls in each peer support group, as well as in the mean overall anxiety scores. As such, Independent Samples t-tests were conducted to compare subscales of the Scared (panic, separation anxiety, social anxiety, general anxiety, and school anxiety) by gender to examine if there was a gender effect within the subscales of the Scared that may have impacted the overall anxiety scores in each peer support group. There was a non-significant difference between girls (M=7.21, SD= 6.0) and boys (M= 5.28, SD= 5.32) in the panic subscale of the Scared; $t(40)= -1.08$, $p= .286$; a non-significant difference between girls (M= 6.38, SD= 4.37) and boys (M= 5.28, SD= 4.38) in the generalized anxiety subscale; $t(40)= -.805$, $p= .426$; a non-significant difference between girls (M= 6.08, SD= 3.64) and boys (M= 5.33, SD= 3.94) in the social anxiety subscale; $t(40)= -.638$, $p= .527$; a non-significant difference between girls (M= 4.79, SD= 2.80) and boys (M= 3.89, SD= 3.38) in separation anxiety subscale Sep $t(40)= -.963$, $p= .341$; and a non-significant difference between girls (M= 2.04, SD= 1.27) and boys (M= 1.56, SD- 1.54) in school anxiety subscale scores; $t(40)= -1.12$, $p= .269$. (See table 5).

Table 5.

Gender Comparisons Across Subscales of the Scared

Scared Subscales	Males		Females	
	M	SD	M	SD
Panic	5.28	5.23	7.21	6.00
Generalized Anxiety	5.28	4.38	6.38	4.37
Social Anxiety	5.33	3.94	6.08	3.64
Separation Anxiety	3.89	3.27	4.79	2.80
School Anxiety	1.56	1.54	2.04	1.27

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study sought to determine if participants with perceptions of high levels of peer support report less anxiety, depression, loneliness, and higher self-esteem than participants with perceptions of low peer support. The results of this study did not show a significant relationship between level of peer support and psychological functioning. This contrasts with the literature, which has shown that a relationship does exist between peer relationships and psychological functioning (Zimmer-Gembeck & Pronk, 2012; Buhremster, 1990; Wentzel, 2004). The lack of statistical power in the current study may have impacted the non-significant results because a power analysis indicated that the sample size was not large enough to detect differences.

Moreover, the lack of statistically significant results may be due to the manner in which peer support/friendship was measured in other studies versus the current study.

For example, the results contrast with the literature, indicating that youth who report a lack of social support or poor peer relationships are shown to be at increased risk for depression and anxiety (Pederson, Vitaro, Barker, & Borge, 2007; Witvliet, Brendgen, van Lier, Koot, & Vitaro, 2010; Bond, Carlin, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Festa & Ginsburd, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck & Pronk, 2012). The results of this study also differ with literature looking at friendship and loneliness in Latino youth specifically, that which indicates that peer relationships in Latino youth do in fact impact feelings of loneliness (Storch, Nock, Masia-Warner, Barlas, 2003). Additionally, research has shown that perceptions of friendship quality are associated with self-esteem (Way & Green, 2006; Liem & Martin, 2011). Although these studies showed a relationship between peer support/friendships and psychological functioning, peer support was measured in a different manner (i.e., different self-report measures and means of assessing peer support) than the way in which peer support was measured in the current study, using the PSS-FR.

Furthermore, the PSS-FR measure was normed on an older sample and it is possible that it did not measure peer support in the manner it was assumed or was intended to for this study. Psychological well-being has been shown to be associated with friendship support in Latino youth specifically (Way & Chen, 2000), and negative friendships in Latino adolescents have been shown to predict social anxiety and depressive symptoms (Le Greca & Harrison, 2005). However, these studies used a sample that included an older population (high school students). Also, it may be that peer relationships have a more predictive value in high school, and that as youth get older and gain independence from their parents, peer support is likely to play a larger role in influencing emotional wellness. Furthermore, with regard to studies with Latino

participants, the specific ethnic/racial identity of Latino participants may make a

difference in levels of peer support reported or on the influence that peer support has in

general. For example, most of the participants in the current study were of Puerto Rican

decent, and may view peer support differently than do individuals of other Latino

cultures. The studies that obtained significant results with Latino populations included

more diversity within their Latino samples or did not provide a breakdown of any ethnic

differences within their Latino samples.

The results of this study also showed no relationship between levels of peer

support and academic functioning (i.e., grades), which also contrasts with literature that

has examined peer support and grades. For example, individuals who perceive their

friendships as supportive have been shown to have higher achievement scores than those

who perceive their friendships as less supportive (Vaquera & Kao, 2009). Additionally,

research involving Latino youth has revealed that peer relationships influence academic

achievement (Woolley & Bowen, 2007), and that self-reported friend support is

predictive of grades (Wooley, et al., 2008). Overall, it appears that research has shown a

link between peer relationships and academic functioning, and this study's low power

likely influenced the non-significant findings between peer support and academic

functioning in this sample. Additionally, this study examined academic functioning

using overall GPA. Including other forms of academic functioning such as standardized

tests scores or specific subject grades may have yielded significant findings, as it has in

other studies (Liem & Martin, 2011; Wooley, et al., 2007).

