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Prosocial tendencies predict friendship quality, but not for popular children

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ABSTRACT

Is prosocial behavior a prerequisite for having good-quality friendships? This study ($N = 477$, mean age = 12.2 years) examined whether the link between children's prosocial tendencies and their perceived friendship quality was dependent on children's level of popularity in the peer group. Children's prosocial tendencies were assessed both as observed behavior in a standardized setting and as a self-reported predisposition to act in prosocial ways. Across measures, the results showed that prosocial tendencies are associated with higher perceived friendship quality among nonpopular children (i.e., children holding average or lower levels of popularity), but not among popular children. Thus, even if they lack prosocial qualities, popular children are still able to hold good-quality friendships. Popular children may have other compensating characteristics, such as popularity by association, that make them attractive for peers to be friends with.

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Introduction

Prosocial behavior—behavior intended to benefit other people—plays an important role in our social lives (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). If humans were unable to show prosocial behaviors such as helping, sharing, and cooperating, it would be difficult to live in social groups, as humans do from the minute they are born. Nevertheless, children show pronounced individual differences in their

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tendencies to act in prosocial ways (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1999, 2006). These individual differences are likely to be consequential for the quality of their interpersonal relationships and their peer relationships in particular. Because prosocial behaviors benefit other people, it seems plausible to assume that these behaviors will typically be valued and rewarded by others (Asher & McDonald, 2009). Indeed, numerous studies have shown that prosocial children are better liked and accepted by their peers than less prosocial children (e.g., Asher & McDonald, 2009; Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006).

Perhaps surprisingly, then, relatively little is known about how children's prosocial tendencies relate to the quality of the *friendships* they hold. Friendships are a quintessential part of children's social lives, satisfying basic needs of companionship, intimacy, and affection (Buhrmester, 1996; Furman & Collins, 2009). Friendships are dyadic, mutually rewarding bonds between children. They are defined by reciprocity: Peer bonds can be called friendships when both children gain benefits, or "social provisions" (e.g., intimacy, affection), from them (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996). Such reciprocity is what distinguishes friendships from other peer bonds. The degree to which children obtain social provisions from a particular friendship is reflected in how they perceive the quality of that friendship (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992).

How may children's prosocial tendencies be related to the quality of their friendships? According to the classical equity theory (Adams, 1965; Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1976), people seek to maintain equity, or a just balance in provisions, in their relationships. In an equitable relationship, both partners receive commensurate benefits from the relationship relative to the contributions they invest. Because prosocial children have much to offer to their friends in terms of social provisions (e.g., instrumental aid, emotional support), they are likely to obtain many social provisions in return, and this should result in high levels of perceived friendship quality. Supporting that view, research shows that prosocial children's friendships are of higher quality than those of less prosocial children (Cillessen, Jiang, West, & Laszkowski, 2005; McDonald, Wang, Menzer, Rubin, & Booth-LaForce, 2011; Markiewicz, Doyle, & Brendgen, 2001).

Yet there is more for children to value in their friendships than their friends' prosocial behavior alone. Children also attach great importance to being popular, especially during late childhood and adolescence (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010), and so they typically prefer to associate with children high in popularity (with popularity defined as peer status based on prestige and visibility in the peer group, also referred to as *perceived* popularity; Cillessen, 2011). Popular children have many characteristics that make them attractive to be friends with. They tend to have fun and exciting social lives, they engage in many cross-gender interactions, they are socially powerful and visible, and they typically get much attention from teachers and classmates (Adler & Adler, 1998; Cillessen, 2011; Closson, 2009; Hawley, Little, & Card, 2007; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). Because peer status is contagious and mere association with a popular peer raises a child's status (Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010; Marks, Cillessen, & Crick, 2011; cf. "basking in reflected glory effect," Cialdini et al., 1976), it is not surprising that many children want to be friends with popular peers (Eder, 1985; Hawley et al., 2007). In fact, it may have so many benefits for children to befriend popular peers that they will require relatively little in return from such friendships in terms of reciprocated prosocial behavior. Thus, it is possible that popular children are able to attain good-quality friendships even when they show relatively low levels of prosocial behavior. Nonpopular children, by contrast, have less to offer in terms of "popularity by association," and so it may be more important for them to show prosocial behavior to attain good-quality friendships—"you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

