

# Close and General Friendships Among African American, Latino, and Asian American Adolescents From Low-Income Families

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*Responding to the lack of research on friendships among racial/ethnic minority adolescents, a study of friendships was conducted among 160 African American, Latino, and Asian American adolescents from low-income families. The goals of the study were to (a) assess gender and racial/ethnic differences in the characteristics and quality of close and general friendships, (b) examine the independent and combined influence of individual-level (i.e., psychological well-being) and contextual (i.e., family relationships and school climate) variables on the quality of close and general friendships, and (c) examine the moderating effect of gender and race/ethnicity on the associations between individual-level and contextual variables and the quality of close and general friendships. Findings indicated significant gender and racial/ethnic differences in the characteristics and quality of close and general friendships. Furthermore, the correlates of friendship quality differed across the type of friendship (i.e., close or general) and across gender, underscoring the importance of distinguishing types of friendships and examining the role of gender in friendships.*

Although we have learned a great deal over the past two decades about the characteristics, quality, and consequences of adolescent friendships, our understanding of these critical relationships has been seriously constrained by two tendencies in the research literature. First, research studies on adolescent friendships have tended to focus exclusively on White, middle-class adolescents. Few have focused on racial/ethnic minority or low-income adoles-

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cents (Clark, 1989; Jones & Costin, 1997). Second, research studies have tended to examine the consequences of adolescent friendships without understanding the contextual factors that shape these formative relationships (L. Brown, Way, & Duff, 1999). Consequently, most of our theories about adolescent friendships do not reflect the experiences of a large portion of the adolescent population and do not take into account the ways in which internal and external environments are associated with the types of relationships that adolescents have with each other. Responding to these limitations in the research literature, we sought to explore the characteristics and quality of friendships and to determine the contextual factors that are associated with the quality of these friendships among Latino, African American, and Asian American adolescents from low-income families.

Those who have investigated the friendships of adolescents of color from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds have typically found significant racial/ethnic differences in the characteristics and quality of friendships (Cauce, 1986, 1987; Coates, 1987; Cooper, Baker, Polichar, & Welsh, 1993; DuBois & Hirsch, 1990; Gallagher & Busch-Rossnagel, 1991; Hamm, 1994; Jones, Costin, & Ricard, 1994). For example, in DuBois and Hirsch's (1990) study of 292 Black and White junior high school children from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds, they found that Black adolescents were more likely than White adolescents to report having a large network of neighborhood friends and were almost twice as likely as White adolescents to report having a close other-race friend with whom they had contact outside of school.<sup>1</sup> Clark and Ayers (1991) found that Black adolescents had more contact with their best friends outside of school, whereas White adolescent friends had more in-school contact. Furthermore, White adolescents were more likely than Black adolescents to have friends of the same race. Jones et al.'s (1994) study of 240 Mexican American, African American, and European American sixth and ninth graders from middle-class families found ethnic differences only among the males: African American males were more likely to reveal their personal thoughts and feelings with their same-sex friends than were Mexican American or European American males. In addition, significant gender differences in same-sex friendships were detected only among the European Americans: Girls reported higher levels of self-disclosure than did boys. Similarly, Dubois and Hirsch's (1990) study of Black and White junior high school children detected gender differences in reported levels of peer social support only among the White students. Gallagher and Busch-Rossnagel (1991) found, in their study of relationships among 311 adolescent girls, that middle-class White and Black girls were more likely to disclose their beliefs and attitudes to their friends than White or Black girls from low-income families.

These studies and others underscore the dangers of drawing general conclusions about friendships based solely on data from White, middle-class adolescents. These studies, however, have typically compared racial/ethnic minority adolescents to White adolescents or low-income adolescents to middle-class adolescents. Consequently, little is known about the variations between or among racial/ethnic minority or low-income adolescents. Research that compares racial/ethnic minority or low-income adolescents with White or middle-income adolescents, respectively, often appears to assume that racial/ethnic minority or low-income adolescents are relatively homogeneous groups. Yet, studies of only racial/ethnic minority or low-income adolescents have suggested that there is tremendous variation within and across racial/ethnic minority groups and within low-income groups (L. Brown, 1998; Cooper et al., 1993). It is critical, therefore, to explore not only the friendships among populations other than White or middle-class groups but also the gender and racial/ethnic differences within and across racial/ethnic minority and low-income populations. This study seeks to examine gender and racial/ethnic similarities and differences within a group of low-income adolescents of color.

### CONTEXTUALIZING FRIENDSHIPS

The theoretical and research literature suggests that relationship quality is influenced by a confluence of individual-level and contextual variables (Allen, Bat-Chava, Seidman, & Aber, 1997; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealander, 1993; Burton, Allison, & Obeidallah, 1995; Seidman, 1991). The quality of adolescent friendships, specifically, appears to be shaped by individual-level psychological variables, such as self-esteem and depressive symptoms, and contextual variables, such as family relationships and school environments. Although researchers have examined the effects of some of these variables on the quality of friendships, they have rarely examined how these individual-level and contextual variables, independently and in combination, are associated with the quality of adolescent friendships.

#### Individual-Level Variables

*Psychological well-being.* Research with adolescents has typically concluded that friendship quality is positively associated with self-esteem (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Blyth & Traeger, 1988; Caucé, 1986; Coates, 1985; Dubow & Ullman, 1989; Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987; Keefe & Berndt, 1996; Lackovic-Grgin & Dekovic, 1990;

Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994) and negatively associated with depression (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Aseltine, Gore, & Colten, 1994; Compas, Slavin, Wagner, & Vannatta, 1986) and psychosocial disturbance (Berndt & Hawkins, 1985; Buhrmester, 1990). In general, research has found that adolescents who express greater satisfaction with their peers or who have more intimate friendships experience greater psychological well-being (i.e., higher self-esteem and lower depressive symptoms).

