

YOUTHS' CROSS-ETHNIC FRIENDSHIPS AND ASSOCIATIONS WITH SOCIOEMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT

Rhiannon L. Smith

Dr. Amanda J. Rose, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

Relationships with peers and friends are important and influential in the lives of youth, especially in adolescence (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). Although attention recently has been drawn to the important roles of race, ethnicity, culture, and diversity in youths' peer group interactions (Graham, Taylor, & Ho, 2008), surprisingly little is known about the formation of dyadic friendships between youths of differing ethnic backgrounds. The current research examines the prevalence of cross-ethnic friendships and the socioemotional adjustment correlates of cross-ethnic friendships among 6th through 8th grade adolescent youth in an ethnically diverse urban middle school ($N = 372$). Youths responded to questionnaires in their classrooms at school. Results indicated that cross-ethnic friendships were more prevalent than previously thought, and importantly, the findings for prevalence differed based on the method used to assess friendships. Gender, developmental, and ethnic differences in cross-ethnic friendship prevalence also were tested. In addition, relations between youths' socioemotional adjustment and participation in cross-ethnic friendships were examined. Youths with advanced social perspective-taking skills had more cross-ethnic friends, whereas youths who experienced perceived barriers to forming cross-ethnic friendships had fewer cross-ethnic friends. Prosocial behavior, likeability among peers, depression, and anxiety were unrelated to cross-ethnic friendship. Associations of perceived popularity with cross-ethnic friendship were positive for boys, but negative for girls. In addition, youths' ethnic identity was differently associated with cross-ethnic friendship for ethnic minority versus non-minority White youth. Applied implications are discussed. Race relations is a complex and compelling issue, and understanding youths' friendships with peers who are different from themselves in terms of race/ethnicity will help to illuminate ways to foster positive intergroup relations.