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# The Social Context of Adolescent Friendships: Parents, Peers, and Romantic Partners

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## Abstract

We argue that adolescent friendships flourish, or wither, within the “linked lives” of other salient social network ties. Based on structural equation modeling with data from two time points, we find that young people tend to be in high-quality friendships when they are tightly embedded in their social network and receive social support from their peers, parents, and romantic partners. In addition, females have higher quality friendships than males, and the life course transition to marriage has detrimental effects on friendship quality. Findings show that the influence of parents does not end in childhood but continues into adolescence. Furthermore, although earlier research documents that friends affect romantic relationships, we find the reverse, that is, romantic partners influence friendships. Results demonstrate that social connectedness and support from a range of network ties contribute to high-quality, caring friendships among youth, highlighting the utility of life course and social network perspectives.

## Keywords

friendship, adolescence, life course, linked lives, social support, social networks

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Individuals in our society place a high value on friendship, and countless philosophers and social commentators echo this sentiment. Friendship relations become particularly central during adolescence and young adulthood as young people seek to establish independence from their family (Fehr, 2000; Parks, 2007). These bonds constitute potent forces in young people's lives, influencing a range of outcomes, including academic (Robnett & Leaper, 2013; Vaquera & Kao, 2008), social and emotional (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005), as well as mental health (Ueno, 2005). Yet not all friendships are equally rewarding and of high quality, and problematic ones can be a source of noticeable conflict and emotional discord (Bagwell et al., 2005; Berndt, 1996; Casper & Card, 2010; Fehr, 2000). Nevertheless, the salience of this vital tie can be taken for granted in both daily life and scholarship (e.g., Rubin, 1985), and more research is needed on the contextual factors that shape fulfilling youth friendships. Here, we note that adolescents' lives are deeply linked to others in their social environment, and that these multiple connections powerfully shape their friendship relations. In particular, we investigate the degree to which social support from three crucial ties, those of parents, friends, and romantic partners, affect the quality of young people's friendships, measuring quality as the degree to which young people perceive their friendships to be caring, dependable, and soothing. We examine three components of social support (Barrera, 1986)—enacted support, perceived support, and social embeddedness.

Supportive social networks are critical to the structure and quality of interpersonal relationships (Connolly & Furman, 2000). For example, supportive and rewarding relationships with parents increase the likelihood of positive friendships for adolescents (Cotterell, 1996; Theran, 2010). Peer support also is apt to have a bearing on friendships, especially as reciprocal relationships with peers are central to the teen years (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996). In addition, as teenagers progress into adulthood, the importance of romantic partners grows (Sullivan, 1953), and these partners likely play an additional, critical part in shaping individuals' affiliative experiences (Furman & Shomaker, 2008; Milardo, 1982; Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983). Existing research, however, typically lacks the data to examine the role of the wider network in which friendships are embedded, and instead examines developmental or psychological forces, or focuses on only one dimension of the social environment (see Franco & Levitt, 1998; Parks, 2007, for notable exceptions). Research on more than one type of social tie is often recommended (Blieszner, 2006; Fehr, 1996; Furman & Shomaker, 2008), yet such a strategy is rarely undertaken.

In this study, we examine the influence on friendship of multiple relationships, including those with parents, peers, and boyfriends or girlfriends. In

our models, we control for the perceived fairness of the friendship, and for gender, to see whether extended network support affects friendship quality, even when taking into account individual assessments of friendship fairness, as well as gender. Our main analyses consist of two structural equation models, a Family Model and a Romantic Relationships Model, using two waves of data from the Iowa Youth and Families Project (IYFP) with responses from young adults, their mothers, and their fathers (Conger et al., 2001). Controls for the possible effects of two important life transitions—the transition from school (Models 1 and 2) and the transition to marriage (Model 2) also are included.

## Life Course Perspective

A life course perspective (Elder, 1994, 1998) complements friendship research because of its emphasis on several notable factors that contribute to the well-being of a person's relationships (Blieszner, 2006; Crosnoe, 2000; Giordano, 2003). According to this approach, people are part of a network of supportive ties as they move through their lives (Cotterell, 1996). Friendships remain embedded in a broader system of relationships that illustrate the fundamental, life course principle of "linked lives." Lives are lived interdependently through this web of shared relationships expressed in the personal networks of friends and family over time (Elder, 1998).

Kahn and Antonucci (1980) refer further to the linked lives' network as a convoy that changes over time but contains resources of value to an individual's functioning and well-being. The image of linked lives as a network convoy is particularly useful for developing a dynamic model of friendship. The notion of linked lives also dovetails nicely with egocentric, social network approaches to the study of interaction (e.g., Felmlee & Faris, 2013) and complements other conceptual frameworks traditionally used in the study of close relationships, such as social support. Furthermore, a broad, life course perspective can provide insights into the period of adolescence (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2011), highlighting the ways in which adolescence is linked to the developmental processes in the life stages that border it.

Here, we explore the extent to which several factors influence friendship quality, all of which are related to the linked lives principle: social support from parents and partners, as well as social embeddedness within an adolescent's friendship network. Social support refers to an individual's sense of belonging or intimacy based on the actions and behaviors of those who are close to an individual (Hobfall, 1996). We examine two measures of social support for the adolescent, in two separate models—enacted social support from mother and father in the first, and perceived social support from a

romantic partner in the second. In the first model, we also include one measure of enacted social support on the part of the adolescent toward their friend, as an intervening variable. In addition, we examine two measures of the composition of an adolescent's friendship network, its extensiveness (i.e., number of friends) and the amount of contact with those friends, to estimate egocentric, social embeddedness. Researchers often use measures of the quantity of social ties, and frequency of interaction, to indicate social embeddedness (e.g., Siedlecki, Salthouse, Oishi, & Jeswani, 2013; Wenger, Dystra, Melkas, & Knipscheer, 2007) within a network of connections.

