Brief Report: How Anxiously Withdrawn Preadolescents Think about Friendship

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that anxiously withdrawn preadolescents demonstrate success in forming friendships, yet these friendships tend to be of lesser quality. Drawing on Selman's (1980) theory of interpersonal understanding, we compared levels of friendship understanding between anxiously withdrawn preadolescents and a sample of non-withdrawn age mates. Fifth graders (N=116; 58% girls; mean age = 10.33 yrs) completed same-sex friendship and social behavior nominations, as well as a semi-structured clinical interview assessing understanding of various friendship issues in response to a hypothetical friendship dilemma. Results suggest that anxiously withdrawn preadolescents demonstrated lower levels of friendship understanding for some, but not all, friendship issues that may be related to friendship quality. The findings suggest that social cognitive assessments of friendship may be useful in understanding the friendship successes and difficulties of anxiously withdrawn preadolescents.

Keywords

Friendship; Social withdrawal; Friendship reasoning; Perspective taking; Social cognition; Preadolescents

Involvement in successful friendships has been associated with overall positive adjustment (see Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006 for review). Not all youth, however, are able to form and maintain these healthy relationships. Socially withdrawn youth, defined as those who consistently display anxious solitary behaviors when among peers (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009), may be at particular risk for friendship difficulties. They frequently lack the social skills and cognitions that underlie friendship relationships (e.g., Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997), perhaps due to their restricted peer interactions (e.g., Rubin & Krasnor, 1986; Schneider, 2009). In this study, we focus on a subset of socially withdrawn preadolescents who show anxious withdrawal in the presence of familiar peers. We examined the

friendship-related cognitions of these anxiously withdrawn youth in an attempt to explain their friendship successes and difficulties.

Selman (1980) suggested that adolescents' understanding of friendship issues (e.g., formation, closeness/intimacy) could be categorized into one of five invariant developmental stages, which reflect increasingly complex perspective taking skills and coordination of multiple viewpoints. Adolescents with clinically diagnosed aggressive or emotional difficulties show less mature friendship understanding than do nonclinical youth (e.g., Gurucharri, Phelps, & Selman, 1984). Withdrawn youth, who also exhibit peer difficulties (e.g., Ladd, 2006), may show similarly immature friendship understanding. Indeed, some researchers have found negative relations between social withdrawal and friendship understanding (e.g. Hart, Keller, Edelstein, & Hoffmann, 1998; Schneider & Tessier, 2007); others, however, have failed to find such a connection (Cohen, Kershner, & Wherspann, 1985).

There are several potential reasons for this inconsistency. First, findings may vary with specific friendship issues. Although socially withdrawn youth are as likely to have and maintain a mutual best friendship as are their more socially competent peers (Rubin, Wojslawowicz, Rose-Krasnor, Booth-LaForce, & Burgess, 2006; Schneider 1999), their friendships tend to be of lesser quality (Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999; Rubin, Wojslawowicz et al., 2006). Thus, we hypothesized that anxiously withdrawn preadolescents would not differ from their typical age mates in their understanding of friendship *formation*, but would show lower levels of friendship understanding for *closeness, trust, conflict resolution, and friendship termination* issues. Second, researchers have failed to differentiate between youth with and without friends, introducing a potential confound. Therefore, we focused on a sample of anxiously withdrawn and typical preadolescents for whom a mutually best friend could be identified. Finally, methods used to identify socially withdrawn samples have been inconsistent (e.g. Cohen et al., 1985; Pellegrini, 1986). Often researchers have failed to distinguish between active isolation *by* peers and withdrawal *from* the peer group due to social anxiety and negative self-regard, obscuring important conceptual and empirical differences between excluded and withdrawn youth (see Rubin et al, 2009). Therefore, it is unclear in previous studies whether it was anxious-withdrawn behavior or peer isolation that was associated with friendship understanding. We addressed this issue by conceptualizing and assessing anxious withdrawal independently of peer rejection.

