

## Do Birds of a Feather Flock Together? The Variable Bases for African American, Asian American, and European American Adolescents' Selection of Similar Friends

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Variability in adolescent–friend similarity is documented in a diverse sample of African American, Asian American, and European American adolescents. Similarity was greatest for substance use, modest for academic orientations, and low for ethnic identity. Compared with Asian American and European American adolescents, African American adolescents chose friends who were less similar with respect to academic orientation or substance use but more similar with respect to ethnic identity. For all three ethnic groups, personal endorsement of the dimension in question and selection of cross-ethnic-group friends heightened similarity. Similarity was a relative rather than an absolute selection criterion: Adolescents did not choose friends with identical orientations. These findings call for a comprehensive theory of friendship selection sensitive to diversity in adolescents' experiences. Implications for peer influence and self-development are discussed.

H. S. Sullivan's (1953) seminal theorizing on the developmental features of friendship calls attention to the importance of shared interests, attitudes, and behaviors between adolescent friends in meeting basic social needs of companionship and intimacy. Close friendships are thought to be the most rewarding when both partners pursue activities and interests that are mutually engaging. Intimate self-disclosure, critical to adolescents as they come to understand who they are and what their place is in the world, is most satisfying and beneficial when it occurs between peers who share similar views with respect to issues of fundamental importance to them (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Social psychological theory and research findings, too, demonstrate that similarity is a key platform for friendship selection and emphasize that adolescents seek friends who share endorsement of activities and orientations that are of consequence to them (T. M. Newcomb, 1961;

Tesser, Campbell, & Smith, 1984). Empirical studies of friendship similarity, focused on issues believed to be central to American adolescents, lend support to Sullivan's theoretical assertions. As a whole, adolescents select friends who are similar to themselves in terms of ethnic-group membership and gender (Shrum, Cheek, & Hunter, 1988) and who share their orientations toward school, extracurricular activities, and deviance (Epstein & Karweit, 1983; Kandel, 1978b).

It is surprising, then, when researchers discover that African American friends are significantly less similar to each other than are their European American counterparts with respect to academic orientations and deviant attitudes and behaviors (M. D. Newcomb, Huba, & Bentler, 1986; Tolson & Urberg, 1993). By some accounts, the degree of similarity between African American friends with respect to these variables is nearly negligible (Tolson & Urberg, 1993). Such findings call for a closer consideration of the forces that contribute to adolescents' friendship selection. The premise of the current study is that friendship selection is shaped by cultural and historical circumstances associated with ethnic-group membership, features of the schools in which friendships develop, and adolescents' personal interests and values. These assertions follow from contemporary person-in-context frameworks of development (e.g., Lerner, 1991) that characterize adjustment as jointly determined by characteristics of the individual, features of social settings that involve the individual, and the broader sociocultural milieu in which the individual is situated. Unfortunately, friendship selection processes have typically been analyzed in isolation from the broader contexts in which they occur, and no unifying theory suggests under what circumstances and with respect to what dimensions adolescents will select similar friends. However, several theoretical perspectives can be enlisted to account for and expand on reported ethnic-group differences in friendship similarity and to suggest additional individual, contextual, and relationship forces to which adolescents will respond when selecting their friends.

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### Ethnic-Group Differences in Friendship Similarity

Researchers have targeted attitudes and behaviors toward academics and deviance as dimensions around which adolescents seek compatibility when selecting friends because these dimensions are believed to be central to adolescents' self-definition and daily lives. However, much of the research that underscores these dimensions either has been based on European American samples or has not attended to ethnic-group variation. According to Ogbu (1991), a consequence of historical circumstances and cultural forces has been that members of "oppressed" minority groups such as African Americans show relative indifference toward many orientations valued by members of mainstream society. In particular, because such issues may be perceived as threatening to their social identity, African American youth minimize the importance of school-related orientations and rely on other dimensions to define themselves positively and uniquely (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Thus, when selecting friends, African American adolescents may attend less to shared orientations toward school than do European American adolescents. Fordham and Ogbu's ethnographic research further suggests that ethnic-group solidarity has evolved to be more central than academic orientations to African American adolescents' self-definition. For members of ethnic-minority groups in particular, the sharing with friends of similar attitudes toward and identification with an ethnic group may provide an important platform for exploration of ethnic identity, a central task of adolescence (Rosenthal, 1986). Thus, similar attitudes toward and identification with African American group membership should be considered as a dimension of consequence to African American adolescents when selecting friends.

According to Ogbu (1991), however, members of "voluntary" minority groups, such as Asian American adolescents, maintain different orientations toward academic issues and ethnic-group membership than do members of oppressed minority groups. It has been argued that because Asian American youth easily assimilate into and attain success at school, ethnic-group membership may be less central to their sense of self and daily experiences than are academic orientations (Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Thus, like their European American peers, Asian American adolescents may seek friends who share their academic orientations, but they may seek friends with less similar attitudes toward and identification with ethnic-group membership than do their African American peers.

Cultural differences in beliefs and values may also explain the comparatively lower levels of similarity between African American friends than between European American friends on deviant behaviors such as substance use. Researchers have speculated that patterns of later onset and generally lower levels of drinking and drug use among African American adolescents than among European American adolescents are attributable to different cultural norms regarding the appropriateness of drug use (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1995; Peterson, Hawkins, Abbott, & Catalano, 1994). If African American adolescents are socialized to be more indifferent than their European American peers to alcohol and drug usage, deviant behaviors and attitudes may translate into a less salient issue among African American friends than among European American friends. A lack of research on patterns and norms of deviant behavior for Asian American adolescents makes it difficult to predict the extent to which shared orientations toward

deviance are a friendship selection criterion for Asian American adolescents.