The few studies that were conducted in this area of research found positive correlations between popularity and friendship quality both in children and in adolescents (Litwack, Wargo Aikins, & Cillessen, 2010; Rose, Swenson, & Carlson, 2004). To our knowledge, no previous work has examined whether children's prosocial tendencies differentially impact their friendship quality, depending on whether they are popular or not. However, there is some preliminary evidence that the friendship quality of popular versus less popular children is dependent on different behavioral dispositions. One study found that children's disposition to engage in relationally aggressive behaviors (e.g., gossiping, excluding others) may have a negative impact on the quality of their friendships, but only for nonpopular children, not for popular children (Rose et al., 2004). Similarly, we propose that the impact of children's prosocial behavior on their friendship quality will depend on their level of popularity.

Indirect evidence for the notion that popular children should be able to attain good-quality friendships, even when showing relatively low levels of prosocial behavior, comes from Hawley's research on adolescents' resource control strategies. Popularity is positively related to the use of resource control strategies, which are strategies to get what you want in either a nice ("prosocial") way or a not so nice ("coercive") way. Hawley et al. (2007) found that both prosocial and bistrategic controllers experience high friendship quality compared with typical controllers. Thus, to the extent that bistrategic and prosocial controllers are usually popular in their peer group, Hawley's work suggests that for popular children it is not necessary to be prosocial all of the time to hold high-quality friendships.

The current study

The aim of the current study was to examine to what extent the presumed link between children's prosocial tendencies and their perceived best friendship quality is moderated by individual differences in popularity. We predicted that prosocial tendencies would be less strongly related to friendship quality for popular children because these children have multiple other resources and qualities that make them attractive to be friends with.

We measured prosocial tendencies using procedures from two fairly independent research traditions. Research in experimental social psychology has relied mainly on behavioral measures of prosocial behavior, typically obtained by observing helping behavior in controlled settings (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Research in personality psychology has relied mainly on self-report measures of one's generalized tendency to act, feel, and think in prosocial ways, indexed by the Big Five trait of agreeableness (Penner et al., 2005). We used a controlled laboratory procedure to measure actual prosocial behavior. In a computerized task, participants ostensibly received e-mails from younger children who asked them for help, and the prosocial quality of participants' responses was coded as a measure of prosocial behavior. We also administered a standard self-report measure of agreeableness.

Popularity and the related construct of likeability (i.e., how much children are liked by their classmates) were measured using peer ratings. The inclusion of likeability allowed us to assess the specificity of the predicted effects for popularity. Friendship quality was indexed by children's perceptions of the social provisions they obtain from their friendships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Because these provisions (e.g., companionship, affection, enhancement of worth) are subjective, we measured them using self-reports (Berndt & McCandless, 2009; Furman, 1996; Ladd, 2009).

Method

Participants

Participants were 477 sixth graders (47% boys and 53% girls) whose ages ranged from 10 to 14 years ($M = 12.2$, $SD = 0.5$). They were recruited from 22 primary schools serving middle-class communities in The Netherlands. Most participants were of Dutch origin (81%); others were mainly of mixed cultural/ethnic origin. Informed parental consent was obtained for all participants (consent rates between schools ranged from 50 to 100%, with a mean consent rate of 80%). Among the sample, 10 children completed only the questionnaires because they were absent on the day the computer task was administered.

Procedure

Participants were tested in a quiet room at their school by female research assistants. They were told that they were participating in a study on children's information processing during computer tasks. Task instructions were provided both on the screen and through headphones. First, participants logged onto the study website where they allegedly interacted with other participants from different schools and different ages. In reality, participants worked on offline computers. Participants were informed that the assignments were difficult to complete for the youngest children participating in the

study and, therefore, that these youngest children were allowed to ask other users for help via e-mail. Participants were told that they could choose either to help these other children or not.