The association between psychological well-being and friendship support, however, appears to vary as a function of gender and the type of friendship.<sup>2</sup> Armsden (1986) detected a stronger association between psychological well-being and friendship quality for girls than for boys, whereas Blyth and Traeger (1988) found it to be stronger for boys than for girls. In one of the few existing studies that examine the correlates of different types of peer relationships, Harter (1990a) found that classmates had a stronger influence on psychological well-being than close friends. She asserts that "acknowledgment from peers in the public domain seems more critical [for adolescents] than the personal regard of close friends, because close friends, by definition, provide support, and their positive feedback may not be perceived as necessarily self-enhancing" (Harter, 1990b, p. 368). Friendship researchers, however, have yet to examine the association between psychological well-being and friendship support among low-income, Latino, and Asian American adolescents and have only rarely investigated such associations among African American adolescents (see Cauce, 1986; Coates, 1985). Consequently, it is unclear whether this association exists among ethnically diverse, low-income adolescents and whether it varies in similar ways as reported by researchers of White, middle-class adolescents (Harter, 1990b).

### Contextual Variables

*Family influences.* Researchers investigating either attachment or social support processes have typically found that the quality of family relationships is also positively associated with the quality of peer relationships (Greenberg et al., 1983; Kerns, 1994; Kerns & Barth, 1995; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Prociano & Heller, 1983; Prociano & Smith, 1997; Youngblade, Park, & Belsky, 1993). According to attachment theorists, children internalize their parents' acceptance of and responsiveness toward them in the form of internal working models of the self in relationships (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). These internal working models, consequently, influence nonfamilial relationships. Thus, children's experiences in relationships with their parents are expected to influence the types of relationships they have

with their peers. For example, children whose parents provide security, warmth, and trust will be more likely than others to experience similar qualities in their relationships with their peers (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Greenberg et al., 1983; Kerns & Stevens, 1996; Ryan et al., 1994; Sroufe & Waters, 1977). Although attachment theory has traditionally focused on early relationships with parents, attachment theorists have also emphasized the enduring and stable nature of attachment styles and have found a significant positive association between current parent and peer relationships (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Cauce, Mason, Gonzales, Hiraga, & Liu, 1996; Gold & Yanof, 1985; Greenberg et al., 1983; Rice, 1990).

Similarly, research on perceived social support has also consistently detected a positive association between perceived family and friend support (Procidano, 1992; Procidano & Smith, 1997).<sup>3</sup> *Perceived support* has been defined as a "general perception that others are available to provide support and, by extension, a sense of acceptance: feelings of being loved, cared for, and accepted fully by others" (Bartholomew, Cobb, & Poole, 1997, p. 361). It has been hypothesized and empirically confirmed that, when a child's need for support are met at home, the child will likely perceive others outside of the home as supportive as well (Bartholomew et al., 1997; Procidano & Heller, 1983; Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990). Theory and research, however, has suggested that the association between parent and peer support may vary as a function of gender, culture, or race/ethnicity (Procidano & Smith, 1997). Different cultural or gender-typical values regarding family and friend relationships may lead to the associations between these two systems of relationships to vary by gender or race/ethnicity (Procidano & Smith, 1997). Yet, neither the social support nor the attachment literature has systematically examined the gender, cultural, and racial/ethnic differences that may exist in the association between parent/family and friend support (Procidano & Smith, 1997).

*School influences.* Scholars have also repeatedly emphasized the importance of examining perceptions of the school environment in studies of friendships and peer relationships (Epstein, 1989; Epstein & Karweit, 1983; Haynes & Emmons, 1994; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996; Minuchin & Shapiro, 1983; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Seidman, 1991). Few researchers, however, have empirically examined the association between perceptions of the school environment and the quality of adolescent friendships. Perceptions of school climate—the quality of interactions and feelings of trust and respect that exist within the school community—have been found to affect

students' self-esteem, level of anxiety and problem behaviors, academic self-concept (Grobel & Schwarzer, 1982; Haynes & Emmons, 1994; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997), school behavior (Haynes & Emmons, 1994; Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990; Reid, 1983; Rutter, 1983; Sommer, 1985), and selection of friends (Epstein, 1989). Perceptions of school climate have been singled out as having a significant effect on the social behaviors and interpersonal relationships of students (Doll, 1996; Epstein & Karweit, 1983; Haynes & Emmons, 1994; Minuchin & Shapiro, 1983; Rizzo, 1989). Epstein and Karweit (1983) state, "negative features in a school environment—ridicule, discrimination, low expectations, stereotypes, repressions, punishment, isolation—may increase the dissociative quality of the setting and affect the thought processes and social behaviors of the students" (p. 60). Schools where such negative features are likely to be found are those that exist in low-income neighborhoods, such as those of the adolescents in our study, that do not have the economic or political resources to create a supportive learning environment for the students. Consequently, the climate in those particular schools may have particularly strong effects on the friendships of the students who attend them.

### THE STUDY

Responding to the limitations and findings from the friendship research, the goals of our study were (a) to assess gender and racial/ethnic differences in the characteristics and quality of close and general friendships among African American, Latino, and Asian American adolescents from low-income families; (b) to examine the independent and combined association of individual-level (i.e., psychological well-being) and contextual (i.e., family relationships and school climate) variables on close and general friendship support; and (c) to examine the moderating effect of gender and race/ethnicity on the associations between individual-level and contextual variables and close and general friendship support. We chose to examine such moderating effects because research consistently indicates that the effects of individual-level and contextual variables on adolescent friendships may vary by gender and race/ethnicity (Blyth & Traeger, 1988; Cooper et al., 1993; Dubois & Hirsch, 1990; Jones et al., 1994; Procidano & Smith, 1997; Way, 1998). In addition, we chose to examine close and general friendships separately in response to research that indicates the importance of distinguishing between the types of friendships (Harter, 1990; Savin-Williams & Berndt,

1990; Shulman, 1993), particularly between close and general friendships (Duff, 1996; Harter, 1990; Way, 1998). Most researchers choose to focus on only one type of friendship (close or general), implicitly assuming that the correlates of one type of friendship will be similar to the correlates of all other types of friendship. Yet, as Harter (1990) has shown, that may be an inaccurate assumption.

