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Social stress in early adolescents' daily lives: Associations with affect and loneliness



Eeske van Roekel ^{a, b, *}, Thao Ha ^c, Maaïke Verhagen ^a, Emmanuel Kuntsche ^{a, d}, Ron H.J. Scholte ^a, Rutger C.M.E. Engels ^a

^a Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

^b Interdisciplinary Center of Psychopathology and Emotion Regulation (ICPE), University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

^c Institute for Interdisciplinary Salivary Bioscience Research, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

^d Addiction Switzerland, Research Institute, Lausanne, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is characterized by increased social stress due to changes in interpersonal relationships, but little is known about daily experiences of social stress. The aim of the present study was to examine daily life predictors of increases in social stress, how these increases affected adolescents' mood, and whether loneliness moderated these relations. The Experience Sampling Method was used to measure positive and negative affect and increases in social stress in 278 early adolescents from the Netherlands. Results showed that adolescents were most likely to experience increases in social stress when they were with classmates, during week days, and in the morning. Lonely adolescents showed higher increases in social stress and responded more negatively to increases in social stress, compared to non-lonely adolescents.

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Introduction

Adolescence is characterized by a turbulent emotional life (Larson & Ham, 1993), in that adolescents experience a broader range of emotions and more variable mood states than adults (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1980). Indeed, greater emotional fluctuations have been found to relate to emotional maladjustment in adolescents (e.g., depressive feelings; Larson, Raffaelli, Richards, Ham, & Jewell, 1990; Silk et al., 2011; Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003). This increased emotional intensity and variability may be partly due to biological changes during adolescence as puberty starts, which has a great impact on mood via hormonal changes (Buchanan, Eccles, & Becker, 1992) and brain development (e.g., Forbes, Phillips, Silk, Ryan, & Dahl, 2011). In addition and likely partly due to these biological changes, early adolescence is also characterized by changes in interpersonal relationships. One of the most important developmental tasks during adolescence is to be able to develop satisfying relationships with peers and create more autonomy from parents (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Hartup, 1996). This substantial shift in social relationships during early adolescence could result in success or failure of this developmental task, which could explain the intense emotional states and increased emotional variability during this period.

* Corresponding author. Interdisciplinary Center Psychopathology and Emotion Regulation (ICPE), University Medical Center Groningen, CC 72, P.O. Box 30001, 9700 RB Groningen, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 50 3613864; fax: +31 50 3619722.

E-mail address: g.h.van.roekel@umcg.nl (E. van Roekel).

In general, adolescents are found to experience more stressful life events (e.g., Compas, Davis, & Forsythe, 1985; Ge, Lorenz, Conger, Elder, & Simons, 1994; Michl, McLaughlin, Shepherd, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2013), and more daily negative events (Larson & Ham, 1993) than pre-adolescents and adults. Previous research has shown that experiencing social stress in early adolescence is predictive of maintaining depressive symptoms (Ha, van Roekel, Iida, Engels, & Kuntsche, under review; Herres & Kobak, 2015) and that life events including targeted rejection (i.e., social stress) have a stronger impact on depressive symptoms than life events not including targeted rejection (i.e., non-social stress) (Slavich, Tartter, Brennan, & Hammen, 2014). These findings highlight the importance of examining social stress in adolescence. However, only a few studies investigated social stress in adolescents' daily lives (e.g., Herres & Kobak, 2015; van Roekel et al., 2013). These studies indicate that adolescents vary in the amount of social stress they experience in their daily lives. However, previous studies are limited in two ways. First, continuous scores of stress are used, whereas stress may only have detrimental effects at a certain threshold. This threshold may be different for each individual, therefore, it seems important to examine within-person increases in social stress. This allows the investigation of the impact of increases in social stress relative to an individual's baseline level of stress. Second, these studies have not differentiated the contexts of social stress, such as whether higher levels of social stress are more likely to occur at school or at home. Knowing in which situations adolescents experience increases in social stress potentially informs interventions that may be tailored to certain situations.

In addition to examining the exposure to social stress in daily life, the responses to social stress are of key importance as previous research in adults has shown that reactivity to daily stressors has a great impact on wellbeing ten years later (Charles, Piazza, Mogle, Sliwinski, & Almeida, 2013). Research has shown that adolescents respond negatively to social stress (Silk et al., 2012; Stroud et al., 2009). Only a few studies have investigated responses to social stress in daily life. One study showed that adolescents responded negatively to negative company (i.e., the extent to which they viewed their company as judging and threatening) in that their levels of positive affect decreased and levels of negative affect increased (van Roekel et al., 2013). Further, two studies on peer victimization, which can be seen as a form of social stress, showed that victimization affects daily mood (Nishina, 2012; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005) and that different types of victimization had differential effects on daily mood (Nishina, 2012). These studies seem to indicate that adolescents respond negatively to social stress, both in daily life as well as in laboratory settings. However, it has not yet been examined how adolescents respond to individually salient increases in social stress. Hence, the first aim of the present study was to examine (a) in which contexts adolescents experience increases in social stress and (b) how adolescents' mood is affected by these increases in social stress.

Loneliness

As the social lives of adolescents become increasingly complex, it is no surprise that feelings of loneliness are found to be particularly present in early adolescence (e.g., van Roekel, Scholte, Verhagen, Goossens, & Engels, 2010). Loneliness is typically defined as the negative emotional response to an experienced discrepancy between the actual and desired quantity or quality of one's social network (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Only two ESM studies have examined relations between loneliness and social stress by examining lonely adolescents' perceptions of others or perceptions of their interactions with others in the daily lives of adolescents (Hawkey, Preacher, & Cacioppo, 2007; van Roekel et al., 2013). These studies found that lonely adolescents perceive both their company as well as their interactions with others as more negative and less positive than adolescents low in loneliness. Although these findings indicate that lonely individuals experience higher levels of social stress in their daily lives, we do not yet know whether lonely individuals are exposed to stable high levels of social stress in general or show increases in social stress in specific situations.

Importantly, loneliness does not only affect how adolescents experience their social environment, it also moderates the relation between social stress and mood levels. Lonely adolescents are more negatively affected by social stress (i.e., the extent to which they view their company as judging and threatening). They experience higher levels of negative affect and lower levels of positive affect when they perceive their company negatively (van Roekel et al., 2013) as compared to low lonely adolescents. These findings are in line with a socio-cognitive model on loneliness that states that lonely people are characterized by hypersensitivity to social threat (Cacioppo & Hawkey, 2009). Furthermore, these previous findings are in line with the differential reactivity hypothesis, indicating that lonely adolescents respond more negatively to social stress. However, it is currently unclear whether lonely adolescents are also exposed to more social stress than non-lonely adolescents (i.e., differential exposure hypothesis). Previous research has indicated that lonely individuals were not exposed to more daily hassles than non-lonely individuals (Cacioppo, Hawkey, & Berntson, 2003), but no research has examined whether this is also the case for social stress specifically. Further, although these studies shed light on how lonely adolescents respond to higher or lower levels of (social) stress, very little is known about responses to extreme levels of social stress (i.e., within person increases in social stress). Hence, a further aim of the present study was to examine whether loneliness was related to heightened exposure to negative social experiences (i.e., more increases in social stress; differential exposure hypothesis) and whether loneliness affected how adolescents responded to an increase in social stress (i.e., differential reactivity hypothesis).

The present study

The original study on this sample (van Roekel et al., 2013) reported previously that lonely adolescents were more affected by negative company as compared to less lonely adolescents. We performed a secondary data analysis to extend these findings by examining when and with whom adolescents experienced within-person increases of social stress (i.e., increases

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