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## Gender, Peer Relations, and Challenges for Girlfriends and Boyfriends Coming Together in Adolescence

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### Abstract

This paper examines how girls' and boys' different peer cultures in middle childhood may set the stage for challenges in emerging heterosexual romantic relationships in adolescence. Two theoretical frameworks are presented for understanding gender differences in children's same-gender friendships and peer groups in middle childhood: the two cultures perspective (Maccoby, 1998) and the emotional tradeoffs perspective (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Emerging empirical evidence is presented to highlight how girls' and boys' gendered friendship qualities may relate to difficulties when girls and boys come together in early romantic relationships. Preliminary longitudinal data are presented that suggest that girls' relational and boys' physical aggression toward same-gender peers in middle childhood may relate to having emotionally intense arguments in early adolescence. Implications for prevention and intervention are discussed.

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The period of gender separation in childhood is followed by a period in which the strong forces of sexual attraction emerge, drawing the two sexes together. But the prior period of gender segregation has created gender divergences in modes of relating to others that call for considerable negotiation between people engaged in the formation of new heterosexual relationships.

Maccoby (1998, p. 12)

If indeed it is the case that girls and boys grow up in different peer cultures, these "gender divergences" in expectations and behaviors in relationships may create challenges for emerging heterosexual romances, and may even be one of the developmental origins of adolescent dating violence. To date, whether girls' and boys' different peer experiences in middle childhood relate to difficulties in heterosexual romantic relations has not been explored empirically. Different theoretical perspectives suggest that girls and boys may arrive in adolescence with different expectations from close relationships that arise at least in part due to different peer socialization experiences in early and middle childhood. This paper will examine whether specific features of girls' and boys' peer cultures in middle childhood may set the stage for difficulties in emerging heterosexual romantic relationships in adolescence.

Girls and boys could experience the peer world differently in numerous ways: expectations for relationships, qualities of friendships, group norms, goals in social interactions, seeking out different peer contexts that likely elicit different peer behaviors, engaging in different types of aggression and bullying, experiencing different types of peer victimization, characteristics related to high (and low) peer status, size and density and qualities of social networks, and last but not least, hopes and expectations for emerging romantic relationships. And, for each of these variables, gender may relate to developmental origins of possible differences, changes with development, and implications for adjustment. To make the picture even more complicated, fully understanding gender and peer relations requires examining not only mean level gender differences but also gender differences in relations among variables. For example, even if boys and girls do not differ in frequency of perpetrating social or relational aggression,

social aggression may be more strongly related to adjustment for girls than boys, or for boys than girls.

Because gender has not often been a primary focus in peer relations research (Underwood, 2004), empirical evidence for many gender differences in peer relations is somewhat scant. However, two important theoretical perspectives have suggested important guiding hypotheses for research on gender and peer relations: the two cultures perspective (Maccoby, 1998) and the emotional trade-offs perspective (Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

The two cultures perspective (Maccoby, 1998) logically begins with the striking phenomenon of gender segregation. Beginning in the third year of life and through the middle childhood years, children seem to interact mostly with peers of their own gender, especially at school. The two cultures perspective argues that girls' and boys' peer groups operate separately and function differently, and that girls and boys are socializing each other to have different values, expectations, and behaviors. A full presentation of the two cultures perspective is beyond the scope of this paper (see Maccoby, 1998, for a detailed discussion). The girls' peer culture emphasizes dyadic relationships, smaller groups, playing near adults, greater compliance with adults, conflict avoidance, intimacy and self-disclosure, intense discussion of close relationships and romance, and closed, exclusive relationships. In contrast, boys' peer culture features large groups, playing farther from adults, rule-breaking, focus on activities and competition, overt anger expression, discussion of risky behaviors and sex, less self-disclosure, and more openness and less exclusivity in relationships.

Although the two cultures perspective has been useful in generating hypotheses about gender and peer relations, some have criticized this approach for over-emphasizing gender segregation and for failing to account for the fact that under some circumstances, girls and boys interact together comfortably (Thorne, 1993). Ethnographic work suggests that boys and girls are willing to engage with each other when they are involved in a compelling activity, when they do not have to choose who will be in the group, when the group has been formed not on the basis of gender, and in settings that are more private (Thorne, 1993). Others have proposed that although girls and boys play together more easily in neighborhoods and other relaxed settings, other-gender relationships go "underground" at school where gender segregation remains strong (Gottman, 1986). Even if gender segregation is stronger at school than in other contexts, children spend a good seven hours daily in the school setting so even interacting in separate groups in that context could shape girls' and boys' developing expectations for relationships.

