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ADOLESCENT PEER NETWORKS AS A CONTEXT FOR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

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The findings reported here emerged from a larger study of the social support networks and help-seeking experiences of low-income, Mexican-origin adolescents in San Diego, California. This larger study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and included special attention to those instances in which participating adolescents found in their friends the support necessary to withstand emotionally challenging circumstances (e.g., school-related problems) and to cope in effective ways. The analyses presented in this article highlight such instances but also examine those instances in which peer relationships failed to provide the safety and consistent support adolescents sought. Among the key findings, we describe how platonic (non-romantic) relationships between adolescent males and females emerged as an important avenue for acquiring the multiple and positive benefits of mature adolescent friendship (e.g., emotional support), particularly for the males. Study participants who reported platonic friendships also tended to report ample and diversified peer networks.

Keywords: *social support; adolescent; peer networks*

We seem to be always talking about our personal stuff; and when I have had problems, I've always gone to her. María gives me advice and tries to make me feel better.

—Marisa Fuentes (3 years in the United States) [translated]

Most adults who have regular contact with adolescents understand the value and importance that these young people attribute to their friends and peers. Yet many adults maintain a quiet suspicion and am-

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bivalence toward adolescent peer groups. On one hand, many people would concede that such groups serve as the primary means by which teenagers share and validate each other's struggles to develop new identities and to assume new, more mature roles. Many would also concede that peers usually provide emotional support and intimate counsel when adults are unavailable or appear indifferent. On the other hand, many adults regard peer groups as the instigators of all the problems we commonly associate with adolescence: defiance of adult norms, the use and abuse of alcohol and drugs, delinquency, sexual experimentation, experimentation with guns, and even suicide (Gaines, 2000; Spina, 2000, in press).

Our usual response to the link between peer group influences and adolescent risk behavior is to shore up community- and school-based mechanisms of social control (Coleman, 1988; Ianni, 1989; Spina, 2000). Seldom do we begin with the premise that peer relationships represent a vital segment of an adolescent social support system and that friendships with peers embody the potential to nurture healthy development and academic achievement in ways that adults would find hard to duplicate. Consequently, we rarely respond to adolescent risk behavior by shoring up or strengthening adolescents' peer support network.

This article examines the peer network as a context for adolescent social support; it examines the empowering potential of adolescent peer relationships as well as the forces that too often undermine their potential to provide such support. Specifically, using data collected for a study conducted by the first author (Stanton-Salazar, 2001), we look at the many instances when adolescents found in their friends the support necessary to withstand emotionally challenging circumstances (e.g., school-related problems) and to cope in appropriate and effective ways. Often, the only people who knew of an adolescent's emotional burdens and stressful circumstances were friends and close peers, and when compelled to react to these circumstances, many adolescents sought help, safety, and relief from their peers. We also address the cases in which peer relationships failed to provide the safety and consistent support adolescents sought and in which distressed teenagers consequently left the peer network.

Given the segregated and resource-poor ecologies in which these adolescents lived and went to school, and the alienation and despair

that often emanate from the collective exposure to such harsh conditions, too many of the adolescents in our study were left to draw from a “pool of eligibles” composed of other distressed teens. In these latter cases, the result was not the conventionally expected hyper-bonding and cultural alliance of disaffected youth; rather, safety was often sought in social distance and self-reliance—a phenomenon only visible through a sociologically grounded, network-analytic framework. Such a framework distinguishes between participation and social interaction within an institutional context or grouping (e.g., the school) and embeddedness within relationships oriented toward the exchange of social support bounded by trust and social obligations (see Lin, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 16). Individuals may be forced by institutional structures to interact with a large and diverse set of individuals, but even high levels of social interaction may not easily translate into access to resources and into relations of interdependence and social support. It is important to note that socially isolated or self-reliant adolescents are often difficult to identify, given their daily routine interactions with many peers and peer groups.

In the following pages, we provide a brief overview of the larger study. Before presenting the findings, we review below the theoretical importance of peer networks in adolescent social development and school integration and build a case for viewing peer groups and peer support networks as an ecological sphere that merits institutional intervention and strengthening.

THE SAN DIEGO LATINO ADOLESCENT NETWORK STUDY

This study of peer social support emerges from a larger multi-method study of the social networks and help-seeking experiences of low-income, Mexican-origin adolescents in San Diego (see Stanton-Salazar, 2001, for complete study). Using field notes gathered through 16 months of participant observation and data from network surveys, interviews, and questionnaires, the study examined a variety of individuals encountered by lower-working-class adolescents of Mexican origin in their social world and categorized the kinds of relationships they formed with the adolescents. That study identified seven catego-

ries of adults as key constituents in the networks of the most resilient participants (i.e., those adolescents who registered multiple support networks, those who were most willing to seek support and most receptive to the supportive actions of others): older siblings, parents, extended family members, friends of the family, school personnel, community- or university-based informal mentors, and role models (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Overall, the study sought to better understand how class, race, ethnicity, and gender influence the lives of urban minority adolescents from low-income immigrant families, particularly in terms of how such social indicators affect the composition and social dynamics of adolescents' support networks. In the analyses presented here, we focus exclusively on another important source of relationship and social support registered by the youth in this study, the source often identified as being more supportive than any other: the peer network.

Most of the data for this study were collected during the 1991-1992 academic year in several urban communities in San Diego, California, and in one urban high school that received students residing in these communities (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). We refer to this school by the pseudonym Auxilio High School (*auxilio* [æek-sí-ljo] [Spanish] *m.* aid, help). The names of all of the participants are also pseudonyms. The school served adolescents from three of the largest Latino neighborhoods in San Diego. The student body at Auxilio High was two thirds Latino, mainly Mexican in origin. About 82% of the Latino students came from working-class households, with about 55% from lower working-class or low-income families. Seventy-five percent of immigrant Latina mothers had not finished high school; 50% had completed 6 years of schooling or less. About 11% of the student body were African American. White students attending Auxilio High, mainly due to the International Baccalaureate magnet program, constituted about 18% of the student body. Other groups represented at the school included Filipinos, Pacific Islanders, Indo-Chinese and Chinese, and Native Americans. The three principal data sets developed and used in the parent study are as follows: (a) network survey data ($N = 75$), (b) in-depth interview data ($N = 51$), and (c) questionnaire survey of the entire student body ($N = 1,187$; basis for multivariate regressions) (see Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

The first author began data collection in the spring of 1991 with a survey of 75 Mexican-origin students, with the sample divided by gender and acculturation level (i.e., years living in the United States combined with degree of English proficiency: recent immigrants [$n = 24$] and acculturated [$n = 51$]). *Recent immigrants*, as an identifier, refers to those adolescents who had lived in the United States for 7 years or less. *Acculturated adolescents* refers to those adolescents who either were born in the United States or who had lived constantly in the United States for 8 years or more. Fifty percent of acculturated females and 76% of acculturated males were born in the United States.) Survey data were obtained using a standard network survey instrument designed to obtain extensive data on a respondent's social networks and supportive relations with various types of agents in the family, community, and school.

During the 1991-1992 academic year, a follow-up series of in-depth interviews were conducted with 51 students selected from the spring network survey (Spradley, 1979).¹ The sample was divided by achievement status, acculturation level, and gender to ensure variation. Two types of in-depth interviews were conducted; the first entailed open-ended questions and probes directly related to the adults and peers verbally identified as sources of support in the spring survey; queries were also made regarding those not identified in network survey (e.g., counselors, parents). The second type of interview entailed open-ended questions and probes that inquired about a range of issues having to do with academic achievement and the influence of various agents and social domains in the school, community, and the larger society. Both sets of interviews were conducted either in English or Spanish, depending on the preference of the interviewee. All interviewers were bilingual. All interviews were audiotaped. The first set of interviews was not transcribed verbatim; rather, extensive notes and quotations were taken (either by the first author or assistants), following a detailed note-taking scheme (see Stanton-Salazar, 2001, pp. 276-277). The second set of interviews was transcribed verbatim. Translations of quoted text that were to appear in published material were made either by the first author or a specific assistant. Reliability between the first author and the assistant reached 0.9 before translated material was incorporated into text (i.e., drafts of journal articles or book).