Due to the lack of research on the friendships of racial/ethnic minority adolescents from low-income families, this project sought to generate rather than to test hypotheses. Such exploratory research is a critical first step for understanding populations who have rarely been included in the research (Jessor, 1993). From such exploratory research, hypotheses will be generated that can be tested in future studies of friendships among racial/ethnic minority and low-income adolescents.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants were 160 ninth-grade students (48% male, mean age = 14.4 years) enrolled in mainstream English courses in an urban public high school in New York City. Approximately half (53.7%) of the students resided in close proximity to the school. Participants were racially/ethnically diverse (48.7% Latino [mostly Puerto Rican and Dominican], 31.3% African American, and 20.0% Asian American [mostly Chinese American]). They tended to come from single-parent families (70%) and have mothers (72.5%) and fathers (66.7%) who were not educated beyond high school. Ninety percent of the student body at this school was eligible for federal assistance through the free lunch program.

### Procedure

Students were recruited in their ninth grade, mainstream English classes and asked to return a signed parental consent form. The parental consent forms were translated into Spanish and Chinese, the two languages most commonly spoken by the non-English-speaking parents. Questionnaires were distributed during one period of English class during the school day. Students were paid \$5.00 to complete the questionnaires. The authors and a racially/ethnically diverse team of research assistants administered the questionnaires.

## Measures

*Background variables.* A demographic questionnaire was administered to assess the participants' birth dates, gender, race/ethnicity, current living situations (e.g., people with whom they live and for how long), and parents' (or primary caretakers) occupation and level of education.

*Family relationships.* The Perceived Social Support Scale for Family (PSS-FA) (Procidano & Heller, 1983) was administered to assess the level of support that the adolescent receives from members of his or her family. This scale asks participants to respond "yes," "no," or "don't know" to 20 statements referring to experiences they may have had with their family members (e.g., "My family members enjoy hearing what I think about things," "My family members give me the emotional support I need"). When administered to urban, racial/ethnic minority adolescents, this measure has shown strong evidence of reliability and validity (Tardy, 1985; Way & Leadbeater, in press). In this study, this measure demonstrated good internal consistency for the total sample ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and for each racial/ethnic group ( $\alpha > .75$ ).

*Perceptions of school climate.* The 71-item School Climate Scale (Haynes, Emmons, & Comer, 1993) has a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The measure yields a total general school climate score composed of questions relating to aspects of one's school, such as order and discipline, student-teacher relations, student-student relations, parent involvement, fairness, and school building. Items include "My school is a safe place"; "At my school, the teachers often make the students feel good about themselves"; and "Students get along with each other at my school." Versions of this measure have been used with racial/ethnic minority and White adolescents and have shown strong evidence of reliability and validity (Haynes et al., 1993; Kuperminc et al., 1997). In this study, this measure yielded good internal reliability for the total sample ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and for each racial/ethnic group ( $\alpha > .87$ ).

*Psychological well-being.* To examine psychological well-being, we chose to combine the scores on self-esteem and depressive symptoms into a composite score. Our decision was based on the research literature on racially/ethnically diverse populations that has repeatedly found depressive symptoms and self-esteem to be strongly negatively correlated (see Aguilar, Eduardo, & Berganza, 1996; S. Brown & Orthner, 1990; Chan, 1995; Duong-tran, 1996). We also found a strong negative correlation between depressive



symptoms and self-esteem in our sample ( $r = -.57, p < .001$ ).<sup>4</sup> Many researchers have argued that, in fact, self-esteem is a component of depressive symptoms (Overholser, Brinkman, Lehnert, & Ricciardi, 1995). For theoretical reasons and in order to avoid multicollinearity, we chose to combine our self-esteem and depressive measures into one score of psychological well-being. Our assessment of psychological well-being was a composite calculated by averaging the z scores of general self-esteem measure and a depressive symptom subscale of a socioemotional adjustment measure (reversed scored). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965), administered to assess general self-esteem, was developed for use with high school students and has been used with racially/ethnically diverse, urban high school students (Buhrmester, 1990; Wheelock & Erickson, 1996). The RSE consists of statements such as "I certainly feel useless at times," to which participants indicate their agreement or disagreement on a 4-point Likert scale. The reliability and validity of the RSE has been well-established (Buhrmester, 1990; Rosenberg, 1965). In this study, this measure yielded good internal reliability for the total sample ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and within each racial/ethnic group ( $\alpha > .75$ ). The 10-item depressive symptoms subscale was from Buhrmester's (1990) measure of socioemotional adjustment. This measure has been used in previous research examining the association between psychological adjustment and the quality of adolescent friendships (see Buhrmester, 1990). Items were drawn from the Children's Depression Inventory (Kovacs, 1980). Students responded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*never or not at all*) to 5 (*very often or very much*), to questions such as "How often do you feel unhappy or down?" This scale has been shown to have adequate reliability (Cronbach alphas range from .72 to .82) and to be significantly correlated with other measures of adjustment (Buhrmester, 1989). In this study, this measure of depression yielded good internal reliability for the total sample ( $\alpha = .73$ ) and within each racial/ethnic group ( $\alpha > .65$ ).