## **Model 1: Family**

Parents are the primary source of social support role for young children; they form the basis for the development of relationships with peers and for individual, psychological well-being (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000). Kohn (1986) notes that parent-to-child value transmission is embedded in a larger social context. Support from families can play a powerful role in protecting against inauthentic friendships and buffering depressive symptoms (Theran, 2010).

Several studies find that parents influence the friendships of their progeny. In an examination of ethnic minority adolescents, family relationships constituted an important contextual factor significantly associated with changes over time in friendship quality (Way & Greene, 2006). According to Cui, Conger, Bryant, and Elder (2002), parents' supportive behavior promotes adolescent supportive behavior toward their friend. In addition, an interview study with high school seniors found a relationship between parents' encouragement and positive adolescent friendships and romantic relationships (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002). Mothers and fathers do not necessarily equally interact with, nor equally influence, their children, however, and mothers and fathers often do not share the same values (Kohn, 1983). According to Youniss and Smollar (1985), mothers engage more often in their adolescent's interests, whereas fathers are primarily perceived as authority figures. Mothers also are more involved and knowledgeable about their adolescent's peer relations (Updegraff, McHale, Crouter, & Kupanoff, 2001). The qualities of a mother's own friendships, in addition, are associated directly with those of an adolescent's friendships (Glick, Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2013).

At the same time, adolescence represents a period in life when young people interact heavily with their peers, and when they often attempt to distance themselves from parental control. Our study represents a relatively stringent test of the hypothesis of parental influence on friendships, therefore, because

we simultaneously control for the effects of peers, romantic partners, as well as other factors on friendship quality. The question we pose is: Does supportive behavior on the part of parents, especially mothers, improve the quality of their adolescent's friendships, while controlling for the effects of other salient factors, such as the effects of their peers? Below is our expectation.

**Hypothesis 1:** Both mothers' and fathers' supportive interactions will promote adolescents' supportive interactions toward their friends.

## Peers

The structure of friendships that young people have within their network is another factor that is apt to shape the quality of their friendships. In particular, we examine measures of social embeddedness, including friendship network size and contact. Adolescents who have more friends exhibit better mental health and fewer depressive symptoms (Ueno, 2005). People who have many friends also are considered more socially competent than those who do not; they are assumed to be more sociable, cooperative, and self-confident (Hartup, 1993). Moreover, better relationships may result from increased contact with friends; a lack of contact likely decreases the chances to deepen close relationships. Although such network characteristics may lead to improved friendship quality (Bagwell et al., 2005; Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998), little research has investigated this possibility. Stated below is our prediction.

**Hypothesis 2:** Individuals with more friendships, and higher levels of contact with those friends, will report greater friendship quality.

## Controls: Perceived Friendship Fairness

In our models, we include a control for a measure of friendship fairness, as perceived by the respondent. Previous research finds that beginning at a young age, children value fairness, and they prefer those who treat others fairly (Sigelman & Waitzman, 1991). Moreover, individuals who view their relationships as fair are more satisfied than those who perceive an unfair relationship (Mendelson & Kay, 2003), and stress occurs when people assess their relationships as unfair, or imbalanced, in inputs and outcomes (Sprecher, 1986). Thus, people are sensitive to how fairly they are treated, and we assume that relationship fairness heavily influences the degree to which youth evaluate their friendships positively. Including a control for perceived friendship fairness in our models allows us to examine whether the wider

social context of adolescents' ties affects friendship quality, while controlling for this potentially influential, individual-level variable.

### **Controls: Gender**

Males and females differ throughout the life course in relation to friendship and friendship quality (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Brendgen, Markiewicz, Doyle, & Bukowski, 2001; Jones & Costin, 1995; Parker & Asher, 1993; Thomas & Daubman, 2001; Way & Greene, 2006). Among other factors, the socialization experiences of women and men are dissimilar, and these experiences affect their friendships: Women are socialized to get along with society while men are encouraged to get ahead (Block & Robins, 1993). Parents, friends, the media, and society in general emphasize such gender norms. Children also often reinforce traditional gender expectations through their informal play and extracurricular activities (Eder, 1995; Fine, 1987; Maccoby, 1990).

One main gender difference is that females tend to have more satisfying and rewarding friendships than males, a trend supported by a large body of literature indicating the relatively greater social significance of intimacy and close relationships for females. Females attach more importance to, and receive more support from, their friendships than do males (Cotterell, 1996; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Adolescent girls express more positive feelings and have more self-disclosure in their friendships and higher levels of friendship quality (Brendgen et al., 2001; Jones & Costin, 1995). In addition, they show more positive behavior in interaction with their friends, whereas boys demonstrate more negative behavior (Brendgen et al., 2001). We assume that young women will have a higher level of friendship quality with their close friends than young men. Controlling for gender, and testing for gender differences, will enable us to examine whether the social context surrounding adolescents can help to improve friendship quality for both females and males.

### **Model 2: Romantic Relationships**

In one of the first analyses of its kind, we explore the effect of romantic relationships on youth friendship quality in our second model. Previous research demonstrates repeatedly that friendship influences romantic relationships. An approving social network of family and friends predicts romantic relationship stability and satisfaction (Felmlee, 2001; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992), for instance, and perceived social support from family and friends associates positively with romantic involvement (Parks et al., 1983). Furthermore, approving networks facilitate relationship stability via social support and

network embeddedness and decrease a couple's intention to divorce or breakup (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Felmlee, 2001). However, it also seems likely that romantic partners shape friendships, but this question generates much less attention in the literature. For example, a romantic relationship may provoke changes in friendships such as the dissolution of a friendship with which one's partner disagrees, the inclusion of a partner's friends into one's network, and an increase in time spent with couple friends (Adams & Blieszner, 1996). A supportive partner may encourage interaction with close friends and participate in mutual engagements, whereas an unenthusiastic mate may discourage contact and balk at joint activities. Research also suggests that as romantic partners become more intimate and as their relationship progresses, their friendship networks overlap more substantially and become more interdependent (Milardo, 1982). Below is our expectation.