The study entailed the task of coconstructing with the adolescent participants the complex meaning systems that organized their network-building and help-seeking behavior. The fundamental importance of help-seeking behavior in adolescent development and well-being is informed by the research in psychology on adult and adolescent coping styles (see review by Frydenberg, 1997). In the process of coping with life's challenges, the individual makes several key appraisals of his or her situation, one of which is to determine what options and resources are available (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). With regard to the possibility of soliciting help, another key appraisal entails an assessment of the potential costs, risks, and benefits entailed in the solicitation (Gross & McMullen, 1983). Positive appraisals and a willingness to seek help from a particular agent were seen as a proxy for the existence of an authentic source of social support—a relationship with a resourceful agent or individual that exhibited a high likelihood of generating valuable forms of social support tailored to the immediate needs of the adolescent (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Although past work has given extensive attention to the theoretical underpinnings of authentic “social capital” (as supportive relations with agents possessing middle-class institutional resources) (e.g., Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, 2003), the analysis presented here focuses on forms of (peer) social support that are not only vital to adolescents' overall well-being but that also exhibit the potential for developing psychological orientations that may promote supportive relations with middle-class institutional agents (e.g., teachers).

From an anthropological point of view, such appraisals or assessments are not merely a matter of individual psychology but are fundamentally cultural and collectively reinforced (particularly within peer groups); these appraisals represent an acquired and accumulated knowledge and meaning system that people of a particular community, group, or subculture use to interpret their network-related experience and to generate their interactions in their social network (Spradley, 1979). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, adolescents act toward (potentially) resourceful agents on the basis of the meanings that these relationships have for them (Woods, 1992). Psychologists have identified these meanings—that is, the significance attributed to these relationships by the adolescents—as key factors

that result either in positive network-building behavior or in its reverse: social disconnectedness and alienation.

We approached the analysis of these meanings from the viewpoint of critical ethnography (Quantz, 1992), which aims to understand, analyze, pose questions, and affect the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape our lives (Freire, 1985). Ultimately, this study accepted the challenge posed by critical ethnographers—specifically, the task of using social science not only to “uncover the most profoundly buried structures of the various social worlds which constitute the social universe” but also to uncover and help generate the mechanisms by which we may ensure their transformation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 7). The underlying goal of the study, as a critical ethnographic project, was not to produce a familiar “emic” perspective on culture but to provide a new and hopefully illuminating perspective on how class, race, ethnicity, and gender forces play themselves out in the lives of urban minority teens, particularly in terms of how such forces affect the composition and social dynamics of adolescents’ support networks (i.e., access to social capital). This challenge also includes attention to instances of countervailing processes that moderate or mitigate the impact of harsh ecological conditions; in this article, we focus on the role of supportive peer relationships.

SOCIALIZATION FUNCTIONS OF ADOLESCENT PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Developmental psychologists have noted the important role played by peer relationships in enabling adolescents to practice and develop behaviors vital to adult relationships and in facilitating social integration in adult institutional spheres. In other words, adolescent friendships, particularly those that are emotionally strong, are more than a socializing force: They provide an important context for learning about the requirements of mature symmetrical relationships, or what Youniss and Smollar (1985) called principled relationships. The principle of symmetrical reciprocity, or reciprocal exchange, the traditional basis of adult friendship, also comes to govern many adolescent friendships. Mutual caring and mutual respect are similarly important; “failure to be fair, to be accepting, to listen, or to treat each other

with consideration [is] seen as being harmful to the relationship and as requiring some sort of actions to repair the harm so that the relationship can continue” (Youniss & Smollar, 1985, p. 130).

The principle of mutual trust also assumes a key role in adolescent friendships—specifically, the expectation that friends will not reveal confidences, will not break promises, and will not sabotage other vital ties in the peer network. This principle often becomes more salient after the adolescent suffers emotional hurt following what becomes characterized as a betrayal, such as a breach of confidentiality or when a friend develops a romantic relationship with a recent or current boyfriend or girlfriend. An adolescent’s fragile and developing self-image is influenced primarily by the adolescent’s perceptions of how significant others see them (e.g., as a fool) (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Betrayed confidences, gossip, rumors, and disrespectful acts threaten one’s social image and good standing in peer communities. In the Mexican-origin sample studied here, the expectations outlined in this section are imbued in the familiar concepts of *confianza* (mutual trust) and *desconfianza* (betrayal of trust).

Our data is replete with evidence showing adolescents immersed in increasingly complex peer relationships. At times, these teens expressed a mixture of exhilaration and exasperation at the effort required to sustain these friendships. Dealing with the subtleties of adolescent friendships became a major preoccupation, with teen participants constantly evaluating and negotiating the terms of their close relationships as well as learning to cope with and to recover from instances of norm violation, betrayal, or rejection. Relationships with friends were perceived as more complicated and tenuous than familiar kinship bonds (i.e., with siblings and cousins); nonfamilial friendships required more monitoring as well as greater efforts to honor the major tenets of mature friendship, particularly that of mutual trust and symmetrical reciprocity.

Under the appropriate conditions, adolescent friendships provide a rich context for developing what Daniel Goleman (1994) and other psychologists have referred to as emotional intelligence. These researchers argue that such intelligence is often of greater consequence to successful living than the linguistic and math dimensions of intelligence conventionally used to measure competence. Howard Gardner (1993) noted that the core of emotional intelligence includes “the ca-

pacities to discern and respond appropriately to the moods, temperaments, motivations, and desires of other people” (p. 9). It also acts at the gateway to self-knowledge, specifically in terms of “access to one’s own feelings and the ability to discriminate among them and draw upon them to guide behavior” (Gardner, 1993, p. 9).

Youniss and Smollar (1985) investigated the extent to which adolescents perceived their interactions with close friends as characterized by symmetrical understanding, measured by whether the friend explained the reasons for his or her ideas in discussion of particular topics and whether the friend really tried to understand the other’s ideas. Symmetrical understanding appears to overlap considerably with dimensions of emotional intelligence. About 66% of the females studied by Youniss and Smollar reported having close friendships characterized by symmetrical understanding and intimacy, compared to fewer than 50% of the males. Notably, nearly a third of the males reported close friendships characterized by a lack of understanding, an absence of intimacy, and a sense of guardedness or defensiveness (Youniss & Smollar, 1985, p. 104).

“EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE” AS A KEY FACTOR IN THE LIVES OF OPPRESSED YOUTH

How are these communicative competencies particularly important to the well-being of racial minority adolescents from low-income families? Peer relationships can go a long way toward mitigating the harmful effects of environmental stress on adolescent mental health. Simply put, adolescents in general depend heavily on their friends for multiple forms of social support and for staying psychologically healthy. Close friends act as “sounding boards for ideas, feelings, and problems” (Youniss & Smollar, 1985, p. 127). They provide mutual validation, occasional critical feedback, and often just an attentive and empathetic ear. The point is that the many psychological and developmental benefits of peer relationships emerge when the parties involved are acting in an “emotionally intelligent” manner, when relationships are principled, and when communicative competence is high. Such benefits may be particularly crucial to adolescents living within resource-poor and problem-plagued environments (Stanton-

Salazar & Spina, 2000). Principled peer relationships may indeed foster the type of social psychological orientation necessary for resourceful relations with adult institutional agents.