*Characteristics of friendships.* Adolescents also responded to two sets of questions about the gender and racial/ethnic composition of their friendship networks, for example, "How many of your friends are African American (or Latino or Asian American or European American)?" and "How many of your friends are girls (or boys)?" Responses to these questions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (*none of my friends*), 2 (*a few of my friends*), 3 (*about half of my friends*), 4 (*most of my friends*), and 5 (*all of my friends*). The likelihood of having same-race/ethnic friends was based on the students' report of the proportion of friends from their own racial/ethnic group. Students were

also asked about the age of their closest friends, the length of time that they have been friends with their closest friends, and whether their closest friends went to the same school.

*Close friendship support.* The Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI) (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) was used to assess students' perceptions of support from a closest same-sex friend. The 30-item NRI assesses positive and negative dimensions of close friendships (e.g., affection, reliable alliance, intimacy, companionship, satisfaction, conflict, antagonism). Participants rate the quality of their relationships with their closest friend (e.g., "How often do you share secrets and private feelings with this person") using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never or hardly ever*) to 5 (*very often or extremely much*). This measure has been used with a racially/ethnically diverse, urban adolescent population and has yielded good internal reliability (Buhrmester, 1990; Clark-Lempers, Lempers, & Ho, 1991; Gavin & Furman, 1996). In this study, this measure yielded good internal reliability for the positive and negative dimensions of the scale for the total sample ( $\alpha = .76$ ) and within each racial/ethnic group ( $\alpha > .74$ ). For the purposes of this analysis, a sum score was calculated from the positive dimensions on the scale for a measure of support.

*General friendship support.* The Perceived Social Support Scale for Friends (PSS-FR) (Procidano & Heller, 1983) assessed perceived support from friends in general. The participants responded "yes," "no," or "don't know" to 20 statements referring to experiences they have had with their friends (e.g., "My friends enjoy hearing what I think about things," "My friends give me the emotional support I need"). When used with racial/ethnic minority adolescents, this measure has shown evidence of good reliability and validity (Tardy, 1985; Way & Leadbeater, in press). In this study, this measure yielded good internal reliability for the total sample ( $\alpha = .80$ ) and within each racial/ethnic group ( $\alpha > .74$ ).

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of Close and General Friendships

Seventy-three percent of the students (67.3% of boys, 78.1% of girls) had predominantly same-race/ethnic friendship networks. This general trend reflected the patterns found within each of the racial/ethnic groups: 73% of

Latino, 63.9% of African American, and 84.6% of Asian American students had predominantly same-race/ethnic friends. To determine whether there were any gender or racial/ethnic differences in the likelihood of having same-race friends, we computed a 2 (gender)  $\times$  3 (ethnicity) analysis of variance (ANOVA). Results indicate a main effect for race/ethnicity,  $F(2, 119) = 3.10, p < .05$ . Asian American students were significantly more likely to have same-race/ethnic friends than both African American students and Latino students. In addition, there was a trend in which girls were more likely to have predominantly same-race/ethnic friends than boys,  $F(1, 119) = 3.37, p < .10$ . There were no interaction effects.

The average age of students' close friends was 15 years ( $M = 14.98$  years,  $SD = 1.93$  years). The average length of time that the students had maintained these close friendships was 6 years ( $M = 6.05$  years,  $SD = 4.00$  years). Only one third of the students' closest friends attended the same school (African American, 24.5%; Latino, 39.5%; and Asian American, 37.5%). There were no gender or racial/ethnic differences in the average age, the length of friendship, or the likelihood that close friends attended the same school.

### Quality of Close and General Friendships

To investigate gender and racial/ethnic differences in close and general friendship support, we computed two separate 2 (gender)  $\times$  3 (ethnicity) ANOVAs for each of the friendship criterion variables. The results from the ANOVA for close friendship support did not indicate a main effect for race/ethnicity or interaction effects. However, there was a main effect for gender,  $F(1, 154) = 4.52, p < .05$ : Girls reported higher levels of close friendship support than boys, according to post-hoc Bonferroni tests.

The ANOVA for general friendship support indicates that the Gender  $\times$  Race/Ethnicity interaction was significant for general friendship support,  $F(2, 154) = 3.89, p < .05$  (see Figure 1). Follow-up one-way (race/ethnicity) ANOVAs within the gender subsamples indicate that racial/ethnic differences in general friendship support existed only among girls,  $F(2, 82) = 8.51, p < .001$ . Post-hoc Bonferroni tests reveal that African American and Latino girls reported more general friendship support than Asian American girls. Follow-up one-way (gender) ANOVAs within the race/ethnicity subsamples indicate that gender differences in general friendship support existed only among Latino students: The girls reported receiving more general friendship support than the boys,  $F(1, 77) = 7.48, p < .01$ .

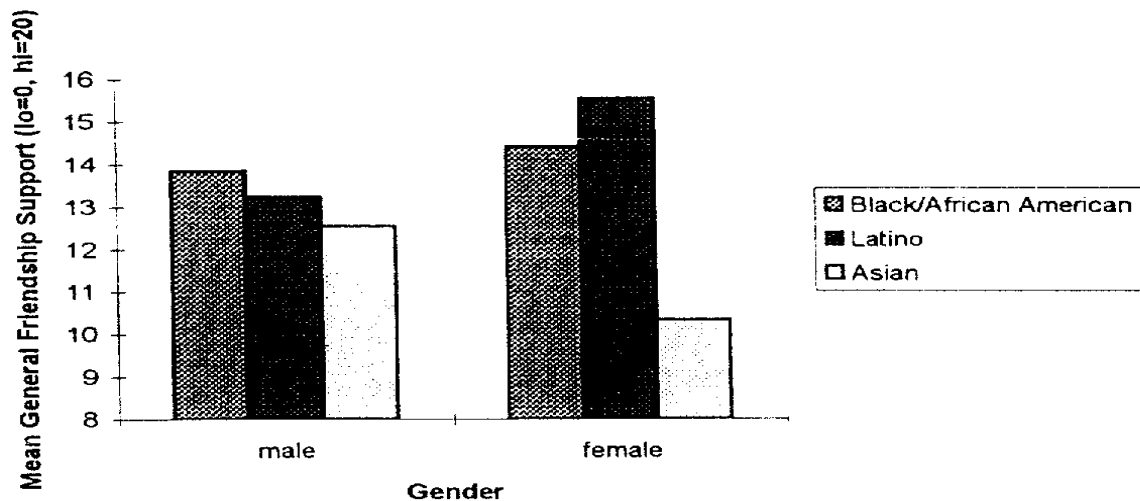


Figure 1. Mean general friendship support by gender and race/ethnicity.