To maximize situational generalizability, our procedure assessed prosocial behavior in three different contexts pertaining to different costs for helping: helping at the cost of one's own performance on the assignment, helping at no cost, and helping at the cost of one's involvement in a fun computer game. The assignment consisted of solving puzzles within a limited amount of time. The puzzles required participants to move pieces of different shapes and sizes to the right places in a silhouette (e.g., of a rabbit or a bird). They were relatively easy to solve for children of this age.

To measure helping at a cost to performance, participants received four (bogus) e-mails from younger participants (e.g., "I don't know how to solve the first puzzle. How should I make the ears of the rabbit?") while they worked on the assignment. The e-mails appeared as a large pop-up screen and contained two buttons: "CLOSE SCREEN" and "SEND MESSAGE." Thus, participants could either click to close the screen and continue working on the puzzle (coded as "no" helping behavior) or click to write a message and send it (the content of the message was coded as "no," "some," or "much" helping behavior; see "Measures" section below). It was ascertained that children received only questions concerning puzzles they already solved themselves.

Next, to assess helping at no cost to performance, when participants had completed the puzzles, they received the following instruction: "You finished this task. Other users are still working. Please wait. . . . If you wish, you may help other children by responding to their e-mails." While waiting, participants received four e-mails with questions about the puzzles.

Finally, to assess helping at the cost of involvement in a fun game, participants were told that they could play a computer game during a break in the study and that if they wished they could help other children who were still working on the puzzles by responding to their e-mails. While playing a computer game, they obtained four e-mails with questions concerning the puzzles.

Next, participants completed self-report measures of perceived friendship quality and agreeableness as well as peer rating measures of popular status and likeability in their classes. Finally, participants were fully debriefed. They were informed that the e-mails they received were fictitious. They were also informed about the study purposes and the need for deception.

Measures

Helping behavior

The quality of participants' helping behavior during the tasks was rated by the first author and a research assistant for each of the responses to the 12 e-mails. For each response, a score of 0 was given when participants provided no help at all, for example, when they did not write anything or when they provided no suggestion to solve the puzzle (e.g., "Sorry, I am busy right now"). A score of 1 was given when participants provided "some help," for example, when they provided encouragement (e.g., "Just try all the pieces, then you will succeed") or general instructions that would not directly help the other child to solve the puzzle (e.g., "Try to look carefully at the shape of the pieces"). A score of 2 was given when participants provided "much help," for example, when they indicated where a particular puzzle piece should be placed (e.g., "The big triangle is the bird's wing") or provided other help that would have directly allowed the other child to solve the puzzle. Interrater reliability (κ) for each of the 12 responses ranged from .82 to 1.00 ($M = .92$).

The measures of helping behavior in the three situational contexts were significantly correlated (correlations ranged from $r = .43$ to $r = .58$, all $ps < .01$) and showed very similar associations with the other study variables. Therefore, an aggregate score for helping behavior was computed from responses to all e-mails (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$), with higher scores indicating more helping behavior.

The amount of helping behavior did differ between situational contexts. A one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that the amounts of children's helping behavior in the performance context ($M = 0.69$, $SD = 0.58$), the no-cost context ($M = 1.21$, $SD = 0.48$), and the entertainment context ($M = 0.79$, $SD = 0.56$) differed significantly, $F(1.88, 877.1) = 225.90$, $p < .001$. Contrasts revealed that helping behavior in the no-cost context was significantly higher than in the entertainment context, $F(1, 466) = 10.87$, $p < .01$. In turn, helping in the entertainment context was significantly higher than in the performance context, $F(1, 466) = 356.30$, $p < .001$.