**Hypothesis 3:** We expect that individuals will have more satisfying friendships if their partners are supportive of their friendships and embedded in their friendship network.

### *Controls: Life Course Transitions*

Life course transitions represent the final component in our friendship quality models. Transitions, or specific life events such as marriage, are embedded in life course trajectories and evolve over short time spans (Elder, 1985) and likely shift patterns of friendship that developed during the school years (Crosnoe, 2000). We control for two important transitions that occur as individuals move from adolescence into adulthood: (a) the transition out of high school or college, "school exit," and (b) the transition into marriage. School exit is controlled for in both models and the transition to marriage is a control in Model 2. Friendships often change when adults confront major life transitions that necessitate the reorganization of their lives (Cotterell, 1996; Hartup & Stevens, 1997), and similar transformations are likely in late adolescence and early adulthood. Surprisingly, few studies exist related to friendship and adolescent school transitions (Berndt, 1996). One exception is Oswald and Clark (2003), who find that high school best friendships decline in overall satisfaction and commitment during the first year of college. Romantic relationships, and in particular the transition to marriage, often stress an individual's friendship network and can lead to the dissolution of old friendships and the inclusion of new ones (Adams & Blieszner, 1996; Rubin, 1985; Wellman, Wong, Tindall, & Nazer, 1997). Milardo (1986) suggests that two



partners become more embedded in each other's networks as a romance progresses.

Controlling for life transitions will allow us to assess how these events could influence friendship quality as adolescents have grown into young adulthood; both transitions may be associated with a decline friendship quality. Including these variables in our models allows us to investigate whether social ties shape friendship, while conditioning on these noteworthy life events.

## Method

### *Participants*

We examine responses from target adolescents or young adults and their mothers and fathers using data from the IYFP. Elder (1994) notes the perspective of just one person is not sufficient: We need information from the interrelated life courses of parents and children. The IYFP survey began in 1989 and recruited families from 34 public and private schools in eight counties located in north central Iowa. Families were eligible for participation if they had an adolescent who was (a) in seventh grade, (b) living with both biological parents, and (c) living with a sibling who was within 4 years of the adolescent's age. At study initiation, these focal or target adolescents ranged in age from 12 to 14 years with a mean age of 12.6. The study followed this cohort of youth from early adolescence to the young adult years. Approximately 78% of the eligible families agreed to participate in the first wave of the study ( $N = 451$ ).

Two waves of data are used in the current study, 1994 and 1999. The 1994 data include information from 352 adolescents (83% of the IYFP focal participants in 1994) who (a) reported having a close or best friendship and (b) whose mothers and/or fathers participated in 1994. In terms of having a best friend, 90% of the focal youth reported having a close or best friend in 1994, but not all of these youths, are included in these analyses because they also had to have data from a participating parent. This double contingency for eligibility for these analyses reduced the focal sample by 7 percentage points. The average age of the respondents was 17.6 years, and 57% are females. These data will be used to estimate a structural equation model that we refer to as the Family Model.

Identical data were gathered in 1999, except additional social support measures were collected regarding romantic partners instead of mothers and/or fathers. In this wave, data are available for 206 participants. To be included in the current study, the individual had to report having a close or best friend

and a romantic partner; this represents 52% of the original sample. This restriction was essential to test the impact of romantic unions on the quality of friendships. The average age of the respondents was 23.3 years, and 54% of respondents are young adult women. These data will be used to estimate a lagged, structural equation model that we refer to as the Romantic Relationships Model.

## Procedures

In 1994, trained interviewers visited each family in their home for approximately 2 hours on two occasions. During the first visit, each of the family members (biological father, biological mother, target adolescent, and sibling) completed a set of questionnaires. Family members independently completed the questionnaires; interviewers were instructed not to leave the house without first collecting and sealing each questionnaire. Within 2 weeks, a second visit to the home occurred, and the family members were videotaped while they participated in four structured interaction tasks. In 1999, data collection continued for target adolescents and their siblings but shifted from mothers and fathers to a close friend or romantic partner. Only one published article from this data set focused on friendship and parental behavior (i.e., Cui et al., 2002). Here, we will examine different waves and new data from partners and include life transitions.

## Measures

**Friendship quality.** Our dependent variable, friendship quality, was measured with a standard index of an individual's perception of his or her close or best friend. This scale was created for the IYFP and was adapted from items developed by Kessler, Price, and Wortman (1985) and Rook (1984). Examples of the friendship quality scale included items that assessed how often the respondent's friend: keeps promises, understands feelings, and shows concern. All seven friendship quality indicators were ordinal and consisted of 5-point scales (ranging from *never* to *always*). The index contained seven indicators that reflected the following dimensions of friendship quality: dependability (two items), soothing (one item), and caring (four items). For example, one of the items read as follows: How often does your close friend keep his or her promises to you? These questions were asked in both models. The alpha level for the friendship quality scale was .87.

**Social support.** Several aspects of social support were included as independent variables: enacted support from parents, adolescent enacted support

toward friend, perceived support from romantic partners, and two measures of social embeddedness. All measures were constructed for the IYFP.

*Parental support.* Enacted support refers to the actions or behavior of individuals when they provide support (Barrera, 1986), and examples include frequency of help or providing emotional support. The Family Model included a measure of enacted social support that was based on a scale composed of four indicators of maternal/paternal support. Data were collected from the adolescent's mother and father, who were asked to reflect on their relationships during the previous year. Examples of items in the enacted support scale included the following: (a) How often do you let your child know you appreciate him or her and (b) How often do you help your child do something that is really important to him or her? The scale reliabilities (alpha levels) were as follows: maternal support = .88 and paternal support = .89.