Self-disclosure within relationships is as an important prerequisite for peer mentoring. Studies show that under the proper circumstances, adolescent relationships, through self-disclosure, provide a key forum for dialogic problem solving—for discussing the nature of the problems confronted and exploring different possibilities for resolving them. Research on gender differences in self-disclosure suggests that young women may have an advantage in accessing the many psychological and developmental benefits that accrue from friendship ties. Conversation topics between adolescent female friends tend to be more oriented to family and personal problems and to the feelings associated with these problems; male conversations tend to be more concrete and event-based (Johnson & Aries, 1983). Male relationships are seen as focusing on the recounting of events and the analysis of activities, whereas female relationships are said to be rooted in the realm of emotions and symmetrical understanding (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). In general, males report less trust in their male friends and significantly less disclosure of their innermost thoughts and feelings compared to their female counterparts (Buhrmester & Furmer, 1987; Claes, 1992; Jones, 1991).

Self-disclosure involves honesty and risk taking. In terms central to this study, it requires developing help-seeking orientation that entails a certain faith and confidence in the peer support process, an inclination to trust others, and a rapidly developing emotional intelligence. Especially important is the capacity to manage those emotions that can interfere with self-disclosure and help seeking; in Salovey's terms, this is "the capacity to soothe oneself, to shake off rampant anxiety, gloom, or irritability," (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, cited in Goleman, 1994, p. 43). This aspect of emotional intelligence entails cognitive appraisals that minimize the specter of threat and emphasize the benefits of relationship, particularly when the relationships in question are potentially resourceful and supportive (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 33).

Given what we know about the potential benefits that accrue from adolescent peer relationships, questions arise about the positive mental health functions potentially embodied in peer network relations

among low-status adolescents living in racially segregated and economically marginalized communities. This is not to suggest, of course, that current research unequivocally substantiates that peer relations are always positive; on the contrary, the existing literature on gender and peer relations demonstrates that not all friendship ties are psychologically and developmentally empowering (see Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). It is clear that our concerns over youth peer groups or subcultures and their supposed resistance to adult normative control continue to dominate scholarly production. A renewed focus on the potential value of adolescent peer relations, however, would certainly include explorations of how the forces of race, ethnicity, class, and gender influence low-status youths' ability and efforts to cultivate friendships that would foster social development and resiliency.

DESCRIPTIVE PROFILE OF LATINO ADOLESCENT PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

This section provides a quantitative overview of adolescents' social networks, particularly how many peers or friends were usually cited in an adolescent's network as well as how prevalent peers were as sources of emotional support and intimate counsel (i.e., advice on personal matters). Data were derived from the network survey and follow-up interviews conducted at Auxilio High School ($N = 75$; complete data = 73). For this data set, the sample is divided by gender and acculturation level (whether living in the United States 7 years or less versus 8 years or more).

Table 1 displays the relevant descriptive statistics of the four subgroups: recent immigrant males and females and acculturated males and females. Peer networks averaged between five and six people, including peers cited merely as companions and not necessarily as sources of explicit social support. This finding should not suggest that everyone followed the same pattern. Among the acculturated females, for example, about 12% cited eight friends or more. Among the acculturated males, about 33% cited eight friends or more.

For three of the subgroups, at least half of the group reported at least one *multiplex* peer relationship; that is, a peer who was seen as a likely

TABLE 1
Peers as Reported Sources of Social Support and/or Companionship

	<i>Recent Female Immigrants^a</i> (N = 10)	<i>Acculturated Females</i> (N = 26)	<i>Recent Male Immigrants</i> (N = 14)	<i>Acculturated Males</i> (N = 23)
Mean size of peer network ^b	6.2	4.77	5.36	6.48
Percentage of subgroup where adolescent indicated a peer as a multiplex relation ^c	60%	50%	43%	57%
Percentage of subgroup where adolescent indicated a peer as a likely or past source of emotional support	70%	73%	50%	57%
Percentage of subgroup where adolescent indicated a peer as a likely or past source of intimate counsel	50%	65%	43%	57%

NOTE: N = 73 with complete data.

a. Recent immigrants were designated as those in the United States for 7 years or less.

b. Peers as either potential or likely sources of at least 1 of 12 forms of social support or as past or regular sources. Number of peers cited as sources of social support and/or companionship; cousins, other kin, and those 21 years or older were not counted. In those few instances when friendship was new (2 months or less), these peers were similarly not counted.

c. Multiplex relations are those ties that are sources of three or more sources of social support (not counting companionship).

source of three or more types of social support (other than companionship). Multiplex relationships tend to be higher in emotional importance. Among those youth who named at least one multiplex peer relationship, the averages for the subgroups hovered between two and three people. Put differently, from 40% to 50% of all peer relationships tended to provide multiple forms of support. The other half were more specialized relationships; for example, a school buddy regularly sought after for help with math homework.

PEERS AS SOURCES OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

At least half of each of the four subgroups cited a peer as a likely source of emotional support. The evidence suggests that among recent

immigrants (in the United States fewer than 7 years) and among the more acculturated, adolescent females are more likely than males to cite a peer as a source of emotional support. The data indicate that within the typical peer friendship network (averaging about five people), at least two relationships usually embodied a sufficient level of trust and confidence to merit identification as an explicit and likely source of emotional support. (This does not rule out the likelihood that friends other than those cited provided emotional support, albeit in tacit and unsolicited ways, through routine peer interactions.)

We also examined the extent to which friends comprised the total number of identified sources of emotional support. Here we see that from about 50% to 75% of participating adolescents identified peers as their sole sources of emotional support. Acculturated females appear to be the most reliant on their peers for this type of assistance.²

PEERS AS SOURCES OF INTIMATE COUNSEL

When we look at *intimate counsel*, or advice on personal matters (outside the realm of academics), gender group differences appear to dissipate. Once again, we refer to Table 1. Between half and two thirds of the youth we studied cited at least one friend as a source of intimate counsel. Still, this leaves quite a significant percentage of each group that did not feel comfortable seeking such support from friends. Among those adolescents who named at least one peer as a likely source of intimate counsel, the averages for each group hovered around two peers. We then see that, in most cases, between 40% and 50% of all supportive peers were considered as sources of either intimate counsel or emotional support or both.

Other evidence emerged showing that peer support may not have been an inevitable feature of these Latino adolescents' lives. More pointedly, a considerable proportion of the adolescents we interviewed revealed peer networks that placed them at considerable risk of social isolation. In closely examining the peer networks of our subsample of 51 adolescents (intensive follow-up interviews with 51 of the original 75 participants), we took into account the number and combination of multiplex and uniplex ties, the existence of platonic friendships, the degree of social interaction and exchange of support, and indicators of network density (e.g., friends knowing each other).

For each subgroup, a substantial proportion, if not the majority, reported either a very small or weak peer social support network or no peer network at all (recent immigrant females: 42%; acculturated females: 60%; recent immigrant males: 66%; acculturated males: 46.2%). Keep in mind that the network of peers who provide specific forms of social support is quite different from the size and influence of an adolescent's immediate circle of friends and acquaintances (cf. Kirby & Moore, 1999). We turn now to our qualitative interview findings.

CRITERIA FOR ESTABLISHING STRONG AND ENDURING RELATIONS: THE PRINCIPLES OF *CONFIANZA*

As with the findings on relationships with parents and with school personnel (Stanton-Salazar, 2001), issues of *confianza*, or trustworthiness, dominated adolescent concerns pertaining to their peer relationships (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1980; Ramírez & Castañeda, 1974). Although it was plainly evident that the adolescents strove to be principled in their relationships, norm violations were rampant and vigilance became virtually habitual. Among those adolescents who experienced repeated betrayals or disappointment, we see friendship selection as a conscious and rationalized process, with friendship candidates undergoing considerable scrutiny.

Elena Guerrero, a senior and member of the varsity cheerleaders, talked extensively about her problematic relations with Terry, a girl she met through her best friend, Carla. For a time, Elena tried to get along with Terry, called her occasionally on the phone, and tried to initiate reciprocal exchanges (e.g., academic support, personal favors). However, when the three tried out for the cheerleading team, and Terry did not qualify (due to poor grades), relations began to sour. Elena conveyed her early suspicions: "Ever since that day when we tried out, she's had this thing against me and Carla."