### Individual, Contextual, and Relationship Moderators of Friendship Similarity

The discussion thus far suggests why and in what ways the selection of similar friends may differ across ethnic groups. But adolescents vary widely in how strongly they endorse particular culturally relevant attitudes and behaviors (Eckert, 1989; Fordham, 1988; Lee, 1993; Peshkin, 1991). Tesser et al. (1984) demonstrated that European American adolescents selected friends who confirmed or supported perspectives that were of personal consequence to them. For ethnic-minority adolescents, qualitative research suggests that ethnic identity is most central to friendship selection for adolescents who report strongly positive feelings about or a strong sense of pride in their ethnic group (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Matute-Bianchi, 1986). With respect to academic orientations, studies indicate for African American adolescents in particular that the desire for a friend who shares academic orientations is greater among higher than among lower achieving adolescents (Fordham, 1988; Peshkin, 1991). It is noteworthy that researchers have defined the "personal consequence" of attributes differently. In some studies, the importance of the attribute to the individual has been considered (e.g., Tesser et al., 1984); qualitative research (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Peshkin, 1991) suggests that how strongly the adolescent is invested in the attitude or behavior is important for the selection of similar friends. In the current investigation, the strength of adolescents' academic orientations, ethnic identity, and degree of substance use were points of focus.

Adolescents select their friends within the confines of schools, the features of which shape the pool of peers available and the kinds of relationships that develop (Epstein & Karweit, 1983). School ethnic diversity in particular may facilitate and constrain adolescents' ability to locate friends who share similar orientations of consequence. To many African American, Asian American, and European American adolescents, shared ethnic background is of critical importance when selecting friends (Hamm, 1992; Shrum et al., 1988). Adolescents in the numerical ethnic majority at their schools, compared with those in the minority, likely have a greater pool of potential friends with whom they share important attitudes and behaviors as well as ethnic-group membership, which suggests that similarity with respect to academic orientations, deviant behavior, and ethnic identity will be greater among adolescents in the numerical ethnic majority at their schools than among those in the numerical ethnic minority. However, according to McGuire and McGuire's (1982; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978) distinctiveness postulate, numerical ethnic-minority status heightens the salience of ethnic-group membership to adolescents' sense of self. Thus, adolescents in numerical minority situations may feel a pronounced need for group solidarity with their friends (Breakwell, 1986; Peshkin, 1991). Moreover, a heightened sense of ethnic-group membership when in a numerical minority is not limited to ethnic-minority adolescents (McGuire et al., 1978; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997); similar levels of ethnic identity may also have relevance for European American adolescents in this situation.

Ethnically diverse schools do not promote exclusive selection of same-ethnic-group friends; instead they offer adolescents the opportunity to select friends across ethnic lines. Qualitative researchers intimate that adolescents select cross-ethnic-group friends because their desire for similarity with regard to academics and deviant behavior supplants their desire for shared ethnic background (Fordham, 1988; Ianni, 1989; Peshkin, 1991; M. L. Sullivan, 1979). This selection pattern appears to be particularly characteristic of adolescents who strongly endorse these behaviors or attitudes and suggests that an examination of the interactive effects of individual and relationship forces would be fruitful. In other words, similarity may be greatest when adolescents select cross-ethnic-group friends and strongly endorse the dimension in question.

In summary, this study explored variability in adolescents' selection of similar friends. First, ethnic-group differences in similarity with respect to academic orientations, substance use, and ethnic identity were examined. Similarity was expected to be greater for academic orientations and deviant behaviors among Asian American and European American adolescents than among African American adolescents and their nominated friends. For ethnic identity, African American adolescents, compared with Asian American and European American adolescents, were expected to be more similar to their nominated friends. Second, specific individual, school-contextual, and relationship factors were explored for their moderating role in friendship similarity. The more strongly a particular attribute was endorsed by adolescents, the greater the similarity that was expected between adolescents and their nominated friends. In addition, similarity was anticipated to be greater with respect to academic orientations and substance use when adolescents were in the numerical ethnic majority than when they were in the numerical ethnic minority. Similarity with respect to ethnic identity, however, was predicted to be greatest when adolescents were in the numerical ethnic minority. Finally, adolescents were expected to select more similar friends across ethnic groups than within their own ethnic group. Reports of ethnic-group differences in friendship similarity (e.g., Tolson & Urberg, 1993) and relational qualities in general (e.g., Dubois & Hirsch, 1990) call for examination of the individual, contextual, and relationship factors separately for each ethnic group.

## Method

### Participants

The data for this study were drawn from a larger study of 9th- through 12th-grade students (14–18 years of age) attending seven ethnically diverse high schools (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). Parents and students in each participating school were informed of the study; all students who were present and whose parents did not refuse to allow their children to participate completed a self-report questionnaire that assessed features of adolescents' psychological development and schooling. Because of its length, the questionnaire was administered on 2 days. Usable questionnaires were obtained from roughly 80% of the available students, for a total of about 6,500 students.

