

Dynamics of Peer Relationships among Adolescents in India - A Qualitative Inquiry

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Healthy peer relationships are critical for an individual's social, emotional, and cognitive development during adolescence. In these changing times, the schooling system has undergone substantial shifts in the last decade, resulting in the evolution of peer relationships in teenagers. This study's goal was to explore the dynamics of peer relationships among adolescents, in order to unravel the differences in different aspects of peer relationships in young and old adolescents. The participants were placed into two groups based on their ages: Group 1 (aged 12-14 years) and Group 2 (aged 15-17 years). This distinction was made to comprehend the phenomenon better and to distinguish the two groups on the same. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, which were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The data revealed five main themes – Interwoven bonds: Friendships, Bullying and Victimization, Conflict & Resolution, Influence of Media, and Parental and Teacher Influence. This study has implications for understanding adolescents' social development, mental health, and broader societal dynamics.

Keywords: Peer Relationships, Adolescence, School, Media, Friendships, Bullying & Victimization

Adolescence represents a critical developmental phase in lifespan marked by profound transformations in physical, cognitive, and emotional domains (Reitz et al, 2014). Within this transitional period, individuals navigate significant alterations in their social lives, particularly within the realm of peer interactions. Peers are defined as individuals of comparable age or grade level, or those sharing similar situational contexts and biological maturation (Mittal and Babu, 2022; Naylor, 2011; Portt et al, 2020), assume paramount significance in shaping adolescents' social experiences. The existing literature has focused on the nature of peer relationships, exploring the various facets such as group dynamics, relational qualities, and shared activities (Portt et al, 2020). Gender differences have also been observed in peer relationships, indicating a complex

interplay between gender dynamics and peer dynamics, reflecting the multifaceted nature of adolescent socialization processes. Peer interactions, encompassing friendships, constitute a pivotal dimension of adolescent development (Berger et al, 2017; Jiabin et al, 2022), which influences their social, emotional, and psychological well-being (Brown & Larson, 2009; Holder and Coleman, 2015; Steinberg and Morris, 2001). The dynamics of peer connections during adolescence also play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' sense of self and identity (Maunder and Monks, 2019), fostering the cultivation of interpersonal bonds, negotiation of interpersonal conflicts, and negotiation of complex social hierarchies. Within the context of peer relationships, adolescents not only derive social support and emotional sustenance from these

relations, but also acquire crucial socio-emotional competencies such as empathy, cooperation, and interpersonal communication (Portt et al, 2020). Moreover, peer interactions, particularly within the framework of friendships, serve as a crucible for conflict resolution, providing adolescents with opportunities to grapple with divergent perspectives and negotiate amicable resolutions (Wang et al., 2020). The developmental trajectory of friendships, as delineated by Collins and Madsens (2006), evolves qualitatively across distinct stages, characterized by shared activities in early childhood, mutual loyalty and care in late childhood, and intimacy and self-disclosure in adolescence. Additionally, Dunphy (1963) has elaborated on the transition of peer relationships into romantic affiliations, tracing the continuum from late childhood through late adolescence.

Majority of developmental research has traditionally centered on its manifestation within interpersonal friendships, as many tenets of trust—such as fairness, loyalty, truthfulness, and accountability—are commonly shared among friends (Flanagan and Stout, 2010). However, peer relations can also harbor sources of distress, exemplified by instances of peer pressure, social malaise, and adverse interpersonal dynamics, should they devolve into negative or hazardous configurations (Jiabin et al, 2022). Consequently, some adolescents may find themselves compelled to overlook instances of negative peer interactions and bullying to secure social inclusion within a group setting, a phenomenon exacerbated by the correlation between peer rejection and subsequent engagement in aggressive conduct (Kim and Nho, 2017), as well as heightened vulnerability to suicidal ideation among adolescents (Platt et al, 2013). Notably, a comprehensive survey encompassing 300,000 adolescents across 79 nations revealed that 30% of respondents

reported having experienced bullying within the preceding 30-day timeframe (Elgar et al, 2015). Such findings emphasize the intricate interplay between peer dynamics and individual well-being, elucidating the pervasive impact of peer-related stressors on adolescent psychosocial functioning.

