

Parental Beliefs About Diverse Friendships for Their Children

Abstract

This study examined whether parents encourage their children to be friends with same-identity peers more than other-identity peers, and how these beliefs may differ depending on child gender and ethnicity. Findings provide insight into the role parents may play in children's preferences for same-identity peers and how ethnic background may influence socialization practices.

Background

- Friendships that are diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender have been shown to have positive effects on youth across the lifespan – positive intergroup attitudes (Tropp & Prenovost, 2010), less peer victimization (Kawabata & Crick, 2011), and better social competence (Hunter & Elias, 1999).
- Diverse friendships foster meaningful interpersonal contact, a highly effective means of reducing prejudice, bias, and exclusion (Allport, 1954).
- Yet, children tend to prefer friendships with same-identity peers to other-identity peers (Graham et al., 2009; McPherson, Smithlovin, & Cook, 2001; Maccoby 1998).
- Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes the importance of understanding how the mesosystem (i.e., interaction between peers and families) relates to child development.
- Little research has examined the role that parents play in encouraging their children to interact with diverse peers and how this may differ between parents of Caucasian children and parents of Latino/a children.

Research Questions

1. Do parents value and encourage same-identity friendships more than other-identity friendships?
2. Do differences in parents' beliefs about friendship diversity depend on their children's ethnic background?

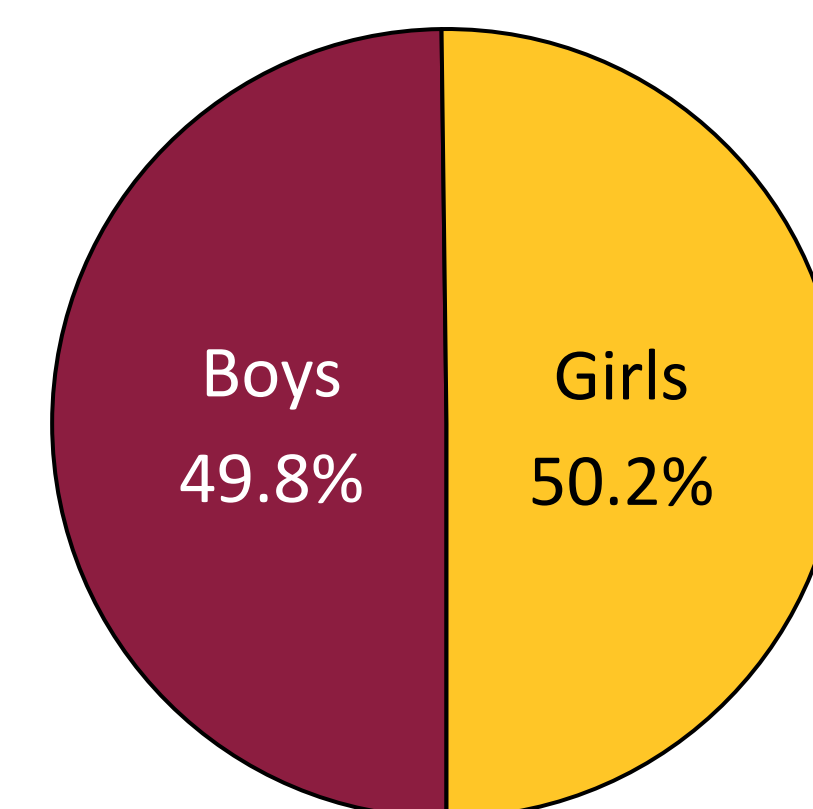
Methods

Sample

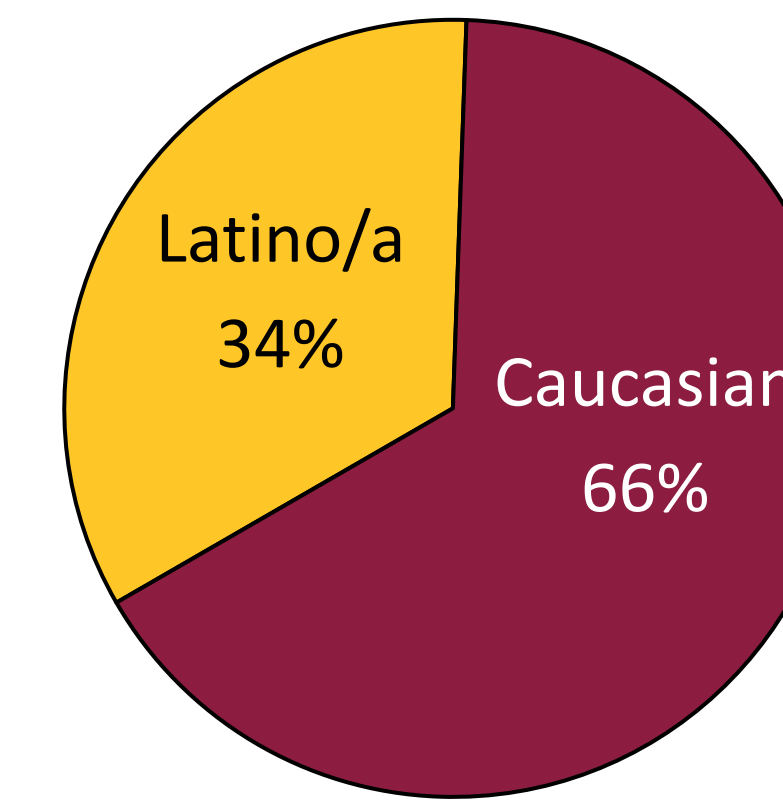
- Data was collected from 239 parents (85.4% mothers) from the Southwestern United States.
- Children were in kindergarten through 5th grades (Mean age = 8.21 years).