Elena stated that soon after the tryouts, she felt she needed to know whether she could continue to trust Terry, so she devised a test of sorts. In her own words,

One time I confided in her. I guess you could say I was trying to test her to see. I told her a secret and told her not to tell my best friend Carla.

Well, she went behind my back and told her, but the good thing was that I had already told my secret to Carla. Ever since that day, I don't trust her with anything.

Elena and Carla later conferred on the matter and agreed not to confront Terry with her infraction. Elena observed, "I guess to other people she can be a good friend but not to me." Queried as to whether Terry had ever asked her for help or whether Terry had ever placed herself in a vulnerable position, Elena admitted, "No, I guess she's too big-headed." After this incident, Elena was free to distance herself from Terry without any intervention or disapproval from Carla.

Issues of dependability also appeared as salient criteria for assessing friendships, at least for the adolescent females. Rosaura, another friend of Elena's, showed herself to be a highly reliable friend. Elena conveyed her appreciation for Rosaura emphatically while admitting her shortcomings, particularly her abuse of drugs and alcohol.

Rosaura doesn't have a lot of willpower. She likes parties and stuff, and she doesn't know how to control herself in that way; but when I need her, she's always there. I'll call her at 12 o'clock at night and she'll be there. She has helped me through a lot of stuff.

Rosaura's dependable availability earned her a very special status in Elena's peer network. Elena also admitted that Rosaura's advice and predictions had been consistently, almost uncannily, on target. Rosaura's consistency and long track record with Elena had permitted Rosaura to gain Elena's unconditional trust, even to the point that Rosaura could become, at times, painfully forthright with Elena. In Elena's own words, "I guess like when you don't want to hear the truth, you just don't like the person who is telling you, but that's a really good friend, because they're telling you the truth."

Rosaura was conscious of her potentially negative influence and encouraged Elena not to be like her in this way. Elena, in turn, had long tried to dissuade Rosaura from abusing drugs and alcohol but tired of her minimal influence on Rosaura. Elena admitted to having considered seeking outside help for Rosaura but was afraid of losing Rosaura's confidence. Silence was an uncomfortable yet worthwhile price to pay when trustworthiness in friendship was seen as a form of peer capital not easily accumulated.

Key to this peer capital formation among adolescents are the principles and rules of engagement similarly found among adults, particularly the norm of reciprocity. Adolescents expect to repay favors and to have their favors repaid. The equality of a relationship, or the opportunity to play both receiver and giver, although seldom a principle in adolescent-adult relations (e.g., with teachers), is paramount in peer relationships. The fact that Terry rarely asked Elena for support was a strong signal to Elena that the foundation for a solid friendship was not being built.

Dolores Villanueva, an 11th grader who had been in the United States only 3 years, described, with a good deal of satisfaction, the evolution of her platonic friendship with Alberto and the considerable trust and positive “help-seeking orientation” that had accumulated in their relationship. Dolores described her relationship with Alberto as highly multiplex and recounted how over the past year they provided each other with various forms of academic support, advice on post-high school plans, emotional support, and intimate counsel. Dolores spoke humorously yet candidly of the significant “credit” she had accumulated in her relationship with Alberto. Asked whether she ever hesitated in asking Alberto for help, she asserted,

Well, no, because he also owes me many favors. . . . If he’s able to, he’ll do them for me and if not, he’ll tell me “Listen here, dear woman, I’m not able to do this for you but next time, I promise.”³ [translated from Spanish]

Dolores spoke proudly of how her relationship with Alberto had matured, becoming more principled, more adult-like. The exchange process was now taken more seriously. “Before, it was just fooling around . . . and this year things are more serious. Now he doesn’t ask for my help on every little thing he needs. Now he asks me for necessary things, something he really needs [translated].”

Asked to talk about how her friendship with Alberto had matured emotionally, Dolores shared both her thoughts and deep feelings.

Well, it’s stronger. It’s grown a bit more. . . . I know I really have his support and he takes me more seriously than other people. . . . We work our problems out together because when he has a problem, he consults

with me and I help him. And when I need something, I ask him and he helps me; really, we have a beautiful friendship. [translated]

Note here Dolores's ability to articulate the subtleties and underlying aspects of mature friendship and social support: the accumulation of credit, the development of trust and mutual dependability, the serious attention to the responsibilities of reciprocal exchange, and the emergence of strong emotional attachment that comes to accompany enduring relations of mutual support. Certainly, such articulation was not evident across all the adolescent groups we studied. By substantial measure, recent immigrant females seemed to exhibit the greatest skill. We will return to this issue later in this article.

THE PEER NETWORK AS A SOURCE OF KEY DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES

Adolescents usually had most to say about their peers around issues related to the exchange of emotional support and intimate counsel. Throughout our interviews, the mental health function of peer relationships emerged as the most salient. Females tended to discuss mental health issues using a more elaborated relational discourse than males, although some young men exhibited similar facility, as we shall see below. For both gender groups, emotionally close and trusting relationships were most often identified by the exchange of emotional support and intimate counsel. Similarly, tales of betrayal and disappointment usually were linked to friends who failed to come through during an emotional crisis or who precipitated or aggravated such a crisis by not providing the desired emotional support.

Although the adolescents in our study had some awareness of the mental health functions of their friendships, often identifying their best or closest friends (whether consciously or implicitly) in terms of emotional support and intimate counsel, very few explicitly articulated the more latent (mental health) functions of peer relationships. We have already addressed the role these peer relationships play in fostering the development of emotional intelligence, in enabling adolescents to learn about the principles of adult symmetrical relationships, and in allowing them to profit from dialogic problem solving.

We also found that peer networks seemed to foster emotional intelligence and dialogic problem solving for adolescents and provided other key benefits as well. One of the many benefits gained through intimate self-disclosure was a panoramic view not only of the kinds of problems, crises, and life-disturbances other adolescents were coping with (e.g., academic difficulties, divorce, care of immigrant parents with minimal schooling, acculturation stress among recent immigrants, substance abuse, depression, community violence, and boyfriend/girlfriend problems—including issues of contraception and pregnancies), but also of how their peers were coping with them. Through diversified peer relationships came the potential of vicarious learning (i.e., efforts to avoid the same mistakes). Elena Guerrero, for example, drew important lessons from the social life of her friend and confidante Rosaura. In the most mature relationships, peers often shared judgments about why the person had found him or herself in a certain problematic situation, and how they may have contributed to or aggravated the problem.

THE VALUE OF PLATONIC FRIENDSHIPS WITH ADOLESCENT FEMALES

Our data on platonic relationships between adolescent males and females suggests that these relationships may provide an important avenue for acquiring the positive benefits of mature adolescent friendships, particularly for the males. Among the young men in this study, the existence of platonic friendships was routinely associated with a generalized positive “help-seeking orientation.” In the larger study, although males as a group were less likely than females to report a positive help-seeking orientation, those young men reporting positive orientations were more likely (than their male peers with negative orientations) to seek academic help from school personnel—with such help seeking serving as a key indicator in the study of social integration in the school (findings based on quantitative measures and multiple regression analyses) (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, chapter 10).

Cultivating a set of supportive cross-gender relationships, particularly during later adolescence, may very well require adherence to principles that allow for the development of emotional intimacy out-

side the domain of romance and sex. The data suggests that males who reported strong platonic (nonromantic) friendships were able to experience relational aspects not usually afforded other males (i.e., the majority), who established ties to females along more conventional lines (i.e., either weak ties or relations involving flirtation and romance). Males reporting platonic friendships often described these relationships as embodying “confidant” relationships. In discussions regarding these friendships, evidence emerged showing regular interactions characterized by what Youniss and Smollar (1985) called *symmetrical understanding*. (In other words, the males acknowledged that these young women spent a good deal of time listening empathetically to their troubles and preoccupations, and in turn, they were able to do the same.) Relations appeared unfettered by the dynamics of romance, flirtation, and sexual pursuit. Yet for those males without girlfriends, it also permitted them to enjoy secure and consistent female companionship. Those males reporting platonic friendships appeared to gain many more opportunities for emotional support and intimate counsel, for putting into practice the principles of intimate adult relationships, and for the development of a relational discourse (a key dimension of Goleman’s [1994] emotional intelligence).

