

Is Peer Support a Venue for African-American Adolescents' Academic Success?

Erika D. Taylor

University of Michigan

Poster presented at the Annual Convention of the
American Psychological Association

San Francisco, California

August 14-18, 1998

This research was supported by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development Among Youth in High-Risk Settings, awarded to Jacquelynne S. Eccles. We would like to thank the following people for their assistance: Jacquelynne Eccles (P.I.), Arnold Sameroff (P.I.), Elaine Belansky, Nick Butler, Diane Early, Kari Fraser, Ariel Kalil, Linda Kuhn, Sara Lord, Karen McCarthy, Sherri Steele, Cindy Winston, Leslie Morrison Gutman, Carol Wong, Oksana Malanchuk, Alice Michael, Robert Roeser, Todd Bartko, Dairia Ray, Kate Rosenblum and Stephen Peck.

Abstract

The present study examines the relation between peer support, school value and academic achievement in a normative sample of African-American adolescents (N=341). We used structural equation modeling techniques to, first, examine this relation for the entire group of adolescents. Second, we investigated gender differences in this relation. Findings for the entire group indicated that peer support is indirectly related to academic achievement (grade point average) through the adolescents' perception of the importance of academic skills. However, after examining gender differences in this relation, we found an indirect relation between peer support and academic achievement to exist for the males only, partially supporting our second hypothesis.

Methods

Participants

- ◆ The participants in this study are part of the Maryland Adolescent Growth in Context Study (MAGICS), an ongoing, longitudinal investigation of adolescents' development and the contexts (family, schools, peers) that may have an impact upon that development. The principal investigators are Jacquelynne Eccles and Arnold Sameroff at the University of Michigan.
- ◆ The 1067 adolescents and their families were asked to complete face-to-face interviews and self administered questionnaires beginning with their seventh grade year.
- ◆ Importantly, the African-American and European-American adolescents' families who are participating in this study represent a wide range of socioeconomic status.
- ◆ The data used in this study are taken mostly from the second wave of data collection (1993), and comprise an entirely African-American subsample (n=341; 178 male, 163 female).

Measures

Peer Support

$\alpha = .68$

4-item scale that captures adolescent perceptions of the frequency with which they are able to depend on friends or other students for help with problems in school, e.g., When you have a social or personal problem at school, how often can you depend on your friends to help you out (1=almost never; 5=almost always).

School Utility Value

$\alpha = .69$

4-items; Assesses how important the adolescent believes school to be for his or her future e.g., I have to do well in school if I want to be a success in life (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree).

Importance of Academic Skills

$\alpha = .81$

2-item scale that captures how important specific academic skills are to the adolescent, e.g. Compared to other students, how important is math to you? (1=much less important to me than other kids; 7=much more important to me than other kids).

Grade point average (GPA).

School record data. (5=A; 1=F).

Results

Hypothesis #1 (see Figure 1)

- ◆ Hierarchical regression analyses indicate that peer support not related to either measure of school value (i.e., school utility value and perception of the importance of academics).
- ◆ Therefore, our first hypothesis is not supported.

Hypothesis #2 (see Figures 2 and 3)

- ◆ Examination of the entire group of African-American adolescents yielded no relation between peer support and school value.
- ◆ However, after examining males and females separately, we found that there is an indirect relation between support and academic achievement via the perception of the importance of academic skills for males.
- ◆ Therefore, our second hypothesis was partially supported.

Note: Only statistically significant paths are shown in models. All values are Beta coefficients.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Discussion

- ◆ Examination of the entire group of African-American adolescents yielded no relation between peer support and school value.
- ◆ However, after examining males and females separately, we found that there is an indirect relation between support and academic achievement via the perception of the importance of academic skills for males.
- ◆ These results are consistent with previous research which has found support to be positively related to outcomes for males.
- ◆ However, these findings are somewhat inconsistent with previous research that has found peer support to be negatively related to academic outcomes.
- ◆ Perhaps the inconsistencies exist as a result of variations in the measurement of support, as well as differential conceptualizations of academic outcomes.
- ◆ Therefore, future research should consider both the positive aspects of peer interaction for African-American adolescents.
- ◆ Furthermore, future research should investigate the relation between specific types of support and specific outcomes.

References

Bahr, S., Marcos, A. Maughan, S. (1995). Family, education and peer influences on the alcohol use of female and male adolescents. Journal for the Study of Alcohol, 56, 457-469.

Berndt, T. (1979). Developmental changes in conformity to peers and parents. Developmental Psychology, 15, 608-616.

Berndt, T. & Keefe, K. (1995). Friends' influence on adolescents' adjustment to school. Child Development, 66, 1312-1329.

Berndt, T., Laychak, A. & Park, K. (1990). Friends' influence of adolescents' academic achievement motivation: an experimental study. Journal of Educational Psychology, 82, 664-670.

Billy, J. & Udry, J. (1985). The influence of male and female best friends on adolescent sexual behavior. Adolescence, 20, 21-31.

Brown, B. (1982). The extent and effects of peer pressure among high school students: a retrospective analysis. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 11, 121-133.