### Correlates of Close and General Friendships

To assess the associations among close and general friendships, and individual-level (psychosocial well-being) and contextual variables (family support and school climate), correlational and hierarchical regression analyses were conducted. As seen from the intercorrelations (see Table 1), results indicate that the two friendship criterion variables were moderately correlated. General friendship support was also significantly and positively correlated with psychological well-being. Both close and general friendship support were associated with family support. School climate was positively associated with close friendship support. In addition, girls reported significantly more close friendship support than boys, and Asian Americans reported lower levels of both close and general friendship support than African Americans and Latinos. The bivariate relations of individual-level and contextual variables suggest that psychological well-being was significantly and positively correlated with both school climate and family support. Furthermore, boys reported significantly higher psychological well-being scores than girls. Family support and school climate were significantly and positively correlated. African Americans reported significantly greater psychological well-being and family support than Latinos and Asian Americans. In turn, Latinos reported higher psychological well-being scores than Asian Americans.

TABLE 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations

	M	SD	School Climate	Family Support	General Friendship Support	Close Friendship Support	Gender	Black	Latino	Asian
Well-being	32.10	5.25	.20*	.36***	.24**	.03	-.15*	.39***	-.17*	-.23**
School climate	2.97	0.47	—	.22**	.04	.16*	-.04	.00	-.01	.01
Family support	13.33	4.84	—	—	.42***	.21**	-.07	.23**	-.13 <sup>†</sup>	-.11
General friendship support	13.81	4.01	—	—	—	.44***	.15 <sup>†</sup>	.07	.15 <sup>†</sup>	-.26**
Close friendship support	3.87	0.73	—	—	—	—	.21**	.13	.03	-.19*

NOTE: Well-being ranges from 0 (*low*) to 50 (*high*). School climate ranges from 32 (*poor*) to 160 (*very good*). Family support ranges from 0 (*low*) to 20 (*high*). General friendship support ranges from 0 (*low*) to 20 (*high*). Close friendship support ranges from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*very good*). Gender is coded as 1 (male) or 2 (female). Being Black is coded as 0 (non-Black) or 1 (Black). Being Latino is coded as 0 (non-Latino) or 1 (Latino). Being Asian is coded as 0 (non-Asian) or 1 (Asian).

\* $p < .05$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed. <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , one-tailed.

*General friendship support.* We next examined the relative contributions of individual-level and contextual variables in explaining the variance in the friendship criterion variables. Hierarchical multiple regression equations were computed in which general friendship support was regressed on psychological well-being, family support, and school climate. In this regression model, gender and race/ethnicity were entered as the first step, psychological well-being was entered as the second step, and family support and school climate were entered as the third step.<sup>5</sup> The sequence of steps in this model is based on an ecological understanding of human development in which the proximal influences on development are entered before the more distal influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Based on previous adolescent friendship research (see Blyth & Traeger, 1988; Cooper et al., 1993; Dubois & Hirsch, 1990; Jones et al., 1994; Way, 1998), we sought to determine whether individual-level and contextual variables were moderated by gender and racial/ethnic group membership in the prediction of general friendship support. Consequently, we also examined two sets of interaction terms in our hierarchical regression model (Set 1: Gender  $\times$  Psychological Well-Being and Race/Ethnicity  $\times$  Psychological Well-Being; Set 2: Gender  $\times$  Family Support and Race/Ethnicity  $\times$  Family Support). Interaction effects were significant for Set 2 but not for Set 1; consequently, the interaction terms in Set 1 were dropped from the model. In our final model, we also included the interaction of Gender  $\times$  Race/Ethnicity to control for the effects of these interactions. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

Forty percent of the variance in general friendship support was accounted for by demographic, individual-level and contextual variables, and interactions entered into the final regression model (see Table 2). The final model shown in Table 2 reveals significant main effects for gender, race/ethnicity, psychological well-being, family support, and several significant interactions. Both the individual-level and the contextual variables significantly added to the explained variance in general friendship support. As indicated in the ANOVAs reported earlier, there were significant interactions between gender and racial/ethnic status, indicating that there were stronger racial/ethnic differences in general friendship support among the girls than among the boys (Latina and African American girls reported higher levels of general friendship support than Asian American girls). The interaction effects also indicated that the association between family support and general friendship support is moderated by gender such that the relationship between general friendship support and family support is stronger for males than for females (see Figure 2). Finally, in a trend that approached significance, the interaction term for Latino  $\times$  Family Support suggested that the relationship between

**TABLE 2: Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Demographic Characteristics, Individual-Level and Contextual-Level Variables, and Interactions on General Friendship Support**

	$\hat{B}$	SE <sub>B</sub>	Final $\beta$	Change in R <sup>2</sup>
Step 1: Demographics				0.08**
Gender	1.42	0.54	0.18**	
Latino dummy variable <sup>a</sup>	2.28	0.73	0.28**	
Black dummy variable <sup>a</sup>	0.55	0.85	0.06	
Step 2: Individual-level variable				0.06**
Well-being	0.11	0.05	0.15*	
Step 3: Contextual-level variables				0.14***
School climate	-0.29	0.57	-0.03	
Family support	0.43	0.06	0.51***	
Step 4: Interactions				0.12***
Gender $\times$ Latino	4.80	1.40	0.30***	
Gender $\times$ Black	3.14	1.55	0.18*	
Gender $\times$ Family Support	-0.32	0.12	-0.19**	
Latino $\times$ Family Support	-0.28	0.17	-0.17 <sup>†</sup>	
Black $\times$ Family Support	0.00	0.19	0.00	
Total R <sup>2</sup> = 0.40, F(11, 148) = 8.91***				

NOTE: N = 160.

a. The reference group for the racial/ethnic group dummy variables is Asians.