Ernesto Arrévalo, an immigrant senior who had lived in the United States for 7 years, was notable for his extensive family network and the many peers he cited in the network survey (13 friends), which included 5 peers as sources of emotional support. Included in his peer network of support were five relationships with adolescent females or young adult women, one a girlfriend, several spouses of family members, and several schoolmates, including Norma. Ernesto and Norma had been friends for nearly 5 years. Ernesto cited Norma as a reliable source of nine types of social support in addition to companionship. He said that they had frequent personal conversations, usually at school, and that they regularly offered each other emotional support and intimate counsel. Note how Ernesto described his feelings for Norma using the concept of “sister,” as follows:

Le tengo un cariño así con ella como si fuera también mi hermana [I have such love for her, as if she were my sister] like that, something like that; that is, I get along well with her. We always support each other, it

doesn't matter what it is; if she asks me, I help her, and if I ask her, she helps me, with anything.

The metaphor of "sister" and "brother" [*hermana, hermano*] emerged repeatedly in adolescent accounts of platonic relationships, although more so in the accounts of males. Yet even in these cases, the emotional bond of fictive kinship was never a guarantee of self-disclosure, only a promise of a greater likelihood.

Daniel Montalvo also reported several strong platonic relationships as well as a diversified peer network. Daniel described Marisa as "a best friend." Like Ernesto and Norma, Daniel and Marisa met in junior high school and spent time together on several projects and group activities, including the school band. Daniel described how he and Marisa spent considerable time playing the guitar and flute together during those years. He said that such activities afforded them the time and leisure to get to know each other well. In discussing their relationship, Daniel affirmed, "We basically talk about everything." He also explained how he accepted Marisa's boyfriend, José, into his personal friendship network. "We're kind of like a family [him, Marisa, and a few other friends], so he became part of the family." Yet the tragic drowning of their friend, Samuel, led Daniel and Marisa to seek emotional support from others. Daniel confessed his perplexity over Marisa's withdrawal, noting that perhaps she needed time to get over Samuel's sudden death.

Part of the story here is that although Daniel and Marisa shared mutual friends that formed something like "a family," Marisa's particular coping style called for a solution outside of the group. In some cases we encountered, coping with a sudden tragedy or an emotional crisis entailed withdrawing to grieve with a selected subset of friends. Evidently, Marisa chose to find solace in her family and her boyfriend, José.

Many of the young men who professed not seeking, receiving, or needing emotional support did nonetheless provide indirect evidence to the contrary. Their self-perceptions or distrust of the disclosure process simply did not permit them to openly admit it. In many cases, such negative orientations prevented these young men from maximizing the often-significant supportive potential that was inherent in their

networks. Mateo Hinojosa, a United States–born, 11th-grade C student and varsity athlete, reported in the original network survey a peer network consisting of four females and eight males. Two male friends, one female friend, and both of his parents were cited as likely sources of emotional support. Yet, in our follow-up interview, Mateo seemed ambivalent about his need for emotional support. Although he felt that his friends were there for him if and when he needed them, he asserted that he usually did not like to talk about highly personal or emotional issues with his peers. He clarified for us those friends from whom he would seek emotional support: “Only people I really, really trust, family mostly. I don’t spill my guts to everybody.” Two male friends originally cited as multiplex sources of support (including emotional support) were later described in the language of companionship, but Mateo’s description hid their function as occasional providers of emotional support. Both friendships originated in junior high school, and both are highly multiplex. Mateo mentioned “friendship,” “money,” “schoolwork,” “help and companionship” in the weight room and on the football field, and other forms of support; but intimate counsel and emotional support were never explicitly mentioned.

Mateo, however, did an about-face when we began talking about Mercy, a young woman he met earlier that year and whom he had come to have deep feelings for, although at the time of the interview she was not his girlfriend. With Mercy, Mateo was able to acknowledge his full engagement in reciprocal relations of intimate counsel and emotional support—which he indicated was happening almost on a daily basis. Mateo shared how Mercy supported him in many ways.

De todo. She supports me to do better in school. She tells me to do good in football and to try to get a scholarship. . . . *Cuando me siento deprimido, hablo con ella* [When I feel depressed, I talk to her].

Mateo also credited Mercy with calming him down when he sometimes felt overwhelmed with rage and tempted to provoke a fight to blow off steam.

You know, I’m the kind of guy that can go around and like, you know, get mad and you know . . . *siento como que quiero chingar a alguien*. [I

feel like I wanna fuck somebody up (i.e., to hit and seriously injure someone)]. She's the person that when she looks at me, you know [giggles], all those mad feelings go to, like, Oh God!, you know. Like she can control me, like she's holding me back, just by looking at me [laughs].

Mateo was able to acknowledge his receipt of emotional support from Mercy in ways he could not when talking about his male friends. His feelings of affection for Mercy and his acknowledgment of her loving manner toward him are culturally appropriate, just as an explicit acknowledgment of the mutual emotional support and love between his male companions were culturally inappropriate. Mateo was able to tune in to his emotions regarding Mercy, to acknowledge the wonder of loving relations with a peer and of how such relations had a calming effect on him. His clumsy yet effortful articulations, however, turned to overworked clichés when describing his close male friends, as if an attempt was being made to hide the deep emotional content of these relationships: "We're homeys. . . . he's a friend, that's all, you know" suggests a denial of greater intimacy made with some annoyance, a plea for the probing to cease. There was some discomfort here, in a way not apparent when Mateo talked about Mercy. Mateo's case, as with many of the other males we interviewed, suggests a gender orientation that prevented males from fully accessing and benefiting from the emotional support apparent in relationships with other young men.

The value of cross-gender (platonic) friendships among males seems particularly salient. Part of why this is the case has to do with homophobic fears that underlie and constrain male relationships in highly patriarchal cultures (see Messner, 1992, pp. 96-97). The expression of emotional vulnerability and the reciprocal exchange of emotional support among heterosexual males must be intertwined (and disguised) with conventional male activities and communicative exchanges to appear legitimate (e.g., drinking together, hugs with an aggressive edge). Such disguising, however, is not without consequences, serving first and foremost to impede the development of young men's emotional intelligence and serving, second, to undercut the healing and developmentally empowering potential within their male peer network.⁴

THE VALUE OF PLATONIC FRIENDSHIPS WITH ADOLESCENT MALES

For both the adolescent females and males in this study, close platonic friendships, specifically multiplex ones, revealed a deeper complexity than same-gender relationships. Our queries of these friendships sparked the most animated discussion from our study participants and generated the most interesting material. Both sexes understood, at some level, that these relationships were special—and deserving of extraordinary care. Already mentioned is the possibility that platonic relationships, particularly among males, carry the promise of fostering the capacity for emotional intelligence. Based on our data, although the possibility of platonic relationships converting to romantic relations is always a possibility, the motives and investments underlying each form seemed sufficiently distinct to make such conversions rare.