Cauce, A. M., Felner, R.D. & Primavera, J. (1982). Social support in high-risk adolescents: Structural components and adaptive impact. American Journal of Community Psychology, 10, 417-428.

Coates, D. (1987). Gender differences in the structure and support characteristics of Black adolescents' social support networks. Sex Roles, 17, 667-687.

Cotterell, J. L. (1992). The relation of attachments and supports to adolescent well-being and school adjustment. Journal of Adolescent Research, 7, 28-42.

Diclemente, R. (1991). Predictors of HIV preventive sexual behavior in a high-risk adolescent population: the influence of perceived peer norms and sexual communication on incarcerated adolescents' consistent use of condoms. Journal of Adolescent Health, 12, 385-390.

Fordham, S. & Ogbu, J.U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of "acting White". Urban Review, 18, 176-206.

Graham, S. (1994). Motivation in African Americans. Review of Educational Research, 64, 55-117.

Mounts, N. & Steinberg, L. (1995). An ecological analysis of peer influence on adolescent grade point average and drug use. Developmental Psychology, 31, 915-922.

Senior, A. M. & Anderson, B. T. (1993). Who's who among African-American student groups in high school: an exploratory investigation on peer subcultures. The Urban Review, 25, 233-249.

Steinberg, L., Dornbusch, & Brown, B. (1992). Ethnic differences in academic achievement: An ecological perspective. American Psychologist, 47, 723-729.

Vaux, A. (1985). Variations in social support associated with gender, ethnicity and age. Journal of Social Issues, 41, 89-110.

Wang, M., Fitzhugh, E., Westerfield, R. & Eddy, J. (1995). Family and peer influences on smoking behavior among American adolescents: an age trend. Journal of Adolescent Health, 16, 200-203.

Table 1
 Mean Gender Differences in Peer Support, School Value and Academic Achievement

	Females (n=163)		Males (n=178)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Peer Support**	2.99	.803	2.63	.715
School Utility Value**	4.06	.609	3.88	.734
Importance of Academic Skills	5.32	1.34	5.34	1.25
Grade Point Average**	3.76	.814	3.28	.800

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

Figure 1. The relation between peer support, school value and academic achievement for African American adolescents (N=341)