\* $p < .05$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed. <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , one-tailed.

general friendship support and family support for Asian American students was stronger than for Latino students. School climate was not associated with general friendship support.

*Close friendship support.* Hierarchical multiple regression equations were also computed in which close friendship support was regressed on psychological well-being, family relationships, and school climate. Using a rationale similar to the regression equation for general friendship support, gender and race/ethnicity were entered as a first step, psychological well-being was entered in the second step, and family relationships and school climate were entered in the third step. We also examined the same two interaction sets as we did for general friendship support (i.e., Set 1: Gender  $\times$  Well-Being and Race/Ethnicity  $\times$  Well-Being; Set 2: Gender  $\times$  Family Support and Race/Ethnicity  $\times$  Family Support) in order to determine whether individual-level

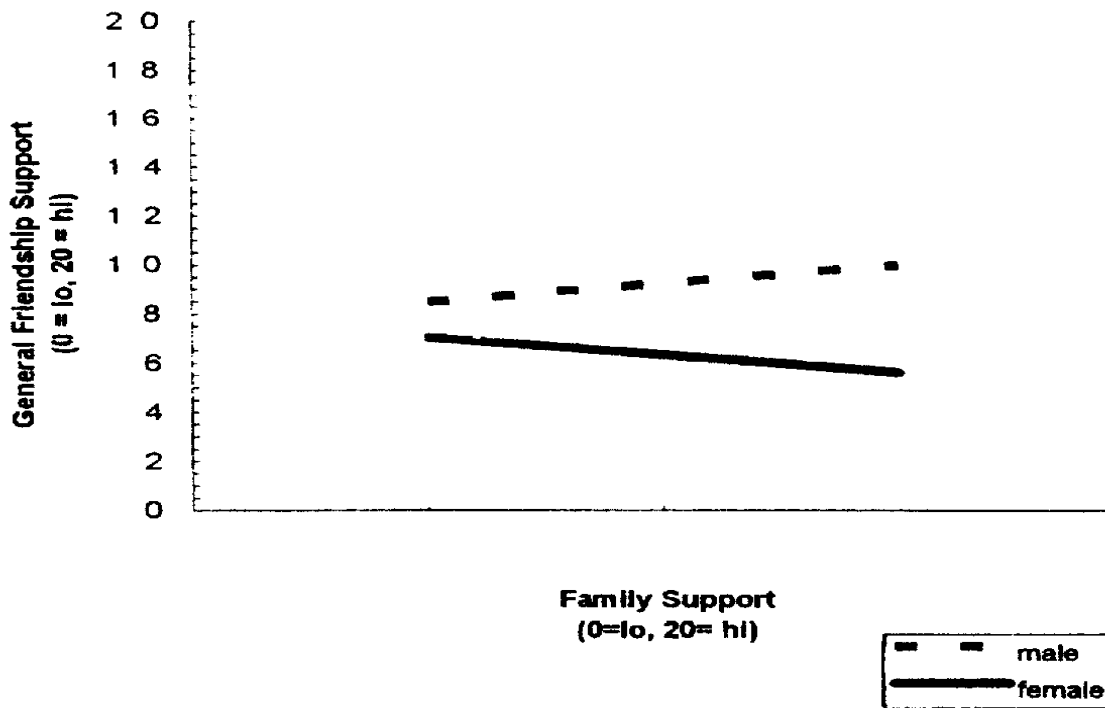


Figure 2. General friendship support interaction, Gender  $\times$  Family Support.

and contextual variables were moderated by gender and racial/ethnic group membership in the prediction of close friendship support. However, the interaction effects were not significant for either of the sets; therefore, all interaction terms were dropped from the model. The Gender  $\times$  Race/Ethnicity interaction terms were also not significant, so they were dropped from the model as well. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 3.

Fourteen percent of the variance in close friendship support was accounted for in the hierarchical regression model presented in Table 3. The results in Table 3 also reveal significant main effects of gender, race/ethnicity, and family support. Girls reported higher levels of close friendship support than boys, and African Americans reported higher levels of close friendship support than Asian Americans. In a marginally significant trend, Latinos also reported higher levels of close friendship support than did Asian Americans. Higher levels of family support were associated with higher levels of close friendship support, controlling for all other variables in the model. In a trend that approached significance, higher student ratings of school climate were associated with higher levels of close friendship support, above and beyond the influences of all other variables.



**TABLE 3: Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Demographic Characteristics and Individual-Level and Contextual-Level Variables on Support From Close Friends**

	$\hat{B}$	SE <sub>B</sub>	Final $\beta$	Change in R <sup>2</sup>
Step 1: Demographics				0.07**
Gender	0.27	0.11	0.18*	
Latino dummy variable <sup>a</sup>	0.28	0.15	0.19 <sup>†</sup>	
Black dummy variable <sup>a</sup>	0.34	0.17	0.21*	
Step 2: Individual-level variable				0.00
Well-being	-0.01	0.01	-0.09	
Step 3: Contextual-level variables				0.06**
School climate	0.22	0.12	0.14 <sup>†</sup>	
Family support	0.03	0.01	0.20*	
Total R <sup>2</sup> = 0.14, F(6, 153) = 3.97**				

NOTE: N = 160.

a. The reference group for the racial/ethnic group dummy variables is Asians.

