

Decisions, Judgments, and Reasoning About Conflicts Between Friendship and Individualism in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood



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ABSTRACT

Expectations for friends' behavior (e.g., friends should help one another) sometimes conflict with principles of individualism (e.g., people should be self-reliant). To examine how people think about such conflicts, 15-, 18-, and 21-year-olds ($N=144$) heard dilemmas in which friendship expectations conflicted with some aspect of individualism. Then, they indicated their decisions about how they would respond to such conflicts, their judgments about how their friend would react to individualistic decisions, and their judgments about rules or expectations of friendship. Next, students answered questions about what their friend would do and how their friend's decisions would make them feel. Students also reported on the quality of their best friendships and on their endorsement of individualistic attitudes and values. The 15-year-olds gave responses that were less friendship-oriented than those of the older students and thus seemed to be less bound to rules or expectations of friendship. Females also tended to make more friendship-oriented judgments than males. In addition, the relation between students' judgments and the measures of friendship quality and individualistic attitudes and values was examined.

INTRODUCTION

Children, adolescents, and adults have definite expectations about how friends should behave toward one another. For example, friends are expected to be companions for activities and to provide one another with help when needed. People also have ideas about their individual rights, and these ideas can be placed within the framework of individualism. The key principles of individualism, however, may conflict with the expectations of friendship. For example, strong believers in individualism might assert their right to choose their own activities instead of doing those suggested by a friend.

The goal of this study was to examine adolescents' and young adults' ideas about conflicts between friendship expectations and individualism. Dilemmas posing conflicts between friendship and individualism were developed. Participants were interviewed about what decision they would make for each dilemma, how an individualistic decision would affect the friend and the friendship, and whether such a decision broke a rule or expectation of friendship. The quality of the participants' friendships and their endorsement of individualism were also assessed.

The first hypothesis was that participants with higher-quality friendships would more often make judgments and use reasoning consistent with friendship expectations. The second hypothesis was that participants who more strongly endorsed individualistic attitudes and values would be more likely to make judgments and use reasoning consistent with individualism. In addition to testing these hypotheses, the analyses explored age and sex differences in students' judgments and reasoning.

METHOD

Fifteen-, 18-, and 21-year-olds participated in the study ($N=144$). The sample was evenly divided by age and sex. In individual interviews, participants were told about five dilemmas in which expectations of friendship conflicted with some aspect of individualism. For example, in one dilemma the participants had to decide whether to accompany a friend to a movie or to do something else that s/he would like better. The other four dilemmas presented different types of conflicts between friendship and individualism (see Table 1). Participants were asked to assume that all dilemmas involved themselves and their same-sex best friend.

Table 1: Summary of Dilemmas to Assess Conflicts between Friendship Expectations and Individualism

- Movie.** Your friend wants to go to a movie but you know you would hate that movie. Would you go? (This dilemma presents a conflict between the expectation that friends will be companions for one another and personal preferences in movies.)
- Assignment.** Your friend wants you to help him/her with a homework assignment but you have a test the next day for which you need to study. What would you do? (This dilemma presents a conflict between individual achievement and the expectation that friends will help one another.)
- Tennis.** You have been beating your friend in tennis all afternoon. Would you ease up to let him/her win a game? (This dilemma presents a conflict between competition between individuals and the expectation of equality among friends.)
- Workout.** As you prepare to leave for the gym for a workout, you meet your friend who is very upset and wants to talk to you. Would you go to the gym or stay and talk to the friend? (This dilemma presents a conflict between one's plans and the expectation that friends will provide emotional support.)
- Tutoring.** A friend is worried about his/her grade and asks you to be his/her tutor. Would you agree to do so? (This dilemma presents a conflict between individual freedom and the expectation that friends will help one another.)

After hearing each dilemma, participants first indicated what they would do by using a 7-point scale on which the highest point (7) was for definitely choosing the option consistent with friendship expectations. Then they used similar scales to indicate how an individualistic decision would affect the friend and the friendship (e.g., "If you decided not to go to the movie, how would your friend feel?" and "Would your decision not to go to the movie change your friend's feelings about your relationship?"). Next, they indicated on a 7-point scale whether an individualistic decision would break a rule of friendship (e.g., "Would you be breaking a rule or expectation of friendship if you decided not to go to the movie?"). Then the perspective was reversed and students answered questions about their friend's decision and how the friend's decisions would make them feel. Students' judgments about each question were not consistent across dilemmas (i.e., $\alpha = .22$ to $.60$), so the responses to each dilemma were analyzed separately.