Agreeableness

The Big Five trait of agreeableness was measured using the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999, translated into Dutch by Denissen, Geenen, van Aken, Gosling, & Potter, 2008). The agreeableness subscale consists of nine items (sample item: “I see myself as someone who is helpful and unselfish with others”). Participants rated their agreement with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 5 = *agree strongly*). Negative items were recoded, and a mean agreeableness score was computed (Cronbach’s alpha = .63), with higher scores indicating higher levels of agreeableness.

Popularity

Popularity was measured using a peer rating procedure. Participants received a class roster and indicated the popularity of each of their classmates. Ratings were provided on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all popular*, 5 = *very popular*). Based on these ratings, a mean popularity score was computed for each participant (Hopmeyer Gorman, Kim, & Schimmelbusch, 2002), with higher scores indicating higher levels of popularity. One advantage of using ratings rather than nominations to index popularity is that all children are explicitly evaluated by their peers. In nominations, children who are not named are unranked (Cillessen & Marks, 2011). Popularity ratings are highly stable over time and positively linked to popularity nominations (Cillessen & Marks, 2011).

Likeability

Likeability was measured using the same peer rating procedure. However, this time participants indicated how much they liked each of their classmates (1 = *don’t like at all*, 5 = *like a lot*).

Perceived friendship quality

Perceived friendship quality was measured using the short version of the Network of Relationship Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985, translated into Dutch by De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009). This scale consists of 12 items and measures children’s perceptions of the social provisions they obtain from their best friends, including companionship, instrumental aid, intimacy, enhancement of worth, reliable alliance, and affection (sample item: “How much does your best friend really care about you?”). Items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *little or none*, 5 = *the most*). A mean score for perceived friendship quality was computed (Cronbach’s alpha = .90), with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived friendship quality.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations between the study variables. Both helping behavior and agreeableness were significantly related to perceived friendship quality ($ps < .01$) but not to popularity ($ps > .18$). Helping behavior and agreeableness were not significantly correlated, as is often true for self-reported and behavioral indexes of conceptually related constructs.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the study variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Helping behavior	0.91	0.42	–			
2. Agreeableness	3.84	0.50	.07	–		
3. Perceived friendship quality	3.39	0.68	.14*	.27*	–	
4. Popularity	3.17	0.80	.05	.06	.27*	–
5. Likeability	3.39	0.51	.06	.19*	.21*	.76*

* $p < .01$.

Girls reported higher levels of friendship quality than boys, $t(475) = -3.96$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.35$. Girls also showed more helping behavior and reported higher levels of agreeableness than boys, $t(465) = -4.73$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.44$, and $t(475) = -4.61$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.42$, respectively. No gender differences were found for popularity and likeability, $t(475) = 0.25$, $p > .80$, and $t(475) = -1.93$, $p > .06$, respectively. There were no interactions involving gender, and controlling for gender in the analyses did not affect the pattern of results. Therefore, gender was dropped from further analyses.

Because of potential dependency in the data (i.e., it is possible that children within classrooms are more similar to each other than children between classrooms), it was assessed whether multilevel analyses were necessary. The intraclass correlation (ICC) showed that the proportion of variance in friendship quality that was due to classroom differences was negligible (i.e., ICC for friendship quality = 1.6%). Furthermore, deviance tests comparing models with fixed slopes (in which the strength of the predictor is the same for all classrooms) and models with random slopes (in which strength of the predictor is allowed to vary between classrooms) for each of the predictors revealed no significant random slopes (all $ps > .50$), making ordinary regression analysis a well-suited analytic approach.

