Friendship group identification, multidimensional self-concept, and experience of developmental tasks in adolescence

Mark Tarrant[a],*, Liam MacKenzie[b], Lisa A Hewitt[b]

[a]*School of Psychology, Keele University, Staffordshire ST5 5BG, UK*
[b]*University of Leicester, Leicester LE1 9HN, UK*

Abstract

This study applied a social identity perspective to the study of adolescent self-concept and social development. British adolescents aged 14–15 years ($N = 114$) completed a questionnaire which asked them to: (i) rate their degree of identification with a school-based friendship group; (ii) complete a measure of multi-dimensional self-concept; and (iii) report their experiences of a variety of personal, relational and socio-institutional (e.g., achieving economic independence) developmental tasks. Compared to low identifiers, participants who were highly identified with a friendship group reported highest levels of self-esteem; and these differences were most marked in non-academic domains of self. High identifiers also displayed higher levels of general self-esteem and reported more positive experiences of personal and relational developmental tasks. The discussion focuses on the potential benefits to understanding of social developmental processes that can be derived from a consideration of adolescents' subjective appraisals of their peer relations.
© 2005 The Association for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Friendship groups; Self-concept; Identity

*Corresponding author.
E-mail address:* m.tarrant@keele.ac.uk (M. Tarrant).

Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that an adolescent's objective position in a peer network is related to various indicators of social competence, including loneliness (Parker & Asher, 1993), depression (Hecht, Inderbitzen, & Bukowski, 1998), aggression (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993) and general self-concept (Boivin & Bégin, 1989). However, comparatively few studies have examined how these indicators might be related to adolescents' *subjective* perceptions of their relationships with peers, yet such perceptions offer a potentially rich source of information about the individual (Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1993; Kiesner, Cadinu, Poulin, & Bucci, 2002). The aim of the current study was to assess adolescents' subjective appraisals of their position in a peer network in terms of their identification with a school-based friendship group and to test the suggestion that such appraisals are related to broader self-perceptions.

Several researchers have argued that friendship groups make a unique contribution to development during adolescence by serving as an important reference point for the evaluation of self and others (Brown & Lohr, 1987; Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994). Brown et al. (1994) suggested that in attempting to define their position in a social network adolescents engage in a series of social comparisons through which they come to see themselves as someone whose characteristics are more similar to one type of individual than they are to another. Once defined as a member of a particular group, that group helps adolescents to structure their relationships with others in the peer network (e.g., Clasen & Brown, 1985; Urberg, Değirmencioğlu, Tolson, & Halliday-Scher, 1995). Brown et al. suggested that the caricatures, or stereotypes, that adolescents form of other groups inform adolescents' decisions about peer relations by *channelling* adolescents into interacting with some individuals while avoiding others (p. 133).

From the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) these stereotypes can be seen to help adolescents positively differentiate their own group from other groups within the peer network. According to social identity theory, the heightened salience of one's social group memberships which occurs following social categorization encourages individuals to evaluate themselves in terms of those memberships. Importantly, it is assumed that group members seek to evaluate their groups positively; that is, they strive for positive social identity. One means by which this is achieved is by forming favourable impressions of one's own groups (*ingroups*) in a comparative context (i.e. relative to groups of which one is not a member: *Outgroups*). A wealth of research mainly with adults has supported the basic tenets of the theory in both real and artificial (i.e. experimentally created) groups (see reviews by Brown (2000) and Turner (1999)). This research has demonstrated that the need for positive social identity underlies a broad range of group-based phenomena, including personal motivation to adopt group norms (e.g. Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995), beliefs about group variability (e.g. Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995), and also willingness to engage in group-protecting behaviours (i.e. intergroup discrimination: Branscombe & Wann, 1994).

Few studies have attempted to demonstrate empirically the importance of social identity processes in developmental contexts, and those which have done have focussed mainly on relationships within large-scale social categories such as ethnicity. Nonetheless, such studies are important in as far as they can inform understanding of the general social identity processes which likely operate across multiple social categories. For example, Nesdale (1999) recently developed a theory of the development of ethnic prejudice called social identity development theory which