Interplay of self-esteem, emotion regulation, and parenting in young adolescents' friendship jealousy

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ABSTRACT

Unwarranted friendship jealousy can create friendship and broader peer difficulties for adolescents. This study expands earlier research on the role of self-esteem in friendship jealousy by considering emotion regulation skill and parental use of psychological control as intersecting factors. 72 young adolescents completed questionnaires on themselves, their friendships, and their family experiences. As predicted, poor self-esteem related to friendship jealousy but only when adolescents were poorly-equipped to deal with strong emotions. Adolescents from homes with psychologically-controlling mothers were also prone to jealousy, evidently because psychological control and broader warmth in the relationship compromised offspring's self-esteem. One consequence of psychological control for offspring may be friendship difficulties related to insecurity over a partner's commitment and exaggeration of the risk posed by rivals.

Children's friendships provide support, companionship, and developmental opportunities (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). This is particularly true at the brink of early adolescence, as the amount of time children spend in the company of friends increases, children become more dependent on friends' feedback, and friendship interaction becomes more intimate and varied (Brown & Larson, 2009; Smetana, 2010). It is therefore not surprising that all children and adolescents are invested to some degree in their friendships and motivated to protect and preserve them. However, individuals who are habitually and typically prone to jealousy over their friends may behave aggressively and in other negative ways that compromise these relationships and their relations with peers in general (Parker, Kruse, & Aikins, 2010). Accordingly, understanding why some children and young adolescents are unusually prone to jealousy over their friends could be an important first step in preventing difficulties for these individuals, their friends, and other peers.

In the present study, we explore the independent and intersecting influences of self-esteem, emotion regulation skill, and parents' excessive reliance on a form of emotional manipulation and intrusiveness known as "psychological control" as risk factors for friendship jealousy in young adolescents. Psychologically controlling parents exploit their offspring's desire for love and acceptance to manipulate them, trading on fear of abandonment. To the extent that a fear of abandonment also characterizes jealousy over friends, links between parents' psychologically controlling behavior and the proneness to jealousy over friends may provide another important illustration of how expectations and insecurities acquired inside the home can generalize to and influence relationships outside the home, with close peers (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). However, parental psychological control may also compromise children's self-esteem (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Cook, Buehler, & Fletcher, 2012; Cui, Morris, Criss, Houltberg, & Silk, 2014; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Smits, Lowet, & Goossens, 2007; Wouters, Doumen, Germeijers, Colpin, & Verschueren, 2013). Children with poor self-esteem, we argue, are vigilant to interpersonal threat and abandonment. Thus, self-esteem could play a role as a mediator between psychological control and jealousy. Finally, emotion regulation skill may play a role because the negative influences of parental psychological control and low self-esteem in jealous situations will be exacerbated when children are poorly-equipped to deal with strong emotions.

1.1. Friendship jealousy in children and adolescents

Friendship jealousy is a negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reaction triggered by a close friend's actual or anticipated interest in or relationship with another peer (see Parker et al., 2010 for a review). Jealous individuals may fear that their partner's outside relationship necessitates an end to their own relationship with the
partner. However, even when they understand that their own relationship will continue, jealous individuals may be distressed over the possibility that they must share their friendship rewards or privileged access to a partner with others and over what may be perceived as a loss of important influence over the friend (Worley & Samp, 2014). Children experiencing jealousy over friends experience a blend of emotions, but especially strong feelings of anger and sadness (Parker et al., 2010; Roth & Parker, 2001).

Jealousy over friends is common at the start of early adolescence but begins declining very quickly for some children as adolescence progresses and they better recognize that the outside interests of their friends do not necessarily imply negative things about their own relationship (Selman, 1980). But not all. For some, the onset of early adolescence marks a period of lasting Vigilance to evidence that their relationship with a friend is flagging and to real or imagined interference in their friendship by outside peers. These individual differences can be measured reliably and are highly stable over short periods and moderately stable from one academic year to the next (Parker et al., 2010). Girls have been found to be more prone to jealousy than boys (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008; Deutz, Lansu, & Cillessen, 2015; Parker et al., 2010; Tuggle, Kerpelman, & Pittman, 2014).

Proneness to friendship jealousy has been found to be associated with several key intra- and interpersonal difficulties in children (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008; Lavallee & Parker, 2009; Parker & Gamm, 2003; Parker, Low, Walker, & Gamm, 2005; Parker, Nielsen, & McDonald, 2015). Ironically, these include difficulties maintaining supportive and healthy friendships. Habitual or coercive demands for exclusivity exceed most cultural expectations for autonomy in friendships and there is evidence that it is tiresome to friendship partners and contributes to partners’ negative emotions, rumination, and uncertainty over the relationship (Bevan & Hale, 2006; Bevan & Tidgewell, 2009). Jealous children report less closeness (Parker et al., 2015) and observations of jealous children with their friendship partners indicate that their relationships are characterized by conflict, disharmony, disconnectedness, power imbalances, and other problematic process (Deutz et al., 2015). There is also some evidence that they are less satisfied with their friendships than other children (Deutz et al., 2015; Tuggle et al., 2014), although the findings are inconsistent (Deutz et al., 2015). They also engage in covert monitoring and other surveillance activities designed to clarify their partners’ and rivals’ intentions. This may increase conflict with friends, who likely find it burdensome and demeaning (Lavallee & Parker, 2009). In fact, conflict related to jealousy appears to play a prominent role in the dissolution of friendships and formation of mutual antipathies (Casper & Card, 2010).

