



Associations between friends, academic emotions and achievement: Individual differences in enjoyment and boredom

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on associations regarding domain-specific academic emotions (enjoyment and boredom) between classmates who are best friends (reciprocated as well as unilateral best friends), and their effects on students' subsequent achievement. Based on 419 dyads (135 reciprocated best friendship dyads and 284 unilateral best friendship dyads), Actor-Partner-Independence models showed a positive effect of best friends' enjoyment on students' enjoyment. Best friends' enjoyment and boredom indirectly influenced achievement through students' enjoyment and boredom (indirect effect), with the exception of unilateral friendship dyads in English class. Differences in the magnitude of influence found for reciprocated and unilateral friendship dyads are discussed in terms of various friendship qualities.

1. Introduction

Based on theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence, academic emotions (e.g., Pekrun, 2006) are considered important preconditions for learning and achievement. Previous research findings have consistently emphasized the positive effects of enjoyment (e.g., Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002) and the negative effects of boredom on learning behavior and outcomes (e.g., Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky, & Perry, 2010; for an overview see: Schutz, & Pekrun, 2007). The contradictory effects of these two emotions may be rooted in their inverse characteristics in terms of valence and arousal: Whereas enjoyment is defined as a pleasant and activating emotion, boredom is defined as a negative and deactivating emotion (Pekrun, 2006).

Despite the undoubted importance of emotions for learning and achievement, the lack of research on how students' emotional experiences are influenced by social contexts is surprising. Some empirical results indicate that teachers (e.g., Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009) and parents (e.g., Gniewosz & Noack, 2012) have an impact on students' academic emotions. Particularly little attention has been paid to the peer group – although peers have been identified as an important context for socialization in many other respects (e.g., Brown & Larson, 2009). Adolescence is characterized by a strong peer orientation (Berndt, 1979) – taken together with the fact that the average total time spent by students in formal classroom settings is 3.034 hours during lower secondary school (OECD, 2013), best friends

in class might not only be a source of school related values and beliefs (e.g., Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003), but also academic emotions. Accordingly, this study focuses on the associations regarding enjoyment and boredom (in different academic domains) between the best friend (which plays a significant role in a student's peer group) and the student. To enhance our understanding of best friendships we focus on reciprocal as well as unilateral friendships, assuming that unilateral friendships also have developmental significance for students (Bot, Engels, Knibbe, & Meeus, 2005). Furthermore, we investigated how these associations are connected to academic achievement. Hence, focusing on both a beneficial and a detrimental academic emotion in the scholastic context, we investigated whether the best friend can be identified as a resource or a risk factor, or maybe even both, with regard to the socialization of academic emotions in the classroom. The large-scale design allows us to test the indirect influences of the best friend's academic emotions on a student's achievement through the academic emotions of the student.

1.1. Academic emotions

Academic emotions are generally defined as emotions related to learning/achievement situations and outcomes (Goetz, Zirngibl, Pekrun, & Hall, 2003). By this definition, academic emotions include achievement emotions experienced in school, but go beyond emotions related to success and failure by also addressing, for example, emotions

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associated with instruction or the process of studying (Pekrun et al., 2002). Expanding earlier conceptualizations of emotions (e.g., Russell, 1980; Schlosberg, 1954), Pekrun (1992) suggested a three-way taxonomy of academic emotions in terms of their focus, valence, and activation (for an overview see Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz, & Perry, 2007). With respect to their object focus, two types of academic or achievement emotions can be distinguished: activity emotions pertaining to ongoing achievement related activities, and outcome emotions pertaining to the outcomes of these activities (Pekrun, 2006). In addition, both activity emotions and outcome emotions can be grouped according to their valence (positive vs. negative or pleasant vs. unpleasant) as well as their level of activation (activating vs. deactivating). Quite recently, research on students' distinct emotions in academic settings has addressed activity emotions such as enjoyment (a positive activating emotion, for an overview see Ainley & Hidi, 2014) and boredom (a negative, deactivating emotion, for an overview see Goetz & Hall, 2014). Generally, it is assumed that positive activating emotions have positive effects on achievement, whereas negative deactivating emotions have negative effects on achievement and learning behavior. Empirical findings support this assumption (e.g., Frenzel, Thrash, Pekrun, & Goetz, 2007; Pekrun et al., 2002; Pekrun, Hall, Goetz, & Perry, 2014).

There is growing empirical evidence that academic enjoyment and boredom are organized in a domain-specific manner (e.g., Goetz, Frenzel, Hall, & Pekrun, 2008). For example, Goetz, Frenzel, Pekrun, and Hall (2006) found that enjoyment shows the strongest degree of domain specificity among different emotions assessed in six subject domains (see also Goetz, Pekrun, Hall, & Haag, 2006). Results obtained by Goetz (2004) showed that the relations between emotions in different subjects are relatively small, indicating that adolescents experience enjoyment and boredom on different levels in different subjects. However, although there is growing evidence of the domain specificity of academic emotions, only few studies have investigated the underlying mechanisms (for an exception see Goetz, Lüdtke, Nett, Keller, & Lipnevich, 2013). Thus, we focused on the possible influence of friends in this study.