Primary analyses

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine whether the presumed link between helping behavior and perceived friendship quality was moderated by popularity. Perceived friendship quality was entered as the dependent variable. Helping behavior and popularity were entered as predictor variables in Step 1 of the analysis, and the Helping \times Popularity interaction was entered in Step 2. Both predictors were centered to reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). The analysis revealed main effects for both helping behavior and popularity. Specifically, higher levels of helping and popularity were related to higher perceived friendship quality, $\beta = .13$, $t(464) = 2.98$, $p < .01$, and $\beta = .28$, $t(464) = 6.24$, $p < .01$, respectively. Importantly, these main effects were qualified by the predicted significant interaction between helping behavior and popularity, $\beta = -.11$, $t(463) = -2.49$, $p < .05$ (see Fig. 1). Post hoc probing (Aiken & West, 1991) showed that for nonpopular children (i.e., 1 SD below the mean), helping behavior predicted perceived friendship quality, $\beta = .24$, $t(463) = 3.94$, $p < .01$. By contrast, for popular children (i.e., 1 SD above the mean), helping behavior did not predict perceived friendship quality, $\beta = .02$, $t(463) = 0.41$, $p > .68$.

To obtain more detailed insight into the moderating impact of popularity, we conducted additional post hoc analyses using the “region of significance” method (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). This method computes at what point along the distribution of a moderating variable (in this case popularity) the slope becomes significantly different from zero. Results showed that the slope was significant ($\alpha = .05$) at a popularity level lower than 0.30—approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ SD above the mean value of the centered popularity distribution. Thus, for children whose popularity levels varied from very low to

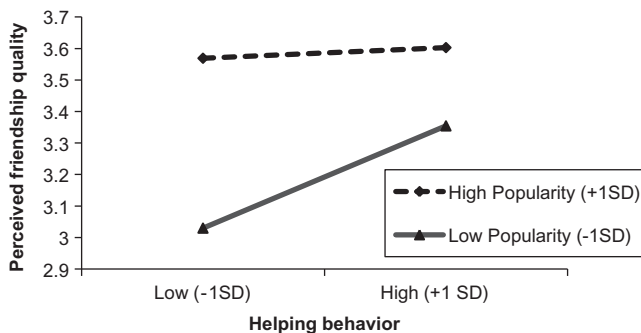


Fig. 1. Popularity moderates the relation between helping behavior and perceived friendship quality. High values of popularity and helping behavior are 1 SD above the mean; low values of popularity and helping behavior are 1 SD below the mean.

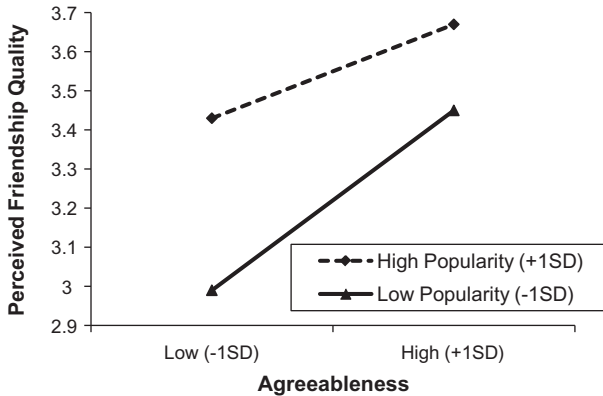


Fig. 2. Popularity moderates the relation between agreeableness and perceived friendship quality. High values of popularity and agreeableness are 1 SD above the mean; low values of popularity and agreeableness are 1 SD below the mean.

somewhat above average, helping behavior predicted perceived friendship quality. No such effect was found for children scoring more than $\frac{1}{3}$ SD above the mean on popularity.

Next, to test whether popularity would also moderate the relation between agreeableness and perceived friendship quality, a second hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. This analysis was identical to the previously reported analysis, but helping behavior was replaced by self-reported agreeableness in Steps 1 and 2 of the analysis. A similar pattern of findings emerged. There were main effects for both agreeableness and popularity, such that higher agreeableness and higher popularity were related to higher perceived friendship quality, $\beta = .26$, $t(474) = 6.12$, $p < .01$, and $\beta = .25$, $t(474) = 5.96$, $p < .01$, respectively.