Among adolescent females in this study, other noteworthy possibilities for advantageous socialization emerged. It is important to note that recent research has shown that adolescent females tend to not only be more psychologically oriented toward peer relationships than are males but also tend to be more receptive than males to messages transmitted by their peers (Bearman & Bruckner, 1999). This finding has both positive and negative implications. Dolores Villanueva's friendship with Alberto, discussed above, became an important vehicle for learning the subtleties and underlying aspects of mature friendship and social support—particularly in relations with males. We also see opportunities for young women to experience the depth of social support from a non-kin male peer, perhaps for the first time in their lives. Finally, we see the possibility that positive platonic relations with adolescent males lay the normative groundwork, and the level of expectations, for future relationships with males—as friends, as school colleagues, and as romantic partners. Perhaps such women, as adults, would be less likely to unwittingly place themselves in subordinate and subservient positions in their relations with men. More immediately important is that these adolescent females would be expected to be less likely to “fall in love” with a young man unaccustomed or resistant to authentically egalitarian and emotionally reciprocating relations—and to its likely correlation: premature or high-pressure sexual

involvement. Bearman and Bruckner (1999), in a survey study of 90,000 adolescents, found that adolescent females' involvement with male friends already engaged in "high-risk behaviors" and with older friends increases their chances of premature sexual involvement and pregnancy. Seen from the vantage point of our own study, platonic relationships with "low-risk" males (i.e., exhibiting moderate to high emotional intelligence) would be expected to lower the probability of premature sexual involvement considerably.

Aida Ponce's peer network provides a significantly different, and perhaps more complex and troublesome, perspective on relations with male peers. Aida, a U.S.-born high school senior, reported a peer network of five friends, three of whom were males, one of them her fiancé. Aida was accustomed to building close friendships with males as well as females. She spoke warmly about her friend David, whom she routinely saw through her participation in the ROTC program at Auxilio High. She described David's sympathetic support: "David's nice to go to because if you have a problem, he doesn't laugh or anything. He's just quiet and he listens." David also occasionally relied on Aida for support: "He'll maybe ask me for advice, what would I do in a situation because he's got a family that's not that good."

Seeking support from J. T., another male friend, however, was somewhat complicated, given that he was the brother of her best friend, Tina. Aida often played a mediator role between the two siblings when they had a dispute, reinforcing her sibling-like emotional connection to both J. T. and Tina. Yet J. T. did not act as a source of emotional support and intimate counsel for Aida, particularly on those issues independent of her relationship with Tina. Aida was able to hone her mediator skills with J. T., but J. T. didn't provide the kind of support generously offered by David.

Aida's relationships with young males reached fullest expression with Pedro, her fiancé. Aida described her satisfaction with the many forms of support Pedro apparently provided her: "He helps me at school, with personal problems in my house, everything. He's like a very supportive person." Yet Pedro's expectation that Aida "be there" for him in a reciprocal manner included reducing her involvement in ROTC, which he perceived as competing with him for Aida's time and energy. Being with Pedro involved negotiating her involvement in an

institutional setting that constituted a major part of her social support system.

Relationships with males, both platonic and romantic, did appear to provide important opportunities for adolescent females to experience emotional and social support from males, as well as to learn how to deal with men on more egalitarian bases. However, such relationships also carried the vestiges of patriarchy, with its cultural pressures toward inequitable and hierarchical relations. Latina adolescents are always susceptible to becoming surrogate mother figures and selfless caregivers for Latino adolescent males who may now feel too grown up and too culturally different to turn to their real mothers for support. Although many Latino young men find in platonic relationships the familiar and soothing figure of a female caregiver and although they employ this familiar connection as the basis from which they can securely explore more egalitarian and nonromantic aspects of cross-gendered friendship, Latina adolescents begin platonic relationships with minimal experience with men as caregivers. So, although platonic relations do heighten the chances for establishing egalitarian and authentically and mutually supportive relationships with young men, without outside mediation or a learned hypersensitivity or aversion to conventionally asymmetrical relations with male peers, "platonic" relations could merely provide another arena from which to practice the traditionally female caregiving role.

BOYFRIENDS

Clearly, the role of caregiver was evident in adolescent females' discussions regarding relations with their boyfriends. Usually, however, such caregiving was set within a relationship marked by adherence to the rules of close friendship, including expectations for reciprocal exchange. In some cases, the sense of identification and attachment became quite intense. One exemplary case is that of Ana Helguerra, an independent, pragmatic, and quite opinionated young woman who had lived in the United States for many years. Ana spoke of her Mexican-Argentine boyfriend, Noel, who had graduated in June and was now enrolled at a local community college. Ana, a senior, described the evolution of their relationship below; note Ana's

reference to their preliminary sibling-like relationship as well as her sense of seeing herself in him.

We became really good friends, and then we got to the point when we thought he was probably a brother of mine that my mom sort of dropped off somewhere [laughs]. And then we started liking each other, and then we started going out, like on a trial basis, and then it worked. . . . I almost see myself in him; he's umm, he's done more things than me, he does all those things that I would do if I were a guy, but I can't because I'm a girl and there's always a barrier (i.e., norms). . . . I see myself in him if I had been a boy.

Noel was an acknowledged source of many forms of support, including emotional support and help with schoolwork. Ana also gave back. Noel came from a very troubled family, and Ana offered as much moral and emotional support as she could.

During periods of distress and emotional vulnerability brought on by the many challenges and predicaments of adolescence, boyfriends and girlfriends do often assume a special status—often the mainstay of the peer support network. The need for emotional support from the partner, particularly at times of crisis, followed by its provision, opens the door for intensified bonding, especially when older family members and adults appear absent or are viewed as the cause of the distress. There are times when the adolescent feels that only their partner or beloved is truly accessible as a source of emotional and social support; under such conditions, an “us-against-the-world” stance appears more probable.

The case of Natividad Fernández, who has lived in the United States since infancy, is also exemplary. This timid, low-achieving, sometimes withdrawn young woman accused her mother of ignoring her and doting on her pregnant younger sister, Eva. To make matters worse, she said, her parents did not like her boyfriend and closely monitored their time together. Natividad's peer network was small, composed only of two young women and her boyfriend Martín; and it was Martín who ranked as her “best friend” and most important source of support and companionship. As she explained it, “Well, he always helps me with everything . . . he's just always there for me.” Natividad did not completely trust her girlfriends' ability to keep confidences

and consciously set limits on her relations with them. Her innermost feelings and concerns were reserved for discussions with her boyfriend.

From Natividad's perspective, there was reason for distrust and caution in nearly every social domain in which she participated. Her family had become a source of hurt and conflict; at school she complained that "there's nobody available" but thought that "the teachers should be there"; and her two girlfriends were perceived as overburdened and undeserving of her trust—and perhaps her respect. Natividad was not pleased that her two closest girlfriends planned their pregnancies and then dropped out of school to have their babies. She saw their circumstances as overshadowing her own problems, yet her sense of loyalty compelled her to remain a major source of support for both of them. However, there was little reciprocity—she understood that they were simply not "there for me." Although she was performing poorly in school, Natividad did not want to get pregnant, because, as she put it, "I want to do something with my life. I don't want to be bumming around or working my butt off for nothing. I want to do something." In the end, Natividad felt that Martín was her lifeline at a time of significant turmoil and uncertainty.

Other cases emerged demonstrating the intense bonding between adolescents and their romantic partners, yet our discussions with the young women in our study also produced the most ambivalent sentiments. Although most adolescent females discussed the reciprocal support enjoyed in their relationships, most accounts by females also emphasized various points of dissatisfaction and conflict. They described incidences of betrayed confidences and frayed reputations, overly jealous boyfriends, and partners inept at providing quality emotional support and unable to reveal their emotional vulnerability or to ask for help. Adolescent females wanted their boyfriends to be trustworthy, noncontrolling, romantically and sexually faithful, communicative, and emotionally intelligent. That their boyfriends were often perceived as grossly deficient in one or more of these qualities led to arguments, disillusionment, and spoiled relations.

Complaints by Aida Ponce's boyfriend, Pedro, regarding her commitment and involvement in ROTC tarnished an otherwise happy and mutually supportive relationship. Aida felt she needed the support of both Pedro and ROTC (i.e., her affiliated friends). Luz María Loza

complained that her boyfriend became perturbed when he saw her chatting with her ex-boyfriend, yet he would not tolerate her queries into his own occasional interactions with his ex-girlfriend. Jacqueline Mora asserted that her boyfriend's jealousy and controlling behavior was a major reason that they finally broke up. Lilia Escarza conveyed her hurt and anger at her former boyfriend who betrayed her confidence.