Respondents included in this study were African American, Asian American, and European American adolescents who could be matched to a best friend.<sup>1</sup> Respondents attended one Wisconsin and six California high schools (Grades 9–12). In five schools, all located in the San Francisco

Bay area, European American students constituted a numerical majority. These included a school serving a working- and middle-class moderate-sized city (70% European American student body); a school serving predominantly lower- and working-class neighborhoods and reporting over 50% of its student body to be European American and roughly 25% of its students as Latino; a school drawing its students from middle- and upper-class neighborhoods (58% European American, 23% Asian American, and a smaller proportion of Latino students); a school enrolling largely working- and middle-class students (55% European American students and 33% Latino students); and a school serving middle-class neighborhoods in which Asian American and Latino students collectively accounted for 36% of the student body and European American students constituted the remainder of the student body. A sixth school, also located in the Bay area, served a broad socioeconomic base in which Asian American students constituted the largest ethnic-group category (40%). This school also included substantial proportions of Latino (21%) and European American (35%) students. The remaining school (44% African American, 32% European American, 15% Latino) was located in a large Midwestern city and was an academic magnet school that drew students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds scattered throughout the city's neighborhoods. Taken together, the sample is diverse in terms of socioeconomic background, ethnic-group membership, and school size. In general, Asian American and European American participants were from middle-class and professional backgrounds, and African American adolescents were from lower or working-class and middle-class backgrounds.

### Procedure and Measures

In addition to basic demographic information (ethnic-group membership, parental education, sex), measures of relevance to this study included academic orientations, substance use, ethnic identity, and friendship selection. Measures of academic orientations, ethnic identity, and substance use were collected during the fall; friendship nominations were obtained the following spring.

**Sociodemographics.** Respondents selected their primary ethnic identification from a list of 16 possible ethnic categories. Problematic identifications were resolved by comparison with school records. Adolescents who indicated membership in one of three major categories—African American, Asian American, and European American—were retained in the current sample. Parental education was also reported by respondents; response options ranged from grade school to professional or graduate degree. For each respondent, mother's and father's reported education levels were averaged to create a single, continuous indicator of parental education.

**Academic orientations.** Three measures of academic attitudes and behaviors were selected on the basis of suggestions from previous qualitative and survey studies. Self-reported grade-point average (GPA) was scored on the standard 4-point scale. Self-reported grades have been found to correlate satisfactorily ( $r = .76$ ) with students' actual grades (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987). Respondents also reported their educational aspirations by indicating how far they expected to pursue their educations. Six response options were available, ranging from "leave school now" to "finish college and take further training (medical, law, graduate school, etc.)." Effort in schoolwork was measured by a composite estimate of the amount of time students spent on homework in mathematics, science, social studies, and English. Response options ranged from 0 hours to 4 or more hours per academic subject per week, on a 7-point scale.

The three measures of academic orientation were significantly correlated ( $r$ s ranged from .37 to .42,  $ps \leq .0001$ ). An academic orientations com-

<sup>1</sup> Although Latino adolescents were well represented in the data set, they did not constitute a numerical ethnic majority in any single school and thus could not be classified according to one of the major variables of interest in the study (numerical ethnic-majority status).

posite was created by combining the standardized indicators of GPA, academic aspirations, and time spent on homework.<sup>2</sup>

**Substance use.** Students completed a five-item drug use instrument (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ) on which they indicated, on a 4-point scale (*never, once or twice, several times, and often*), how frequently in the past 6 months they had used various controlled substances. Similar measures in previous studies indicate that this scale is a valid measure of adolescent drug use (Needle, McCubbin, Lorence, & Hochhauser, 1983; O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1983; Polich, 1982). Scores were derived by calculating the mean item response; scores ranged from 1.00 (low) to 4.00 (high).

**Ethnic identity.** In an extensive review of the literature on adolescent ethnic identity, Phinney (1990, 1992) identified three elements of ethnic identity relevant to members of all ethnic groups: self-identification as a group member, sense of belonging to a group, and attitudes or feelings toward one's own group. Respondents' ethnic-group membership was determined by their answers to the ethnic self-identification question. Sense of belonging to the ethnic group was measured by the following question: "Suppose you wanted some people to know all about you. How important would it be for them to know about your ethnic background?" Response options ranged from *not at all important* to *extremely important* on a 5-point scale. Feelings about one's ethnic group membership were measured by the following item: "Overall, my feelings about my ethnic background are. . . ." Response options ranged from *strongly negative* to *strongly positive* on a 6-point scale. The latter two items were moderately correlated ( $r = .22, p \leq .001$ ) and conceptually similar. Thus, the item scores were standardized and combined into a single composite score of ethnic identity. Admittedly, a two-item assessment is a limited measure, but for the purposes of this investigation it provides a general indication of ethnic identity based on Phinney's identification of the major components of ethnic identity relevant to all ethnic groups. However, potentially weak reliability may obscure relationships involving this variable.

**Friendship nominations.** Respondents provided the first and last names of up to five of their closest school friends. School records were used to code the ethnic-group membership of the nominated friends. Friendship nominations were nonreciprocal.

### Determination of Friendship Similarity

Adolescents were matched to their nominated best friends. Because friendship similarity is believed to characterize close or best friendship (Epstein, 1989), only individuals listed in the first position on the friendship nomination measure were included.<sup>3</sup> Seventy percent of the sample could be matched to a friend. Failures to match arose when students nominated as friends were not themselves respondents in the larger study. Students who could not be matched to a close friend did not differ significantly from those included in the study with respect to ethnic-group membership, parental education, or gender. No participant appeared as a target or a nominated friend in more than one dyad. A small proportion of friendship dyads (14%) were cross-gender friends; these dyads were dropped because of an insufficient number for analysis. Following these exclusions, a total of 271 African American, 1,719 European American, and 504 Asian American target adolescents were matched to their nominated best friends.<sup>4</sup> Dyads were classified as *same-ethnic* if the target's nominated best friend was of the same ethnic background and as *cross-ethnic* when the nominated friend was from a different ethnic background. Cross-ethnic nominated friends of European American targets were primarily African American, Asian American, or Latino adolescents. For African American and Asian American adolescents, nominated cross-ethnic friends were European American. Other friendship constellations were rare or nonexistent; few African American and Asian American targets nominated close cross-ethnic friends who were not European American (Hamm, 1992). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the sample by target's ethnic background, selection of same- versus cross-ethnic friend,