These main effects were qualified by the predicted significant interaction between agreeableness and popularity, $\beta = -.09$, $t(473) = -2.04$, $p < .05$ (see Fig. 2). Post hoc probing showed that for nonpopular children (i.e., 1 SD below the mean), the relation between agreeableness and perceived friendship quality was significantly stronger than for popular children (i.e., 1 SD above the mean), $\beta = .34$, $t(473) = 5.99$, $p < .01$, and $\beta = .17$, $t(473) = 2.92$, $p < .01$, respectively. Post hoc analyses using the region of significance method showed that the slope was significant ($\alpha = .05$) at a popularity level lower than 1.11—approximately $1\frac{1}{3}$ SD deviation above the mean value of the centered popularity distribution. Thus, for children whose popularity levels varied from very low to well above average, agreeableness predicted perceived friendship quality. No such effect was found for very popular children, who scored higher than $1\frac{1}{3}$ SD above the mean on popularity.

As is common among children this age, popularity was strongly correlated with likeability ($r = .76$). To assess the specificity of the effects we found for popularity, we repeated the regression analyses, but this time we controlled for likeability (by entering this variable first in the regression model). Although there was a main effect for likeability, $\beta = .23$, $t(465) = 5.02$, $p < .01$, this effect disappeared when popularity was added to the model. All other variables remained significant and similar in strength compared with the models without likeability. Thus, the findings of the current study pertain specifically to popularity.

Discussion

Do children hold higher quality friendships to the extent that they are more prosocial? It depends on their level of popularity. Specifically, the current study found that children's prosocial tendencies (assessed either as observed behavior in a controlled setting or as a self-reported predisposition to act in prosocial ways) were associated with higher perceived friendship quality among children holding lower and average levels of popularity. For children holding higher levels of popularity, however, friendship quality was relatively independent of their prosocial tendencies. Regardless of their proso-

cial tendencies, popular children tended to have relatively high levels of friendship quality. Importantly, these results held even when controlling for likeability, highlighting the specificity of these findings for popular status.

Consistent with prior research (Cillessen et al., 2005; Markiewicz et al., 2001; McDonald et al., 2011), we found that for most children, the tendency to act in prosocial ways toward others is associated with higher friendship quality. People strive toward a just balance of the social provisions they give and receive within their friendships (Adams, 1965; Mendelson & Kay, 2003). Prosocial children have much to offer to their friend in terms of social provisions (e.g., the provision of emotional support or instrumental aid) and, thus, are likely to obtain many social provisions in return, resulting in high friendship quality.

Why is it, then, that popular children's prosocial tendencies toward others are not associated with higher quality friendships? We propose that popular children have other compensating characteristics that make them attractive for peers to be friends with. Popular children are powerful, influential, and visible (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1998; Cillessen, 2011), and they can help their peers to gain popularity (Dijkstra et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2011), which is particularly desirable to young adolescents (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). Thus, popular children's friends may well be motivated to maintain their friendships regardless of whether their popular friends behave prosocially. Consistent with such an explanation, previous research has shown that popular children (unlike their less popular counterparts) can afford to be relationally aggressive without experiencing negative consequences for their level of friendship quality (Rose et al., 2004). Popular children, so it seems, can rely on other qualities that make them attractive as friends.

In the light of these findings, the well-known phenomenon that lower status children are often inclined to imitate the behavior of their popular peers (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006; Prinstein, Brechwald, & Cohen, 2011) may be particularly problematic. Although for some children such imitation could lead to a rise in status, for most children this will not be the case because high status is reserved for only a few children in the peer group (Dijkstra et al., 2010). To the extent that nonpopular children will imitate the more coercive and less prosocial behaviors of their popular peers, this may come at the expense of the quality of their friendships.

It should be noted that popularity was not significantly related to prosocial tendencies, in contrast to previous studies (e.g., Dijkstra, Lindenberg, Verhulst, Ormel, & Veenstra, 2009; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006). One possible explanation is that, unlike these previous studies, our study used different sources of information to index popularity (i.e., peer ratings) and prosocial tendencies (i.e., behavior in a standardized task and self-reports). Thus, our findings were not influenced by shared method variance.