*Adolescent enacted support toward friend.* A second measure used the same scale as parental support and focused on the adolescents' enacted support toward their close friend during the last month. All indicators were ordinal with a 7-point scale (1 = *never*, 7 = *always*). This was an intervening variable in Model 1. The scale reliability was as follows: adolescent support = .86.

*Romantic partner's support.* The Model 2 analysis replaced parental support with a measure of perceived romantic partner social support as reported by the focal participant. Perceived social support referred to the perceived availability and adequacy of supportive ties (Barrera, 1986). Rather than quantifying the number of supporters or amount of contact with friends and family, relevant measures here included individuals' perception of their social support or another person's perception of an individual's support system (Barrera, 1986). This item was based on responses to the following question: How well does your partner (dating or married) like your closest friends (1 = doesn't like or get along with, 2 = doesn't like but does get along with, 3 = neither likes nor dislikes, 4 = likes but not as much as I do, 5 = likes as much as I do)?

*Social embeddedness.* Two separate latent measures of social embeddedness emerged from the data, and these included the following: number of close friends (0 = none, 1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three or four, 4 = five or six, 5 = seven or eight, 6 = nine or more) and contact with close friends (1 = never, 2 = less than once a month, 3 = 1-3 times a month, 4 = about once a week, 5 = more than once a week, 6 = every day). Model 2 also included a measure of couple embeddedness: How many of your close friends are couple friends, people who are

also friends of your partner (1 = none, 2 = a few, 3 = some, 4 = a lot, 5 = all)? These data were gathered via reports by the focal participant in both models.

Note that because they focus on the composition of the network, the three measures for embeddedness (number of friends, contact with friends, and couple embeddedness) represent indicators treated here as independent variables. Friendship quality, however, a common dependent measure in friendship research (see Bagwell et al., 2005; Bagwell et al., 1998; Hartup, 1993; Ueno, 2005), constitutes our dependent variable.

**Controls.** The analyses also controlled for perceived friendship fairness, life transitions, and gender. Identical perceived friendship fairness indicators were collected for both models. The measures in this study examined relationship fairness using four ordinal indicators (based on a 5-point scale ranging from *never* to *always*) that were developed for the IYFP and adapted from items developed by Kessler et al. (1985) and Rook (1984). All items were reverse coded, so that higher scores indicated more fair friendships. The ordinal items measured how often a close or best friend does the following: makes too many demands, insists on having their way, expects more than they are willing to give, and acts as if they are the only important person in their group of friends. As scaled, a high scorer on this measure would not make too many demands, would be cooperative and let the focal participant have his or her way about things much of the time, would expect to give as much as they get from the relationship, and would treat the focal participant as if he or she is just as important as the peer. In other words, a high scorer would be quite fair in the way they expected the relationship to function. The alpha level for the fairness scale was .83.

The Model 1 and Model 2 analyses included school exit (1 = no—the respondent remains in school, 2 = yes—the respondent is no longer enrolled in school; they are employed or otherwise); the Model 2 analysis also included the transition to first marriage (1 = no, 2 = yes). Gender (0 = female, 1 = male) also is incorporated into both models.

### *Plan of Analysis*

We examined the effects of social factors on friendship quality in both models with latent-variable structural equation models. Maximum likelihood estimates of the model coefficients were obtained by using LISREL (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996). We considered two approaches to missing data: listwise deletion and an Expectation-Maximization algorithm (EM algorithm). Both listwise deletion and the EM algorithm produced essentially the same results; therefore, only the results from listwise deletion will be reported here.

In the first model, the Family Model, parents' enacted social support operates indirectly on friendship quality through its direct effect on the adolescents' enacted support toward their friend. All other social factors have direct effects. We estimate a direct effect on friendship quality for gender and an indirect effect that operates through adolescents' enacted support. The Romantic Relationships Model resembles the Family Model but differs in three important ways. First, romantic partner social support and couple embeddedness in friendship networks replace parental support. Second, the transition to first marriage is included. Third, we include Model 1 friendship quality as a control variable, which allows us to examine the effects of key theoretical variables on *change* in friendship quality from Time 1 to Time 2.

## Results

### *Descriptive Results*

On average, individuals report involvement in supportive and fair friendships both in the Family Model and the Romantic Relationships Model, as can be seen in Table 1. According to our respondents, friends keep promises almost always in Model 1 ( $M = 4.43$ ) and Model 2 ( $M = 4.48$ ). In the Family Model, most respondents had three to four close friends ( $M = 3.67$ ) and had contact with these friends nearly every day ( $M = 5.71$ ). However, both quantity of friends and contact with friends significantly decreased over time ( $p < .001$ ). Mothers engaged in supportive behavior more frequently than did fathers. In the Family Model, children's supportive behaviors with their friends ranged from about half the time to almost always. In the Romantic Relationships Model, most individuals had some friends in common with their romantic partner ( $M = 2.52$ ) and typically their partner liked their friends ( $M = 4.36$ ). The great majority of respondents, 95%, were enrolled in school in Model 1, but in Model 2, only 22% were enrolled. In addition, the majority of respondents, 55%, were married in Model 2.

To assess changes over time, we estimated paired samples *t* tests for each measure of friendship quality in Model 1 and Model 2 with youth who responded to and fit the requirements for inclusion in both waves ( $n = 181$ , see Table 1). The findings reveal considerable stability in the assessment of quality. There were no significant differences in any of the seven individual measures, nor in the overall friendship quality scale, for either model. Nevertheless, the average response to three of the four measures of fairness increased between the two periods. That is, individuals believe that their friends are more fair 5 years following the initial data collection. Respondents also report significantly fewer friends, and less contact, in Model 2 compared

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Paired Samples *t* Tests for Variables in the Analyses.