Table 1

*Percentage Breakdown of Sample by Target Ethnicity, Selection of Nominated Friend, and Numerical Majority Status in School*

Variable	Target's ethnic background		
	African American	Asian American	European American
Nominated friend			
Cross-ethnic	19	41	19
Same-ethnic	81	59	81
Target's numerical majority status			
Majority	52	49	74
Minority	48	51	26

and numerical ethnic-majority status in the school. African American and European American participants in particular tended to select same-ethnic friends. Research based primarily on African American and European American adolescents has long established that ethnic-group membership is a significant factor that attracts adolescent friends (e.g., Schofield, 1989; Shrum et al., 1988). However, in the current study, ethnic-group membership was treated as an independent variable that shapes friendship selection rather than as an attribute that attracts friends.

Two metrics were used to determine similarity between target adolescents and their nominated friends. One index was dyadic difference scores, calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the target adolescent's score on the scale and the nominated friend's score on the scale. This index of similarity indicates how closely matched the target's and the nominated friend's scores were with respect to each dependent variable: The more closely the difference scores approximated zero, the more similar the dyad members' scores were to one another. Dyad difference scores permit individual, contextual, and relationship factors to be examined in relation to each target–friend dyad. The second index was determined at the group level. For each variable, Pearson product–moment correlations were calculated between the target adolescent's and the nominated friend's scores and were contrasted across groupings of interest. Strongly positive correlation coefficients indicated a similar relative posi-

<sup>2</sup> A factor analysis was conducted within the samples of each ethnic group to ensure that academic orientations were appropriately represented by a single factor. For each group, a single factor clearly emerged with an eigenvalue greater than 1 and with each item loading at .50 or higher.

<sup>3</sup> Preliminary analyses compared similarity between adolescents paired with a nominated friend with similarity between adolescents paired with a peer selected at random who attended the same school but was not listed as a friend by the target adolescent. For all dependent variables, similarity measured by dyadic difference scores and by adolescent–matched-peer score correlations indicated that friends were significantly more similar than randomly paired peers. The results of these analyses are available from the author.

<sup>4</sup> Preliminary analyses revealed that roughly 25% of the dyads were missing data for either the target individual or the paired friend on the dependent variables. Results of chi-square analyses, available from the author, indicated that African American respondents had the least missing data. In addition, missing data for all of these variables came disproportionately from respondents in predominantly European American schools. For the ethnic-related variables only, there were significantly more missing cases from the lowest socioeconomic group. Younger and older adolescents were evenly represented in the distribution of missing data. Mean substitutions were not used in order to avoid masking the actual differences between groups and because the large remaining sample size provided adequate power.

tioning of the target and the nominated friend within their respective samples. This index is scale-free and therefore easily interpreted as a measure of relative similarity. However, examination of the means and standard deviations for academic orientations, ethnic identity, and substance use indicated that the sample of target adolescents and the sample of nominated friends had highly similar distributions of scores. Thus, the greater the magnitude of the positive correlation coefficient, the closer the match between the target's and the nominated friend's actual scores.

## Results

### *Ethnic-Group Differences in the Selection of Similar Friends*

The first set of analyses examined ethnic-group differences in adolescents' selection of similar friends. Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) procedures were used to compare dyad difference scores across ethnic groups. Parental education was included as a covariate factor because preliminary analyses indicated significant associations among this variable, ethnic-group membership, and several dependent variables.<sup>5</sup> Because gender has a pervasive influence on adolescent friendship, the gender of the target adolescent (the same as the nominated friend in all dyads) was also included as a covariate factor.

The covariate factors showed a significant relation with the attributes,  $F(1, 1,642) = 5.53, p \leq .001$ . Univariate analyses indicated that parental education was significantly associated with academic orientations ( $\beta = -.33, p \leq .001$ ). After the effects of parental education and gender were controlled for, there was a significant main effect of ethnic group,  $F(2, 1,642) = 14.44, p \leq .001$ . Univariate analyses revealed significant main effects of ethnic group on academic orientations,  $F(2, 1,642) = 4.12, p \leq .01, \eta^2 = .01$ ; on ethnic identity,  $F(2, 1,642) = 15.48, p \leq .001, \eta^2 = .02$ ; and on substance use,  $F(2, 1,642) = 22.80, p \leq .001, \eta^2 = .03$ . Fisher least significant difference tests indicated that for academic orientations, African American adolescents (adjusted  $M = 0.23$ ) selected significantly less similar friends than did either Asian American (adjusted  $M = -0.10$ ) or European American (adjusted  $M = -0.14$ ) respondents. African American adolescents (adjusted  $M = 0.02$ ), however, shared more similar levels of ethnic identity with their nominated friends than did either Asian American (adjusted  $M = 0.15$ ) or European American (adjusted  $M = 0.56$ ) adolescents. Finally, with respect to substance use, African American adolescents (adjusted  $M = 0.44$ ) selected significantly more similar friends than did either Asian American (adjusted  $M = 0.23$ ) or European American (adjusted  $M = 0.28$ ) adolescents.