In a systematic review examining bullying and victimization among adolescents in India, it was revealed that name-calling emerged as the most prevalent form of bullying (Thakkar et al, 2021). Furthermore, the review identified several risk factors associated with bullying, encompassing variables such as body weight, religious affiliation, age, and personality traits. Moreover, the consequences of bullying were found to encompass a spectrum of adverse psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, and behavioral maladjustment. Additionally, empirical investigations have also found a notable association between adolescents' engagement in health risk behaviors—such as smoking, alcohol consumption, physical altercations, and sexual activity—and the composition of their peer networks, with individuals who engage in such behaviors being more likely to be surrounded by peers who exhibit similar conduct (Allen et al, 2012; Arnett, 2007; Fujimoto and Valente, 2012; McDonough et al, 2016). Bandura's social learning theory (1997) offers valuable insights into understanding this phenomenon, positing that individuals are more likely to emulate behaviors modeled by individuals perceived as relatable or influential within their social milieu. Thus, the presence of peers engaging in health-risk behaviors may also serve as potent catalysts for the replication of such conduct among adolescents, underscoring the pervasive influence of social dynamics on health-related behaviors.

Given the importance of peer relationships for adolescents, the present study also aimed

to understand the dynamics of peer relationships among adolescents in India, and how peer relations change with time in adolescence concerning different aspects like friendships and conflicts. Given India's diverse socio-cultural context and structural inconsistency with Western cultures, literature from Western countries may not be generalizable to the Indian population, requiring scientific inquiry into the aspects of these phenomena that are specific to India. Further, it is very crucial in the current times to understand this phenomenon in the new era, where technology and social media have taken over. The findings of the study can be further used in educational and counseling settings as it will give us a window to the lives of adolescents; the findings will further add to the growing literature of developmental studies.

Method

Research Design

The study used a qualitative design to understand peer relations in adolescence and how they change with respect to time in early adolescence to late adolescence. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is best suited when the inquirer wants to address a research problem in which the variables are not known and need to be explored, and incorporates data derived from open-ended information that researchers gather through interviews, private documents, and audiovisual material.

Participants

The participants were school-going adolescents from middle and upper-middle-class families, residing in Delhi-NCR, India, in the age range of 12 to 17 years, selected using a purposive sampling procedure. Although the accepted age range for a teenager is normally between 12 to 18 years of age, this range includes adolescents with diverse cognitive and emotional development. Consequently, the participants were

divided into two groups – Group 1 consisted of six participants in the age range of 12 -14 years and Group 2 consisted of 6 participants in the age range of 15 – 17 years. Thus, 12 adolescents were interviewed, of which 6 were females and 6 were males; groups 1 and 2 consisted of equal numbers of males and females.

Data Collection and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews (SSI) were taken with the help of an interview guide (attached in the appendix), which lasted for around 30-90 minutes (average duration: 40 mins). The SSI was administered conversationally with one respondent at a time and consisted of a mixture of closed- and open-ended questions, frequently reinforced by follow-up why or how questions. An outline was prepared for the interview based on the literature review and research questions. There was no fixed order for the questions or the conversations, and they were adapted according to the flow of the conversation. All the participants were duly informed about the nature and purpose of the study. The consent was taken from the participant as well as the participant's guardian. All the participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any given point in time. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained, and they were informed that the results of the study would be taken as a whole and would be only used for academic purposes.