	Family Model		Romantic Relationships Model		Paired difference		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
Friendship quality							
FQ1: Keep promises	4.43	0.58	4.48	0.57	-0.01	0.64	-0.12
FQ2: Show concern	4.35	0.74	4.47	0.67	0.07	0.73	1.23
FQ3: Understand feelings	4.31	0.69	4.41	0.59	0.01	0.76	0.20
FQ4: There for you	4.30	0.86	4.50	0.71	0.12	0.92	1.78
FQ5: Talk about worries	4.33	0.92	4.51	0.73	0.14	1.12	1.65
FQ6: Relax and be self	4.64	0.62	4.58	0.53	-0.06	0.68	-1.09
FQ7: Care about you	4.29	0.77	4.54	0.75	0.03	0.79	0.57
Friendship Quality Scale	31.25	3.70	31.48	3.58	0.29	3.60	1.07
Fairness							
F1: Make demands	4.18	0.77	4.55	0.55	0.28	0.87	4.35***
F2: Insist way	3.84	0.90	4.23	0.74	0.31	1.08	3.91***
F3: Expect more	4.14	0.82	4.47	0.72	0.23	0.98	3.12**
F4: Only important	4.37	0.80	4.63	0.62	0.08	0.78	1.43
Social embeddedness							
Number of friends	3.67	1.33	3.17	1.18	-0.51	1.41	-4.85***
Contact with friends	5.71	0.69	4.82	1.12	-0.91	1.30	-9.32***
Father enacted support							
D1: Care about child	4.80	1.11					
D2: Act loving or affectionate	4.67	1.17					
D3: Appreciate ideas	4.92	1.04					
D4: Help with important	4.89	1.03					
Mother enacted support							
M1: Care about child	5.42	1.05					
M2: Act loving or affectionate	5.28	1.17					
M3: Appreciate ideas	5.39	1.01					
M4: Help with important	5.42	1.05					
Adolescent enacted support							
A1: Care about friend	4.52	1.72					
A2: Act loving or affectionate	3.91	1.99					
A3: Appreciate friend's ideas	5.15	1.42					
A4: Help friend with important	5.52	1.16					
Romantic partner support							
Get along with partner's friends			4.36	0.74			
Couple embeddedness							
Couple friends in common			2.52	0.78			
School exit (1 = no, 2 = yes)	1.05	0.21	1.78	0.41	0.73	0.46	21.43***
Marriage transition (1 = no, 2 = yes)			1.45	0.50			
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)	0.43	0.50	0.41	0.49			
<i>n</i>	352		206		181		

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed tests).

with Model 1. The results suggest that young adults have less dense and active friendship networks than previously, but at the same time, their friends are now less likely to make demands, to insist on having their way, and to expect more than they are willing to give.

Next, we examine gender differences in our measures (see Table 2). Here, we used a statistical comparison of means. In Model 1, there are significant gender differences for all of the indicators of quality and fairness: Females report higher quality and more fair friendships compared with males. In addition, females are significantly more likely to engage in supportive behaviors, such as expressing care and affection, appreciating ideas, and helping out with important tasks. Adolescent males, however, are significantly more likely to have a greater number of friends in both waves.

There are somewhat fewer gender differences in the Model 2 wave of data. Males and females do not differ significantly on two of the seven indicators of friendship quality, and there are no significant differences in their responses to two of the four fairness indicators. These findings lend some support to Way and Greene (2006), who suggest a life course change in which male friendships begin to emulate those of females as they age and enter early adulthood.

## Modeling Friendship Quality

We estimate two structural equation models of friendship quality. For both models, we first conducted an exploratory factor analysis for the scales. Previous research suggested that perceived friendship fairness co-varies with friendship quality (see Mendelson & Kay, 2003), and so we used a varimax rotation factor analysis for both waves of data that included the friendship quality and fairness indicators. The factor analysis revealed that three friendship quality indicators loaded closely with the fairness indicators (full analysis available upon request). We dropped these three indicators to preserve independence between this scale and the fairness scale. The loadings for the quality indicators that we dropped ranged from .13 to .28; the fairness indicators ranged from .06 to .29. The seven remaining friendship quality indicators ranged from .58 to .85.

Second, we estimated reduced models (or confirmatory factor analysis [CFI]) in LISREL to confirm the theoretical models. Results were validated. Third, we estimated baseline models—full structural equation models without any error co-variances. Fourth, we re-estimated the structural equation models with error co-variances based on our interpretation of theory and the organization of the scales. For example, we estimated the error-covariance for each of the friendship quality indicators that were in similar categories