Partial correlation coefficients (effects of parental education and gender removed) were calculated between target adolescents and nominated friends and were tested for significant differences across ethnic groups for each composite measure (Bruning & Kintz, 1997; see the present Table 2). These analyses were consistent with the findings from the MANCOVA procedures with respect to academic orientations. Differences between ethnic groups with respect to ethnic identity did not attain statistical significance, although the pattern of differences was consistent with the MANCOVA results. Correlational analyses further indicated that European American target adolescents and their nominated friends were significantly more similar than were African American target adolescents and their nominated friends with

**Table 2**  
*Partial Correlation Coefficients of Similarity Between Target and Nominated Friend on Three Composite Measures by Target's Ethnic Group*

Composite measure	Target's ethnic group		
	African American	Asian American	European American
Academic orientations	.14 <sub>a,b</sub> **	.23 <sub>a</sub> **	.34 <sub>b</sub> **
Ethnic identity	.15**	.06	.07
Substance use	.33 <sub>c</sub> **	.44**	.58 <sub>c</sub> **

*Note.* Effects of parental education and gender are removed. Correlation coefficients with the same subscript letters are significantly different ( $p \leq .01$ ) from one another.

\*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

respect to substance use, although there was pronounced similarity for African American adolescents and their nominated friends on this variable. Although correlations between targets' and nominated friends' substance use did not differ significantly for African American and Asian American pairs, as suggested by the MANCOVA procedure, the pattern of results was consistent between analyses. For both Asian American and African American students, similarity between target adolescents and their nominated friends was substantial but comparably less than the similarity between European American target adolescents and their nominated friends.

Correlational analyses illuminate the magnitude of similarity observed between friends. Consistent with the results of other research (e.g., Kandel, 1978b), similarity between targets and nominated friends was greatest with respect to substance use. Similarity was modest between targets and nominated friends on academic orientations (with the exception of African American dyads, for whom similarity was low). Similarity between adolescents and nominated friends on ethnic identity was low for all ethnic groups.

### *Individual, Contextual, and Relationship Factors in Friendship Selection*

The second objective of this investigation was to examine the extent to which individual, contextual, and relationship factors independently and conjointly were associated with adolescents' selection of similar friends. A series of hierarchical linear regressions was conducted on the three dependent variables (dyad dif-

<sup>5</sup> Parental education is also a variable on which friends are believed to be similar (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). In this sample, correlations between friends with respect to parental education were in the low to modest range:  $r(200) = .13, ns$ , for African Americans;  $r(1,178) = .25, p \leq .001$ , for European Americans; and  $r(340) = .19, p \leq .001$ , for Asian Americans. The correlation between target adolescents and their nominated friends was significantly greater for European American than for African American target adolescents ( $z = 4.09, p \leq .01$ ) and for European American than for Asian American target adolescents ( $z = 4.08, p \leq .01$ ). Similarity between targets and nominated friends did not differ significantly for friends classified as African American and friends classified as Asian American.

ference scores for academic orientations, ethnic identity, and substance use). All regressions were conducted separately within each ethnic group. Predictor variables included the target adolescent's orientation toward the variable (measured by the target's score on the academic orientations, ethnic identity, and substance use composite measures), the target's numerical ethnic-majority status (1 = majority, 0 = minority), the ethnic composition of the dyad (1 = cross-ethnic friend, 0 = same-ethnic friend), as well as all two-way and the three-way interaction terms. Interaction terms were standardized multiplicative products of standardized univariate variables (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Parental education and gender were entered on the first step as control variables. The second step included the independent variables; interaction terms were entered on the final step of the regression. Final regression equations included only those interaction terms that were significantly associated with the dependent variable.

At each step, the significance of the change in  $R^2$  was assessed to determine the contribution of each block of variables. Interaction terms were further analyzed if they were significant and if they added a significant increment to the variance accounted for by the equation. All interaction terms that met these criteria were interpreted according to Posthoff's variation on the Johnson-Neyman procedure outlined in Aiken and West (1991). This procedure yields values of the continuous variable at which the groups of the dichotomous variable differ significantly on the dependent variable.

Finally, for instances in which categorical predictor variables (e.g., ethnic composition of the dyad and numerical majority status) were significantly correlated with dyad scores, partial correlations (with effects of gender and parental education removed) between target adolescents' and nominated friends' scores are presented to aid in the interpretation of group differences.

*African American adolescents.* Table 3 presents the results of the regression equations for each dependent variable for the African American adolescents. With respect to academic orientations,

similarity between targets and nominated friends was greater when targets reported a higher level of parental education. The target's orientation, the target's majority status, and the ethnic composition of the dyad did not make significant contributions to the similarity between targets and nominated friends. However, the multiplicative effects of the target's academic orientations and the dyad's ethnic composition were significantly and uniquely associated with the degree of similarity between targets and nominated friends. No cases in the data were located in the regions of significant difference identified by the follow-up procedures. In other words, although including the interaction term improved the fit of the model, substantive interpretation of the interaction effect is not supported by these data.

Although similarity between African American adolescents and their nominated friends with respect to ethnic identity was not predicted by any single univariate or product term, numerous relationships among individual, contextual, and relationship variables and similarity were observed with respect to substance use. After the effects of parental education and gender were controlled for, target adolescents reporting lower levels of substance use selected friends with more similar levels of substance use than did target adolescents reporting higher levels of substance use. In addition, African American target adolescents and their nominated friends shared more similar levels of substance use when the nominated friend was cross-ethnic ( $r = .74$ ) than when the nominated friend was same-ethnic ( $r = .20$ ). The contribution of the univariate independent variables accounted for an additional 18% of the variance in similarity between targets and nominated friends. Finally, target-friend similarity was associated with the interaction of target's substance use and ethnic composition of the dyad. This multiplicative product contributed an additional 4% of the variance explained. As was the case for academic orientations, follow-up analyses found no cases in the data in the regions of significant difference.