Data Analysis

The inductive approach was used to analyze interview transcripts and field notes, which were aimed at detecting patterns in the data using thematic codes. "Inductive analysis" refers to when patterns, themes, and categories of analysis emerge from the data rather than being imposed on it prior to data collection and analysis (Patton, 1980, p. 306). In conclusion, theme codes and concepts were used to simplify and analyze

data. Themes arose gradually as a consequence of a combination of getting to know the facts, drawing logical connections with the interview questions, and contemplating what was learned during the

first literature review. Themes progressed from a low level of abstraction to significant, overarching themes found in the specific evidence presented by the data at various phases (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Themes and Sub-themes with verbatims

Themes	Sub-themes	Verbatims	
		Group 1	Group 2
Interwoven bonds: Friendships	Need for friendships meaning of friendships quality of a friend activities Gender	<p><i>"a friend helps during bad times... everyone needs a friend".</i></p> <p><i>"..one has to talk nicely with the girls.. can't talk with girls like the way we talk to boys"; I feel shy whenever I have to talk to girls"</i></p>	<p><i>"...they (friends) are my everything.."" I share everything with them.. I know they will be there no matter what"</i></p>
Bullying and Victimization	Teasing others Bullying victimization Others Involvement in Bullying behaviors	<p><i>"Troubling someone too much, targeting them"</i></p> <p><i>"I used to feel bad for some time but then everything became normal"</i></p>	<p><i>"Bullying just happens... and it is done just for fun,,, and it happens everywhere... there is no particular intention of hurting someone" "I know that it was wrong but at that time it was necessary".</i></p>
Peer Conflict and Resolution	Conflicts Resolution Gender	<p><i>"generally when thinking doesn't match with someone then conflicts happen."</i></p>	<p><i>I am afraid of fighting with girls... girls are good at conversations and boys are at fighting."</i></p>
Influence of Media	Type of content Belief	<p><i>"I want to have a friend like Devi has in that daily soap"</i></p>	<p><i>"...Girls behave very innocently ... they believe it's a movie going on and a hero will come for them"</i></p>
Parental and Teacher Influence	Relationship with parents Teacher's role	<p><i>"she tells us not to talk to someone if they do not study ... stay away for them"</i></p> <p><i>"Stay away from bad kid"</i></p>	<p><i>"We don't really care about her (Teacher's) opinion"</i></p>

Theme 1-Interwoven bonds: Friendships

The theme 'Interwoven Bonds: Friendships, talks about the importance of friendships in peer relationships, and it unveils personality traits of friends and adolescents' perspectives in this regard. The

group 1 described true friendship as sharing food and playing together in a broader language. They stressed that friendship provides both socializing and an academic reason like discussing specifics of doing assignments, homework, and tests. If you ask the respondents about the main attributes

of a friend, they will tell you that a friend must be a good person and have no bad habits and vice.

Another obvious difference between the views of the participants on the assisting of friends versus classmates particularly was the perceived level of considered support towards the assisting of the friends and classmates and an obvious tendency towards the increased prosocial behavior among the friends was observed this is firmly aligned with what Barry and Wentzel (2006) and Choukas-Bradley et al. (2015) discovered, as the nature of the relationship has a direct bearing on the type of assistance offered. The study followed up on gender dynamics at the level of friendships. Female participants mentioned the tendency to connect with the same gender, suggesting that they do so because they share common likes, as well as that they communicate and understand each other better. Even though some researchers oppose the view of intrinsic differences in the same and opposite friends (Duck and Wright, 1993), others suggest cultural norms may play a great role in determining such differences (Felmlee, Sweet, and Sinclair, 2012). The male respondents, in this case, hesitate to interact with their female friends and are often shy, or have limited the conversation to respectful phrases, which is the contrary with the male friends.

During their development, adolescents (Group 2) move on to a more abstract and emotionally mature interpretation of friends at a later stage across the age groups of 15 to 17. As per Collins and Madsen (2006), the positive effect of friendship is not only that it provides a company but also cousins an outlet whereby an individual shares his or her emotions and opinion with the other person involved. This became clear during the studies where it was usually female participants who spoke about their female friends and their emotional relationships.

The intensity of parental distancing during this time is also noteworthy since the teens become more and more seeking approval and comfort outside the home (Kerig et al, 2012). As perceived in the work of De Goede, Branje, and Meeus (2009), young friends grow up from superficial to authentic, supportive friendships. Late adolescents see friendships as more of emotional support rather than for informational or entertainment purposes, even though parent-child ties remain important sources of support (Mittal and Babu, 2022; Berger, Hohmann and Furman, 2017). Yet girls readily maintained friendship and did not try to modify their behavior with male peers, while integrating female peers into the group to discuss emotional issues. Unlike the male participants, the female participants liked friendships for the hilarious joint activities, yet experiencing a kind of force that sometimes keeps them from emotional sharing, which may be the playing decelerating role influenced by the gender culture that favours man-man relationships but ignores spiritual interaction between individuals.