In summary, our goal was to examine differences in friendship understanding between anxiously withdrawn preadolescents and their more typical classmates. We addressed notable gaps in the literature by focusing on specific friendship issues, assessing social withdrawal independently from peer rejection, and including only preadolescents who had mutual best friends.

Method

Participants

Our 827 participants (406 boys) were drawn from a larger sample of 5th graders from eight mid-Atlantic U.S. elementary schools, with a mean age of 10.33 years (*SD* = 0.52). Parental consent rate was 84%. Ethnic and racial compositions within the schools (40% Caucasian, 22% Hispanic/Latino, 22% African American, and 15% Asian) paralleled countywide distributions.

School Measures

Friendship nominations (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994)—Participants nominated their two same-sex "best" friends and all had at least one same-sex mutually reciprocated friendship (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996).

Child Behaviors—Participants nominated same-sex classmates for various roles in an extended version of the *Revised Class Play* (ECP; adapted from Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985). Item scores were standardized within gender and classroom. The Aggression (7 items; e.g. "*Someone who fights*"; Cronbach's α=.91) and Anxious Withdrawal (4 items; e.g. "*Someone who gets nervous about participating in group discussions*;" Cronbach's α=.87) factors of the ECP were used herein (see Burgess, Wojslawowicz, Rubin, Rose-Krasnor, & Booth-LaForce, 2006 for details). This behaviorally based measure has been used successfully in other studies of peer relationships (Bowker & Spencer, 2010; Rubin et al., 2006).

Identification of the Risk and Control Groups

ECP scores were used to demarcate the sample further. *Anxiously Withdrawn* preadolescents ($n = 52$, 18 boys) had Anxious Withdrawal ECP scores in the top 33% and Aggression scores in the bottom 50%. *Comparison* preadolescents ($n = 64$, 30 boys) had Anxious Withdrawal and Aggression scores in the bottom 50% (see Ladd & Burgess, 1999 and Schneider, 2009 for similar procedures). As expected, preadolescents in the Anxiously Withdrawn group had higher ECP withdrawal scores than did preadolescents in the Comparison group, $F(1, 114) = 157.67$, $p=.001$. The Anxiously Withdrawn group members also had lower ECP aggression scores, $F(1,114) = 6.66$, $p=.01$.

Laboratory Measure

Friendship Conceptions Interview (adapted from Schultz, Yeates, & Selman, 1989; Selman, 1980)—A hypothetical friendship dilemma was followed by probes to elicit preadolescents' understanding of friendship formation (e.g. *Why does a person need a good friend?*), closeness (e.g. *What makes a good close friendship last?*), trust (e.g. *Do you think trust is important for a good friendship?*), conflict resolution (e.g. *How should arguments be settled between friends?*), and friendship termination issues (e.g. *What makes friendships break up?*). Each response was coded into one of five stage levels; the highest stage score within an issue was used for analyses. The measure showed good inter-rater reliability (percentage agreement = 83.4%; Cohen's Kappa = 0.72, based on independent ratings of 27 transcripts).

Procedures

Following IRB approval, school-based measures were administered in large group format to all preadolescents who received parental consent. Participants were subsequently invited to the laboratory with their mutual best friends to complete additional questionnaires and the Friendship Conceptions Interview.

Results

Differences in Friendship Understanding

A Group (*Anxiously Withdrawn, Comparison*) by Gender MANCOVA was conducted for the five friendship understanding issues, with aggression as a covariate. Pillai's Trace criterion revealed significant multivariate effects for Group, $F(5, 107) = 4.46$, $p=.001$, $n^2 = .17$ and Gender, $F(5, 107) = 2.30$, $p=.05$, $n^2 =.10$. Post-hoc tests for Group revealed significant main effects for closeness, $F(1, 111) = 11.74$, $p=.001$, $n^2 =.10$ and friendship

termination, F (1, 111) = 5.60, p=.02, n^2 =.05 (see Table 1). *Anxiously withdrawn* preadolescents responded to closeness and friendship termination issues with less social cognitive sophistication than did *Comparison* preadolescents.