Table 3  
*Parameter Estimates From Hierarchical Regression Analysis Relating Selection of Similar Friends to Individual, Contextual, and Relationship Factors Among African American Target Adolescents*

Predictor	Academic orientations		Ethnic identity		Substance use	
	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>
Step 1	.04*		.01		.02	
Parental education		-.40*		-.09		-.02
Gender		.48		-.09		-.17
Step 2	.02		.01		.18***	
Target's orientation		-.13		-.01		.76***
Ethnic composition of dyad		-.24		.38		-.33**
Target's majority status		.43		-.48		-.04
Step 3	.04**		<i>ns</i>		.04**	
Target's Orientation $\times$ Ethnic Composition of Dyad		1.27**				-.52**
Total $\Delta R^2$	.10**		.02		.24***	
<i>N</i>		218		217		237

*Note.* Smaller difference scores indicate greater similarity. Target's orientation refers to the nominating adolescent's endorsement of the dependent variable. Ethnic composition of dyad was coded as 1 = cross-ethnic, 0 = same-ethnic; target's majority status was coded as 1 = majority, 0 = minority.

\*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .



Table 4  
Parameter Estimates From Hierarchical Regressions Relating Selection of Similar Friends to Individual, Contextual, and Relationship Factors Among Asian American Target Adolescents

Predictor	Academic orientations		Ethnic identity		Substance use	
	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>
Step 1	.01		.01		.01	
Parental education		-.05		.02		.01
Gender		.02		.06		-.05
Step 2	.04*		.04**		.29***	
Target's orientation		-.16**		.20***		.72***
Ethnic composition of dyad		-.32		.10		-.11**
Target's majority status		-.29		-.11		.03
Step 3	<i>ns</i>		<i>ns</i>		.08**	
Target's Orientation $\times$ Ethnic Composition of Dyad						-.31***
Total $\Delta R^2$	.05*		.05**		.38***	
<i>N</i>		378		375		456

Note. Smaller difference scores indicate greater similarity. Target's orientation refers to the nominating adolescent's endorsement of the dependent variable. Ethnic composition of dyad was coded as 1 = cross-ethnic, 0 = same-ethnic; target's majority status was coded as 1 = majority, 0 = minority.

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

*Asian American adolescents.* With respect to academic orientations, Asian American target adolescents reporting more positive academic orientations selected more similar friends than did Asian American adolescents reporting weaker academic orientations, after parental education and gender were controlled for (see Table 4). For ethnic identity, with the effects of parental education and gender removed, target-friend similarity was greater for targets reporting less strongly positive orientations toward being Asian American than for targets reporting more strongly positive levels of ethnic identity.

Target adolescents' own level of substance use was significantly associated with the degree of similarity between themselves and nominated friends; after the effects of parental education and gender

were removed, similarity increased as the target reported less frequent substance use. The ethnic composition of the dyad was also significantly associated with similarity on substance use; cross-ethnic friends had more similar substance use ( $r = .61$ ) than did same-ethnic friends ( $r = .33$ ). Finally, target-friend similarity with respect to substance use was predicted by the multiplicative product of target's substance use and ethnic composition of the dyad. Follow-up analyses indicated that no cases in the data were located in the regions of significant difference identified by the follow-up procedures.

*European American adolescents.* European American target adolescents' selection of similar friends was associated not only with their personal orientations but also with contextual and relationship factors. Table 5 summarizes the results of each regression

Table 5  
Parameter Estimates From Hierarchical Regressions Relating Selection of Similar Friends to Individual, Contextual, and Relationship Factors Among European American Target Adolescents

Predictor	Academic orientations		Ethnic identity		Substance use	
	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>
Step 1	.03**		.01		.01	
Parental education		-.05		-.15**		-.04
Gender		-.08		-.04		-.02
Step 2	.11***		.02		.14***	
Target's orientation		-.27***		.07*		.25***
Ethnic composition of dyad		.21		.32**		-.11***
Target's majority status		-.44***		-.10		.02
Step 3	<i>ns</i>		<i>ns</i>		<i>ns</i>	
Total $\Delta R^2$	.14***		.03**		.15***	
<i>N</i>		1,239		1,289		1,574

Note. Smaller difference scores indicate greater similarity. Target's orientation refers to the nominating adolescent's endorsement of the dependent variable. Ethnic composition of dyad was coded as 1 = cross-ethnic, 0 = same-ethnic; target's majority status was coded as 1 = majority, 0 = minority.

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

equation. For academic orientations, after the effects of parental education and gender were removed, similarity was greatest when European American targets reported strongly positive academic orientations. European American adolescents were also more similar to their nominated friends when they were in the numerical ethnic majority rather than the numerical ethnic minority in their schools, although partial correlation coefficients calculated for the majority ( $r = .35$ ) and minority ( $r = .31$ ) groups suggested that relative similarity was comparable.

With respect to ethnic identity, after the effects of parental education and gender were removed, within-dyad similarity was greater when a cross-ethnic friend was selected than when a same-ethnic friend was selected. However, partial correlation coefficients suggested that the relative similarity of cross-ethnic ( $r = .09$ ) and same-ethnic ( $r = .07$ ) dyads was comparable.