Theme 2- Bullying and Victimization

The theme explains bullying behavior in the context of peer relationships, emphasizing the types of adolescent taunting and the ways that peers are involved in such situations. The World Health Organization (2002) reports that bullying includes physical or psychological use of force against another individual, whether resulting in injury, psychological harm, or deprivation.

Group 1 said that the bullying is just simply too much and it gets to the point that it can't be taken anymore. Several strategies of bullying were found. Students were often teased and ridiculed for their physical traits such as weight or height. This was based on previous research (Kshirsagar et al, 2007; Malhi et al, 2014). The participant's

narrations showed cases of bullying based on physical traits like a girl 13 years old being teased by her classmates about her glasses which made her to temporarily cease using them and emotional agony.

The older adolescents i.e. Group 2 agreed in doing behaviors that might be considered bullying, but they viewed them as acts rather than detrimental. The other 17-year-old girl related an episode of thoughtlessly pulling a peer around because of seating, which she later came to realize was improper. This agrees with the it can be a result of peer pressure and ignorance of the consequences of it (Fox and Boulton, 2005).

The consequences of bullying are very strong and it has been linked with low self-esteem, bad behavior, and suicidal thoughts (Mtesalona, 2018; Koyanagi et al, 2019; Lereya et al, 2015; Wang et al, 2020). Successful interventions require a holistic understanding of bullying dynamics with different age groups, enhancing empathy and perspective in youngsters through education, to prevent bullying (Wenger, 1999; Mittal and Babu 2017).

Theme 3- Peer Conflict and Resolution

This theme talks about conflicts among peers and strategies for conflict resolution. The basis of conflict for Group 1 adolescents lies in the lack of consensus or disagreement in things. A boy of 14 years stated that dissenting viewpoints are a major source of conflict. Although clashes among males sometimes went as far as blows, they were settled in days at most, in contrast to female conflicts that were mostly verbal. Participants from Group 2 also stated ego clashes as a common cause of conflict, with males frequently experiencing more verbal troubles given their inherent strength in physical conflict as opposed to conversing.

The theme identifies gender roles that influence conflict behavior, where males are

more likely to use physical aggression and females use verbal forms, which reflects a society where females are not allowed to act aggressively (Dhillon and Babu, 2015; Hyde, 2005). In addition to jealousy, social exclusion, and bullying such as stealing, harassment, and labelling cliques and divisions are often formed (Sidorowicz and Hare, 2009).

The strategy for solving the conflicts in Group 2 was gender-dependent, and the females in this group were more focused on communication as vital. On many occasions, conflicts were settled through the apology of one party or by the peer friends who helped to mediate the conflict. Conflict resolution is a pivotal social competence that affects social adaptation and psychological adjustment among individuals. Youths who cannot harness such skills may be pushed out by their peers and adjustment failure (Rinaldi and Cheong, 2020).

Theme 4 Influence of Media

The fourth theme looks at the effects of media on peer relationships among teenagers, considering social media impacts as well as OTT material. With deepening peer engagement through platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, the nature of teenagers' interactions online is greatly impacted (Matrix, 2014).

Group 1 individuals, who mostly involved themselves in television, described daily soap shows as friendships that they hoped to be like. For instance, a thirteen-year-old female hoped to have a supportive friend like a movie character from a daily soap, which underlines the depiction of media.

Group 2 whose media consumption was not limited to social media and OTT platforms showed a profound shift from TV content to digital streaming services. A 17-year-old female participant showed the importance of the media portrayals of relationships and

social interactions in framing the expectations and aspirations of adolescents as they can be seen copying the characters on Netflix while organizing parties. This reaffirmed the research that media content can determine the social standards for adolescents (Nanglu, 2017).