\* $p < .05$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed. <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , one-tailed.

## DISCUSSION

Our study of friendship patterns among ethnic minority adolescents from low-income families found significant gender and ethnic/racial differences as well as similarities. Similar to previous research, racial/ethnic differences were detected in the characteristics of friendships. However, the differences were between racial/ethnic minority groups rather than between White and racial/ethnic minority groups. Although Asian American students were more likely to have same-race/ethnic friendships than Latino or African American adolescents, the majority of the students in all three racial/ethnic groups reported having predominantly same-race/ethnic friends. A reason for this pattern may be due to the racial/ethnic composition of the school. The students in our study attend a school that consists exclusively of racial/ethnic minority students, where no one racial/ethnic group is in the clear majority. Consequently, there may be less pressure and interest among students to befriend students from other racial/ethnic groups. African American students, for example, may be more likely to befriend White students if they are attending schools with predominantly White students (see Dubois & Hirsch, 1990) than if they are attending schools with a diverse student body. Future research should investigate why students typically choose same racial/ethnic friends even when they attend a racially/ethnically diverse school.

In addition, our data indicate that African American students are not the only racial/ethnic minorities who are likely to have non-school-based friendships.<sup>6</sup> Only a third of the Latino, Asian American, or African American participants' closest friends attended the same school as they did. Clearly, this finding may be due to the fact that the students in our study were in the ninth grade and had, consequently, attended high school for only 3 months (data were collected in November). School transitions are difficult for adolescents, and they may need at least one semester to form close friendships within that school (Eccles et al., 1993). Dubois and Hirsch's (1990) research, however, found that Black junior high school students were significantly more likely than White students to report having a network of neighborhood friends. In addition, research has indicated that neighborhood-based friendships are particularly likely to proliferate in low-income neighborhoods where more social interaction occurs than in suburban, middle-class neighborhoods (Berg & Medrich, 1980). All of the students in the study came from low-income neighborhoods, where the young people in these neighborhoods attend schools throughout the city rather than within their neighborhoods. The physical proximity of friendships among racial/ethnic minority adolescents from low-income neighborhoods who have been in school together for at least 1 year should be examined in future studies. If, in fact, such adolescents are likely to have close friends outside of school, this finding has immediate implications—for school-based friendship research.

Racial/ethnic and gender differences were detected in the quality of adolescent friendships. Latino and African American females reported significantly higher levels of general friendship support than Asian American females. Reasons for this racial/ethnic difference may lie with the parental rules and regulations regarding peer interactions. Previous research with Asian Americans has indicated that parents of Asian American adolescents often impose strict regulations regarding peer interactions (Ping & Berryman, 1996). Although such research has not indicated gender differences in the parental monitoring of peers, it is likely that girls are monitored more than boys because they are expected to help more at home (Ping & Berryman, 1996). The strict regulation of where, when, and how much time is spent with peers may make it particularly difficult for Asian American females to find and maintain supportive friendships.

Our study also found that Latinos were the only racial/ethnic group to report gender differences in general friendship support: The girls reported significantly more general friendship support than the boys. However, when we examined close friendship support, gender differences were detected among Latino, African American, and Asian American adolescents: The girls in all three racial/ethnic groups reported higher levels of close friend-

ship support than did the boys. This latter finding supports decades of research on adolescent friendships (see Belle, 1989; Berndt, 1982; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Camarena, Sarigiani, & Petersen, 1990; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Reisman, 1990; Way, 1996). Gender differences in the quality of friendships appear to be a function of race/ethnicity and the type of friendship (close vs. general friendship). Such differences (and similarities) may lie with the varying cultural expectations among boys and girls regarding close and general same-sex friendships. Expectations regarding friendships will likely influence the actual quality of these relationships. Research is clearly needed to examine why gender differences (or lack of) exist in the quality of friendships among adolescents.

Our regression analyses indicated that the individual-level and contextual variables, combined and independently, contributed a large portion of the variance in general friendship support. As expected, psychological well-being was positively associated with general friendship support. Strikingly, we detected no gender differences and no ethnic/racial differences in this association. It appears that the positive association between psychological well-being and general friendship support found so often among White, middle-class adolescents is also true of many ethnic minority, low-income adolescents. However, the direction of effect between these variables is unclear. Researchers have suggested that, although psychological well-being (i.e., self-esteem and/or depressive symptoms) may predict friendship quality, friendship quality may also predict psychological well-being (Buhrmester & Yin, 1997). Although concurrent research is an important first step in determining the variables that are associated with friendship support, longitudinal research is necessary to determine the direction of the effect.

Our regression analysis also indicated a significant positive association between family and general friend support, but that association was stronger for males than for females. This interaction effect may be explained by socialization forces that girls and boys experience in American society. Girls, who are encouraged by the larger culture to have intimate same-sex friendships, may have such friendships even when their relationships at home are not supportive (see Duff, 1996; Way, 1998). Some girls may, in fact, find solace in such friendships, especially when their relationships at home are not supportive (Gold & Yanof, 1985; Way, 1998). In contrast, boys, who are less encouraged by the larger culture to have intimate same-sex friendships than girls (Raymond, 1994), may only have such friendships if they are able to discover the benefits of having such relationships at home. Consequently, the association between the quality of family and friend relationships may be stronger for boys than for girls.