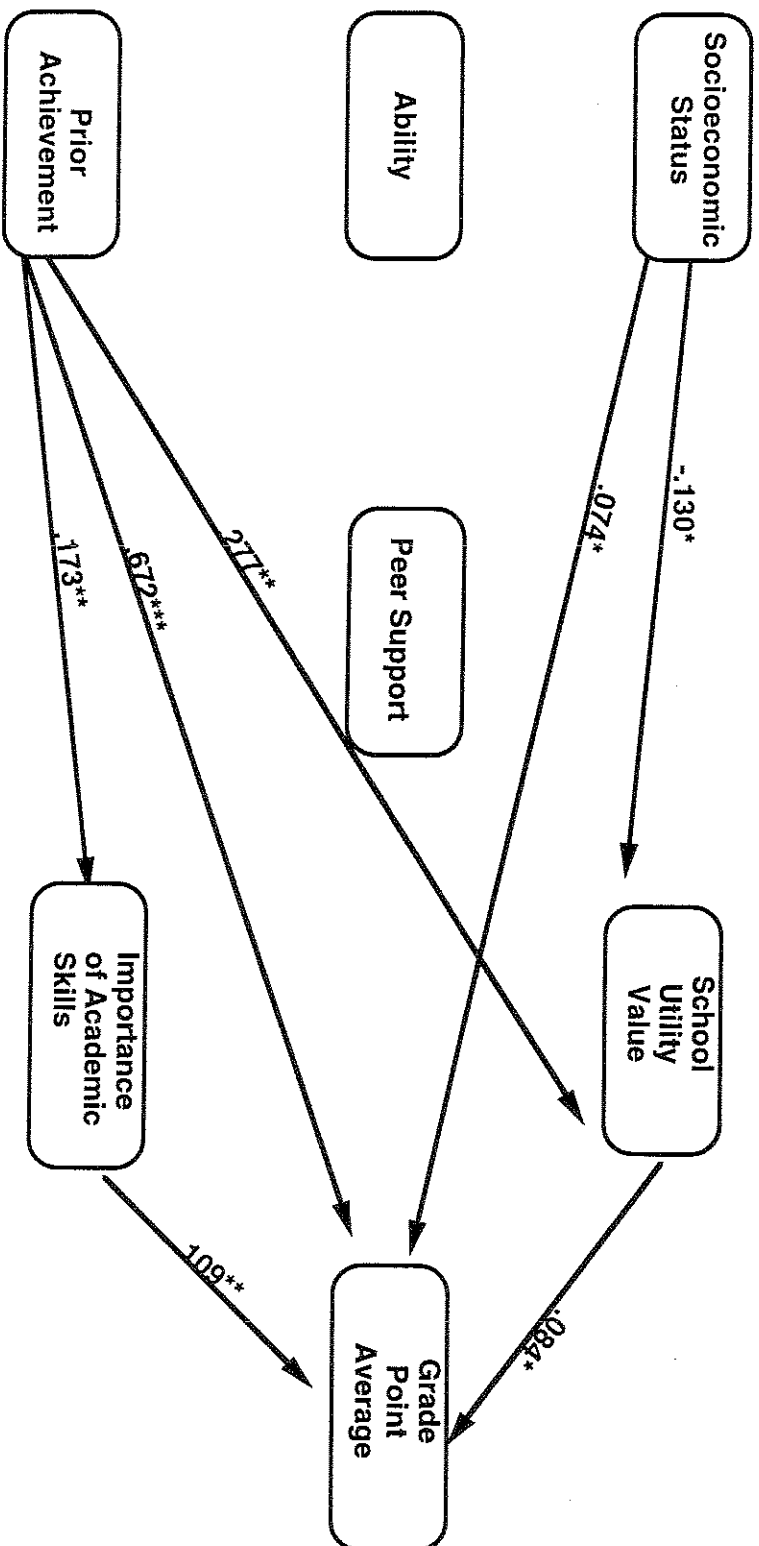


Figure 2. The relation between peer support, school value and academic achievement for African American females (n=163)

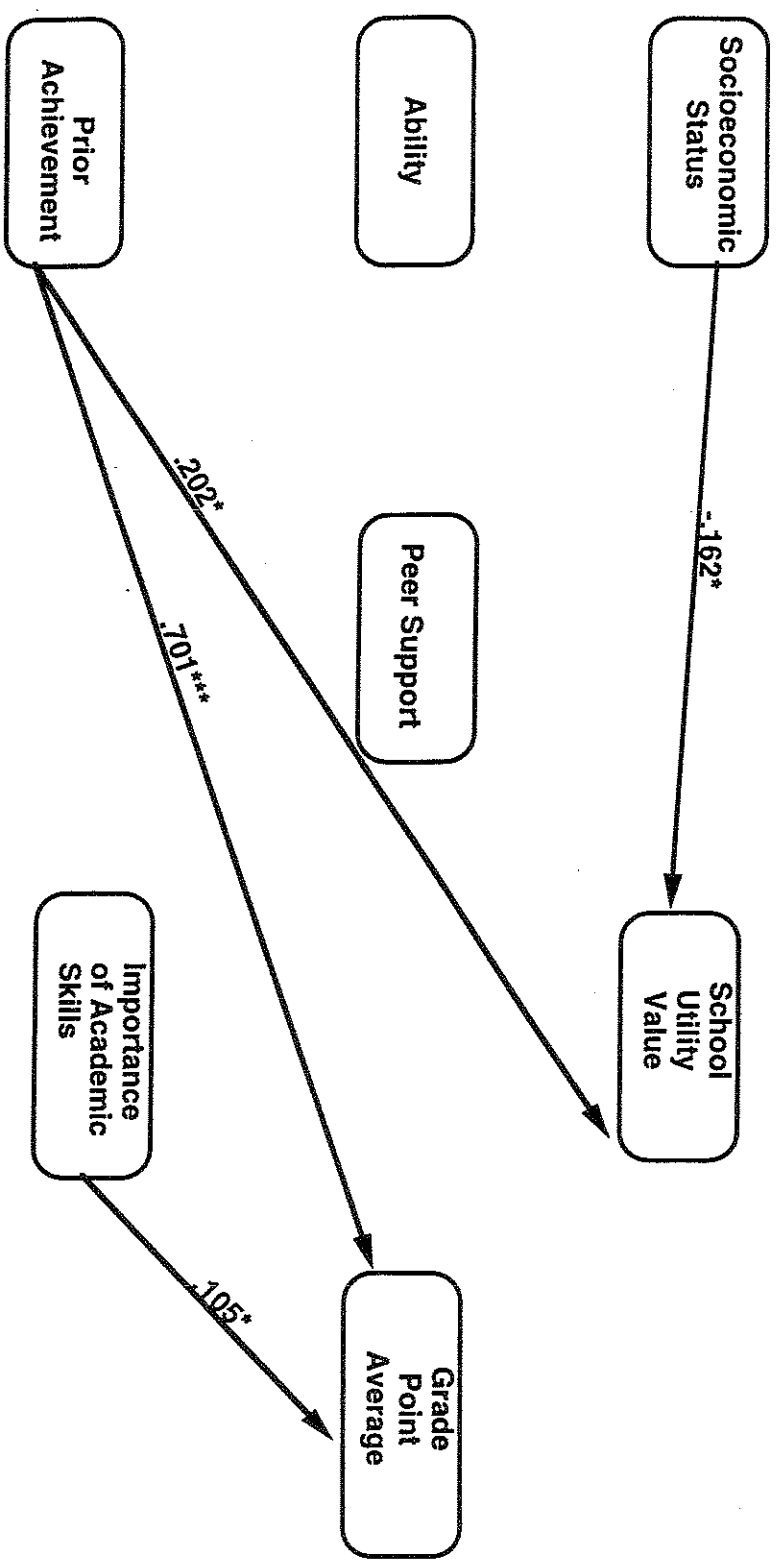


Figure 3. The relation between peer support, school value and academic achievement for African American males (n=178)