After providing each judgment, students gave their reasons for that judgment. These open-ended responses were content-analyzed and then classified into categories, most of which focused on ideas about friendship or about individualism. To control for verbal fluency effects, proportion scores were computed for each individual question across all dilemmas of one type and used as the final dependent variables.

After the interview, participants completed a questionnaire about the quality of their friendship that they had in mind when responding to the dilemmas. This questionnaire, adapted from Berndt and Keefe (1995), included items about both positive features (e.g., intimate self-disclosure, loyalty) and negative features (e.g., conflict, rivalry). Participants responded to each question using a 5-point scale. The internal consistency of the measures of positive and negative features was high ($\alpha = .78$ and $.85$, respectively).

Participants also completed a questionnaire adapted from Braithwaite and Law (1985) and from Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, and Luca (1988) that assessed individualistic attitudes (e.g., "If you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself") and values (e.g., self-respect, competition). Participants' responses were made on multi-point scales. Four measures were created based on the results of factor analyses of the attitudes and values items: competitiveness, self-reliant attitudes, social status values, self-oriented goals. These measures also were high in internal consistency (α from $.70$ to $.81$).

RESULTS

Age Differences in Judgments and Reasoning about the Dilemmas

Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) with age and sex as between subjects factors and type of dilemma (i.e., original or reversed) as a within subject factor were done with each judgment as the dependent variable in a separate analysis. Table 2 summarizes the age differences in judgments that were found for specific questions on two specific dilemmas (i.e., Workout and Assignment). The age differences in students' decisions on the Workout dilemma was qualified by an interaction with sex, $F(10, 268) = 2.14, p < .05$. Although the age difference was nonsignificant for females, the 15-year-old males were less likely than the 18- and 21-year-old males to make a friendship-oriented response. On the same dilemma, the 15-year-olds were less likely than the 18- and 21-year-olds to say that they and their friend would be upset by an individualistic decision, $F(10, 268) = 2.63, p < .01$. Similarly, the 15-year-olds were less likely to say that their friend's or their own feelings would change following an individualistic decision than the 18-year-olds were on the Workout dilemma, $F(12, 250) = 2.15, p < .05$. On two dilemmas (Assignment and Workout), the 15-year-olds were less likely than the 18- and 21-year-olds to say that an individualistic decision would break a rule of friendship, $F(10, 270) = 3.28, p < .001$.

Table 1: Age Differences in Judgments about Conflicts Between Friendship and Individualism

Dilemma Question	15	18	21
"Would you skip your workout to talk with your friend or go to the gym and talk with your friend later?"	5.50 _a	6.54 _b	6.67 _b
"If you decided not to talk with your friend right then, how do you think his/she would feel?"	3.76 _a	4.31 _b	4.13 _b
"If you decided not to talk with your friend right then, would it change his/her feelings about your friendship?"	1.75 _a	2.25 _b	1.98 _b
"If you decided not to talk with your friend right then, would you be breaking a rule or expectation of friendship?"	4.98 _a	6.42 _b	5.88 _b
"If you decided not to help your friend with the assignment, would you be breaking a rule or expectation of friendship?"	1.88 _a	2.56 _b	2.67 _b

Notes. Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$. Higher scores represent more friendship-oriented responses.

The MANOVA for the reasons for changes in the friendship after an individualistic decision varied with age, but was qualified by an interaction with type of dilemma, $F(10, 254) = 2.58, p < .01$. More than the older students, the 15-year-olds said that it would not be a problem if they made an individualistic decision on the original dilemmas because their friend would only be temporarily affected (e.g., "She'd get over it eventually since we're such good friends."). When explaining whether their individualistic decision would break a rule of friendship, the 15-year-olds were less likely than the older students to mention friendship expectations like the ideas of helping one another and more likely to assert their individualism (e.g., "In life you have to put your own priorities first"), $F(12, 248) = 2.17, p < .01$.