**Table 2.** t Tests for Significant Gender Differences (Male Score Subtracted From Female Score).

Indicators	Family Model			Romantic Relationships Model		
	M difference	SE	t value	M difference	SE	t value
<b>Friendship quality</b>						
FQ1: Keep promises	0.22	0.06	3.62***	0.29	0.08	3.67***
FQ2: Show concern	0.63	0.07	8.74***	0.66	0.08	7.90***
FQ3: Understand feelings	0.42	0.07	5.87***	0.27	0.08	3.35***
FQ4: There for you	0.58	0.09	6.63***	0.17	0.10	1.70
FQ5: Talk about worries	0.51	0.10	5.34***	0.49	0.10	4.98***
FQ6: Relax and be self	0.38	0.06	5.93***	0.13	0.07	1.74
FQ7: Care about you	0.70	0.07	9.34***	0.34	0.10	3.33***
Friendship Quality Scale	3.45	0.39	8.88***	3.01	0.46	6.52***
<b>Fairness</b>						
F1: Make demands	0.23	0.08	2.79**	0.18	0.08	2.33*
F2: Insist way	0.32	0.10	3.38***	0.27	0.10	2.60**
F3: Expect more	0.35	0.09	3.99***	0.17	0.10	1.69
F4: Only important	0.23	0.09	2.72**	0.13	0.09	1.51
<b>Adolescent enacted support</b>						
A1: Care about friend	1.20	0.17	6.92***			
A2: Act loving or affectionate	1.48	0.20	7.40***			
A3: Appreciate friend's ideas	0.84	0.15	5.69***			
A4: Help friend with important	0.60	0.12	4.94***			
<b>Social embeddedness</b>						
Number of friends	-0.36	0.14	-2.53*	-0.34	0.17	-2.06*
Contact with friends	0.04	0.07	0.56	0.09	0.16	0.60
<b>Romantic partner support</b>						
Get along with partner's friends				-0.01	0.10	-0.09
<b>Couple embeddedness</b>						
Couple friends in common				-0.12	0.11	-1.06
School exit (1 = no, 2 = yes)	0.01	0.02	0.38	0.09	0.06	1.52
Marriage transition (1 = no, 2 = yes)				-0.04	0.07	-0.58

Note. 1994 data: Female, n = 202; male, n = 150; 1999 data: Female, n = 121; male, n = 85.  
 \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed tests).

(i.e., dependability, caring, and soothing). As a result, the model fit improved. This procedure adjusts for biases in measurement that may be correlated (Bollen, 1989). We also included additional error-covariance in the models if they were theoretically and substantively relevant.

The model fit improved from the baseline models for both the Family Model and the Romantic Relationships Model. The baseline Family Model had a chi-square divided by degrees of freedom ratio of 5.16 with a CFI of .89 and a Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC) of -1,191. The final Family Model fit improved to a chi-square ratio of 3.99 with a CFI of .92 and a BIC of



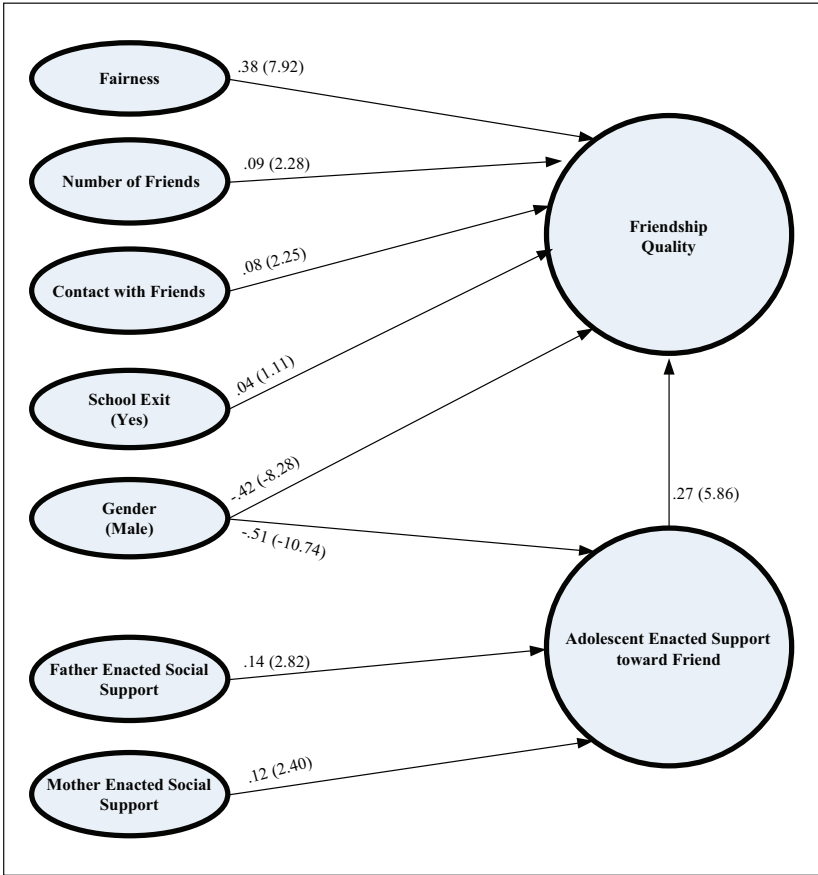
-1,422. The baseline Romantic Relationships Model had a chi-square ratio of 5.16 with a CFI of .87 and a BIC of -358. The final Romantic Relationships Model fit improved to a chi-square ratio of 4.13 with a CFI of .90 and a BIC of -439. Thus, goodness of fit statistics indicate that the final models fit the data well.

## Family Model

Results for the structural equation model of friendship quality in our first analysis suggest that many of the social factors examined here significantly influence friendship quality (see Figure 1). First, peer relationships are linked with friendship quality. Both social embeddedness indicators, an adolescent's number of friends ( $b = .04, p < .05$ ) and contact with friends ( $b = .03, p < .05$ ), are significantly and positively related to friendship quality. Thus, youth with a greater number of friends and those who have more contact with their friends experience more rewarding friendships compared with teens who have fewer friends and less contact. In addition, fairness is positively associated with friendship quality ( $b = .14, p < .001$ ), suggesting that peers who are in fair, or equitable, friendships are more likely to have satisfying friendships compared with those in unfair, or imbalanced, relationships.

As expected, parents are also directly linked with adolescent behavior and indirectly associated with friendship quality. Social support from both mothers ( $b = .20, p < .05$ ) and fathers ( $b = .39, p < .01$ ) significantly influences adolescents' enacted support toward their friend(s) and, in turn, adolescents' enacted support is significantly associated with friendship quality ( $b = .09, p < .001$ ). These findings indicate that adolescents who experience supportive parenting imitate that behavior in their friendships and have more satisfying friendships.