1.2. Relevance of enjoyment and boredom

The positive effects of students' enjoyment on achievement (e.g., Pekrun et al., 2002), and the detrimental effects of boredom on achievement across scholastic domains (e.g., Daniels et al., 2009; Pekrun et al., 2010), have been documented by a number of studies. Theoretical explanations depict a mediation through motivation, (meta-) cognitive activities, and cognitive resources. In this sense, enjoyment has been found to be positively, and boredom to be negatively, associated with students' mastery goals, interest, intrinsic motivation, attention, effort investment, self-regulation, elaboration and the use of metacognitive strategies (Pekrun et al., 2002; Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006) and, in turn, achievement (Goetz, 2004).

Enjoyment and boredom have been found to be among the most frequently reported emotions in the scholastic context (Goetz, Frenzel, Pekrun, Hall, & Lüdtke, 2007; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Due to their prevalence in academic settings and their contrary effects on learning and achievement, as well as their salience across academic domains (e.g., Goetz et al., 2007), we addressed these two emotions in the current study.

1.3. Friends' influences on students' academic emotions

Previously, when predicting students' academic emotions through social environments, researchers have primarily focused on parents and teachers observing, respectively, their expectancies and characteristics of their instructional or educational practices. Pekrun (2006), for instance, argued that individual sources of emotions (i.e., control- and value-related appraisals) are influenced by parents' and teachers'

achievement expectations and interaction structures (e.g., feedback practices, established goal structures, autonomy support vs. control). Other theoretical models specifically underpin the relevance of social influences on students' enjoyment and boredom. For example, Robinson's (1975) model of academic boredom explicitly considers social environment as a third type of antecedent, asserting that teachers, parents, and peers (in terms of valuing the subject domain) may impact students' experiences of academic boredom. The present study adopts this perspective and applies it to the friendship context.

In the context of the present study we define friendship as a voluntary, dyadic relationship between two individuals (e.g., Hartup, 1996). We also explicitly include perceived best friendships in terms of unilateral friendships in our definition (e.g., Bot et al., 2005), thus focusing on reciprocal as well as unilateral best friendships. Neglecting the restriction of reciprocity is justified by the assumption that unilateral friendships are also subject to developmental influences (here, in terms of adopting academic emotions). It can be assumed that a student's motivation to develop a mutual best friendship may result in a large-scale adoption of the other individual's academic emotions (and attitudes, values etc.), in that an expression of great similarity may heighten the probability that the unilateral friendship will develop into a mutual best friendship. When focusing on friendships in the school context, we have to keep in mind that classmates remain constant across school subjects in many school systems (as in the German school system). Therefore, the best friend is expected to have an influence on a student's academic emotions in all domains.

Empirical evidence shows that individuals can pick up emotions from partners while interacting (Coviello et al., 2014; Fowler & Christakis, 2008) and, consequently, their emotions become similar to those of their friends (e.g., for school related values see Shin & Ryan, 2014). One theoretical explanation can be derived from the emotional contagion theory (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994): Students can adopt the emotions of their best friends through face to face interactions. More specifically, this theory provides a framework to explain why particularly close relationships, such as dyadic friendships, provide conditions which facilitate the adoption of emotions from one another. This process comprises two steps: The first step is derived from the hypothesis that individuals mimic the emotions of their counterparts. Regarding classroom relationships, the intention to mimic the emotions of one another is more likely to develop between best friends because the empathy created by exhibiting the same emotions strengthens intimate reciprocal friendships (or it might form the basis for an intimate friendship). As a result, the counterpart feels understood by his/her best friend. In addition—and particularly relevant in the school context where instructional methods and the classroom climate can restrain students from openly expressing their emotions—students can perceive the emotional reactions of their best friends through verbal expressions, such as “Math is fun” (cf. Hatfield et al., 1994). Findings in a study by Wild, Enzle, Nix, and Deci (1997) point out that information about emotional experiences can be an important source for perceiving another person's emotions. Back to emotional contagion theory, the second step is based on the facial feedback hypothesis, which aims to explain why individuals really do feel the same way their interaction partner feels: The central nervous system is responsible for emotional experiences. Thus, feedback via facial expressions, such as enjoyment or boredom, is transmitted to the central nervous system. Consequently, a person experiences the same emotion as his/her counterpart. For best friends in the same classroom, verbal, mimic and facial feedback processes seem to be highly responsible for the expression of similar domain-specific emotions between friends. With respect to intrinsic value, a motivational aspect that is closely related to enjoyment, empirical findings underpin this assumption with regard to the long-term adoption of friends' values (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Molloy, Gest, & Rulison, 2010; Ryan, 2001; Shin & Ryan, 2014). For example, Shin and Ryan (2014) analyzed relationships among 6th graders, looking for links between students' intrinsic values and their (best) friends' intrinsic

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