The emotional tradeoffs perspective further suggests that gender differences in qualities of peer relationships may have costs and benefits for children's emotional adjustment (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). From a thorough meta-analytic review, Rose and Rudolph (2006) found that girls are higher on prosocial behavior, self-disclosure, and caring about dyadic relationships; girls experience greater stress around friendships and peer status; and girls seek support from others and ruminate more about problems than boys do. Each of these features of girls' relationships may have emotional tradeoffs; for example, girls' greater self-disclosure might enhance the intimacy of their friendships, but may contribute to girls' propensities for co-rumination and internalizing problems (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). In contrast, boys are higher on rough-and-tumble play and overt aggression, more involved in sports and other competitive activities, care more about dominance in the peer group, but also seem to experience more peer victimization, especially physical aggression. Boys' large group orientation and competitive play might enhance their development of group relationships, but boys' play styles may interfere with the development of close relationships and could confer risk for behavior problems (Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

Both of these theoretical perspectives suggest that girls and boys arrive in adolescence with different relationship styles and expectations that may pose difficulties for emerging romantic relationships. Although few studies have specifically examined how gendered qualities of peer relations in middle-childhood might relate to challenges in emerging romantic partnerships, recent empirical findings suggest that these questions might merit additional exploration. For example, girls seem to understand distinctions between girls' and boys' friendships better than boys do (McDougall & Hymel, 2007). Thus, girls may be more accommodating of boys' interactional styles (Rose, 2007), then become frustrated when they realize that their flexibility may be one sided in a heterosexual romantic relationship. As another example, girls engage in extensive discussion of other people (McDonald et al., 2007), yet are willing to be socially exclusive of others only behind the target's back (Underwood & Buhrmester, 2007). Therefore, girls could be appalled by boys' directness toward disliked others, whereas boys could be frustrated by girls' lack of assertiveness followed by perseverating in maligning others behind their backs.

Evidence for the proposition that gendered qualities of peer relations may relate to qualities of adolescent romantic relationships is also emerging from our ongoing longitudinal study of developmental origins and outcomes of social aggression. Participants in this multi-method, multi-informant study were 281 children and their parents, friends, and teachers who were recruited in when they were nine years old. This typically developing sample includes equal numbers of girls and boys and is 20 % African American, 60% Caucasian, and 20% Mexican American, which was representative of the county in which the research was conducted. Parents reported on annual family incomes: 20% reported an annual income of less than \$25,000, 22% reported an annual income of \$26,000–\$50,000, 17% reported an annual income of \$51,000–\$75,000, 31% reported an annual income of \$76,000–\$100,000, 2% reported an income of greater than \$100,000 per year, and 8% did not disclose annual incomes.

Children participating in this study came to the laboratory for observational assessments in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> grades, at which they were interviewed and completed a series of tasks with a close friend and with a parent to observe social processes related to the development of social aggression. At these yearly visits, youth completed the Friendship Qualities Measure (FQM, Grotmeter & Crick, 1996). The FQM is a 43-item, self-report questionnaire designed to measure qualities of close friendships (Grotmeter & Crick, 1996). The FQM includes subscales that assess intimate exchange, relational aggression within the friendship, overt aggression within the friendship, relational aggression toward others, and overt aggression toward others. The FQM subscales have adequate reliability (Cronbach's alphas range from .61 to .87), and validity (Grotmeter & Crick, 1996).

In the summer after 7<sup>th</sup> grade when participants were 13 years old, they completed questionnaires assessing relationships and adjustment, including the Romantic History Questionnaire (Buhrmester, 2001). The Romantic History Questionnaire is a 40-item, self-report questionnaire that measures romantic involvement, satisfaction, suffering, and sexuality. The Romantic History Questionnaire has strong reliability and validity. This measure is ideal for the purposes of this study because it is designed to assess both the early, beginning steps of romantic engagement and more advanced involvement.

Table 1 presents correlations between same-gender friendship qualities when girls and boys were in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and qualities of emerging romantic relationships in 7<sup>th</sup> grade: involvement, satisfaction, sexuality, and suffering. If girls' greater intimacy in childhood friendships leads to disappointment when they start to form relationships with boys, then same-gender friendship intimacy might be negatively associated with romantic satisfaction and positively correlated with suffering. For this young sample, this hypothesis was not supported. If boys' aggression in their same gender friendships relates to problems when they start to interact with girls, then

boys' aggression with same gender peers may be positively related to romantic suffering and negatively related to romantic satisfaction. These results received only partial support. Boys' overt aggression toward same gender peers in 4<sup>th</sup> grade tended to be correlated with romantic involvement and suffering, and was significantly correlated with sexuality in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Curiously, overt aggression toward others was positively associated with romantic satisfaction for boys.