Gender is significantly associated with both enacted support and friendship quality; adolescent girls display more support toward their friends ( $b = -1.02, p < .001$ ) and are involved in higher quality friendships ( $b = -.28, p < .001$ ) relative to teenage males. Nevertheless, the Family Model indicates that adolescent enacted support continues to significantly influence friendship quality independent of gender. We also examined our model (and the subsequent model) separately by gender and found no significant interactions (results not shown here). Thus, supportive adolescents, regardless of gender, engage in relatively rewarding, high-quality friendships. The control for school exit, however, does not have a significant influence in the model.



**Figure 1.** Standardized maximum likelihood estimates for Family Model ( $n = 352$ ). Note.  $t$  values in parentheses;  $\chi^2/df = 3.99$ , CFI = .92, Bayesian Information Criteria = -1,421.91. CFI = confirmatory factor analysis.

### Romantic Relationships Model

Results from the romantic partner model reveal that the previous measures of peer effects influence changes in friendship quality over time. For example, young adults with more friends ( $b = .04, p < .01$ ), and greater contact with those friends ( $b = .08, p < .001$ ), have more rewarding friendships in Model 2, compared with those who have fewer friends and less contact, while controlling for friendship quality in Model 1 (see Figure 2). In other words, higher levels of contact and activity result in growth in friendship quality

over time. In addition, fairness remains positively associated with increases in quality ( $b = .13, p < .001$ ).

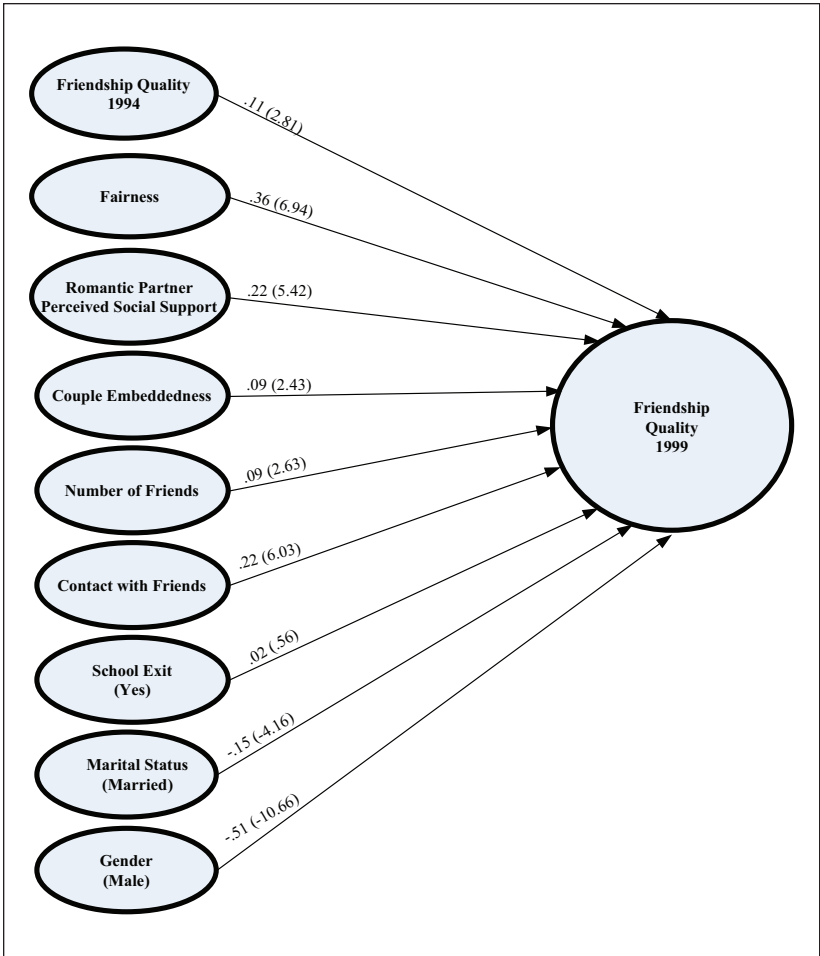
We find, further, that social support from romantic partners and couple embeddedness are significantly linked with positive changes in friendship quality, as expected. Individuals who perceive that their romantic partner likes their friends, and gets along well with them, are more likely to find that the quality of their friendships improves over time than are those who believe that their romantic partner dislikes, and does not get along with, their friends ( $b = .07, p < .001$ ). In addition, those with more couple friends in common with their romantic partner, that is, high couple embeddedness, experience greater growth in friendship quality than those with fewer or no common, couple friends ( $b = .07, p < .05$ ).

The transition to marriage also influences changes in friendship quality. Married adults have significantly less satisfying friendships over time compared with those who are single ( $b = -.07, p < .001$ ). In other words, it appears that the transition to marriage precipitates a decrease in friendship quality, because friendship quality from the first wave is included as a control variable. Similar to findings from the previous analysis, school exit does not have a significant effect in the model, however. Furthermore, young men experienced significant decreases in friendship quality over the two time periods, as compared with young women ( $b = -.23, p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

The goal of this research was to better understand the contextual mechanisms that lead to more rewarding friendships during the adolescent and early adulthood portions of the life course. The results show that the social factors studied herein have important consequences for friendships during this period. We find that the multiple social ties of parents, peers, as well as those of romantic partners all appear to shape friendship quality, that is, the degree to which youth perceive their friendships to be caring, dependable, and soothing. Note that the positive effects of support from parents and romantic partners, and that of social embeddedness with peers, remain significant even while controlling for a measure of perceived friendship fairness.