Methods cont.

Child Gender



Child Ethnicity



Measures

Gender/Ethnicity Beliefs about Child Friends Measure

- Likert scale of 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*)
- *I encourage my child to be friends with girls/boys/same-ethnic children/other-ethnic children.*
- *I think that it is important for my child to be friends with girls/boys/same-ethnic children/other-ethnic children.*

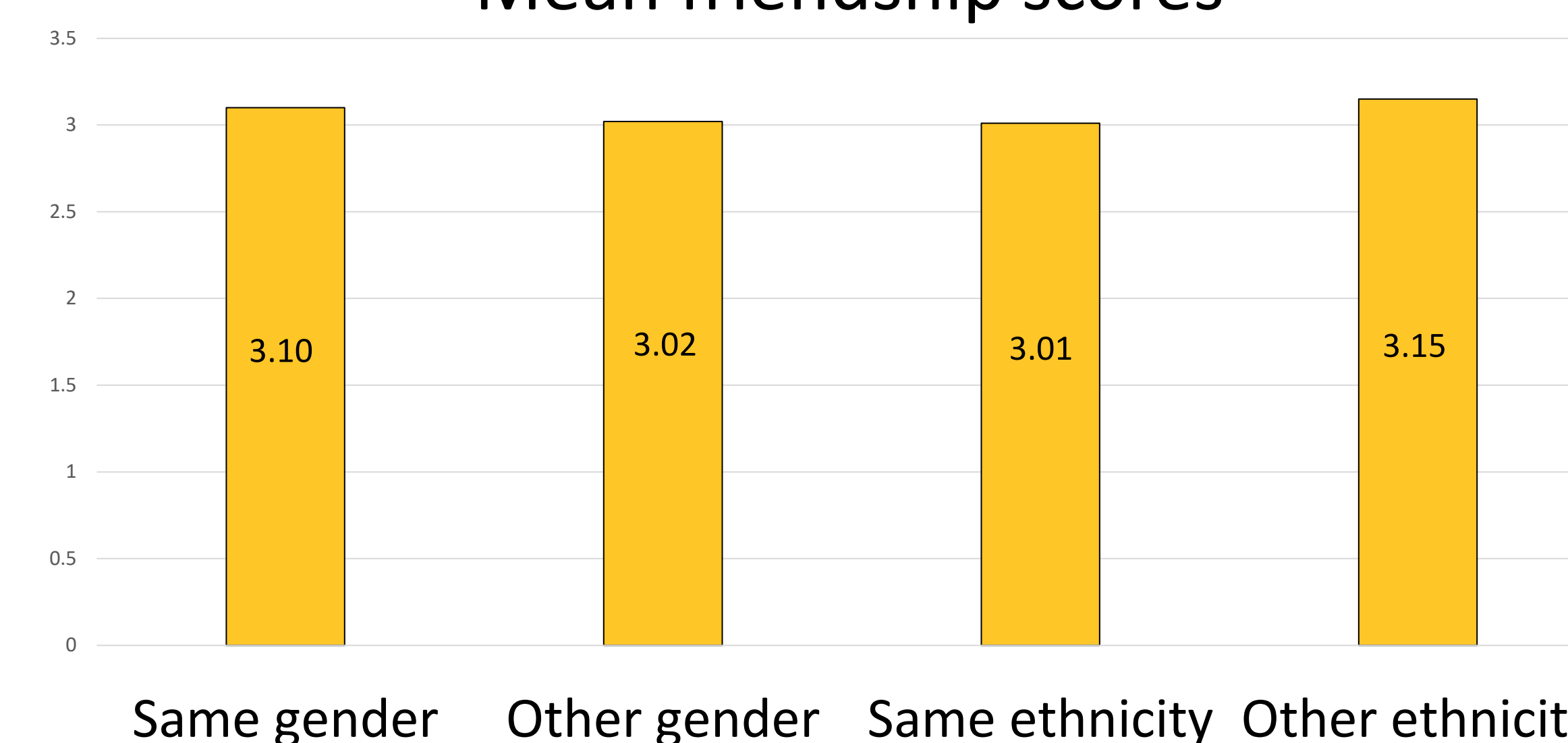
Analysis

2 (child gender: boy vs. girl) x 2 (child ethnicity: Caucasian vs. Latino/a) x 2 (gender friendships: same-gender vs. other-gender) x 2 (ethnic friendships: same-ethnic vs. other-ethnic) mixed-design ANOVA

Results

Overall, parents report that they value and encourage their children to be friends with same-gender peers more than other-gender peers ($p < .001$) and other-ethnic peers more than same-ethnic peers ($p < .001$).