There was no correlation between the behavioral measure of helping and the self-report measure of agreeableness. This is not unusual. Broad constructs such as the Big Five personality trait of agreeableness tend to be related to measures of actual behaviors only when these behaviors are aggregated over a range of situations (Epstein, 1983). More specific behavioral measures, such as ours, typically represent only part of the agreeableness construct.

Our study has several strengths. First, we extended the literature by examining children's friendship quality in the context of their social roles in the larger peer group (i.e., popularity). Although the importance of the joint study of friendship and group processes is generally acknowledged, empirical studies doing so are rare to date (Rubin et al., 2006).

Second, we diversified our measurement of prosocial tendencies by including both a behavioral measure of helping and a self-report questionnaire measuring agreeableness, a general tendency to act in prosocial ways. The simultaneous inclusion of both experimental social psychological and personality measures can be seen as an optimal way to address strengths inherent in each tradition. The strength of our behavioral measure is that it was obtained in a tightly controlled research setting and is relatively impervious to biases that may influence informant measures of prosocial behavior (e.g., social desirability, memory lapses). The strength of our self-report measure is that it is well validated and reflects children's prosocial predispositions that generalize across situations and behaviors. Our findings generalized across measures, strengthening the robustness of the study findings.

Third, our findings cannot be explained by shared method variance. All study variables were indexed by different sources of information—observations for prosocial behavior, peer ratings for popularity, and self-reports for perceived friendship quality.

A number of limitations should be noted. First, friendship benefits are subjective and often differ for the two partners in a friendship (Berndt & McCandless, 2009; Furman, 1996; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). We chose to focus exclusively on target children's perceptions of their friendship quality because we wanted to link those to their own prosocial tendencies and popularity. Still, future research could examine whether the joint effects of children's prosocial tendencies and popularity also translate into the benefits that *friends* perceive as obtaining from the friendship.

A related issue is that we focused on target children's popularity and did not assess the popularity status of their friends. It is possible that the moderating effect of popularity may be more pronounced in friendships with clear status asymmetry because in such friendships the lower status friends may benefit more from associating with their higher status friends than in friendships between children who are similar in status. Further research is needed to test this hypothesis.

Second, children's prosocial tendencies were measured as they occur toward peers in general, not as they occur specifically toward their best friends. This said, research supports the view that children who hold prosocial predispositions also tend to behave prosocially within their friendships (Cillessen et al., 2005). For example, peer-nominated prosocial behavior (i.e., reported by the class) tends to be positively related to how much help and guidance children provide in their friendships (i.e., reported by friends; McDonald et al., 2011). Still, future research on this topic may benefit from including relational-specific measures of prosocial behavior. For example, the helping task in the current study could be adapted to measure children's helping behavior toward their best friends.

Third, we chose to focus on the age period of early adolescence, a time when children attach relatively great importance to being popular, and to associate with popular peers (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). Our developmental focus limits the ability to make generalizations to children of other ages. We cannot exclude the possibility that during developmental periods when popularity is less prioritized, prosocial tendencies do predict friendship quality regardless of children's popularity. Future research should examine the extent to which the moderating role of popularity holds for other age groups.

Conclusion

Not all friendships are created equal. Although it is intuitive that children will hold closer and more affectionate peer relationships to the extent they are more prosocial, our findings indicate that there are exceptions. Popular children enjoy high-quality friendships regardless of whether they behave kindly toward others. In concert with findings from previous work (Cillessen et al., 2005; Litwack et al., 2010; Rose et al., 2004), it seems that for young adolescents there are at least two ways to obtain high-quality friendships: having high peer status and behaving in prosocial ways. Because high status is reserved for only few children (Dijkstra et al., 2010) and is resistant to change (Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990), it is hard to attain for most children. Less popular children who hold unsatisfying friendships may benefit from learning to share, cooperate, and be more helpful toward other children so that they too can attain reciprocal, supportive, and satisfying friendships.

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