Our results underline the value of taking a broad life course perspective toward adolescent friendships. We see that young people's lives are linked inextricably to others in their network who affect their close bonds of friendship. Moreover, the transition to another life stage, that of married life, also shapes the quality of a young person's relationship with a friend. These findings provide support for the importance of the social network, as well. Friendships do not consist simply of isolated pairs of individuals that operate



**Figure 2.** Standardized maximum likelihood estimates for Romantic Relationships Model ( $n = 206$ ).

Note.  $t$  values in parentheses;  $\chi^2/df = 4.13$ , CFI = .90, Bayesian Information Criteria =  $-438.77$ . CFI = confirmatory factor analysis.

independently of their environment; they are composed of dyads embedded in an extended network of friends, romantic partners, and family members. The wider social environment of parents, peers, and romantic partners proves to be consequential for the quality, or overall value, of an adolescent’s informal bonds.

More specifically, we find that the more embedded people are in their friendship network, the more satisfying are their friendships. Having a greater number of friends and more contact with those friends are both associated with positive friendship quality at one point in time and with growth in friendship quality over time. These findings provide further support for the crucial role of linked lives among adolescents. Enacted social support on the part of parents indirectly influences friendship quality through an adolescent's enacted social support toward their friend. Enacted social support in this study includes caring, acting affectionately, showing appreciation, and helping with important tasks. Adolescents with mothers and fathers who frequently engage in these behaviors are significantly more likely to act in supportive ways toward their friends. In turn, an adolescent's supportive behavior toward their friend influences the likelihood that the adolescent will have satisfying friendships. Although it may not be surprising to find that social support from parents influences younger children's associations, here we see that parental support remains critical during adolescence as well. Furthermore, both mothers' *and* fathers' supportive behavior contributes to their adolescents' subsequent relationships; positive effects are not limited to mothers. Thus, it appears that both parents have important effects on the informal connections of their offspring during adolescence, and these effects are significant even when controlling for a range of other factors, such as peer effects.

Later in the life course, perceived social support from romantic partners also influences friendship quality. Young adults whose mate likes their friends are significantly more likely to report relatively high friendship quality, in contrast to those whose partner dislikes their friends. In addition, couple embeddedness is linked to friendship quality. Those with a greater number of friends in common with their romantic partner report more rewarding friendships compared with those who have fewer or no couple friends. This finding informs Milardo's (1986) notion of structural interdependence—that couples become more embedded in each other's social networks as their relationship becomes more serious. The effect of couple embeddedness also highlights the importance of including the concept of linked lives, and measures of the social network, in future research on friendship processes.

Previous research indicates that friends influence romantic relationships (e.g., Felmlee, 2001; Parks, 2007); this study finds that the opposite is true as well—romantic partners influence friendship quality. Support from a young adult's romantic partner significantly predicts growth in levels of friendship quality over a 5-year period. In other words, having a partner who likes and gets along well with a youth's friends predicts positive changes in that person's friendships.

The current study also concurs with previous research regarding our control variables: gender and life transitions. Our findings demonstrate that adolescent girls have higher levels of friendship quality, and engage more frequently in supportive interactions with their friends, compared with adolescent boys. However, regardless of gender, individuals who are supportive toward their friends have more satisfying and rewarding relationships.

Finally, the transition to marriage significantly decreases friendship quality. Unmarried young adults report higher levels of friendship quality than do their married counterparts, and qualitative research reveals that romantic relationships, specifically marriage, can be stressful on friendships (Rubin, 1985). School exit, however, is not significantly linked to friendship quality in this study. Perhaps leaving school shifts the location for friendship formation from the high school grounds to the college, vocational setting, or the workplace. This shift in location may result in fewer friendships overall (Flynn & Conger, 2014), but not necessarily ones that are less rewarding. These control variables are noteworthy, too, because their inclusion in our models demonstrates that the effects of multiple social ties on friendships remain significant, regardless of whether or not young people become married or leave school.

Our findings reinforce the salience of the social network perspective and the related concept of linked lives for dyadic ties among youth. Adolescents' lives are located in a complex social network, and this network, in turn, has a powerful influence on their one-on-one social connections. Young people who lack supportive parents, friends, and romantic partners, that is, the very ones who most need support, are apt to find it challenging to form positive, rewarding peer relations. Instead, it appears here that the "rich get richer." Adolescents whose lives already are linked to a supportive and extensive social network are those who are likely to form dependable and caring friendships.

This study also has implications for recent developments in the study of friendship across the life course. Empirical studies of friendship from a life course perspective are rare (Crosnoe, 2000). Here, we see that the application of the life course perspective, and specifically the incorporation of the concept of linked lives, as well as that of life transitions, add valuable components to traditional approaches. When viewing friendship at specific developmental stages or from a cross-sectional standpoint, researchers neglect the influences of the wider social environment within which youth remain embedded.

This study, nevertheless, does have limitations. Future research is necessary to test the generalizability of the findings to other age groups, ethnicities, and to urban areas. Although other reports show that the findings from the larger data set tend to replicate in urban populations (i.e., Conger, Patterson,

& Ge, 1995) and with samples of minority families and adolescents (i.e., Conger et al., 2002), we cannot be certain that will be the case in the present study. An additional limitation is that the data set we use here follows participants for a limited time period of 5 years. Perhaps longer periods of data collection would result in more variability in friendship over time and would enable investigation of the effects of additional life transitions. It also would be useful to explore how the friendship trajectory changes or stays the same for older adult males and females. Finally, future research should address the degree to which social network members continue to influence friendship in a variety of life stages so as to gain a well-rounded approach to all aspects that contribute to this important social bond.

Regardless of possible limitations, this research provides a starting point for other scholars to expand upon in future research on this salient social bond. Importantly, we find here that several dimensions of the social stratosphere influence friendship quality, and that friendship quality varies during the adolescent and early adulthood phases of the life course. This research exemplifies the significance of linked lives, networks, and social support. Indeed, our study demonstrates quality friendships are more likely when young people are embedded in their friendship networks and when they receive social support from multiple social ties, including those of parents, peers, and romantic partners.

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