Follow-up univariate tests for Gender revealed a significant main effect for the issue of closeness within friendship, F (1, 111) = 7.79, p=.006, n^2 =.07; girls responded at higher levels of sophistication than did boys, consistent with prior literature (e.g., Zarbatany, McDougall, & Hymel, 2000). All interaction effects were non-significant.

Discussion

Our results revealed that anxiously withdrawn and nonwithdrawn preadolescents demonstrated similar understanding of friendship formation, offering support for previously established similarity in friendship prevalence in withdrawn and non-withdrawn children (Rubin, Wojslawowicz et al., 2006; Schneider, 1999). Withdrawn youth often have the skills and knowledge to form friendships; however, the ability to sustain high quality friendships may require different cognitions and social skills (Bowker, Rubin, Rose-Krasnor, & Booth-LaForce, 2007). Indeed, our study revealed that anxiously withdrawn preadolescents had lower levels of understanding for closeness and termination issues. The lack of understanding of closeness and intimacy found in the current study may explain these relatively poor friendship quality interactions. Indeed, withdrawn young adolescents have been found to interact less frequently with their friends than non-withdrawn adolescents while showing more neutral affect (Schneider, 2009).

Our results also showed that anxiously withdrawn adolescents had lower levels of reasoning about friendship termination, suggesting they tend to view friendship termination as the product of unilateral rather than mutual causes. In reality, it may be the best friend, rather than the anxiously withdrawn preadolescent, who decides to end the relationship. Presently, researchers have not examined how preadolescents think about or place responsibility for the break-up of their friendships.

Unexpectedly, the friendship cognitions of anxiously withdrawn preadolescents did not differ from comparison peers for conflict resolution and trust issues. Withdrawn children have been shown to provide more immature resolution strategies to conflict than do less withdrawn children, as well as less assertive techniques and more other-oriented goals (Adalbjamardottir, 1995; Rubin, Daniels-Beirness, & Bream, 1984). One explanation for our dissimilar results may be that the Selman perspective-taking coding, unlike those used in previous research, is based on the *rationale* for the response rather than its specific content. A second explanation centers on recent evidence suggesting that anxiously withdrawn children may be as adept as their more sociable peers at negotiation and perspective taking but only *within the context of a mutual best friendship* (Burgess et al., 2006). The social cognitive deficits previously reported may be a result of samples that included socially withdrawn children who were friendless.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the construct of social withdrawal is markedly heterogeneous. We focused on what researchers have typically referred to as shyness in familiar settings or anxious withdrawal. Researchers would do well to further disentangle anxious withdrawal, shyness, unsociability, and social isolation in future studies of friendship cognitions (Rubin et al, 2009). Second, we studied a sub-sample of anxiously withdrawn preadolescents - those who have a mutual best friend. Although this sampling decision allowed us to "unconfound" anxious withdrawal and friendlessness, it also limits the generalizability of our findings.

In summary, anxiously withdrawn preadolescents who had a mutual best friendship demonstrated specific social-cognitive deficiencies in their understanding of friendship closeness and termination. These deficiencies may help explain why they experience success in initiating a friendship, but have difficulty maintaining high quality relationships (Schneider, 1999). In the future, researchers should examine associations among friendship quality, concepts, and behaviors in greater detail, using coding systems that capture both the rationale and content of responses of withdrawn and nonwithdrawn preadolescents.

Acknowledgments

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Table 1

Standardized Variable Means and Standard Deviations for Study Sample

	Socially Withdrawn group (*n* = 52)		Comparison group (*n* = 64)			
	M	SD	M	SD	F	p-value
Child Behaviors						
Social withdrawal	1.04	1.00	- 0.54	0.10	157.67	0.000
Aggression	- 0.57	0.10	- 0.52	0.10	6.66	0.011
Friendship Issues						
Formation	2.29	0.50	2.22	0.49	1.00	0.321
Closeness	2.71	0.46	2.91	0.30	11.74	0.001
Trust	2.11	0.38	2.25	0.47	3.06	0.083
Conflict resolution	2.42	0.54	2.55	0.50	1.32	0.252
Termination	2.29	0.54	2.53	0.56	5.60	0.020