This year I was talking to my boyfriend, telling him my problems and I said to him, "Don't tell so and so," and the first thing he did, you know, was go and tell his friends, so I don't trust him anymore.

Elisa Montes relied on her boyfriend Ray for emotional support but lamented that when she needed advice, he didn't know what to say. He would listen to her, but Elisa also wanted Ray to provide her intimate counsel, along with an empathetic yet insightful perspective. Elisa explained it this way, "He didn't understand what was wrong with me; he's a guy and guys usually don't get things like this; they're not really sentimental."

Other adolescent males voiced their frustration at their girlfriends' insistence that they adhere to certain principles of intimate adult relationship, that they be sensitive to their feelings and concerns as well as self-aware about their own emotions. Javier Soto found it somewhat awkward to admit to the social support and emotional benefits he derived from his relationship with his girlfriend Elizabeth, now pregnant and living with him and his mother. Javier described his relationship as "understanding," then paused, searching for other things to say, until he described his relationship as "good, close and whatever, understanding and all that." A few minutes later, however, Javier had other key things to say.

She tries to get an attitude, because I can tell her what to do, and she tries to tell *me* and I won't do it and she gets mad, 'cause I can tell her what to do, but she can't tell me what to do.

Although Javier had recently been expelled from Auxilio High for an entire academic year for fighting and had a pregnant girlfriend, he asserted that he did not have any problems. Even if he did, he said, he

would not tell Elizabeth, because she would only feel sorry for him. He preferred to deal with his problems by himself. Although admitting, albeit in a clumsy way, that Elizabeth offered him "understanding," he also declared that he is "always doing things for her." Her emotional offerings are thus compensated with personal services and "favors" but seldom with emotional reciprocity. Such examples reflect the challenges, complaints, and frustrations of young Latinas desirous of a special relationship with a male, one that reflects, to a significant extent, the principles of a mature and evolved adult relationship; yet the cultural constraints of adolescence under patriarchy appear considerably at odds with such youthful female longings.

THE LANGUAGE OF COMMUNALISM IN LATINO PEER SUPPORT

We see then the reasonable possibility that the human relational styles of recent Mexican immigrants may be playing an important contributing role in generating peer relationships that are particularly conducive to the sharing and exchange of social support. Other related factors may also be at play. Although the English language historically functioned as the linguistic vehicle for the emergence of Anglo individualism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Waterman, 1984; Watt, 1989), Spanish, at least in the Latin American context, has served as the repository for traditional third world communalism. Spanish is a "relational discourse" in a way English is the modernist discourse of individual autonomy and the asocial self; Spanish carries the means to articulate the subtleties of relationship in the same way English offers the codes useful in articulating individual identity.⁵ It is not so surprising then that the scholarly treatments of traditionally Mexican human relational styles show an uncanny resemblance to current scholarly treatments of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1994; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Still other factors underlying platonic friendship among immigrants can be cited. The shared experience as immigrants in a foreign land and the sense of opportunity and optimism also may play a crucial role. Rather than being bound by the glue of cultural disaffection, recent immigrant adolescents share a hope for a better life than that of their parents; they see the United States as the promised "land of opportunity," not one of blocked opportunity (Ogbu, 1991).

The stricter norms governing the social lives and peer relationships of Mexican adolescent females must also be examined (see Buriel, 1984). To the extent that immigrant females adhere to these standards, we see platonic relationships forming within a normative climate that clearly dictates appropriate behavior between adolescent males and females. In immigrant enclaves, such norms are regularly reinforced by parents through their insistence that they, as a family and as a subcommunity, are "different" from the others (i.e., from the more culturally assimilated and disaffected sector of the Latino community).

More acculturated sectors of the Latino youth community are more susceptible to contemporary mainstream norms and ideologies related specifically to cross-gender relationships and to relationships in general: the premium placed on self-reliance and on individual identity, the commercial hyper-exploitation of female images as sexual icons, and the general relaxing of norms regulating sexual behavior among teens. With "subtractive acculturation" (versus biculturalism and Spanish language retention) also comes the gradual detachment from Mexican Spanish as the discourse binding the peer network (Gibson, 1995).⁶ In contrast to the experience of many immigrants reared in Spanish-speaking countries, U.S.-born Latino youth (or those who immigrate to the United States as young children) grow up exposed routinely to mainstream cultural messages that emphasize the values of competition, individual accountability, and self-reliance (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985).

PEER NETWORKS AS TENUOUS WEBS

It is easy to assume that the peer group is where low-status teens retreat to find relief from the stresses of adolescence and marginality, that peer groups consistently provide refuge and support. Yet our interviews reveal that, for a good number of working-class Latino youth, the pattern of isolation and social silence observed in relations with adults at home and at school, also pervades relations with peers. These interviews reveal a disquieting and often obscure form of alienation in the Latino adolescent peer community, obscure because social interaction with peers may register at moderate to high levels.⁷

This alienation, a form of extreme self-reliance, becomes most visible through a network-analytic lens; peer interactions may appear abundant, particularly given the sea of Latino students observable at Auxilio High. Yet peer interactions do not necessarily translate into relationships of trust and social support. Examples of disconnection and exasperation have already been shown. Lilia Escarza conveyed her disappointment over her former boyfriend's betrayal of her trust. In a time of tragedy and sorrow, David turned to Marisa but found her emotionally unavailable.

For most of these young people, adolescence is experienced within cultural and institutional spaces (particularly schools) that provide virtually no systematic training for the task of constructing social systems of support, including the cultivation of positive peer relationships. Such spaces are also defined by class and racial forms of segregation. School organizations and athletic teams do provide an important setting for many youth (for tacit learning), and yet close to two thirds of Latino students at Auxilio High did not participate in organizations or teams.

Although segregated urban environments bring together young people who share the same experiences as "occupants of the social bottom"—and thus create the potential for mutual validation and community, the pool of eligibles often remains limited to others similarly distressed or alienated. The adolescent distressed over the betrayal of a close friend does not fully comprehend that her friend's ego defenses could not permit true commitment due to her own history of disappointment and betrayal. Staying socially connected and resilient in the face of disappointment or betrayal often hinges on a peer network expansive enough so that other peers are available to take up the slack when network losses are incurred. Thus, another key feature of any peer group or pool of eligibles from which adolescents draw friendship ties, apart from the average degree of disappointment experienced by those in the pool, is the degree to which the cultural principles of trust and *confianza en confianza* have eroded or been reaffirmed.

Relational orientations are founded not only on past experiences around issues of trust but also on existing relationships (within a community or pool of eligibles) that promise adherence to the cultural principles outlined above. Such relationships not only promise vital

social and emotional support but may also pave the way to peer social capital—relationships that facilitate access to middle-class institutional resources (Stanton-Salazar, 2004). Those who perceive themselves as having peer social support not only are able to stay connected but are also able to recover from occasional disappointment and loss. Those who perceive otherwise are most susceptible to disconnection and withdrawal into self and, in the arena of the school, to alienation and the risk of premature departure. A good number of adolescents we interviewed were able to derive support and companionship from siblings and other kin (e.g., cousins), particularly during times of emotional crisis, thus buffering them from the emotional consequences underlying distressing network losses. Other adolescents were not as fortunate.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

The adaptive responses of inner-city Latino youth are varied, yet all are influenced to some degree by the cultural and institutional ideologies and network orientations that shape relationships among different kinds of people in the family, community, and school. These ideologies and orientations carry the capacity either to accelerate alienated coping responses among youth (e.g., social isolation, drug and alcohol abuse, antischolastic identities, gang involvement) or to foster supportive exchanges within naturally forming cliques and networks that comprise the extended family, community, and school.