Finally, substance use similarity between European American adolescents and their nominated friends was greater when targets reported lower substance use than when they reported moderate or frequent substance use. Similarity was also greater when the selected friend was from a different ethnic group ( $r = .65$ ) than when a European American friend was selected ( $r = .54$ ).

#### *Similarity as a Function of Overall Group Homogeneity*

A potential explanation for the observed associations between similarity and the various categorizations of dyads may be that nominations of friends who are similar reflect a limited selection range with respect to that variable in the pool of potential friends. In other words, perhaps similarity is greater for some groupings of dyads than others because there is little variability with respect to the attribute within the pool of potential friends. To consider this possibility, I examined ranges and standard deviations for all respondents in the larger data set ( $N =$  approximately 6,500) first for each ethnic group. Across schools, although European American ( $SD = 1.06$ ) and Asian American ( $SD = 1.10$ ) adolescents were less varied with respect to ethnic identity than were their African American ( $SD = 1.30$ ) peers, there was sufficient variability for all groups. For academic orientations, standard deviations were of acceptable magnitude and comparable ( $SD = 1.53$  for African American,  $SD = 1.46$  for Asian American, and  $SD = 1.55$  for European American students). Overall, standard deviations were modest for substance use and somewhat greater for Asian American adolescents ( $SD = .77$ ) than for African American ( $SD = .55$ ) or European American ( $SD = .54$ ) adolescents. For other disaggregations of the sample (e.g., by school and numerical ethnic-majority status), there was sufficient variability and comparability to suggest that selection was not biased by a limited selection range of potential friends.

#### *Discussion*

Similarity between African American, Asian American, and European American adolescents and their nominated friends was examined with respect to three dimensions suggested to be of consequence to adolescents: academic orientations, ethnic identity, and substance use. Within each ethnic group, the independent and interactive moderating roles of adolescents' endorsement of each dimension, numerical ethnic-majority status at school, and selection of a same- versus cross-ethnic friend were explored. This

sample is unique in representing adolescents of three major ethnic groups. These adolescents came from a wide array of socioeconomic backgrounds and attended schools that varied with respect to ethnic composition.

The results confirm that similarity with respect to academic orientations and substance use is a characteristic of adolescent friendship. Although predicted to be important to friendship selection in ethnically diverse contexts, shared levels of ethnic identity did not appear to be a major selection criterion for adolescents of any ethnic group in the study. This lack of findings is difficult to interpret, because it may reflect a limited measure of ethnic identity rather than a lack of salience of these issues in the choice of friends. Finally, in a manner consistent with past research (e.g., Kandel, 1978b), African American, Asian American, and European American adolescents and their nominated friends shared more similar levels of substance use than academic orientations or ethnic identity. Similarity may be greatest with respect to substance use because of the potentially significant consequences associated with this behavior. The results of the current study raise two critical issues regarding the nature of adolescents' selection of similar friends. First, similarity is variable in nature. Second, similarity is a relative rather than an absolute selection criterion.

#### *The Variable Nature of Friendship Similarity*

Similarity appears to be a variable and responsive selection criterion: Adolescents select friends who are highly similar with respect to some dimensions but relatively dissimilar with respect to others. Ethnic-group membership, strength of endorsement of the dimension, and the selection of a cross-ethnic friend can heighten the degree of similarity with respect to any particular dimension. Similarity for academic orientations was moderate for European American and Asian American adolescents and, as predicted, significantly greater than for African American adolescents and their nominated friends, for whom similarity on this dimension was significant but low. Similarity in terms of ethnic identity was expected to be greatest for African American adolescents and their nominated friends. Although this prediction was supported, the level of similarity on this dimension in this study was quite low for adolescents from all three ethnic groups. Finally, with respect to substance use, African American adolescents and their nominated friends were less similar than European American adolescents and their nominated friends, which is consistent with past research (Tolson & Urberg, 1993). However, there was a high degree of similarity on substance use for adolescents and nominated friends from all three ethnic groups. These findings suggest that although there is a closer absolute match between European American adolescents and their nominated friends, substance use is salient to African American and Asian American adolescents when selecting friends.

These results add to a growing body of research indicating that adolescents from various ethnic groups differ in their selection of similar friends. It should be noted that the differences observed in the current study do not seem to be attributable to adolescents' experience of a restricted range of possible friends from which to select in their schools. To date, no research directly addresses why ethnic groups vary with respect to similarity as a selection criterion. It may be the case, as the theoretical framework for the



current study suggests, that historical and cultural circumstances unique to each ethnic group lead youth to attend to different dimensions when selecting friends. The comparatively lower and minimal degree of similarity between African American adolescents and their nominated friends on academic orientations is consistent with Ogbu's (1991) assertion that this dimension is downplayed for African American adolescents. Also consistent with an explanation based on Ogbu's (1991) model is that similarity between Asian American adolescents and their nominated friends on this dimension was relatively high, perhaps reflecting a strong importance attached to academic orientations.

An alternative explanation is that ethnic-group differences reflect different antecedents of African American, Asian American, and European American participants' friendship selection. For instance, different experiences associated with bussing (e.g., Miller, 1989), not considered in this or other studies, may mean that European American school friendships are longer in duration than African American school friendships and thus that European American friends have had more time to develop shared views. Further, as Tolson and Urberg (1993) noted, most research on friendship similarity assesses school-based friendships, which may not represent African American adolescents' closest friendships (Dubois & Hirsch, 1990). A vital challenge for future research is to distinguish relationship processes from antecedent experiences in friendship formation.