The teenage boys wanted to have friendships like those they had seen in the movies, which suggested the media's role in shaping their social goals (Nanglu, 2017). As Choukas-Bradley and Nesi (2020) argue, social media has altered peer interactions, thereby lifting adolescents' social norms and standards. The impact of social networking sites where young people have both positive and negative experiences (Abi-Jaoude, et al, 2020). Social media platforms give room for social bettering, especially those that have high peer status. This way, they can form new friendships and command influence among the teens (Gadekar and Ang, 2020). On the other side, the social compensation hypothesis is the argument that the socially anxious or loners make use of social media to leave their lonely life and have the social status and peer relationships they prefer (Abi-Jaoude et al, 2020; Nesi et al, 2018).

Theme 5 Parental and Teacher Influence

This theme examines the impact parents and teachers play, in adolescent's peer relationships. Parents and teachers continue to shape their dynamics and composition to a large extent. The two groups (Group 1 and Group 2) had similar influences from parents who usually disapproved of friendships with peers seen as academically disconnected or exhibiting disruptive behavior. Teachers have considerable influence regarding student relationships through means such as seating arrangements, which may also affect their proximity and ultimately friendship development (Beirman, 2011; Farmer and Others, 2011). Observations were made in which teachers actively encouraged students

to stay away from other students who were related to misconduct thus creating a stereotyped partition in peer groups.

Although teacher interventions worked in Group 1's case, peers remained as friends throughout the adolescence process in Group 2, and that states the power of bonds among adolescents their age (Collins and Madens, 2006). Positive peer acceptance is correlated with family support and involvement in early adolescence (Feldman and Wentzel, 1990). Furthermore, persistent close relationships with parents are linked with higher levels of perceived social competence and greater satisfaction with peers in adolescence (Bell et al, 1985).

Research identifies that the role of family in the socialization process of adolescents is significant throughout adolescence, as parents continue to impact the formation of external relationships (Dekovic, 1992; Parke and Ladd, 1992). This continuous parental influence gives evidence to the family and peer relationship connection which is a very important avenue in the social development of adolescents.

Limitations

The study is subject to several limitations, foremost among which is its qualitative methodology. While qualitative research offers valuable insights, it lacks statistical representation and primarily presents data in the form of perspectives, thereby precluding the generalization of findings to broader populations. Moreover, the small sample size of 12 participants restricts the depth of understanding of the intricate phenomenon of peer relationships. Additionally, the utilization of purposive sampling further limits the generalizability of findings, particularly given the sample's homogeneity in terms of geographical location and socio-economic background, thus constraining extrapolation to rural populations.

Implications and Future Research

The present study shed light on peer relations in adolescence and the difference in these relationships among early and late adolescents, which has remained an understudied area in the existing literature. This knowledge can help parents, teachers, counselors, and educational institutions in formulating and implementing programs for children to develop cognitive and social skills. Further, the phenomenon of bullying, exclusion, and deviant peer practices can all have a negative impact on a child's social-emotional development and thus, these aspects are important to be understood by psychologists to further work on these domains in the direction of enhancing the well-being of adolescents. To further advance knowledge in this field, future research endeavors could consider augmenting sample sizes and integrating quantitative methodologies alongside qualitative approaches. A mixed-method approach holds promise in providing a comprehensive understanding of peer relationship dynamics, thereby facilitating the generalization of findings to broader populations. Additionally, there is scope for more detailed exploration of the themes identified herein, with a view to attaining a deeper comprehension of adolescent peer relationships and informing evidence-based interventions aimed at fostering adolescent well-being.

Conclusion

The paper investigates the peer relationship dynamics among Indian adolescents in detail, focusing on the complex processes of changes from early to late adolescence. Through qualitative analysis, the research highlights six key themes: Interwoven bonds: Friendships, Bullying and Victimization, Peer Conflict and Resolution, Influence of Media, and Parental and Teacher Influence. Each theme illustrates the crucial shifts in interpersonal relationships

that occur as teenagers grow and reflections of the changes that are going on in their cognitive and emotional development.

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