Sex Differences in Judgments and Reasoning about the Dilemmas

The MANOVAs revealed that females tended to make more friendship-oriented judgments than males did. On one dilemma (Movie), females ($M = 5.43$) were more likely than males ($M = 4.47$) to say that they would attend the movie that their friend wanted to see, $F(5, 134) = 3.89, p < .01$. On a different dilemma (Tennis), there was a Sex \times Age interaction, $F(10, 268) = 2.14, p < .05$. At age 18 only, females ($M = 4.48$) made more friendship-oriented decisions than males did ($M = 2.80$). On two dilemmas (Movie, Workout) female students were more likely than male students to say that they and their friend would be upset by an individualistic decision, $F(5, 134) = 4.68, p < .001$. On one dilemma (Assignment), however, more males ($M = 1.15$) than females ($M = 1.06$) said that an individualistic decision would change their own and their friend's feelings about the relationship, $F(5, 134) = 2.28, p < .05$.

Relation between Measures of Friendship and Individualism and Judgments

On 9 of the 10 dilemmas, students whose friendships had more positive features were more likely to make friendship-oriented decisions and to say that their friend would do the same ($r = .17$ to $.45, ps < .05$). On three dilemmas, students whose friendship had more negative features were less likely to say that their friend would make friendship-oriented decisions ($r = -.17$ to $-.44, ps < .05$) and more likely to say that their friend would be upset ($r = .24$ to $.27, ps < .01$).

Students who more strongly endorsed competitive attitudes were more likely than other students to say that they would be upset by an individualistic decision on two dilemmas ($r = .19$ to $.27, ps < .05$) and that their friend would be upset on one dilemma ($r = .17, p < .05$). On both versions of one dilemma, competitive students were more likely than other students to say that an individualistic decision would change their own ($r = .22, p < .01$) and their friend's ($r = .18, p < .05$) feelings about the relationship.

Students who more strongly endorsed self-oriented goals said that their friend would be more likely to make an individualistic decision on two dilemmas ($r = .23$ to $.19, ps < .05$). On three dilemmas, these students were less likely than other students to say that they would be upset by their friend's individualistic decision ($r = -.21$ to $-.18, ps < .05$) or, on one dilemma, that an individualistic decision would change their own feelings about the friendship ($r = -.18, p < .05$).

CONCLUSIONS

The pattern of age differences in students' judgments and reasoning about the conflicts between friendship and individualism suggests that the 15-year-olds were less bound to friendship expectations and were more individualistic than the 18- and 21-year-olds were. Ideas about friendship expectations and how they relate to rules about friends' interactions apparently continue to develop across the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Kohlberg reached a similar conclusion, arguing that adolescents primarily look out for their own needs and interests. When they move into adulthood, however, they acknowledge the norms for relationships like friendships (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). On the other hand, previous studies have suggested that that both adolescents and young adults value certain expectations of friendship. Additional research is needed to learn more about how adolescents and young adults resolve conflicts between these expectations and ideas about independence and other facets of individualism.

There was a slight tendency for females to give more friendship-oriented decisions and to say that they would be more upset by an individualistic decision, but males were more likely to say that such a decision would change the friendship. However, males and females did not differ in their judgments about rules of friendship or in the reasoning about any of their judgments. Apparently, sex differences in students' responses to conflicts between friendship and individualism are not consistent for different situations.

As predicted, participants whose friendships had more positive features more often made decisions that were in accordance with friendship expectations. In addition, students' reports of negative friendship features were related to their judgments about their friend's decisions and emotional reactions to an individualistic decision. Part of having a low-quality friendship may be anticipating that friends will not act in ways consistent with common expectations of friendship. High ratings of negative features may also reflect the propensity of friends to becoming angry if they don't get their way.

As predicted, two measures of individualism were related to students' judgments about the dilemmas. Students who more strongly endorsed competitive attitudes more often said that they and their friend would be upset by an individualistic decision and that such a decision would change their feelings about the friendship. These findings may be related to the quality of their friendships, because more competitive students generally had lower-quality friendships. Because these students experienced more conflict and rivalry in their friendships, they may have been more aware of the negative effects that an individualistic decision might have.

Students who more strongly endorsed self-oriented goals were more likely to say that their friends would make individualistic decisions. These students were less likely to be upset by their friend's individualistic decision and to say that it would change their feelings about the relationship. In individualistic societies, people are expected to emphasize personal achievement and success and act in accordance with their own needs and desires. Adolescents and young adults who are very self-oriented seem to accept the fact that their friends will assert their individualism.

Finally, worth mentioning is that the other two measures of individualism, self-oriented attitudes and social status values, were not related to students' responses to the dilemmas. Perhaps individualism that is expressed in the context of friends' interactions differs from individualism that is expressed in other situations. Thus, more research is needed in order to better understand which aspects of individualism relate to interactions with friends.

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