Minority youth and their peer networks are no less affected by those mainstream ideologies (e.g., individualism) while seeking to cope with life's challenges; they may very well be especially susceptible to it when the school embraces such an ideology as its principal worldview (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Based on the evidence gathered in this study of peer support, we argue that embeddedness within peer networks significantly influenced by the cultural principles of trust and of social support appear to provide the resources necessary to foster developmental gains (e.g., social skills; see Cochran, Larner, Riley, Gunnarsson, & Charles, 1990, p. 273) and school achievement, in spite of the many stressors associated with acculturation stress and

with segregated and economically marginalized schools and neighborhood environments (see Spina, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

Enriching and supportive peer relationships and networks also appear to buffer the adolescent from environmental stressors (e.g., intermittent family poverty, community violence, resource-poor schools) and to enable the adolescent to develop relationship-based coping strategies that foster resiliency (entailing forms of emotional intelligence) rather than reinforce distress patterns and emotional defenses that reflect an alienated character (e.g., isolation, social estrangement, raging) (see Frydenberg, 1997; Spina, 2002; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000).

The forces of race, class, and patriarchy, as experienced by the adolescents who participated in this study, need to be understood in terms of their negative impact on the supportive capabilities of people in their environment (family members, school personnel, and peers). In attempting to establish themselves in a web of social support, these adolescents drew from pools of adults and peers that very often exhibited distress patterns that limited their own respective supportive abilities. Effective social support (particularly emotional support and intimate counsel) requires the provider to be rational, emotionally intelligent, and responsive to the feelings and needs of the recipient. Attempts to provide support and to adhere to the principles of mature and responsible relationship (e.g., symmetrical understanding) often fall short when providers are overcome by their own distress patterns (e.g., teachers suffering from "burnout," peers overwhelmed by family crises and suffering from low self-esteem or depression). Calls for help can trigger the providers' own past psychological injuries and stimulate old, rigid, repetitive, and patterned behaviors incongruent with the requirements of social support and reciprocal exchange (see Aguilar, 1995).

In the final analysis, the exclusionary forces experienced by these adolescents precipitate coping patterns and network behaviors that increase the probability of risk behavior (e.g., drug use, teen pregnancy) and alienation within school (e.g., truancy, low effort, disengagement). Peer relationships among inner-city Latino youth are usually portrayed merely as the vehicle for such risk behavior. Yet, as we have been able to see here, such relationships also carry great potential for

protecting adolescents from the worst effects of class and racial segregation.

What can be done to make these profoundly transformative relationships more widely and systematically available to urban adolescents? The research reported above suggests strongly that supportive peer relationships are most likely to form when both social and psychological conditions are conducive to them, and, of course, the social and psychological conditions for friendship are inextricable. For example, we noted that in harsh social environments, the pool of eligibles from which an adolescent might form peer relationships often consists entirely of other distressed teens and that in these circumstances, adolescents tend to seek safety in isolation. The psychological barrier to forming close friendships—lack of trust—arises from the social barriers and economic and political conditions that circumscribe an adolescent's world.

Changing these conditions would require greater political will. It is simplistic to believe that individuals, institutions, or communities, acting in isolation, can successfully counteract explicit and implicit societal messages and the cultural-economic system that fosters them. Those in poor areas have neither the resources nor the capacity to transform the poverty and racial isolation of our inner cities. Currently, we are seeing a steady erosion of government programs designed to promote the success and overall well-being of working-class and low-income youth. Such programs will not be developed, reinstated, or adequately funded unless advocates for disadvantaged marginalized populations exert political pressure and develop powerful alliances.

Another finding of our research was that the formation of supportive peer relationships requires a facilitating institutional context. Young people need opportunities to interact in contexts where they can get to know and learn to trust one another. Aida Ponce's friendship with David was supported by their shared participation in ROTC. Extracurricular and after-school programs provide ideal contexts for young people with similar interests to form close bonds. The value of such programs is taken for granted in wealthier communities, which tend to devote considerable resources to providing such opportunities to young people. But Auxilio High and other schools in poor districts do not always have the cultural and financial capital to provide such

programs and, even when after-school activities are available, many poorer students are unable to participate in them because they have much-needed after-school jobs or are needed at home to care for siblings while a parent works (Spina, 2002). In addition, in many immigrant and poorer inner-city communities, it is dangerous to be outside, and children and teenagers are often confined indoors after school, further limiting opportunities to form friendships (Spina, 2002). Again, to foster constructive relationships for low-income teens, we must look at the larger social and political framework of their lives.

Finally, we note that the emotional strength that young people need to form strong, supportive friendships can in part be fostered by the mentorship of adults and of other, more well-grounded teens. Middle- to upper-class networks tend to provide adolescents with social capital: relationships that provide access to resources, privileges, and power and exposure to larger, higher status, more heterogeneous groups of people. Poor students as a rule have little or no access to agents who can facilitate their incorporation into resourceful peer networks and facilitate crossing from one social or cultural network to another (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, 2003). *Entrée* alone does not ensure “access” for those youth not necessarily familiar with the codes of behavior and the underlying ideology of different networks. Mentors can maximize students’ opportunities to enter and participate in a web of supportive peer groups or networks by providing students with the information and training that they need to negotiate cultural barriers.

In sum, enhancing the social support networks of low-status youth entails working with youth to cocreate an institutional culture that not only fosters authentically supportive peer and adult mentoring relationships and networks but also addresses the ongoing manifestations of racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, capitalist imperialism, and neocolonialism, rooted as they are in the ways our society appropriates and distributes social and economic wealth and political power.

NOTES

1. Interview data for each of the 51 participants were not matched with data from the questionnaire survey of the entire school due to the anonymity promised to survey takers.

2. Similar analyses were conducted in a previous study using survey data collected from six Bay Area/Peninsula sample high schools, although here we looked across three generational cohorts (a third-generation/U.S. resident group was included). (Tables available on request.) In this previous study, conducted in 1987, statistics were reported for a range of people representing potential sources of emotional support, including peers. Also reported were statistics for actual reliance on people for emotional support during the last 4 months. Findings similar to those reported here emerged from this Bay/Peninsula Area sample; from close to two thirds to about three quarters of the youth sampled indicated a peer as a likely source of emotional support. From two fifths to three fifths of each group indicated a peer as an actual or past source of emotional support during the last 4 months (see Stanton-Salazar, 2001, for findings from both the Bay Area and San Diego studies). As implied by our San Diego data, there may be a slight tendency for peers to increase as likely sources of emotional support as they become more acculturated, although group differences were not statistically significant at the .05 level.

3. The original interview text was communicated in Spanish, transcribed verbatim in Spanish, and then translated into English.

4. Scott Swain's (1989) work on male relationships provides a different perspective and an important one to consider. Swain argued that conventional analyses of men's relational patterns are based on a "feminine" standard and that because of this standard, male friendships are usually found to lack expressivity and intimacy. Swain argued that males and females tend to experience distinctive kinds of intimacy (men's intimacy being more covert, women's intimacy more overt). I thank Michael Messner (personal communication, November 29, 1999) for reviewing an early version of this article and for alerting me to Swain's contribution to this important area of study.

5. Of course, the English plays of William Shakespeare come to mind, with their rich and complex interpretations of human relationships. Keep in mind that Shakespeare wrote his plays long before the rise of capitalist industrialization and modernism. Furthermore, the rich relational discourse found in his plays was crafted not so much from the mundane world of social intercourse but from the realm of art and poetry.

6. The term "subtractive acculturation" was coined by Margaret A. Gibson (1995) to refer to an acculturation process that produces a gradual loss of proficiency in the person's first language as well as diminished access to native cultural resources.

7. The concept of alienation receives extensive treatment in Stanton-Salazar (2001) and is re-interpreted and elaborated there as "alienated embeddedness."

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