1.2. Self-esteem and friendship jealousy

Considerable theory and research with adults supports the assertion that what jealous individuals find especially distressing is not just the interloper’s infringement on the relationship, but also the implied unfavorable social comparison to the rival and inferred rejection by the friend or romantic partner (e.g., Broemer & Diehl, 2004; DeSteno, Valdesolo, & Bartlett, 2006; Dijkstra & Buunk, 2002; Salovey & Rodin, 1991; Sharpsteen, 1995; Yarab & Allgeier, 1999). Individuals with chronically low self-esteem may habitually overestimate their partner’s attraction to others and are thereby prone to experience threat and jealousy when it is otherwise unwarranted. By comparison, individuals with higher self-regard are less likely to feel competitive with the people around their partner and, in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary, more likely to offer benign interpretations of their partner’s activities with others.

Consistent with this view, Parker and colleagues (Lavallee & Parker, 2009; Parker et al., 2005) report negative correlations between self-esteem and children’s friendship jealousy. While statistically significant, these correlations have nonetheless been surprisingly modest in magnitude. Refinements in the conceptualization and operationalization of self-esteem may provide additional insight (Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008; Stieger, Preyss, & Voracek, 2012). However, consideration should also be given to how well-equipped individual children are to deal with the strong and mixed set of emotions that can be generated when children with low-esteem feel threatened by friends’ interest in and activities with others. Overall relations between self-esteem and jealousy may be attenuated by the presence of children with low self-esteem who are better skilled at pre-empting or regulating their emotions and therefore more resilient than others to jealousy arising from negative self-esteem.

1.3. Emotion regulation and jealousy

Adaptive emotion regulation involves the use of specific strategies for the purpose of increasing, maintaining, or decreasing emotion responses and permits children to respond flexibly and in acceptable ways to environmental events that frustrate them or thwart important personal goals (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Egum, 2010; Gross, 2014). Although emotion regulation varies somewhat in response to the demands of particular situations, stable individual differences in emotion regulation are already well-established by early childhood (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Rawana, Flatt, McPhie, Nguyen, & Norwood, 2014).

With adults, how individuals regulate their emotions has been shown to play an important role in understanding negative responses to many types of interpersonal threats and frustrations (e.g., Blachnio & Przepiórka, 2010; Tangney & Salovey, 1999). Studies with children and adolescents have also demonstrated links between skillful regulation and adjustment to threat and stress (see Eisenberg et al., 2010; Saarni, 1999; Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Steggall, 2006). For example, research has demonstrated that the ability to regulate emotions enhances children’s resilience in the face of stressful life events such as parental divorce or residential instability (e.g., Flouri & Mavroveli, 2013; Rossman, 1992), ineffective or harsh parenting (e.g., Cui et al., 2014), maternal depression (e.g., Silk, Shaw, Forbes, Lane, & Kovacs, 2006), difficulties with teachers (e.g., LaBillois & Lagacé-Séguin, 2009), and bullying (e.g., Myers et al., 2013).

Because jealousy involves a rush of strong and competing emotions, it is reasonable to expect that emotion regulation may also play a role in the experience and expression of jealousy. A number of studies support this premise with adults in the context of romantic relationships and friendships (e.g., Bevan, 2004; Blachnio & Przepiórka, 2010; Guerrero, Trost, & Yoshimura, 2005; Hobson, 2010; Most, Laurenceau, Graber, Belcher, & Smith, 2010; Zammuner & Fischer, 1995) and with typically-developing (Kolak & Volling, 2011; Miller, Volling, & McElwain, 2000) and atypically-developing (Bauminger, Chomsky-Smolkin, Orbach-Caspi, Zachor, & Levy-Shiff, 2008) children surrounding their siblings. However, no published study has investigated whether emotion regulation skill directly relates to jealousy over friends in childhood or whether skillful emotion regulation may dampen the vulnerability to friendship jealousy created by low self-esteem at this age.

1.4. Parental psychological control and friendship jealousy

There has been considerable interest over the years in parents’ use of “psychological control” involving intrusive and unwarranted manipulation of children’s emotional experiences, self-perceptions, and sense of relationship security (e.g., Barber & Harmon, 2002; Barber, Stolz, Olsen, Collins, & Burchinal, 2005; Murray, Dwyer, Rubin, Knighton-Wisor, & Booth-LaForce, 2014; Ury, Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2011). Psychological control exploits children’s dependence upon and desire for parental acceptance and approval (Barber, 1996). Psychologically-controlling parents are highly evaluative, are prone to disappointment with their child, and link their love and approval of the child in explicit and contingent ways to the child’s ability to please. They use guilt-induction to cultivate anxiety and insecurity in their child, manipulate their children in ways that are difficult for their child to identify and
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