Previous qualitative research with racially/ethnically diverse, low-income adolescents suggests that girls may be more flexible in their relationships than boys (Way, 1996, 1998). Way's research found that girls were more willing than boys to seek and maintain close, same-sex friendships despite experiences of betrayal by their peers. The willingness of boys, on the other hand, to have close, same-sex friendships depended to a large extent on whether they had been betrayed by other boys: Boys who had been betrayed by male peers often spoke of not being able to have close, male friends "any longer" (Way, 1996, 1998). The present study suggested a similar gender difference in flexibility regarding parent and peer relationships: Boys reported having supportive friendships when their relationships at home were supportive, whereas girls reported having supportive friendships even when they did not have such relationships at home. The root of this flexibility may lie with the different messages that girls and boys receive about the importance of relationships with others (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

Unexpectedly, the combined and independent influence of the individual-level and contextual variables on close friendship support was only minimal. Gender, race/ethnicity, and family support independently contributed to the explained variance in close friendship support, although school climate marginally contributed to the variance in a trend effect. No interaction effects were detected. The lack of association between psychological well-being and close friendship support may be due to the fact that, by definition, close friends are those who do "threaten one's self-esteem" (Blyth & Traeger, 1988; Harter, 1990b). As Harter (1990b) notes, adolescents assume that one's best friend will support them, so "their opinions don't really count. It's what the other kids think and want that counts" (p. 368). Consequently, Harter states, "adolescents must turn to somewhat more objective sources of support [than best friends] in order to validate the self" (p. 368). Harter's theory not only posits a plausible explanation of why the association between psychological well-being and close friendship support was not significant but also why the association between psychological well-being and general friendship support was significant.

The positive association between family support and close (and general) friendship support provides empirical support for the theories put forth by attachment and social support researchers who claim that the support experienced at home will be highly associated with the support experienced outside of the home. Family and friend support appears to be associated with each other for boys, girls, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. Similar to our finding regarding psychological well-being and general friendship support, however, the direction of effect between family and

friend support is unclear. Family support may predict friendship support, but friendship support may also predict family support (Gold & Yanof, 1985). Longitudinal research should examine the effects of family and friendship support on each other and determine if and when these prospective effects vary by gender, ethnicity/race, or culture.

Finally, there was a trend detected in the association between school climate and close friendship support, suggesting that those with positive perceptions of their school climate also have positive perceptions of close friendship support. This marginally significant finding may reflect the longevity of close friendships in the sample (the average length of a close friendship was 6 years). Having long-term close friendships—whether they are school based or neighborhood based—may lead students to have rose-colored glasses regarding the environments of which they are a part, including their school environment. Friends in general, which may include more recent and less intimate friends, may not have such an effect on the students' perspectives (which may explain the lack of association between school climate and general friendship support).

One of the most remarkable findings from our analysis of general and close friendship support was that the individual-level and contextual variables, combined and independently, explained much more of the variance in general friendship support than in close friendship support. In addition, the correlates and moderators of each type of friendship support differed from each other. Psychological well-being and school climate were differentially associated with general or close friendship; family support was associated with both close and general friendship support, yet family support was moderated by gender only in the prediction of general friendship support. Although the research to date has typically examined only one type of friendship, our findings underscore the importance of examining the correlates and characteristics of different types of friendships.

Our results suggest not only important differences in the patterns of friendship support but also striking similarities. Neither the association between family and general or close friendship support nor the association (or lack thereof) between psychological well-being and general or close friendship support differed significantly by race/ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> Although scholars have repeatedly suggested that the associations between family and friend support, for example, may differ as a function of race/ethnicity or culture (Cooper et al., 1993; Procidano & Smith, 1997), our findings suggest remarkable similarities across race/ethnicity. However, it is unclear if the processes that underlie the association between family and friend support are similar across cultures or racial/ethnic groups. Although the outcome is similar, qualitative

exploratory research is needed to examine whether the underlying processes vary according to cultural traditions, expectations, and values.

Although we have known for over two decades that friendships are powerful predictors of future socioemotional health (Asher & Hymel, 1986; Goodyer, Wright, & Altham, 1989; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981) and that they greatly enhance adolescents' interpersonal skills, understanding, and psychological well-being (Buhrmester & Yin, 1997; Hartup, 1996; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990), we are just beginning to understand the friendships among racial/ethnic minority or low-income adolescents. This study provides evidence for important differences and commonalities in friendship patterns among African American, Latino, and Asian American adolescents from low-income families. It also suggests that the correlates of friendships vary by gender and the type of friendship. Research is needed to assess the replicability of these findings so that our understanding of friendships may be broadened to include adolescents from a wide range of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds rather than from only a select few.

## NOTES

1. The racial and ethnic terms we are using to describe previous research are consistent with the terms used by the researchers in the study.

2. For the purposes of this article, *psychological well-being* is defined as a combination of self-esteem and depressive symptoms (see S. Brown & Orthner, 1990; Buhrmester & Yin, 1997).

3. Recent research indicates that those who are securely attached are also those who perceive high levels of social support (Bartholomew, Cobb, & Poole, 1997). Blain et al. (1993) found that a positive model of self and others was strongly associated with high levels of perceived support from friends and family. Such research concludes that attachment status and perceived social support are highly interrelated.

4. The self-esteem and depressive symptoms measures were highly negatively correlated within each racial/ethnic group as well (African Americans,  $r = -.52, p < .01$ ; Latinos,  $r = -.62, p < .001$ ; Asian American,  $r = -.53, p < .05$ ).

5. We created a dummy variable with our race/ethnicity variables in which Asian Americans were the contrast group. We selected Asian Americans as our contrast group because our preliminary findings regarding friendship supported indicated that the experiences of the Asian American students were different from the experiences of the Latino or African American groups. The Latino and African American adolescents appeared more similar to each other than the Asian American adolescents.

6. Clark and Ayers (1991) found that African American adolescents were more likely than White adolescents to have non-school-based friendships.

7. One of the interaction terms, however, was marginally significant. The interaction of Latino  $\times$  Family suggested that the association between family and friend support is stronger for Latinos than it is for Asian Americans.

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