Furthermore, there were various trends in group differences, including more

participants in the low support group, compared with the high support group; there were

more males than females in the low support group and more participants born in the USA

in the low support group. The influence of these group differences on the results is

unclear, due to the small sample size and subsequent low statistical power. Having more

participants in the low support group is likely due to the majority of participants

endorsing high levels of peer support on the PSS-FR, and on the median score used to

divide groups being subsequently higher than if more participants had reported lower

levels of peer support. It is also possible that due to the Latino cultural values of

familismo, participants have strong relationships with their families; even if they reported

low peer support, these family relationships compensate for the lack of peer support that

would otherwise influence psychological and academic functioning.

     With regard to gender differences (i.e., more boys than girls in the low support

group, and more girls than boys in the high support group), further analyses were

conducted to examine if gender differences could explain the non-significant findings

between peer support groups. However, results indicated that there was no gender effect

on the findings of the study. Additionally, due to the high peer support group showing a

higher mean score of anxiety on the SCARED than the low peer support group, further

analyses were conducted to look at gender and the subscales of the Scared. However,

there was no significant gender effect with regard to the total SCARED scores or on

specific subscales on the Scared. Furthermore, anxiety in general tends to be more

prevalent in girls, so having more girls in the high support group with higher anxiety

scores may be the reason that the high peer support group showed a higher anxiety mean

than the low peer support group, which had more boys. It should also be noted that

overall, 42% of all participants had a clinically significant anxiety score, which may

indicate that, in general, participants reported a high level of anxiety. Because many of the participants reported high levels of anxiety, it is possible that this impacted the ability to detect differences that one might see in another sample. The high levels of reported anxiety may be unique to his sample.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the current study. Although results revealed some trends towards group differences, due to the small sample size, the current study did not have sufficient power to accurately detect any differences that might exist. The generalizability of the study is also limited because the sample was derived from a very specific population of Latino youth who reside in specific inner city neighborhood, which is not representative of Latinos in general. Moreover, although the sample included Latino youth, generalizing the results to all Latinos may not be appropriate. The Latino population is very diverse, encompassing many different countries and cultures, and the majority of the Latinos in this sample are of Puerto Rican descent, given the current, known demographics of the school.

Another limitation of this study is the use of self-report measures. Participants' perceptions of their peer relationships, and also their psychological functioning were assessed using self-report assessments, which may not be accurate. Participants may have been worried about making a good impression on the evaluator, or were worried about their peers or teachers viewing their answers. Thus participants may have underreported negative feelings or symptomologies and answered the questionnaires in a way that would present themselves in a positive manner. In contrast, participants may have exaggerated or may have over-reported symptoms if they did not fully understand

the questions. In comparison with using only self-report measures, research shows that having multiple modes of measurement from multiple raters (such as reports from teachers or parents, and behavioral observations) boosts the credibility of research findings (Paulus and Vazire, 2007).

Additionally, the peer support measure, the PSS-FR has been tested only with children as young as fourteen years, and there is no documentation of its validity with a sample of students aged eleven to fifteen years, as in the current study. Thus, the PSS-FR may not truly reflect the perceptions of peer support for Latino youth, aged 11-15 years. Moreover, it is notable that there was little variability within scores of the PSS-FR (min= 52, max= 78). Again, this is likely due to the majority of participants endorsing high levels of peer support on the PSS-FR, and to the median score used to divide groups being subsequently higher than if more participants had reported lower levels of peer support. Although there were more participants in the low support group using the median cutoff, the range between the lowest level of reported peer support and highest was not that large. It is possible that if there were more variability in the sample, lower levels of perceived social support would have been detected, especially because Latinos have been found to report lower levels of perceived social support, relative to other groups (Turney & Kao, 2009). However, these results again are likely due to this study's having a low sample size.

Future directions

Peer support in youth remains an area greatly in need of research (Ellis et al., 2009). Much of the research on peer relationships has focused on the use of objective assessments (Parker, Rubin, Erath, Woislawowicz, & Buskrik, 2005), in which youths'

perceptions of their peer relationships are more likely to reveal the nature of these

relationships (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979; Furman, 1996). With regard to

assessments that measure perceived peer support in youth, specifically the PSS-FR,

additional research is needed. Because the PSS-FR has previously been used with a

sample of youth 14 years and older (Way & Greene, 2006) it may be a more valid

measure of peer support for older adolescents. Additionally, although there were no

significant results found using the PSS-FR in this study, it may be that the PSS-FR is a

valid measure to use with adolescents, but with those from a broader ethnic population.

Nonetheless, there needs to be a continued focus on finding a peer support measure for

minority adolescents because most of the research examining adolescent friendships has

been among middle class, European American youth (Way & Chen, 2000). Gender

differences in scores should also be closely studied in the future use of the PSS-FR.

　　　　Because evidence has shown that positive outcomes are most likely in youth who

have friends; when relationships with these individuals are supportive and intimate

(Hartup & Stevens, 1997), more attention should also focus on how perceptions of peer

support and quality influence overall functioning in youth. Additionally, school staff

should be aware of the possible influence that peers can have on students' emotional and

academic health (Rueger & Jenkins, 2013) and consider how to prevent or buffer the

effects of negative peer relationships. Finally, Latino cultural values emphasize familial

relationships (Wolley, 2009) and the student-teacher relationship has also been shown to

play an important role in school behavior and academic achievement in Latino students

(Garcia-Reid et al., 2005). Due to the influence of parents and of teachers on Latino

student outcomes (Woolley, 2009), future research should examine the influence that

both parents and teachers have on Latino youth's relationships with peers, on their

psychological functioning, and on their academic success.

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