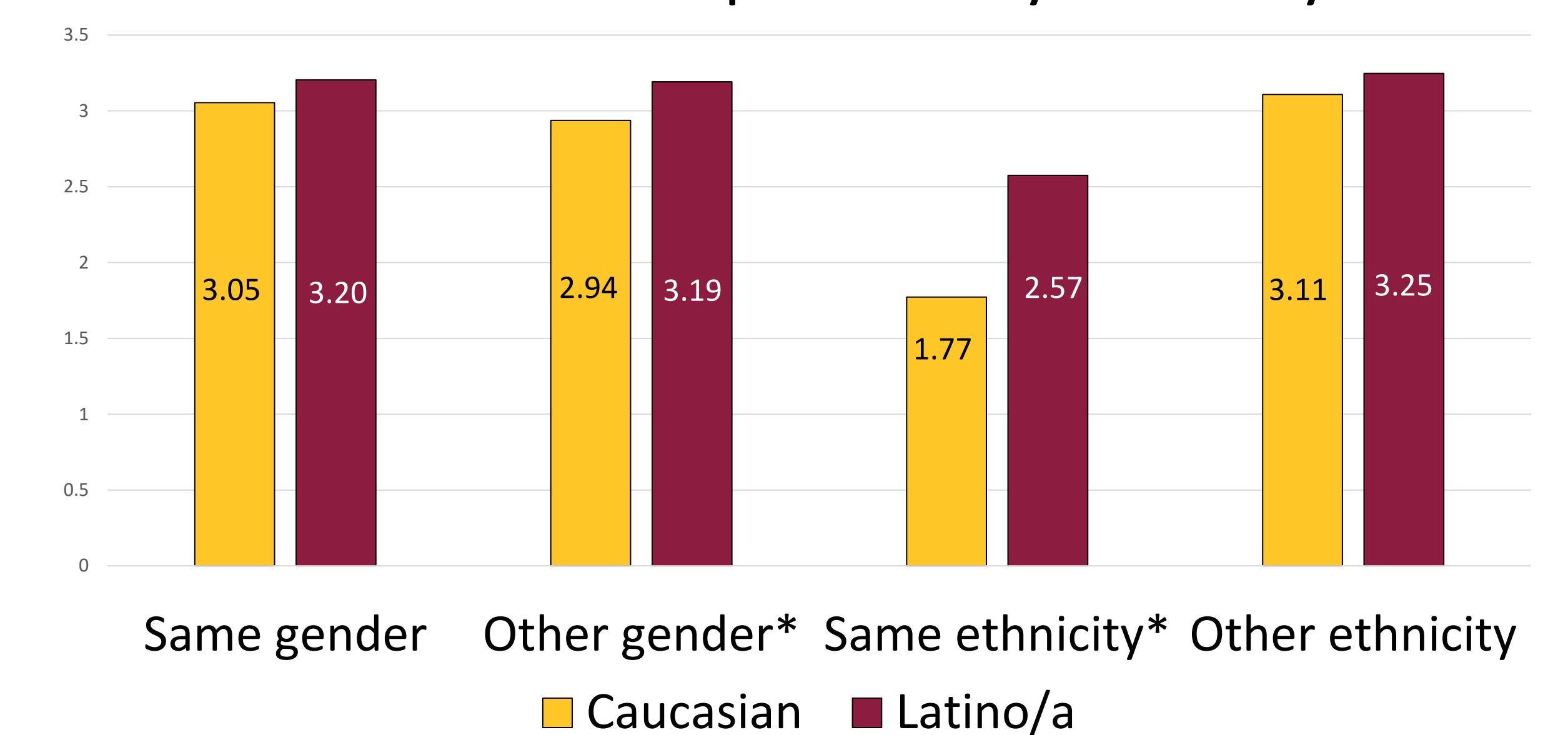
Mean friendship scores



Results cont.

Parents of Latino/a children reported higher encouragement of other-gender ($p < .001$) and same-ethnic friendships ($p < .001$) than parents of Caucasian children.

Mean friendship scores by ethnicity



Discussion

- Findings suggest that, overall, parents think about gender diversity differently than ethnic diversity. Parents of both ethnicities seem to be more progressive in their views of ethnically-diverse friendships than gender-diverse friendships for their elementary aged children.
- Across all ethnic and gender categories, parents of Latino/a children report higher value and encouragement of friendships than parents of Caucasian children.
- Differences in same-ethnic friendship beliefs may relate to cultural values and issues of oppression/privilege.
- Parenting interventions can seek to foster inclusion and equity by informing parents about the benefits of diverse friendships and providing strategies on how to promote them.

Future Directions

- Future research should consider the ethnic composition of the communities in which families live and how it relates to parental beliefs about diverse friendships.
- Future studies should also examine how parental beliefs about diverse friendships relate to the number of other-identity peers in children's actual friendship networks.
- This work should be replicated with other ethnic populations.

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