As another way of exploring whether gendered friendship qualities might be related to romantic difficulties, for this same sample, logistic regressions were conducted to examine whether 4<sup>th</sup> grade friendship qualities predicted endorsing "have emotionally intense arguments" with romantic partners in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. For girls, relational aggression within same-gender friendships in 4<sup>th</sup> grade predicted having emotionally intense arguments with romantic partners in 7<sup>th</sup> grade (Odds Ratio = 2.74,  $p < .05$ ). For boys, there was a trend for overt aggression toward same gender peers in 4<sup>th</sup> grade to predict having emotionally intense romantic arguments in 7<sup>th</sup> grade (Odds Ratio = 3.49,  $p = .09$ ). These results suggest that the form of aggression most typical within same-gender friendships in middle childhood, relational aggression for girls and physical aggression for boys, predicts having emotionally intense romantic arguments in early adolescence. Although this ongoing longitudinal study provides some preliminary support for hypotheses, it is important to remember that these preadolescents were still fairly young and it will be important to study how gendered friendship qualities may predict romantic relationships problems in older samples. Many have speculated that different romantic relationship styles may develop from growing up in separate girls' and boys' peer cultures (Furman & Simon, 2006; Maccoby, 1998); it is high time this claim be subjected to rigorous empirical test.

In conclusion, theories and emerging evidence suggest that gender differences in peer relations in middle childhood may set the stage for challenges in emerging, heterosexual, romantic relationships in adolescence. Even if gender segregation is strongest at school (Gottman, 1986) or in public settings (Thorne, 1993), children spend substantial time in these contexts and socializing mostly with peers of their own gender may lead to challenges for forming other-gender relationships. Evidence suggests that around grades 6 and 7, girls and boys begin to interact more on the playground (Pellegrini, 1994), and boys start to direct rough-and-tumble play toward girls (Pellegrini, 2001). "Pushing and poking courtship" begins (Maccoby, 1998, p.70). Social networks expand to include members of the other gender (Cairns et al., 1995), and involvement in mixed gender networks predicts beginning romantic involvement (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). Adolescents seem to carry qualities of their same-gender relationships into their emerging romances; youth who report bullying others also say they are more aggressive in their romantic relationships (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Laporte, 2008). If girls and boys expect other gender relationships to operate as their same gender friendships have, the potential for disappointment and frustration seems great. It is easy to imagine that girls could be enraged by boys' more direct style of conflict resolution and irritated by their more competitive style, and that boys could be perplexed by girls' propensity to co-ruminate, to engage in excessive discussion of problems with close friends (Rose, 2002).

Whether these challenges are so severe as to confer risk for dating violence is unclear and merits further investigation. Particularly for youth who may have other risk factors for aggression and violence, such as emotional dysregulation and exposure to violence in their homes and neighborhoods, it is easy to imagine that frustration and disappointment with the relationship style of the other gender could lead to intimate partner violence. However, it is also important to acknowledge the possibility that girls' and boys' different relationships styles could strengthen emerging romances because romantic relationships may provide then with relationship qualities that are less available in same-gender relationships. Boys may enjoy

opportunities for greater intimacy and self-disclosure than they could experience in their relationships with boys, and girls might enjoy more comfort with competition in their interactions with boys.

Viewing gender differences in peer relationships as posing challenges for emerging romantic relationships and possibly as antecedents for dating violence has implications for prevention and intervention programs. Programs to reduce adolescent dating violence could include components to highlight possible differences in girls' and boys' relationships styles and expectations, highlight the strengths of each gender group, and cultivate respect for the different values and skills that young women and men bring to beginning romantic relationships.

Both the two cultures and the emotional tradeoffs perspectives run the risk of ignoring variability within each gender group. By looking more closely at when girls and boys interact comfortably and by being open to the possibility boys and girls might seek from each other what they cannot find in same gender relationships, we may find clues as to how to help young women and men form healthy relationships and learn to resolve conflicts non-violently, and better yet, constructively. As eloquently stated by Thorne, "A more complex understanding of the dynamics of gender, of tensions and contradictions, and of the hopeful moments that lie within present arrangements, can broaden our sense of the possible" (p. 173).

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**Table 1**

Correlations between Same-Gender Friendship Qualities in 4<sup>th</sup> Grade and Romantic Relationships in 7<sup>th</sup> Grade (Girls/Boys)

<b>Romantic Friendship Qualities</b>	<b>Involvement</b>	<b>Suffering</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Satisfaction</b>
Intimacy	.03/-.01	-.16/.00	-.05/-.14	.00/-.08
Relational aggression within the friendship	.20/.09 <sup>t</sup>	.35/.13**	.25/.04*	.05/.01
Overt aggression within the friendship	-.07/.06	-.03/-.03	.03/.06	-.04/.05
Relational aggression toward others	.13/.06	.16/-.01	.10/.11	0.1/.21 <sup>t</sup>
Overt aggression toward others	-.13/.19 <sup>t</sup>	-.03/.20 <sup>t</sup>	-.09/.29**	-.01/.24*

Note.

\*  
 $p < .05$

\*\*  
 $p < .01$

<sup>t</sup>  
 $p < .10$