Within each ethnic group, a clear and consistent finding was that adolescents selected more similar friends when they more strongly endorsed the dimension in question. This finding extends social psychological research findings (e.g., Tesser et al., 1984) to African American and Asian American adolescents' friendship selection and to selection with respect to ethnic identity. Further, the results indicate that the personal consequence of a given dimension is not always reflected by high participation or involvement. As expected, European American and Asian American adolescents and their nominated friends shared more similar academic orientations when target adolescents more strongly and positively endorsed academic attitudes and behaviors. However, similarity between adolescents and their nominated friends with respect to substance use was greatest when target adolescents reported low levels of substance use. Several studies suggest that shared antisocial orientations are the most characteristic of antisocial youths' friendships (e.g., Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995). The results of the current study are more in line with Youniss and Smollar's (1985) observation that dissimilarity in nominated friends is threatening to adolescents for behaviors that are deviant and not characteristic of the adolescent.

With respect to substance use, similarity was heightened when African American, Asian American, and European American adolescents selected cross- rather than same-ethnic friends. Qualitative researchers have intimated that the selection of cross-ethnic friends is motivated by a search for similarity with respect to dimensions of consequence (e.g., Peshkin, 1991). In the current study, shared orientations toward substance use may have been a point of initial attraction for adolescents from different ethnic groups. Alternatively, if adolescents have already chosen a friend who differs with respect to ethnic-group membership, the need for common ground with respect to other salient issues may be crucial to the survival of the relationship. The role of similarity in cross-ethnic friend selection requires further study.

It was unexpected that numerical ethnic-majority status in school did not distinguish friendship similarity. Although regression equations that used difference scores as dependent variables indicated that European American target-friend similarity was greater when European American students were in the numerical ethnic majority at school, partial correlation coefficients suggested that group differences were rather small and were possibly detected because of the large sample of European American respondents. Numerical ethnic-majority status at the school level may not be a factor sensitive enough to predict friendship selection. Tracking efforts common in high schools tend to resegregate students along ethnic lines (Oakes, 1985). Microcontextual factors such as classroom ethnic balance or extracurricular contact may relate more directly to the selection of similar friends.

Taken together, these results have important implications for understanding friendship selection. The selection of similar friends depends on individuals and what is of consequence to them, which cannot be separated from the social settings, relationships, and sociocultural milieu in which friendship selection occurs. A comprehensive developmental formulation of friendship selection is needed that takes into account intrapersonal, interpersonal, and broader contextual opportunities and constraints—and that considers the antecedents and consequences of adolescents' selection of similar friends.

### *The Relative Nature of Similarity*

In addition to highlighting the variable and responsive nature of friendship similarity, the results of this study indicate that similarity is more of a relative than an absolute criterion for friendship selection. That is, adolescents do not appear to seek friends who are identical to themselves. This characteristic of friendship selection has important implications for adolescents' adjustment. In the context of identity development, adolescents may leave themselves room to negotiate views and explore values within the security of compatible relationships. Further, locating friends who are relatively similar yet not identical may satisfy the need to find commonality with others and at the same time establish a unique sense of self (Erikson, 1968).

If adolescents leave themselves room to grow in their friendships, they also open the door to have an influence on and to be influenced by their nominated friends. Future research must consider such implications of the relative nature of friendship similarity for adolescents' adjustment. For instance, Epstein's (1983) research suggests that when discrepancies in achievement occur between friends, lower achieving friends improve in academic standing over time. Although Epstein's sample was ethnically diverse, these analyses were conducted without attention to ethnic-group differences. Qualitative research on African American adolescents raises concerns that academically oriented adolescents may compromise their attitudes and beliefs in order to maintain their friendships with less academically oriented African American peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Peshkin, 1991). The magnitude of the correlations in the current study indicates that there is potentially greater room for influence between African American adolescents and their friends compared with adolescents from other ethnic groups and their friends. Sorting out the processes of influence between friends is a complex undertaking that requires longitudinal data (Epstein, 1983; Kandel, 1978a) and, according to

these results, attention to individual, relationship, and sociocultural circumstances.

### Limitations and Future Directions

An important consideration in any conclusions drawn from this study is that the degree of similarity between adolescents and their nominated friends may depend on whether the relationship is reciprocated, whether the friendship is still in the making, or other characteristics. Although these finer distinctions were not assessed in the current study, previous research has found that reciprocity does not differentiate friendship similarity with respect to the variables under investigation in the current study (Tolson & Urberg, 1993). Further, friendship nomination, behaviors, and attitudes were measured concurrently in this investigation. The extent to which similarity influenced the formation of friendship or was a by-product of the relationship cannot be determined. Longitudinal research is necessary to elaborate further on these issues.

As in most studies, the participants attended schools that are not necessarily representative of ethnically diverse schools in the United States. The features of friendships observed may be linked to the mission or nature of specific schools (Epstein, 1983). Further, although these findings generalized theory and past research to a large, heterogeneous sample of adolescents, important subtleties may have been masked when adolescents were classified into broad ethnic groups. For instance, Asian-descent adolescents' school and peer experiences vary according to their countries of origin (Lee, 1993).

The results of this study offer new and significant insight into friendship selection processes for adolescents in different socioecological, school contextual, and relationship circumstances. Adolescents respond to personal interests and to opportunities afforded by the contexts in which they select friends. Future research must elaborate on the influence of these factors, disentangle antecedent conditions from relationship processes that lead to friendship similarity, and strive to understand the role of similarity in adolescents' adjustment. Ultimately, researchers must formulate a comprehensive framework for understanding processes of friendship selection and influence that is sensitive to the diversity in adolescents' experiences.

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